


The Seven Basic Plots

Why we tell stories

BY

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'We stand around in a ring and suppose;
But the Secret sits in the middle – and knows.'
Robert Frost

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Introduction and Historical Notes

‘He had likewise projected, but at what part of his life is not known, a work to show how small a quantity of REAL FICTION there is in the world; and that the same images, with very little variation, have served all the authors who have ever written.’

Dr Samuel Johnson, recorded in
Boswell’s Life of Johnson

In the mid-1970s queues formed outside cinemas all over the Western world to see one of the most dramatic horror films ever made. Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws*, which heralded the arrival of the most successful popular storyteller of the late-twentieth century, told how the peace of a little Long Island seaside resort, Amity, was rudely shattered by the arrival offshore of a monstrous shark, of almost supernatural power. For weeks on end the citizens are thrown into a stew of fear and confusion by the shark’s savage attacks on one victim after another. Finally, when the sense of threat seems almost too much to bear, the hero of the story, the local police chief Brody, sets out with two companions to do battle with the monster. There is a tremendous climactic fight, with much severing of limbs and thrashing about underwater, until at last the shark is slain. The community comes together in universal jubilation. The great threat has been lifted. Life in Amity can begin again.

It is safe to assume that few of the millions of sophisticated twentieth-century moviegoers who were gripped by this tale as it unfolded from the screens of a thousand luxury cinemas would have paused to think they had much in common with an unkempt bunch of animal-skinned Saxon warriors, huddled round the fire of some draughty, wattle-and-daub hall 1200 years before, as they listened to the minstrel chanting out the verses of an epic poem.

Yet just consider the story of that ancient poem which has survived to our own day mainly to be dissected in examination rooms by generations of bored and baffled students of Anglo-Saxon literature.

The first part of *Beowulf* tells of how the peace of the little seaside community of Heorot is rudely shattered by the arrival of Grendel, a monster of almost supernatural power, who lives in the depths of a nearby lake. The inhabitants of Heorot are thrown into a stew of fear and confusion as, night after night, Grendel makes his mysterious attacks on the hall in which they sleep, seizing one victim after another and tearing them to pieces. Finally, when the sense of threat seems almost too much to bear, the hero Beowulf sets out to do battle, first with Grendel, then with his even more terrible monster mother. There is a tremendous climactic

fight, with much severing of limbs and threshing about underwater, until at last both monsters are slain. The community comes together in jubilation. The great threat has been lifted. Life in Heorot can begin again.

In terms of the bare outlines of their plots, the resemblances between the twentieth-century horror film and the eighth-century epic are so striking that they may almost be regarded as telling the same story. Are we to assume that the author of *Jaws*, Peter Benchley, had in some way been influenced by *Beowulf*? Of course not. Even if he had read *Beowulf*, it is most unlikely that he could have conceived a story with the power of *Jaws* unless it had emerged spontaneously into his own imagination. Yet the fact remains that the two stories share a remarkably similar pattern – one which moreover has formed the basis for countless other stories in the literature of mankind, at many different times and all over the world.

So what is the explanation?



It is a curious characteristic of our modern civilisation that, whereas we are prepared to devote untold physical and mental resources to reaching out into the furthest recesses of the galaxy, or to delving into the most delicate mysteries of the atom – in an attempt, as we like to think, to plumb every last secret of the universe – one of the greatest and most important mysteries is lying so close beneath our noses that we scarcely even recognise it to be a mystery at all.

At any given moment, all over the world, hundreds of millions of people will be engaged in what is one of the most familiar of all forms of human activity. In one way or another they will have their attention focused on one of those strange sequences of mental images which we call a story.

We spend a phenomenal amount of our lives following stories: telling them; listening to them; reading them; watching them being acted out on the television screen or in films or on a stage. They are far and away one of the most important features of our everyday existence.

Not only do fictional stories play such a significant role in our lives, as novels or plays, films or operas, comic strips or TV 'soaps'. Through newspapers or television, our news is presented to us in the form of 'stories'. Our history books are largely made up of stories. Even much of our conversation is taken up with recounting the events of everyday life in the form of stories. These structured sequences of imagery are in fact the most natural way we know to describe almost everything which happens in our lives.

But it is obviously in their fictional form that we most usually think of stories. So deep and so instinctive is our need for them that, as small children, we have no sooner learned to speak than we begin demanding to be told stories, as evidence of an appetite likely to continue to our dying day. So central a part have stories played in every society in history that we take it for granted that the great storytellers, such as Homer or Shakespeare, should be among the most famous people who ever lived. In modern times we have not thought it odd that certain men and women, such as Charlie Chaplin or Marilyn Monroe, should come to be regarded

as among the best-known figures in the world, simply because they acted out the characters from stories on the cinema screen. Even when we look out from our own world into space, we find we have named many of the most conspicuous heavenly bodies – Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Orion, Perseus, Andromeda – after characters from stories.

