

The Story Copywriter Podcast

Episode 31:
The Plot Archetype



31: The Plot Archetype

[Listen or Download MP3](#)

Estimated reading time: 16 minutes. Contains 3268 words

After I first got involved in the business storytelling space, I went to a bit of a research frenzy. I started reading books about storytelling. I read Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero's Journey*. I kept on hearing people talk about the hero's journey, actually.

Daniel Levis at the time had a training course about it. According to Daniel, all great stories basically follow the same plot. In my head I was like, "Nah, that can't be true." That, to me, seemed like a myth of categorization. Probably a convenient myth to someone who is trying to sell you a course and sell you a process where you just plug in your words into the structure.

I took a look at Daniel's course, and I don't want to knock anyone's training because I'm sure it benefited some people. But to me it felt too plug and play. Plug in these words into this story.

To me, that isn't what storytelling's about. I think storytelling in that way lacks authenticity, because the story should just be you talking. It should just be you telling stories, as you would do normally over the breakfast table, or over a coffee, or in the meeting room. Storytelling a very natural thing. So I kind of dismissed this idea of there being one or so many basic plots, or a hero's journey.

Not long after that, a friend recommended that I pick up Christopher Booker's book, *The Seven Basic Plots*. In *The Seven Basic Plots*, over about 900 pages, Booker analyzes stories going back 3000 years or so to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the book he asks, "What is it about the stories that have lasted? Do they follow particular plot structures?"

Often there will be no seemingly common threads between the stories he's talking about. In one breath he's talking about *Harry Potter*, in the next he's talking about the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the next he'll be talking about *Macbeth*. But what he points out is that all of these stories do actually follow a familiar plot structure.

Booker identifies seven different 'archetypal' plot structures:

- Overcoming the monster
- Rags to riches
- Rebirth
- Tragedy
- Comedy
- The quest
- Voyage and return

He talks about a couple of other stories in the book that don't quite conveniently fit in this structure, but broadly, I think he's onto something. The range of stories that he discusses in the book is so impressive. And it's not just confined to novels. He talks about plays, he talks about television programs. He talks about movies. In section four of the book he talks about why stories work; why we have these moving picture reels in our heads, why they capture our attention.

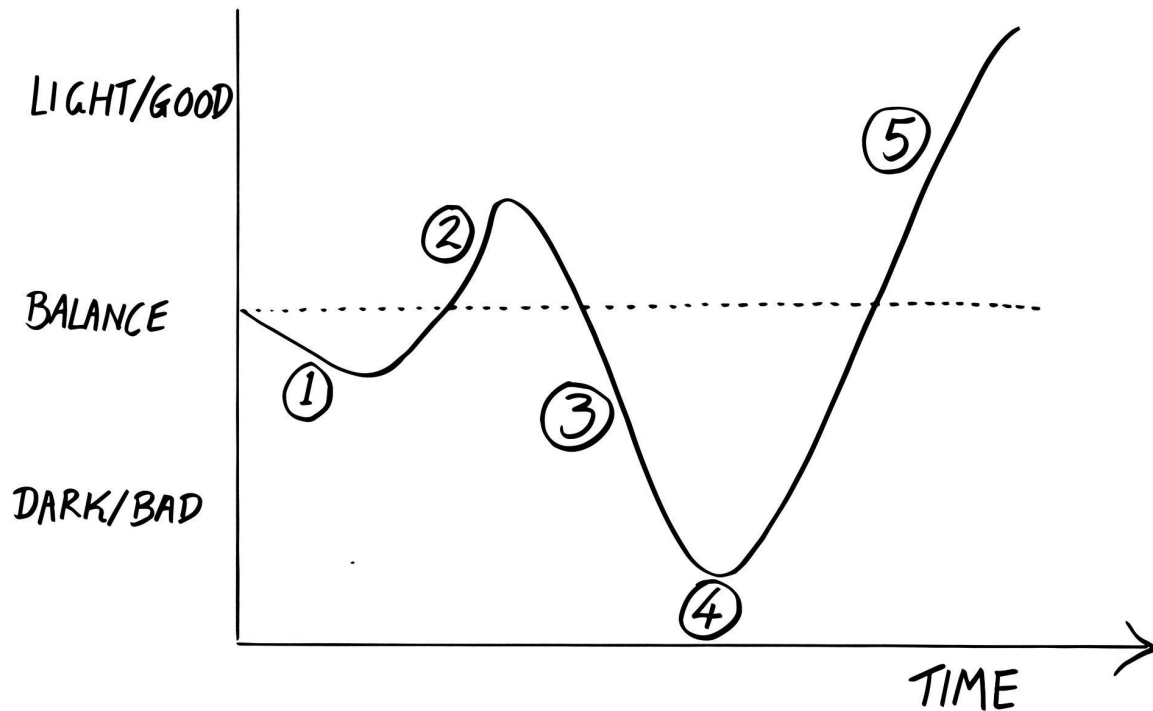
Booker positions that because the story is illustrating character change, the character change is really the point of the story.

