The Seven Basic Plots

I recently finished chunking through Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots* (subtitled, 'Why we tell stories'). It would be not entirely accurate to say I read the whole thing, all 705 large pages, each with very small print - I skimmed over large sections of it, which is easy to do as it contains hundreds of descriptions of the plots of stories and it is possible to get at Booker's ideas without reading all of them. For anyone wishing to attempt to read this book, I recommend only reading plot summaries of stories you already know. It saves a lot of time.

This book has received a lot of negative reviews, largely because Booker bases his entire treatise on Jungian psychology without noticing that the world at large no longer holds Jung in very high esteem. (Some would say Jung has been 'discredited', which is the modern version of declaring something to be 'heresy' - reflecting the different forces at work in the modern zeitgeist).

However, once you accept that this is where Booker is writing from, his ideas are reasonable and potentially useful. In terms of advancing the boundaries of modern knowledge, I feel he doesn't really take us any further than Joseph Campbell - but his models are perfectly workable. A model, after all, is just a model, and not truth. In my opinion, you can't have too many models for looking at the world.

Booker's prose style is very readable, and his plot summaries are wonderfully written if occasionally trivially inaccurate - but sadly he doesn't seem to know how to get a point across concisely. For my own benefit, I wanted to catalogue Booker's basic plot patterns, and so I'm providing them here in case they are of interest to anyone else. These aren't my ideas, so don't shoot the messenger!

For reference, Booker believes we tell stories as a mechanism of passing a model for life from generation to generation; that in essence, all stories are archetypal family dramas, and that their core message is that we must resist selfish evil (Booker doesn't use this term, preferring 'ego-centred', according to his Jungian framework). I find this a lovely belief system, although it will likely be quite unpalatable to those who idolise testability.

What follows are the skeletons of his 'seven basic plots'. The word 'plot' as used by Booker may give people pause, as he does not use it to mean the literal events of the story, but rather the symbolic events of the story, and note that not every story follows the template perfectly. In this regard, I prefer the term 'meta-plot' - indicating a degree of abstraction between how we usually use plot, and how it is employed in the book. Also, I am purposefully providing only the minimum amount of detail - I am recording it here for reference, I do not expect these notes to be wholly sufficient to understand Booker's models. *If you want any more information, please check the book rather than asking me.*

My thanks to Ben for loaning me the book in the first place.

The Basic Meta-plot

Most of the meta-plots are variations on the following pattern:

1. **Anticipation Stage**
   The call to adventure, and the promise of what is to come.
2. **Dream Stage**
   The heroine or hero experiences some initial success - everything seems to be going well, sometimes with a dreamlike sense of invincibility.
3. **Frustration Stage**
   First confrontation with the real enemy. Things begin to go wrong.
4. **Nightmare Stage**
   At the point of maximum dramatic tension, disaster has erupted and it seems all hope is lost.
5. **Resolution**
   The hero or heroine is eventually victorious, and may also be united or reunited with their 'other half' (a romantic partner).

There are some parallels with Campbell's Heroic Monomyth, but his pattern is more applicable to mythology than to stories in general.

Overcoming the Monster (and the Thrilling Escape from Death)

Examples: Perseus, Theseus, Beowulf, Dracula, War of the Worlds, Nicholas Nickleby, The Guns of Navarone, Seven Samurai/The Magnificent Seven, James Bond, Star Wars: A New Hope.

Meta-plot structure:

1. Anticipation Stage (The Call)
2. Dream Stage (Initial Success)
3. Frustration Stage (Confrontation)
4. Nightmare Stage (Final Ordeal)
5. Miraculous Escape (Death of the Monster)

Rags to Riches

Examples: Cinderella, Aladdin, Jane Eyre, Great Expectations, David Copperfield
Dark Version: Le Rouge et Le Noir (1831), What Makes Sammy Run? (1940)

Meta-plot structure:

1. Initial Wretchedness at Home (The Call)
2. Out into the World (Initial Success)
3. The Central Crisis
4. Independence (Final Ordeal)
5. Final Union, Completion and Fulfilment

The Quest

Examples: The Odyssey, Pilgrim's Progress, King Solomon's Mines, Watership Down

Meta-plot structure:

1. The Call (Oppressed in the City of Destruction)
2. The Journey (Ordeals of the Hero/Heroine & Companions)
   May include some or all of the following:
   a. Monsters
   b. Temptations
   c. The Deadly Opposites
   d. The Journey to the Underworld
3. Arrival and Frustration
4. The Final Ordeals
5. The Goal (Kingdom, Other Half or Elixir won)

Voyage & Return

Examples: Alice in Wonderland, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Orpheus, The Time Machine, Peter Rabbit, Brideshead Revisited, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Gone with the Wind, The Third Man (1948)

Meta-plot structure:

1. Anticipation Stage ('Fall' into the Other World)
2. Initial Fascination (Dream Stage)
3. Frustration Stage
4. Nightmare Stage
5. Thrilling Escape and Return

Comedy

Comedy is dealt with by a less rigid structure. In essence, the comedy meta-plot is about building an absurdly complex set of problems which then miraculously resolve at the climax. There is much discussion of how the comedy plot has developed over time:

Stage one: Aristophanes
Stage two: 'The New Comedy' (comedy becomes a love story)
Stage three: Shakespeare (plot fully developed)
Comedy as real life: Jane Austen
The plot disguised: Middlemarch, War and Peace
The plot burlesqued: Gilbert & Sullivan, Oscar Wilde

Meta-plot structure:

1. **Under the Shadow**
   A little world in which people are under the shadow of confusion, uncertainty and frustration and are shut up from one another.