Yet what is astonishing is how incurious we are as to why we indulge in this strange form of activity. What real purpose does it serve? So much do we take our need to tell stories for granted that such questions scarcely even occur to us.¹

In fact what we are looking at here is really one mystery built upon another, because our passion for storytelling begins from another faculty which is itself so much part of our lives that we fail to see just how strange it is: our ability to 'imagine', to bring up to our conscious perception the images of things which are not actually in front of our eyes.

If someone says to us 'the Matterhorn'... or 'a zebra'... or 'your kitchen table at home'... or 'a dragon breathing fire'... something very peculiar happens. Somewhere inside our heads, the words can trigger off a mental picture of each of these things. No one knows exactly where or how that image is produced or perceived. But we have this capacity to conjure up the inward images not only of places, people and things not present to our physical senses, but even of things, such as that fire-breathing dragon, which have never existed physically at all.

And it is of course this ability to conjure up whole sequences of such images, unfolding before our inner eye like a film, which enables us to have dreams when we sleep, and when we are awake to focus our attention on these mental patterns we call stories.

What this book sets out to show is that the making of these patterns serves a far deeper and more significant purpose in our lives than we have realised: indeed one whose importance can scarcely be exaggerated. And the first crucial step towards bringing this into view is to recognise that, wherever men and women have told stories, all over the world, the stories emerging to their imaginations have tended to take shape in remarkably similar ways.



We are all familiar with the teasing notion that there may be 'only seven (or six, or five) basic stories in the world'. It is tantalising not least because, even though this suggestion has not infrequently been put forward in print, its authors never seem to carry it further by explaining just what those stories might be. But it is now more than 30 years since I began to realise that there might seriously be some truth in this idea.

1. In many conversations I had about this book during the years when it was being written, the explanation most commonly offered as to why we like stories was that they satisfy our need for 'escapism'. Certainly this describes the way we often use stories, as a means to escape out of the 'real world' into that realm of fantasy or imagination we find so beguiling. But in no way does it explain why we should be able to find diversion in this particular way. As soon as we begin to explore the psychology behind our ability to imagine stories, it becomes obvious that this 'explanation' in fact explains nothing.

While writing a book on a quite different subject, I found my attention focusing on a small number of particular stories. They included a Shakespeare play, *Macbeth*; Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*; a 1960s French film, Truffaut's *Jules et Jim*; the Greek myth of Icarus; and the German legend of Faust. On the face of it, these stories might not seem to have much in common. But what haunted me was the way that, at a deeper level, they all seemed to unfold round the same general pattern. Each begins with a hero, or heroes, in some way unfulfilled. The mood at the beginning of the story is one of anticipation, as the hero seems to be standing on the edge of some great adventure or experience. In each case he finds a focus for his ambitions or desires, and for a time seems to enjoy almost dream-like success. Macbeth becomes king; Humbert embarks on his affair with the bewitching Lolita; Jules and Jim, two young men in pre-First World War Paris, meet the girl of their dreams; Icarus discovers that he can fly; Faust is given access by the devil to all sorts of magical experiences. But gradually the mood of the story darkens. The hero experiences an increasing sense of frustration. There is something about the course he has chosen which makes it appear doomed, unable to resolve happily. More and more he runs into difficulty; everything goes wrong; until that original dream has turned into a nightmare. Finally, seemingly inexorably, the story works up to a climax of violent self-destruction. The dream ends in death.

So consistent was the pattern underlying each of these stories that it was possible to track it in a series of five identifiable stages: from the initial mood of anticipation, through a 'dream stage' when all seems to be going unbelievably well, to the 'frustration stage' when things begin to go mysteriously wrong, to the 'nightmare stage' where everything goes horrendously wrong, ending in that final moment of death and destruction. No sooner had I become aware of this pattern than many other well-known stories began to suggest themselves as following the same general shape. Not surprisingly, these included a good many dramatic and operatic tragedies, such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Carmen*. They included myths and legends, such as that of Don Juan; novels, such as the dreams turned to nightmare of those two unhappy heroines, Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, both ending in suicide; or films such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, describing the two young lovers who lightly heartedly embark on a career as bank robbers and end up riddled with a hail of bullets. Again and again through the history of storytelling it was possible to see this same theme, of a hero or heroine being drawn into a course of action which leads initially to some kind of hectic gratification and dream-like success, but which then darkens inexorably to a climax of nightmare and destruction. And at this point two questions began to intrude.

Firstly, why was this so? Why has the imagination of storytellers seemed to form so readily and regularly round this theme? Why do we recognise it as such a satisfactory shape to a story? (1)

Secondly, were there other patterns like this underlying stories, shaping them in quite different ways? After all, this cycle of self-destruction only describes a certain type of story, with an 'unhappy ending'. What about all those stories which have 'happy endings'? Were there any similar basic patterns underlying these too?

As soon as I began to look at stories in this light, a number of other possible basic plots began to suggest themselves. There were, for instance, all those stories about the overcoming of a 'monster', like *Jaws* or *Beowulf*, in which our interest centres on the threat posed by some monstrous figure of evil, who is then challenged by the hero and finally, after a climactic battle, killed. There were 'rags to riches' stories, like *The Ugly Duckling* or *Cinderella*, where our main interest lies in seeing some initially humble and disregarded little hero or heroine being raised up to a position of immense success and splendour. There were stories based on the theme of a great quest, like the *Odyssey* or *The Lord of the Rings*, where our interest centres on the hero's long, difficult journey towards some distant, enormously important goal.