We always have this character arc where the hero goes on some kind of journey. It's a journey from darkness to light, or a journey from confusion to vision. Or a journey from incomplete to complete.

This is why so many Disney movies finish up with the hero of the story marrying and living happily ever after. It's not just a cliché. It's because the hero has gone from incomplete to complete. It's the process of character change that enabled him or her to do that.

So I thought all of that was interesting. About two years later, something prompted me to reread the book. Some little worm in my brain kind of prompted this. I don't know what the trigger was, but something compelled me to go and read the book again. As I read about these seven basic

plots, I realized that in each plot phase, Booker describes five phases. I realized that if you were to graph those five phases, regardless of the plot, they basically followed the same structure.



Phase one is always 'The Call'. The call is where something happens that means the hero of the story cannot remain on their current path. Dark Riders arrive in The Shire, and the hobbits are not able to continue living happily undisturbed. In some stories like *Harry Potter*, the call actually happens in the past. We join the narrative partway through the character arc, and then the backstory is told to us in segments. That's something that you can do.

But for our planning purposes, we're going to first plan the story chronologically. Later when it comes to write the story, you don't actually have the start at the beginning. You can start in the middle and then piece together the pieces before as you go. That's also fine to do, but initially we're going to plan the story chronologically.

So the call is the first stage. Think about the graph above. If the line goes up, good things are happening. If the line goes down, bad things are happening. The horizontal X axis represents the passing of time. So the call is normally an event that is bad, or threatening. It's slightly down. There is a threat that appears, dark clouds appearing on the horizon. If it's comedy, there will be some kind of confusion that comes into the story. Some kind of fallout happens.

In the second phase of the story, we have the dream phase. So our hero, or heroine, (I'm using hero as in the 'he or she' version), initially makes good progress towards achieving the goal of

the story. But they're making good progress in a way that is often self-serving or confused in some way. Aladdin makes good progress towards winning the heart of Princess Jasmine, but he does so by pretending to be Prince Abubu. He does so by pretending to be someone else.

So it looks like the story is going to resolve. But then we get phase three, the nightmare stage, where everything goes wrong. The wheels fall off the bus. Aladdin is vanquished by Jafar to the edge of nowhere. In a novel, this frustration stage will go down and down and down. We see this in many Charles Dickens books.

The frustration goes on for quite a long time until we eventually get to stage four, which is the final conflict; the point of insight at which the character arc is complete. Luke Skywalker is no longer the little boy fighting Darth Vader. He grows into himself and becomes a Master Jedi. Often at stage 4 we will see the 'muse', or several 'helper' characters that enable the hero to become the fullest version of themselves.

In stage five then, we have the resolution. The graph goes back up. Everything returns back to how it was, or better. And this is true even in a tragedy. Even though Macbeth, who is the hero of the story, doesn't make it, the kingdom of Scotland returns to its natural state. So those are really the five stages that Booker talks about. And they apply to all of the seven basic plots that he identifies.

I realized on a second reading of his book that this is useful too for business purposes. You could seek to write a story about any of these plots. You could write a "rags to riches" story. You could write an "overcoming the monster" story. You could write a tragedy story, if you're trying to draw attention to a potential peril that your customer might be facing. You could write a comedy story about a confusion of identities. You could write a rebirth story about the rebirth of your business. You could write a quest story about the time you went on a particular journey. You could write a "voyage and return" story about the time you physically or emotionally got stuck in a dark place, and it took you a long time to get back.

