

Theories of Story and Storytelling

by Eric Miller, PhD

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This piece of writing asks, and begins to answer, such questions as: What is a story? How can story and storytelling be defined? What are the seven elements of a story? What are some types of stories? What makes stories and storytelling great, entertaining, meaningful, and memorable? How have various scholars, psychologists, and cultures seen stories and storytelling? What are some functions of stories and storytelling in individuals and in society?

“Story” can be defined as, a series of events.

“Storytelling” can be defined as, *relating* a series of events.

“Story” and “narrative” mean the same thing. “Narrative” is simply a more academic term than “story”.

In a story, causality is involved in some way (along the lines: A leads to B, B leads to C, C leads to D, etc).

Story and storytelling can be considered as types of play. *Anthropology of Play* scholars have posited that three conditions to be satisfied for an activity to be considered as play, are that the activity is done

- in a special time
- in a special space
- just for fun

Play presents a model of the past, and a model for the future.

Two kinds of play are

- Art (which involves creating beauty through collaboration)
- Games (which involves rules and competition)

Stories are pieces of art, and can serve as a basis of games.

We can study how a story is told/performed/presented (presentation analysis). And we can study the actual content of the story (content analysis).

A distinction can be made between *actual storytelling*, and presenting a story through other mediums. The difference is that in *actual storytelling*, the tellers and listeners can give instantaneous and ongoing feedback to each other. Even though making movies (or other recordings, or books) is not *actual storytelling*, we often speak of *cinematic storytellers*. To be most verbally accurate, we might say that movie makers (and novelists, etc) are *presenting a story*.

It is debatable as to whether or not *actual storytelling* occurs through mediated situations such as telephoning or videoconferencing. Some purists feel that for an event to be considered as *actual storytelling*, the participants need to be physically present with each other. Nonetheless, as the level of interactivity in an electronically-mediated communication event increases (especially in terms of immediacy of feedback, and audio and video representation of participants), the event may become more storytelling-ish.

Projection, Identification, Empathy, Imitation, and Imagination are important processes when it comes to people and stories. People project themselves into story characters. They identify with the characters. They feel empathy with the characters. This occurs through the use of the listener's imagination. The listener may then imitate the character.

Each culture has traditional and conventional ways of signaling that a story is beginning and ending. In English, one way is -- "Once upon a time", and "They lived happily ever after".

Some storytellers like to comment upon, and tell the moral of, a story. Others like to let the story speak for itself, and permit listeners to generate their own interpretations and meanings.

Storytellers often alternate between

- narrating a story, and going into character (role-playing, speaking dialogue).
- speaking and singing.
- normal conversational speech and movement; and stylized (exaggerated, rhythmical, etc) speech and movement
- telling in the past tense, and in the present tense.

What are Some Uses of Stories?

Stories can

- give meaning to life, express values, teach the young, and convey culture.
- connect elements in one's own self, experience, and life.
- connect one to one's (individual and group) past, and to other cultures.
- give one a sense of wholeness, that the pieces of one's life fit together and add up to something.

What Makes a Storytelling Event Great, Entertaining, and Meaningful?

Listeners are drawn in, and feel involved and engaged. They relate to the teller and to what is being told. They forget themselves, and get involved in the efforts, struggles, and behavioural styles of the characters. They put themselves in the place of the characters; they relate to characters' situations and decisions, on the levels of feeling (emotion) and intellect (thought). The story is important to both teller and listeners. The style of telling is vivid and clear -- the design (of the form and content) of the storytelling experience is in step with the times.

Dramatic Tension

Dramatic tension results when audience members expect something to happen. Skilled storytellers know how to raise and manipulate such expectations. Some expectations are built into certain cultures, through conventions and traditions. Other expectations are universal to humans.

Eleven Elements of Story

Eleven elements of story --

- 1) Characters (decisions and follow-through).
- 2) Place.
- 3) Time (continuous, or jumps, flashbacks?)
- 4) Storyline (also known as, plot).
- 5) Sensory Elements: Smells, Flavours, Colours, Textures, etc.
- 6) Objects. Such as: Clothing. A costume. A piece of fabric.
- 7) Characters' physical gestures, and attitudes.
- 8) Emotions in the story (for the characters, the teller, and the listeners).
- 9) Narrator's Point of View. (Who is telling the story?
Is the story being told by a character in the story?
Is it clear whom the intended audience might be?)
- 10) Narrator's Tone of Voice, Attitude, Style (casual, formal, other?).
- 11) Theme (Meaning, moral, message, idea).