I embarked on an almost indiscriminate course of reading and re-reading, through hundreds of stories of all kinds (soon recognising how little most of us actually remember in detail even about stories we think we know quite well). And it was not long before I began to make a startling discovery. Not only did it indeed seem to be true that there were a number of basic themes or plots which continually recurred in the storytelling of mankind, shaping tales of very different types and from almost every age and culture. Even more surprising was the degree of detail to which these 'basic plots' seemed to shape the stories they had inspired; so that one might find, for instance, a well-known nineteenth-century novel constructed in almost exactly the same way as a Middle Eastern folk tale dating from 1200 years before; or a popular modern children's story revealing remarkable hidden parallels with the structure of an epic poem composed in ancient Greece.

As one 'basic plot' after another emerged to view, each with its own particular structure, I eventually found myself with just one intractable pile of stories which did not seem to fit any of the patterns I had been looking at. I puzzled over them for some time. They seemed to be completely diverse: several were classic children's stories, like *Peter Rabbit*, *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland*; there were a long list of novels, from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Brideshead Revisited*; there were science fiction stories, like H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*; there were films ranging from *The Third Man* and *The Wizard of Oz* to *Gone With The Wind*. Then the penny dropped that all these stories were in fact shaped by the same basic plot, one I had not even considered before (that which I have called 'Voyage and Return'). And at this point I found myself brought up against the possibility which is the basis of this book. Although I had long been familiar with that old teasing notion that there are only a handful of basic plots to stories, I had never taken it any more seriously than most people. I was now having to accept that, to a remarkable extent, it might actually be true.

Of course I could already see that the truth was by no means as simple as those lighthearted references to a limited number of basic stories might imply. Obviously it was not true that every story fits neatly and with mechanical regularity into one or another category of plot: otherwise we should all have noticed the fact long ago, and stories would scarcely be the endlessly varied and fascinating things that they are. There are extensive areas of overlap between one type of plot and another. Indeed, there are many stories which are shaped by more than

one 'basic plot' at a time (there are even a very small number, including *The Lord of the Rings*, which include all seven of the plots which give this book its title). There are still other stories which are shaped only by part of such a plot. Again there are others, a great many, which show the story somehow 'going wrong', in terms of failing fully to realise the basic plot which lies behind it. As we shall see, the question of how and why stories can go wrong in this way, usually leaving us, the audience, with a dissatisfied sense that something has somewhere gone adrift, provides some of the most significant clues of all as to how stories work and what they are really about.

But the further my investigation proceeded, the more clearly two things emerged. The first was that there are indeed a small number of plots which are so fundamental to the way we tell stories that it is virtually impossible for any storyteller ever entirely to break away from them.

The second was that, the more familiar we become with the nature of these shaping forms and forces lying beneath the surface of stories, pushing them into patterns and directions which are beyond the storyteller's conscious control, the more we find that we are entering a realm to which recognition of the plots themselves proves only to have been the gateway. We are in fact uncovering nothing less than a kind of hidden, universal language: a nucleus of situations and figures which are the very stuff from which stories are made. And once we become acquainted with this symbolic language, and begin to catch something of its extraordinary significance, there is literally no story in the world which cannot then be seen in a new light: because we have come to the heart of what stories are about and why we tell them.



The perception that various basic themes and situations seem to recur through human storytelling is scarcely a new one. I shall end this introduction with a kind of technical note giving a brief background to how, over the past two centuries, a succession of writers, anthropologists, scholars and psychologists have approached this puzzle from many different angles, as they tried to explain why the same basic types of story should be found in the literature, folk tales and myths of different cultures all over the world.

Where this present book approaches storytelling in a quite different way from anything written on this subject before, however, is the extent to which it looks at all kinds of storytelling on the same level. We are not concerned here just with the well-known plays and novels of what is regarded as 'serious' literature. We shall be looking at every type of story imaginable: from the myths of ancient Mesopotamia and Greece to James Bond and *Star Wars*; from central European folk tales to *E. I. and Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; from P. G. Wodehouse to Proust; from the Marx Brothers to the Marquis de Sade and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*; from the Biblical story of Job to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; from the tragedies of Aeschylus to Sherlock Holmes; from the operas of Wagner to *The Sound of Music*; from Dante's Divine Comedy to *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. This is because, when we penetrate to the root of what our impulse to imagine stories is really

about, we see there is in fact no kind of story, however serious or however trivial, which does not ultimately spring from the same source: which is not shaped by the same archetypal rules and spun from the same universal language.

To arrive at the point where all this can be finally seen in proper perspective, however, it is necessary to travel on a long and complex journey. And before we embark I should set out a brief route-map, so that it will become clear how the different stages of that exploration build on each other in working towards the eventual goal.