Having this as a framework is helpful because picking ONE signature story to tell in your marketing is hard. Of all of the things that you've done in the past, how do you prioritize them? How do you pick one story to put at the heart of your marketing or to put right after people opt into your world?

It's far easier if I say, "Can you write me a story about the time when you were down on your luck and then you found a way to resolve it?" That's rags to riches. It's far easier having that constraint. The constraints are quite liberating.

In the real world, outside of Disney, a story will meander and have different threads. Some sections will go on for longer than you maybe need when you're telling your story.

So the five phases provides a framework. It says, "Write about the call. Write about the dream stage. Write about the frustration stage. Make the frustration stage go on for a little bit, because people tend to skip the frustration stage."

One of the key business storytelling mistakes is that people go straight from the call to the happy ending. You MUST have the frustration stage too, before the final conflict and resolution. In the final conflict you need to ask: what was the insight that caused you to grow as a person? Often that insight is the thing your customers are missing when they are on the same journey. The resolution then communicates your vision. What are you moving towards now?

It's actually a lot easier to write the story if you're following those five stages. If you're writing an email sequence for instance, one email could be the call. The second email is the dream stage. The third email is the frustration stage. The frustration stage is a good place to maybe introduce a mini-soap opera sequence. Maybe you write two or three emails about the frustration stage with a cliffhanger in between each email, so people really want to really want to carry on reading and find out what happens next.

Then finally you have the moment of understanding, which is the key insight you're trying to get across to your customers. And then the resolution. If you're creating an email series to sit at the heart of your marketing, it's a lot easier to do it with this kind of framework. You don't have to use the framework, but it's helpful.

So the three ideas I want to talk about on today's podcast are:

1. The plot archetype is a tool, not a requirement
2. The plot archetype is a deep principle
3. The plot archetype lends itself to 'signature stories'

1. The plot archetype is a tool, not a requirement

The hero's journey or the plot archetype is really a storytelling tool, not a requirement. When you start to delve into the mechanics of storytelling and you start reading about how screenplays are written, it can feel quite overwhelming. It can feel quite complicated. It can become easy to lose sight of the fact that we are all, as humans, natural storytellers.

So you don't actually have to follow the plot archetype. Even if you just open your email marketing platform and start writing stories to your list, that is so much better than not sending any emails. You don't have to follow the hero's journey or the plot archetype. It's just a tool. It's a tool to help you plan and execute a great business story. Maybe that business story is split across an email series, maybe it's split across a series of blog posts.

But it's just a tool. It's a hammer, if you like, in your storytelling toolkit. And it's always better to have the tools. If you don't have the tools, then in some respects, you leave yourself exposed. The more tools you have in your toolkit, the less likely you are to get stuck telling your story.

2. The plot archetype is a deep principle

The concept of the plot archetype structure is a deep principle from literature. Christopher Booker really identifies this in his book, because he shares stories that are thousands of years old. Even before then, humans have been telling stories to each other for at least 200,000 years in our species, and no doubt much longer than that in the species that came before us.

I have no doubt that even though we've only been codifying stories in written form for a few thousand years, this is a really old principle. I wouldn't miss the fact that Disney replicates the same story pattern over and over and over. They don't deviate from it.

The hero of the story is nearly always an orphan. Perhaps not always, but quite often they are an orphan. One or more parents is missing. In some way, they are incomplete at the start, and then they are made complete by finding love through the story. It's not a cliché, it's a deep principle.

And the better you can understand these deep principles, the more you can leverage them when you're telling your story. We're not trying to trick anyone by doing this. We're not using this as a fad. We're just leveraging the principles of good storytelling to get our message across in the most emotionally powerful way we can.

Ultimately, I believe humans and business are all about emotion. And therefore all about stories, because stories are the way that we communicate emotion. If you can't tell your story in your marketing, it makes it much harder to connect with people at an emotional level. That's what a story does. It goes beyond the logic, it goes beyond reasoning. So for anyone who isn't ready to buy right now, it explains what you stand for, why you do what you do, what your purpose and your mission is. That's what we're doing when we tell these stories.