Elements 1-10 combined produce element 11.

Moments of decision are crucial in stories, as in life. A character's nature is exposed (or self-created) through his/her decisions and actions. That is: A figure's character manifests and expresses itself in, is embodied in, his/her decisions and actions. These decisions and actions form important parts of the storyline, the plot.

Three Kinds of Stories

- Personal Experience stories
- Traditional stories
- Created stories.

Created stories often involve a mix of elements from Personal Experience stories and Traditional stories.

Regarding Personal Experience stories: Why do people remember and decide to share certain experiences? What events tend to be considered significant enough for one to make a story out of them? Telling a story involves expressing points of view -- that an event is significant, and how one feels about it. Thus telling a story is an act of moral persuasion. If teller and listeners can agree that a story is worth telling, and that it has a certain point and meaning -- they are members of a community together.

Types of traditional stories include:

- Folktale
- Legend
- Epic
- Myth

Folktales tend to be timeless and placeless, with characters that are well-known in a culture. One type of Folktale is a Fairy tale -- Fairytales have a magical element.

Legends are historical stories, which took place in a certain place, often in the distant past, with some divine element.

Epics are long stories that tell of the adventures of heroes/heroines as they travel from one end of the land to the other. Epics tend to be encyclopedic, serving as compendiums of many aspects of a culture, and often end with the hero/heroine founding a new institution (even a nation).

Myths are stories about divine characters. Myths often concern the creation of the physical world, and occur before human history. Storytellers sometimes bring out -- in characters, and in audience members -- mythic feelings in everyday life and experience.

These categories (or *genres*) of story were invented, it seems, in ancient Greece, and have been adopted by European and USA cultures. Other categories of story exist in other cultures. It is a good idea to always see what categories of story exist in a culture, instead of imposing categories from the outside. People might benefit from inventing and/or developing their own theories of story (please see below).

Personification (also known as **Anthropomorphism**) is an important tool of storytelling. This involves projecting human characteristics and qualities -- such as thoughts, emotions, desires, sensations, physical gestures, and speech -- onto animals, other nonhuman beings, natural phenomena, inanimate objects, and even abstract ideas. The term, anthropomorphism, is derived from two Greek words: *anthropos*, meaning human; and *morph*, meaning shape or form.

Another tool of storytelling is to project aspects of contemporary life onto occurrences in earlier time periods.

Theories of Story include

- 1) Vladimir Propp's theory of *Fragmentation and Wholeness*.
- 2) Joseph Campbell's theory of *Heroic Journey and Community Revitalisation*.
- 3) Carl Jung's theory of *Psychological Integration*.
- 4) The theory of the "*The Well-Made Play*" (Conflict, Crisis, and Resolution).
- 5) Bob McGee's theory of *Characters Wanting Things*.
- 6) Aristotle's theory of *Catharsis*.
- 7) The Indian theory of *Rasas*.

1

Vladimir Propp's theory (Propp 1928) states that a story (especially a folktale) is composed of three stages (he was Russian):

- a) Peaceful home,
- b) Break-up of the home, often seemingly caused by a villain figure.
- c) Member of the broken home tracks down the villain, defeats him/her, and re-establishes the home.

2

Joseph Campbell's theory (Campbell 1949) also states that a story (especially a heroic legend) is composed of three stages (he was of the USA):

- a) The hero's/heroine's community is dull and barren. (For examples: people are unable to have children; there is no rain, etc.)
- b) The hero/heroine goes on a journey, obtains a sacred object, and
- c) Returns to the community with the sacred object, thus revitalizing the community.

3

Carl Jung's theory of Psychological Integration -- which he often called "Individuation" (the making of an individual) -- states that stories are composed of two stages (he was of Switzerland):

- a) Elements are apart.
- b) Elements are integrated.

This approach has involved seeing aspects of existence as Male and Female elements, which symbolise both aspects of each individual's personality (micro level), and aspects of nature (macro level). For examples: The sea might symbolise the Female element, and the land might symbolise the Male element. Daytime and action might symbolise the Male element; and night and the regeneration of sleep and rest might represent the Female element. A male character might represent the Male element, and a female character might represent the Female element -- but this is not always the case. This theory states that each individual's personality is composed of Male and Female elements, and that stories portray, represent, and facilitate the psychological integration (in the teller and in each listener) by bringing these Male and Female elements together and into harmony with each other.