This book is divided into four parts.

Part one, 'The Seven Gateways To The Underworld', examines each of the seven 'basic plots' in turn. At first sight, each is quite distinctive. But as we work through the sequence, we gradually come to see how they have certain key elements in common; and how each is in fact presenting its own particular view of the same central preoccupation which lies at the heart of storytelling.

Part two, 'The Complete Happy Ending', looks more generally at what all these main story-types have in common. In particular we find that there are not only basic plots to stories but a cast of basic figures who reappear through stories of all kinds, each with their own defining characteristics. As we explore the values which each of these archetypal figures represents, and how they are related, this opens up an entirely new perspective on the essential drama with which storytelling is ultimately concerned. But we also come to see how there are certain conditions which must be met before any story can come to a fully resolved ending. This leads on in Part three to an investigation of one of the most revealing of all the factors which govern the way stories take shape in the human mind.

The third part of the book, 'Missing the Mark', which concentrates almost entirely on stories from the last 200 years, explores how and why it is possible, in a storyteller's imagination, for a story to 'go wrong'; or, as we say, 'lose the plot'. The first two parts of the book have been primarily concerned with those stories which express the archetypal patterns underlying them in a way which enables them to come to a fully resolved and satisfactory ending. In the third section of the book we see how, in the past two centuries, something extraordinary and highly significant has happened to storytelling in the western world. Not only do we look here at such an obvious question as why in recent times storytelling should have shown such a marked obsession with sex and violence. As we look at how each of the basic plots has developed what may be called its 'dark' and 'sentimental' versions, we see how a particular element of disintegration has crept into modern storytelling which distinguishes it from anything seen in history before. But this in turn merely reveals one of the most remarkable features of how stories take shape in the human imagination; because we also see how those archetypal rules which have governed storytelling since the dawn of history have in no way changed. In fact these 'aberrant' stories not only obey the same rules; they even in themselves provide all the clues to understanding what has gone amiss, and why they cannot come to fully satisfactory endings. They thus show us just how and why in the collective psyche of our culture this element of disintegration should have arisen.

This third part of the book ends with a chapter on what are arguably the two most centrally puzzling stories produced by the Western imagination, Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannos* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Only at this point have we at last completed the groundwork which is necessary to looking at the deepest questions of all. Just why in the course of our biological evolution has our species developed the capacity to create these patterns of images in our heads? What real purpose does it serve? And how do stories relate to what we call 'real life'?

These are the questions we look at in the fourth and final section of the book, 'Why We Tell Stories', which begins with two very significant types of story which we have not looked at before. This relates myths about the creation of the world and the 'fall from innocence' to the evolution of human consciousness and our relations with nature and instinct. In unravelling these riddles, what we see is how and why the hidden language of stories provides us with a picture of human nature and the inner dynamics of human behaviour which nothing else can present to us with such objective authority. We see how a proper understanding of why we tell stories sheds an extraordinary new light on almost every aspect of human existence: on our psychology; on morality; on the patterns of history and politics, and the nature of religion; on the underlying pattern and purpose of our individual lives.

The last two chapters, the longest in the book, attempt to use all we have learned about storytelling to reinterpret the psychological evolution of mankind since the dawn of civilisation. The first, 'Of Gods And Men', takes the story from the cave-paintings of Lascaux up to the French Revolution and the rise of Romanticism. The final chapter takes the story through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up to the present day, ending with the film-version of *The Lord of the Rings* and the second Gulf War of 2003. The book then ends with a brief epilogue touching on one of the greatest stories ever written, Plato's *Parable of the Cave*.

By the time we have reached this point in exploring the real reasons why we tell stories, I hope I shall have conveyed something of why there can be few more important mysteries left for humanity to unravel on this earth.

WHY DO SIMILAR STORIES APPEAR ALL OVER THE WORLD?

A HISTORICAL NOTE ON PREVIOUS APPROACHES TO THIS QUESTION

The earliest instance which has come to light of an author observing that similar stories and situations may be found throughout literature appears in the late eighteenth century, in James Boswell's biography of Dr Samuel Johnson. In one of those poignant references to projects which Johnson talked of during his life but never got round to completing, a friend recalled to Boswell how the great man had once mentioned his intention to write a book showing (in the words quoted at the beginning of this Prologue):

'how small a quantity of REAL FICTION there is in the world; and that the same images, with very little variation, have served all the authors who have ever written.'

Dr Johnson was one of the best-read men of his age. He was familiar with virtually the whole of the surviving literature of classical times, not to mention most of the outstanding plays and novels written since the Renaissance (at least in English). It seems clear that his sharp and capacious mind had been so struck by the constant recurrence of certain images and situations in storytelling that he hoped one day to think about the matter more systematically. Alas, he leaves us with nothing more than this tantalising clue as to how far his observations might have taken him.

