

I Am Not a Metaphor

Booker, Christopher. *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. Philadelphia: Temple Press, 1995.

If you've spent any time studying literature or folklore, you've heard the grand pronouncement that there are actually just seven possible stories in the world, which storytellers recycle *ad infinitum*. But you probably have not heard the expert who makes this pronouncement actually explain what those seven plots are. It's even less likely the expert goes on to examine these seven and to propose a comprehensive thesis of why human beings tell stories at all. In 750+ pages, which took 34 years to write, Christopher Booker attempts to define the seven basic plots common to all storytelling, replete with examples that range from ancient mythology to modern popcorn movies; then to examine these seven archetypes and explain the human need to tell stories, in these forms. In effect, Booker is working out a more precise definition of what a story is, by examining the shapes a human mind can give it, in a scientific and systematic way. Once he has laid out that definition, he can propose his theory for why the human mind creates stories at all; once he has that definition, he can explain what function stories play in our psychological development.

Part I of the book lays out Booker's seven plots: Overcoming the Monster, the Quest, Rags to Riches, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. The first, Overcoming the Monster, breaks down in roughly these five stages: The Call, when the hero is summoned to confront some threat to his community; Initial Success, when the hero has his first brush with danger, emerging successful and victorious; Confrontation, when the hero meets the monster in all its terrible glory; Final Ordeal, when the hero faces his greatest challenge, presented by the monster itself; and the Miraculous Escape, when against all odds the hero survives the ordeal and defeats the monster. Such is the archetype behind *Beowulf*, *Dracula*, and James Bond movies, which Booker traces through its many permutations from mythology and folklore to war stories and modern science fiction. The other six archetypal plots are presented in similar fashion, broken down into their essential stages, and illustrated with copious examples.

The reader soon gets the idea that Booker will find one of his seven archetypes behind any story you throw at him: a separate index of the stories he references is impressive both in quantity and breadth (although light on non-Western sources). It is a neat parlor trick, to be sure, but it's also an enterprise that could become absurdly reductionist. So to his credit, Booker does not attempt to simplify complex works simply to shoehorn them into his seven plots. Instead, he admits the combination of multiple plots into a single work. In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, e.g., he identifies the Overcoming the Monster and Quest archetypes, among others. Mysteries receive their own separate chapter in Part IV, as do creation stories, which define their own category.

Having established his basic plots, Booker closes Part I with a comparison of all seven. In each plot, Booker uncovers a fundamental conflict between life-affirming forces of "light" and stagnant, egoistic forces of "dark." Except in Tragedy, the light forces crystallize around a hero (usually male, but not always) to defeat or transform the dark forces, thus resolving the story. This is easily demonstrated in an Overcoming the Monster plot, wherein a "light" hero like Beowulf of Anglo-Saxon legend defeats

"dark" monsters like Grendel and saves King Hrothgar's kingdom. It is less obvious in other archetypal plots like Comedy, wherein miscommunications and misunderstandings require crucial information to be "brought into the light" before the darkness is dispelled and the story can resolve into a happy ending. Or Rebirth, where the hero himself becomes shadowed and obscured by dark forces, whether literally, like Jonah in the belly of the whale, or emotionally, like Ebenezer Scrooge. Ultimately, however, light overcomes dark and the story ends happily. While Tragedy at first glance appears fundamentally different, Booker presents this plot type as the inversion of Overcoming the Monster, wherein the protagonist himself is the Monster. Richard III of Shakespeare's play or Dr. Faustus serve as illustrative examples. These stories play by the same rules for Booker, however: light still overcomes dark in the end. The tragedy lies in the fact that the main character was allied to the darkness rather than the light, necessitating his downfall at the story's resolution.

Booker develops these observations further in Part II. Not only are all seven plots similar in their endings, but the way they arrive at their endings is fundamentally the same. The light hero must unite and integrate four key elements: mind, body, heart, and soul. Alternately, Booker calls these intelligence, strength, feeling/compassion, and awareness/wisdom. The latter two are "feminine," the former "masculine," and this is why, in Booker's view, stories so frequently present a male hero, embodying intelligence and strength, who must rescue a beautiful but helpless heroine, embodying compassion and wisdom. Furthermore, Booker explains that this is why so many stories end with a wedding or other union between a male and a female. The coupling represents the unification of the "feminine" values with the "masculine," a sign that the main character(s) have fully integrated both sides of their personality.