2. **Tightening the Knot**
   The confusion gets worse until the pressure of darkness is at its most acute and everyone is in a nightmarish tangle.
3. **Resolution**
   With the coming to light of things not previously recognised, perceptions are dramatically changed. Shadows are dispelled, the situation is miraculously transformed and the little world is brought together in a state of joyful union.

Tragedy

Examples: Macbeth, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Carmen, Bonnie & Clyde, Jules et Jim, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Julius Caesar

Meta-plot structure:

1. Anticipation Stage (Greed or Selfishness)
2. Dream Stage
3. Frustration Stage
4. Nightmare Stage
5. Destruction or Death Wish Stage

Rebirth

Examples: Sleeping Beauty, The Frog Prince, Beauty and the Beast, The Snow Queen, A Christmas Carol, The Secret Garden, Peer Gynt

Meta-plot structure:

1. **Under the Shadow**
   A young hero or heroine falls under the shadow of a dark power
2. **The Threat Recedes**
   Everything seems to go well for a while - the threat appears to have receded.
3. **The Threat Returns**
   Eventually the threat approaches again in full force, until the hero or heroine is seen imprisoned in a state of living death.
4. **The Dark Power Triumphant**
   The state of living death continues for a long time when it seems the dark power has completely triumphed.
5. **Miraculous Redemption**
   If the imprisoned person is a heroine, redeemed by the hero; if a hero, by a young woman or child.

Dark Versions

All of the above plots have dark versions, in which the 'complete happy ending' is never achieved because of some problem. The only exception is Tragedy, which is already the 'dark' version.

New Plots

Two additional plots are presented which are outside of the basic seven listed above. Note that the existence of general patterns of plot is not intended to mean that no other plots are possible.

Rebellion Against 'The One'
A solitary hero/heroine finds themselves being drawn into a state of resentful, mystified opposition to some immense power, which exercises total sway over the world of the hero. Initially they feel they are right and the mysterious power is at fault, but suddenly the hero/heroine is confronted by the power in its awesome omnipotence. The rebellious hero/heroine is crushed and forced to recognise that their view had been based only on a very limited subjective perception of reality. They accept the power's rightful claim to rule.

Example: The Book of Job
Dark version: Brave New World, Nineteen Eighty-Four

The Mystery
Begins by posing a riddle, usually through the revelation that some baffling crime has been committed. Central figure unravels the riddle.

Examples: Bel and the Dragon, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie

Archetypes

In addition to patterns of plots, there is a pattern of characters provided according to Jungian principles. These archetypal characters are as follows:

Negative (centred on Jungian Ego i.e. "evil"):

   Dark Father, Tyrant or Dark Magician
   Dark Mother, Dark Queen or Hag
   Dark Rival or Dark Alter-Ego
   Dark Other Half or Temptress

Positive (centred on Jungian Self i.e. "good"):

   Light Father, Good King or Wise Old Man
   Light Mother, Good Queen or Wise Old Woman
   Light Alter-Ego or Friend and Companion
   Light Other Half (light anima/animus)

Note: Booker uses 'witch' where I use 'hag', for reasons that will be apparent to most readers.

Three other archetypes are referenced:

The Child
The Animal Helper
The Trickster

Additional Concepts

The Complete Happy Ending
In the regular versions of the meta-plots, if all that is ego-centred becomes centred instead on the Self (i.e. if all characters are redeemed), the result is a 'complete happy ending'. In the dark versions of the story, the ending is generally tragic and disasterous - both are considered to be following the same meta-plot. It is also possible for stories to contain elements of both approaches.

The Unrealised Value
The chief dark figure signals to us the shadowy, negative version of precisely what the hero or heroine will eventually have to make fully positive in themselves if they are to emerge victorious and attain 'the complete happy ending'. Therefore, the villain metaphorically represents what the hero or heroine will conquor both within themselves, and in the world of the story.

Above and Below the Line
In general, (and especially in comedy) there is a dividing line in effect. Above the line is the established social order, and below the line are the servants, 'inferior' or shadow elements. The problem originates 'above the line' (e.g. with tyranny) but the road to liberation always lies 'below the line' in the 'inferior' level.

Below the line can also be represented as a 'shadow realm', containing the potential for wholeness. In the conclusion of the story, elements may 'emerge from the shadows' to provide resolution.

The Seven Basic Plots is published by Continuum, ISBN-0-8264-5209-4.

Posted on October 11, 2005 at 04:48 PM in <u>Book Review</u> | <u>Permalink</u> | <u>Comments (27)</u>