Another well-read near-contemporary of Johnson's whose thoughts seem to have turned in the same direction was Goethe (1749-1832), who several times in his *Conversations With Eckermann* touches on the same question: most notably in the remark often quoted since:

'Gozzi maintained that there can be but thirty-six dramatic situations; Schiller took great pains to find more, but was unable to find even as many as Gozzi.'²

Then, from quite another direction, in the second half of the nineteenth century, came the startling discovery by the growing army of anthropologists, ethnologists and students of folklore of the extent to which the same themes and motifs appeared through the myths and folktales of the entire world. It was not just that, as Sir James Frazer showed in *The Golden Bough* (1890), there were remarkable similarities in the central religious myths of different cultures, such as the idea of the god who dies and is reborn (as early as 1871 George Eliot's Mr Casaubon in *Middlemarch* had been engaged on 'a great work' to show that 'all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed': again, we are not given the slightest clue as to why Casaubon might have come to such a notion). The really startling thing was that the assiduous collectors of folktales were now coming across versions of the same basic story cropping up from places culturally and geographically so far apart that it no longer seemed possible that such stories could have sprung from just one original source. It was one thing for variants of, say, the 'Cinderella story' to be found all over Europe, from Serbia to the Shetlands, from Russia to Spain; at least all these countries did share some common cultural and linguistic traditions. But when the same story was found, in different guises, in China, in Africa and among the North American Indians, it was clear that its ubiquity could no longer be explained simply in terms of cultural contact, or of a common historical source, however archaic.

So where did the stories come from? One response of many of these late-nineteenth century writers was to suggest that somehow all these stories, myths and legends were simply attempts to explain and to dramatise natural phenomena, familiar to all mankind. One popular theory, particularly associated with the

2. Frustratingly, there is no reference to this in the extensive surviving correspondence between Schiller and Gozzi, the leading German and Italian playwrights of their day. At the beginning of the twentieth century George Polt was inspired by Goethe's reference to compile his own, somewhat laborious survey, *The Thirty Six Dramatic Situations*. While he goes into elaborate detail about such motifs as 'Supplication of the Beloved By Those Dear to the Suppliant', Polt is not, however, concerned with actual plots so much as mere 'situations'; and only with 'tragic situations' at that.

philologist Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) was that stories of the god who dies and is reborn were 'solar myths', describing the setting and rising of the sun. It was suggested that the widespread folktales in which a heroine is eaten by a monster must have had something to do with the sun being 'eaten' by the moon in the course of an eclipse. Others held that the tales of 'dragons' and 'monsters' found all over the world originated in the discovery of dinosaur bones. But such theories were wholly inadequate to explain the astonishing universality, not just of the stories themselves, but often of the tiny details by which they were expressed – even though a more sophisticated version of these 'metaphors for nature' arguments has been advanced in more recent times by writers like the Canadian academic Northrop Frye, who attempted in his *Anatomy of Criticism* to relate the underlying forms of Tragedy and Comedy to the theme of 'death and resurrection' in the natural cycle of the year (Winter giving way to Spring, and so forth).

A second response, particularly popular among the experts on folklore themselves, has been to say in effect that there is simply no satisfactory all-embracing explanation for the ubiquity of certain story-forms. Since Victorian times, the accumulation of parallels and links between the folk tales of hundreds of different cultures has turned into a major academic industry. Well over 1000 versions have been collected of the 'Cinderella story' alone. The 'literature', as scholars call it, now abounds in whole libraries-full of such items as 'Three Hundred and Forty Five Variants of Cinderella, Catskin and Cap O'Rushes, abstracted and tabulated, with discussion of Mediaeval Analogues and Notes'; or 'Tom-Tit-Tot: A Comparative Essay on Aarne-Thompson Type 500 – The Name of the Helper'; or 'A New Classification of the Fundamental Version of the Tar Baby Story on the basis of Two Hundred and Sixty Seven Versions'. Certainly the folklorists have established that the spreading of tales through cultural contact has been a far more complex process through history than might at first seem conceivable. Stories told to the Grimm brothers by German peasants in the early nineteenth century, for instance, have been traced back to Indian sources dating from well over a thousand years before, having entered Europe via trading routes or at the time of the Crusades, and been endlessly reworked by countless different storytellers in between. Stories collected in Africa and Asia in modern times as 'indigenous folk tales' have been traced back in turn to the Grimms, having been passed on by missionaries and dressed up in local clothing.

But one consequence of uncovering such complexities is that these busy collectors have been so overwhelmed by the Everest of material they have accumulated that they have finally despaired of finding any theory that actually might make sense of it all: that might discern a common ground in human psychology to account not just for the origin of the tales and their recurring features but also, just as important, for their continuing appeal through many generations to millions of outwardly quite different people, living in quite different cultural circumstances. In the words of Peter and Iona Opie:

'Happily such all-embracing theories are now regarded with scepticism. It is no longer felt that any one theory is likely to account satisfactorily for even the majority of the

tales. Their well-springs are certainly numerous ... their meanings – if ever they had meanings – are thought to be diverse. Each tale, it is now believed, should be studied separately.³

The sigh of relief that one no longer has to think about such difficult matters is almost audible! However, the fundamental riddle remains.