The perceiving of elements of existence in oppositional pairs has been typical of the Structuralist approach in academic thought.

4

Especially in the USA and England, from the 1920s to the 1950s -- the Golden Age of Modern Western Drama -- there was much talk about "The Well-Made Play".

This model also applied to other forms of story presentation, such as screenplays and novels. According to this theory, stories revolve around conflict:

- a) Exposition (situation background).
- b) Conflict develops.
- c) Crisis.
- d) Resolution.

This model does not have much to say about the art of avoiding conflict. Moreover, it was produced by cultures which were very competitive and individualistic, sometimes to the point of being self-destructive.

5

The following notes are based on material in Bob McGee's Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting (1997).

Character Development: What changes occur in the character's situation or condition? Does the character grow, change, learn? Is the character transformed? Or is it just that the character's inner nature is revealed? A character's inner and innate nature is revealed through his/her choices under pressure.

"Character is destiny". A character's fate is created by who he/she is, and what he/she does.

A character may be on a **Quest, Mission**, to do, create, or find something; may **Desire** to become something, or win over someone.

The central character's quest is the story's **Spine, Super-Objective, Controlling Idea**. Look into a character's heart to discover what he/she is seeking.

What are a character's **Objectives** in a scene, a sequence of scenes, the entire story? What change occurs in a scene? How does a scene move the story forward? What is at risk, at stake, in each scene? The higher the risk, investment, expenditure, the more valuable the prize.

The **Hook, Inciting Incident**, captures the audience members' attention, awakens their curiosity, sets the story into action, upsets the balance of forces in the central character's life. The character must react to restore balance. The Inciting Incident establishes the story's **Major Dramatic Question**. Tells the audience: this is the issue, this is what is at stake. Now we want to see how things work out, what happens next.

There may be some **Problem** in the story that the characters or the audience members want to be resolved. If all are content, there may be no need for dramatic action (but there still could be action and story perhaps).

Conflict may occur due to scarcity, frustration, ambition, desire. **Progressive Complications, Obstacles, Hurdles** may be faced by the main character in the course of his/her attempting to restore balance to his/her situation, to achieve a goal.

Set-up -- gives information to characters and audience members.

Pay-off -- this information is used by characters in a way that moves the story forward.

Pivotal Event, Turning Point. "A Turning Point is centered in the choice a character makes under pressure to take one action or another in the pursuit of desire" (248).

Reversals, Twists, are surprising things that a character does, or that happen to a character.

Subplots -- may contradict or resonate with the Controlling Idea of the main plot.

Irony -- opposites co-exist.

Up-ending. Down-ending. False-ending. An **Open Ending** means, it could go any number of ways. It is left open.

“**Classical Design** means a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his/her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change” (p. 45). Key terms include: **Causality, Closed Ending, Linear Time, External Conflict, Consistent Reality, Sole and Active Protagonist.**

At some point, the main character goes to an extreme in pursuing his/her goal. The changes are **Irreversible**. The main character passes a **Point of No Return**.

These are qualities of the “Hollywood Movie” -- along with the idea that life can change, especially the optimistic idea that life can change for the better. In what ways might this approach be limited? What are some other possibilities?

6

Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, and literary and drama critic, presented and discussed the theory of “Catharsis” (Aristotle, approximately 2,350 years ago). This especially applied to one type of drama -- tragedy, in which the hero is destroyed by a tragic flaw within himself. This flaw was often hubris (pride). According to the theory of catharsis, audience members feel awe, and finally release and relief, by observing and identifying with a great figure who falls due to his/her tragic flaw.

7

In classical Indian aesthetics -- as set forth in the Sanskrit text, the Natyasastra (Bharata, approximately 2,000 years ago) -- there are eight *Bhavas* (imitations of emotions that actors perform) and corresponding *Rasas* (the audience members’ reactions). These eight emotions are:

Astonishment, Comedy, Love, Disgust, Heroism, Sadness, Fear, and Anger.
(Peace was added later.)

According to this approach, what happens in a storytelling event is that the story presenter presents the representation of the emotion, and the audience members then experience that emotion. Some commentators say that plays, etc, should mix different *Rasas* but should be dominated by one.

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