We're also passing on knowledge, and I think storytelling is the oldest way that humans pass on knowledge from one generation to the next. For many tens or even hundreds of thousands of years, storytelling was the only way that knowledge was passed along from one generation to the next. Told verbally, told through songs or myths. Which is why these myths continue to be around us today. So I really do think this is a deep principle and not something to just dismiss as a Disney cliché. It's a very good reason why Disney is so successful, so don't ignore it!

3. The plot archetype lends itself to 'signature stories'

The plot archetype structure lends itself to what I call 'signature stories'. You might only have one or possibly a handful of signature stories. Signature stories are stories that you tell over and over in different formats. In email sequences, when you meet new prospects, when you're presenting on webinars, when you're presenting on stage, there's going to be a handful of stories that you draw on.

The plot archetype lends itself to signature stories, because the plot archetype is all about **character change**. It's illustrating your journey and the journey that you internally have been on. And by doing so, you're illuminating the path ahead for a potential customer.

You're not going to use the plot archetype structure all the time. It might be that you work on this once for a story that you tell when people first enter your world. That could be when they first follow you on Facebook; it could be when they first opt into your email list. It could even be when they first meet you. But there's likely to be just one or even a handful of stories.

You're not going to use the plot archetype all the time. That would be too much. Because a lot of the stories that we tell routinely are more grounded in everyday goings-on; everyday events. You're not going to tell an epic story every time. Whereas the plot archetype is a framework for telling epic stories and placing them in your marketing in a sensible way.

Over the next few episodes, we're going to have a look in detail at each plot structure that Christopher Booker identified. So in next week's episode, we're going to have a look at the "overcoming the monster" plot.

All of us have monsters in our past. Maybe not physical monsters, like what Harry Potter is trying to fight off. But the reason that Harry resonates with us is because on some level we're all trying to overcome monsters, or we all have at some point in our lives. So we'll talk about that on next week's episode.

Recap...

Today's episode has been all about the plot archetype structure. We've talked about how I discovered this, and how I previously thought that the idea of there being one or a handful of basic plots was a myth of categorization. I don't actually think that's true. It is a real thing, because it crops up over and over and over so many times in literature. Every successful Disney movie follows the same structure.

The first idea we talked about was that understanding the plot structure is a storytelling tool, but not a requirement. You don't always have to use this, but it's a handy hammer to have in your storytelling toolbox. The second idea was that this is a deep principle. It really taps into the reason that storytelling works. The reason that all of us as humans have this story radar blipping around in our head is because to be human is to have emotions, and storytelling is the language of emotions.

The third idea was that the plot archetype structure really lends itself to having one or handful of signature stories that you use over and over in different formats. So you're not trying to use this all the time. You're just trying to use it to help craft an emotionally compelling signature story.

What else is going on in Story Copywriter land? Well, this is the first episode of 2022. So we've had a bit of a break. Quite a welcome break, although with small kids it's maybe questionable whether it was in fact a break, and whether I get more peace by being at work and recording these podcasts! When I record these podcasts, I record them at home when the kids are out. So talking to you is probably the quietest time that I get.

For two weeks over Christmas and New Year, we had absolute mayhem. So I'm kind of glad to be back, actually. Christmas was nice. We enjoyed Christmas, we went to see Linzi's family in Blackpool. We had some fairly pleasant weather, given that Blackpool is in the north of England and on the coast. Normally it's very cold. I actually went running on the day after Boxing Day. I ran a few miles along the prom on the seashore and it was quite mild, quite pleasant. It's really nice to run by the sea.

I live in the middle of England, so about equidistant between either coast. So it is nice to visit the sea. Which I think is another human thing. I think humans, to me, are coast-dwelling creatures. Or maybe we have largely dwelled around coasts and rivers. The sound of water is therapeutic and I think that's why it appeals so much to me to visit the coast every now and again. So that's what we did over Christmas.

I hope you had a good break, I hope you're fully refreshed, and I will talk to you next time about the "overcoming the monster" plot. As always, if you've had value from this episode, feel free to share it. Share it with a group that you're part of or share it on social media.

If you've enjoyed this transcript, you can support the podcast (and the development of future transcripts!) by buying me a 'virtual coffee', for \$5/month. You can do that at storycopywriters.com/coffee.