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A rather deeper approach to this whole problem in fact began to emerge more than a century ago when the German ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) first put forward the theory that the human mind seems to be so constituted that it naturally works in certain forms or grooves, and round certain basic images. He accounted for the similarities he had discovered in the myths and folk tales of the primitive cultures he had studied by suggesting that such stories were based on what he called *elementargedanken* or 'elemental ideas', which somehow derive from the very nature of the human psyche, and which therefore all human beings have in common.

It was some years later that Sigmund Freud, in the 1890s, began to suggest that a great deal of human behaviour could be explained by the fact that enormous areas of our psychic activity lie in that part of the mind we call the unconscious, below the threshold of our conscious awareness. One of the most obvious ways in which we become aware of the existence of this is through our dreams, which spontaneously present to us sequences of pictures, like fragments of stories, without our being able to intervene consciously in controlling their contents in any way. And Freud was, of course, particularly struck by the parallels he observed between the contents of dreams and the themes of certain myths.

Perhaps in some way such myths were related to the very basis of the way we unconsciously perceive the world: to the inner patterns of our psychic development as individuals? Certainly the celebrated example of the 'Oedipal triangle', the perennial battle of the child to cope satisfactorily with the vast, overshadowing psychic presence of its parents, seemed to show a remarkable correspondence between an ancient myth and the experience of countless modern individuals whose problems seemed in large part to derive from this major hurdle on the road to establishing their own healthy, independent psychic identity. Perhaps all the other motifs of myth and folklore could be seen in the same Freudian light, as stories of 'rapacious mothers' (Hansel and Gretel), 'castration fears' (the sword which breaks) or the 'escape from the womb' (Jonah and the whale). After all, this was certainly relating stories to something universally experienced by mankind: our sexuality, our most fundamental human relationships, our memories of birth and fears of death. Over the past 100 years innumerable attempts have been made to interpret myths, folk tales and other stories in this way, from Ernest Jones's essay analysing Hamlet as another example of the Oedipal triangle to Dr Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) analysing the reasons for the appeal and value of the old fairy tales to the children of today.

3. Introduction to *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Peter and Iona Opie (Oxford University Press, 1974).

But still, as a comprehensive explanation of stories, such an approach seemed far from adequate: even in many instances grotesquely limited. However universal and important our relations with our parents or our sexuality may be, this surely was not the whole explanation of the complex structure of myths and tales all over the world, in all their myriad guises? Was there not a yet deeper level at which the meaning of these tales might be found: not necessarily one which rejected the Freudian explanation in its entirety, but one which transcended it, reflecting something much deeper and more universal altogether?

When I first came to this subject through my initial researches into the basic plots underlying stories, I discovered that in the previous 70 years yet another, much more fundamental, approach to myths and folk tales had been emerging which corresponded more closely to what I had begun to recognise as the real nature of stories. So much does my own approach lie in this tradition, and so much did it help me to understand all sorts of things about stories more clearly, that I will not even attempt to summarise it here, since it is implicit in much of the book which follows, and at certain points, where appropriate, I hope I shall make that debt explicit.

Suffice it to say that this tradition has in many ways built on that first perception by Bastian, over a century ago, that the human imagination seems to be so constituted that it naturally works round certain 'elemental' shapes and images; and on the further insight of Freud and others that, for an explanation of a great deal of what is most significant in human behaviour we must look into those parts of the psyche of which we cannot be directly aware, because they are below the threshold of our immediate consciousness. But whereas Freud became preoccupied with just a part of the picture, with sexuality and with the problems of the individual psyche, his Swiss colleague Carl Jung moved on to the much wider question of how, at a deeper level, we are all psychologically constructed in the same essential way. We all, at that deeper level, have the same psychological make-up, in much the same way as we are all genetically 'programmed' to grow physically; and it is only on, as it were, the more superficial levels of our psyche that our individuality emerges, and that each of us finds our own individual problems in coping with the 'programme' of development that our deeper unconscious has laid down for us.

If we are looking for an explanation of why certain images, symbols and shaping forms recur in stories to an extent far greater than can be accounted for just by cultural transmission, we must look first to those deeper levels of the unconscious which we all have in common, as part of our basic genetic inheritance. These work around what Jung called 'archetypes': 'the ancient river beds along which our psychic current naturally flows'; and it is only on this level of the archetypal structures that the basic meaning and purpose of the patterns underlying storytelling can be found.

Jung himself, of course, wrote much about myths and folk tales, as have many of his followers, such as Marie-Louise von Franz. Another author generally in the

same tradition was the American Joseph Campbell who attempted in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and *The Masks of God* to relate an enormous amount of such storytelling to what he called 'the monomyth', a kind of universal story of which individual myths and tales merely present different aspects. Other authors have extended this kind of general approach to take in some of the better-known literary works of our culture, as did Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* and Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death In The American Novel*, cited in the pages which follow. And I cannot conclude this brief summary of writers whose work I found illuminating without referring to an author much less well-known than any of these, John Vyvyan, whose little book *The Shakespearean Ethic* was not only an attempt to extend this kind of analysis to some of Shakespeare's plays, but is also the most original book about Shakespeare I have ever read.

