

## **PLOTTING TO SUCCEED**

Plot is the foundation of your story, the skeleton without which it can't stand up. I've heard that there are only seven plots in the world. I've also heard that there are two plots in the world!

### **SEVEN PLOT THEORY:**

**TASK:** Overcoming a specific evil in order to save the world. (St George and the dragon. Any Hollywood action movie.)

**QUEST:** Going in search of something that is needed to make the world a better place, usually something quite spiritual – the holy grail, or some other expression of perfection, such as the truth (murder mysteries are quests).

**JOURNEY:** Leaving home, returning as a changed person as a result of challenges faced and overcome. (Any coming of age story.)

**THE FALL:** Tragedy. Begins at top and falls to the bottom. Tragedy, loss of paradise because of a fatal flaw. (Any Shakespearean tragedy.)

**RAGS TO RICHES:** Begins with nothing and receives everything (Cinderella).

**REBIRTH:** Begins in oppression and ends in freedom. (Any prison break story.)

**COMEDY PLOT:** Not necessarily funny! A complex difficulty, possibly a misunderstanding, separates two characters but in the end they are brought back together. (War and Peace. Four Weddings and a Funeral. Any romantic story.)

### **TWO PLOT THEORY:**

Here we begin with a closed circle – containing the place of safety, like a family or small community – and the circle is broken and redrawn in one of two ways:

(1) The adventure plot, in which the character leaves the confines of the circle to confront a threatened evil and then returns, having preserved the sanctity of the circle;

(2) The siege plot, in which the circle is invaded by evil which has to be expelled before safety is restored to the inhabitants of the circle.

**However many plots there are, there is this single truth:**

*Every plot has to have a beginning, a middle, and an end.*

In the *beginning* (after we have established our character) comes the event which upsets the order of things. The *middle* consists of our character reacting to that *event*. The *ending* is where some semblance of order is restored (not necessarily the same sort of order).

The danger is that the plot sags in between the beginning and the ending – creating what publishers refer to as a doughnut. What is needed is a series of turning points in the course of the story, which act like tent poles supporting the centre of the plot structure.

Joseph Campbell, a twentieth century expert in comparative mythology, distilled the central story that underpins all famous myths and legends, and called it The Hero's Journey.

There are twelve stations in **The Hero's Journey**.

**1. The ordinary world of the hero.** In which the hero is seen as a rounded character in the context of his/her own lives.

**2. The call to adventure.** In which the hero experiences a wake-up call.

**3. Refusing the call.** In which the hero refuses the call to adventure and prefers to remain at home.

- 4. Enter the mentor.** In which an important guide or teacher-style character reinforces the call to adventure.
- 5. Crossing the threshold.** In which the hero accepts that action is called for, and that s/he is the one to do it.
- 6. Tests.** In which the hero overcomes various challenges in the course of which s/he discovers friends, and understands the nature of his/her enemies.
- 7. Approach to the inner cave.** In which the hero confronts his/her worst fear.
- 8. Ordeal.** Engaging in battle with and defeating the demon.
- 9. Reward.** The hero is well rewarded for their bravery – with riches of a fairly basic kind, like wealth or the love of a good man/woman.
- 10. The road back.** The hero resolves to return home. But as s/he is returning as a changed person, the obstacles facing him/her on the road present new and different dangers – possibly temptations.
- 11. Resurrection.** A final unexpected challenge in which the hero has to face afresh an old demon. The ability of the hero to rise up and comprehensively defeat this demon underscores the depth of inner change undergone by the hero in the course of the journey.
- 12. Returning with the elixir of life.** The hero returns home with a deeper, spiritual reward – perhaps knowledge, understanding, or compassion – something that doesn't just reward them in a material way but elevates them into a better person.

You might notice that what keeps the Hero's Journey turning is that it is both an adventure plot and a story about character.

Ideally in *every story* your main character should undergo an inner journey as well as outer journey.

In the **outer journey**, real material events happen to your character. In the **inner journey** the character changes emotionally, reaching the end of the story as a fundamentally altered person.

The **balance** between the inner and the outer journey is up to the writer. A crude distinction is that commercial fiction emphasises outer journeys and literary books emphasise inner journeys. The best books describe an outer journey that keeps the reader turning the pages, and supply an inner journey which affords a lasting sense of satisfaction.