Part III, oddly enough, deals with stories that fall short of Booker's archetypes in some way. A selective reading of all literature prior to 1800 allows Booker to conclude that since the Industrial Revolution, something has happened to storytelling, a process that has rapidly accelerated as time goes on. Stories either fail to resolve (*Waiting for Godot*, e.g.) or resolve only in the most empty, perfunctory way (*Ulysses*, or sentimental tales like the first *Superman* movie, e.g.). This latter category of story may have the superficial appearance of one of the seven archetypes, but is missing the archetype's true meaning. As Booker explains in full depth in Part IV, stories provide humans with a necessary psychological resolution between the individual (the ego) and the larger world (the Self, in Jungian terms). A genuine balance between mind, body, heart, and soul achieves this. When a story character is too egocentric, he or she must be transformed in the course of the story or defeated like any monster—if the story resolves properly, according to Booker's scheme. If a character does not achieve such a balance, if a character remains egocentric and immature, lacking some crucial value, then his or her story must not, should not, resolve in any satisfactory way. And in fact, Booker concludes that no story does so; characters like Camus' Mersault in *L'Etranger*, regardless of the satisfaction they may profess in the end, have no true resolution to their tales because they remain locked in their egocentric worlds. Even Lady Chatterly and her lover, though their union would seem to evoke the coming together of feminine and masculine values that Booker considers so crucial to a fully realized plot, are only going through the motions, and in fact, Booker would argue, the hope professed at the end of Lawrence's novel is empty.

The story ends with the lovers separated, their relationship built solely on sensational sex, not the wholehearted union Booker imagines in tales like *The Magic Flute*.

There are glaring problems with Booker's thesis, not least of which is his insistence on the representation of "feminine" values by a female character and "masculine" values by a male character. Could we not tell a realistic, effective story that presents a male hero who is compassionate but not strong? Or a female who is intelligent but not wise? Booker does not answer us, but his treatment of the movie *Alien* is instructive. The plot here is a paint-by-numbers Overcoming the Monster type, wherein the hero battles monstrous aliens on a space station using (as is typical) a mixture of mental ingenuity and physical violence. Originally written as a male and cast with a male actor, the hero Ripley was ultimately played by Sigourney Weaver in the film. When it was released, *Alien* found favor with critics and fans, and Ripley was touted as an important touchstone in just how willing the public had become to see women out of the kitchen (or the bedroom). Yet in Booker's view, *Alien* misses the point of the archetype and ultimately fails. Because no "feminine" character appears in traditional guise, delicate and pretty in a white party dress, he concludes that the necessary feminine values are missing from the story altogether. Apparently Booker missed Ripley's concern for her crewmates and the spaceship cat. "The whole point of her part in the story was that nothing about it should be distinctively *feminine*," says Booker. "She was simply transported directly into the traditional role of a *manly* hero [486, emphasis added]." Yes, Mr. Booker, you understand the point perfectly – the reason Ripley represents a step forward in sexual equality is that her role in the story transcends her biological gender. In Overcoming the Monster, she does what any human being is capable of doing (and needs to do); but by describing the story of *Alien* in the terms that he does, Booker reveals how thoroughly gendered his notion of hero is: the hero who is capable of overcoming monsters through physical violence and intelligence can best be described as "manly," while absence of anything Booker can readily identify as "feminine" must consequently mean the absence of other values like compassion and concern for others. The presence of Ripley herself, as she is and played by a female actor, apparently does not count. Furthermore, in criticizing stories like *Moby Dick* as "dark" inversions of their archetypes because, among other complaints, they fail to end with the union of a man and woman, Booker evidences a frankly stunning homophobia. He insists that mind and body, heart and soul must be unified in the end of a satisfactory story, and in the same breath demands that the resolution of these paired values can only be represented in story by the marriage of a male character and a female character. This leaves no possibility that a story of homosexual lovers developing a mature relationship could satisfy the same psychological itch as the story of heterosexual lovers. Nor can stories of friends, children and parents, siblings, or platonic cousins fill the gap, regardless of how artfully the parties in these other possible relationships compliment each other's strengths and shortcomings.

One might well argue that Booker is dealing with literary issues that have no real bearing on the real-world treatment of women, homosexuals, or anyone else he finds insufficient to bear the weight of a story's meaning where they appear in fiction. Characters, as he himself argues, are not real people but metaphors, representatives of different psychic aspects and attributes. Cinderella embodies merely some aspects of me while Prince Charming embodies others, and every person, male or female,

encompasses both, as well as the wicked stepmother and the kindly fairy godmother. All characters are traits we might bring out in ourselves.

Yet at the same time he has sought so deeply into the human psyche to understand why we tell stories, Booker has ignored one of the most basic teaching functions of stories. Stories give us models and codify norms. They show us who we might be not solely through implicit metaphors that most of us never consciously ponder; on a more immediate level they tell us what people like us can and cannot do. If the hero is always a man with a sword, will we ever believe that the hero can be a woman with a sword? Or leave the sword at home altogether? We identify with characters first on the superficial level, picking out who matches us in age, sex, race. If stories fall into seven rigid categories that admit no deviance from an even deeper archetype beneath that, human potentials are tossed aside without even a backward nod.

I commend Booker for tackling storytelling with a serious and methodical eye. Virtually every human being receives and transmits stories in some form or another, and it is well worth our effort to understand why. The groundwork he lays in this book now awaits other scholars, more diverse perhaps, or at least with more imagination, to move us to a real, tenable understanding of what stories do for us.