The crucial point of departure, however, widening out these approaches in a way which allows us at last to see the activity of telling stories from a wholly new perspective, is the recognition that all kinds of story, however profound or how-ever trivial, ultimately spring from the same source, are shaped around the same basic patterns and are governed by the same hidden, universal rules.

At this point our journey can begin.



the world, just as our own ego-consciousness has called into being those 'weapons of mass destruction' – biological, chemical and nuclear – which could bring about the destruction of our own world. But on the far side of the eternal winter and holocaust of fire which marks the final catastrophe, comes Odin's vision of some strange and wonderful rebirth.

The truth is that we can dream dreams, we can paint word-pictures, we can imagine stories – but they cannot tell us for certain how the story of mankind will end, let alone what form such a 'rebirth' might take. As Robert Frost had it:

'Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire,  
I hold with those who favour fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate,  
To say that, for destruction, ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.'

What stories can tell us, however, much more profoundly than we have realised, is how our human nature works, and why we think and behave in this world as we do. That is why I believe that to arrive at a proper understanding of why our species has the compulsion to imagine stories is as important a riddle as there is left for mankind to solve on this earth.

Even if it cannot save us from ourselves, it may help us to understand why Dante ended his great poem on that most extraordinary thought of all: his vision that, even when life is ended, we can still be absorbed back into that unimaginable power which ultimately holds all the universe together and which continues for ever: the love that moves the sun and the other stars.

## EPILOGUE

The Light and the Shadows  
on the Wall

'First people deny a thing; then they belittle it; then they say it was known all along.'

Alexander von Humboldt

One of the most profound stories in the world is really no more than an elaborate image: Plato's Parable of the Cave.<sup>1</sup> He conjures up the picture of a row of men, imprisoned in a cave, their gaze forcibly fixed in only one direction. Here on the wall in front of them they see a constant play of shadows as figures and objects pass in front of a fire behind them; and, since this is all they ever see, they take it for the reality of the world in which they live.

One of them then finds himself free to look around and move from his place. He dimly sees above and behind them what appears to be a purer, stronger light than that of the flickering fire. He makes the rough and steep ascent up to its source, to discover that it is coming from the mouth of the cave. He steps out into the daylight, where he sees the sun. At first its light is so bright that he is blinded. But as he gradually becomes accustomed to it, he can for the first time gaze on the real world outside the cave and all that is in it.

'Dazzled by what he has seen, he makes his way back down into the darkness to where his old companions are still transfixed, like a modern television audience, by the play of shadows on the wall. He tries to explain to them the wonder of what he has witnessed, but there is no way they can understand what he is talking about. The dancing shadows on the wall are the only reality they know. They laugh at him, imagine he is making up his story about what he has seen, and call him mad. He, on the other hand, can now see the shapes on the wall clearly for what they are, as no more than shadows and illusions. He can longer share his companions' commendation of each other for all their clever observations about the shadows, and what they represent, because he has glimpsed 'reality'.

The archetypal essence of this story is much the same as that symbolised in the Cheyenne story of *Jumping Mouse*. When Jumping Mouse returns to the dark forest and tries to tell his fellow mice about his journey to the great river, and how he had caught a far-off glimpse of the 'Sacred Mountain', they cannot understand what he is talking about and scorn him.

The forest-dwelling mice, like Plato's cave-dwellers, represent collective ego-consciousness. They are naturally sure the world they see around them is real,

1. *The Republic*, Book VII.

because it is all their limited state of consciousness allows them to see. The hero of each of these stories has found that the walls of his consciousness have suddenly fallen away, allowing him to glimpse something immeasurably more real. But having been through such an inspiring experience, there is no way he can communicate it to his companions, because their vision is still bound by the limitations of the ego. As the Argentine novelist Jorge Luis Borges once put it, for a believer to try to communicate to an atheist what is meant by 'God' is like trying to explain to a blind man what is meant by the colour yellow.

One day, I believe, it will eventually be seen that for a long time one of the most remarkable failures of our scientific approach to understanding the world was not to perceive that our urge to imagine stories is something just as much governed by laws which lay it open to scientific investigation as the structures of the atom or the genome.

The paradox, as is mirrored by Plato's Parable, is that it is the very nature of our limited ego-consciousness which stands in the way of our seeing how much stories can teach us about the limitations on our consciousness.

That is why among those who will unconsciously experience the greatest resistance to the approach put forward by this book are those critics and specialists in 'literature' who are already sure that they know what stories are about. Many of the interpretations of individual stories in these pages will contradict views they have already formed and would find it hard to abandon.

But in the end, however inadequately I may have argued the case, the general approach to stories set out in this book will come to be widely accepted, simply because it opens up our understanding of why we tell stories in a way which makes it scientifically comprehensible. However many examples the hypothesis is tested against, the laws hold. These are the shapes around which our mind creates stories. This is why we respond to them in the way we do.

Obviously a crucial moment in the narrative we have been following is the change which has come over storytelling in the past 200 years. It is the very fact that so many stories have 'lost the plot' in this way, reflecting such a fundamental psychic shift in our culture, which has made it possible to see much more clearly just what is the purpose of the archetypal patterns underlying stories when they are functioning properly. In Dr Salk's words, 'it is where life's normal structures are disturbed that we come to know the essential laws of the species'.

There is nothing with which stories are more intimately concerned, as we have seen, than the conflict between 'dark' and 'light'. Yet, in the words quoted earlier from Laurence Whistler, the light needs the dark to become articulate'. The very reason why we see the world in terms of this contrast stems from the fact that our consciousness has become separated from its instinctive unity with nature. And certainly in some respects, the further we move away from that unity, as the history of the past two centuries shows, the more confused and lost we become. But the more we experience the darkness and spiritual void this leads to, the easier in some ways it becomes to recognise what it is we have become exiled from. As we explore the shallowness and limitations of the world into which we are unconsciously led by the darkness of the human ego, the more consciously we can appre-

ciate the 'light', in ways which would never have been possible had we not been separated from it.

Dante needed to travel down to the very lowest point of hell before he could begin the climb up to Paradise. Odysseus needed to go through the hell and darkness of his twelve ordeals before he was ready to reclaim his 'other half' and his kingdom. Christ needed to die in his 'ego self' before he could be resurrected in the Self that is eternal. In our own time, those Soviet 'dissidents' needed to endure the Communist tyranny of lies at its worst, before they could become inwardly strong enough to recognise the truth.

Whatever the power that created the universe, what more extraordinary act of the imagination could there be than that it should create a tiny part of that material universe which took on its own separate existence, in a way which enabled it to reproduce itself, creating life? And then that this strange new entity should gradually differentiate out of itself, becoming more and more complex, until it required two different individual organisms of the same species to join together to produce a third – which would then have to unite with a fourth for the process to be repeated. And then that part of this entity, life, should eventually become so unimaginably more complex that it developed a unique new form of consciousness, enabling it not only to step outside its unconscious obedience to instinct but to use it to speculate as to where it had come from and why it had been created.

Many of these new individual organisms might conclude that their only function in existing was to live separately from that totality of life from which they had emerged, and to enjoy the pleasures of gratifying their instincts until the time came for them to be extinguished. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Others, however, might look on the world and the universe into which they had been born with a sense of holy awe, as the miraculous totality of which they had individual consciousness was just a fleeting, minuscule expression.

The cosmic mind which had originally set all this in motion had at last created an organism which could, however dimly, share a tiny bit of its own consciousness; which could become aware of its own transcendent existence; which could sense that behind all creation and all the universe was one unifying power which bound it all together, as one substance, one structure, one all-connecting impulse and one spirit which, because it transcended matter, was eternal: that four-in-one quaternity which the human mind was to translate into the terms of its own understanding as body, mind, heart and soul. And one way in which it would do this was by imagining it in terms of stories.

In the end we are all of us in a sense experts on stories, because nothing is closer to us than to see the world in the form of stories. Not only are our heads full of stories all the time; we are each of us acting out our own story throughout our lives. Outwardly male or female, we are each of us, like David Copperfield, cast as the hero of the story of our own life – just as we are equally its heroine. And the aim of our life, as we see from stories, is that those two should become one, to 'live happily ever after'.

Wherever possible, I have tried in this book to supply the original thought behind all the terms we use when we are talking about stories: hubris, nemesis,

denouement, catastrophe. The only words for which no dictionary seems to provide the original root idea are in a way the most important of all: those words 'hero' and 'heroine' themselves. But, after many years working on this book, I am convinced that, lost in the mists of history, they must be closely related in some way to our word 'heir'. In other words, the hero or the heroine is he or she who is born to inherit; who is worthy to succeed; who must grow up as fit to take on the torch of life from those who went before.

Such is the essence of the task laid on each of us as we come into this world. That is what stories are trying to tell us.

## THE SEVEN BASIC PLOTS

### Author's Personal Note

When in the autumn of 1969 it was first decided that I should write this book, I had little idea that 34 years would elapse before it was finished. To spend half a lifetime writing a single book is obviously ridiculous, and my first debt is to all those people during the decades between who, when told that I was working on a book on 'the basic plots of storytelling', greeted the idea that anyone should attempt such a project with such enthusiasm. Their warm response gave me more encouragement than they can have known; even though, as the years went by, not a few began to express a suspicion that, like Dr Casaubon's 'key to all mythologies', my efforts would never see the light of day.

The idea for the book originated when I was working on a book called *The Neophiliacs*, analysing the changes which had taken place in English life in the 1950s and 1960s. By the time this was published in October 1969 I had already seen enough of the unconscious patterns underlying the way in which we imagine stories to wish to explore them more systematically. At dinner with my then-agent Diana Crawford, in a long-vanished restaurant off Buckingham Gate, we agreed that I should follow that impulse; and I set to work, knowing that my first task would be to read through a wide variety of stories, to see how the idea might develop.

The following year I gave a talk on *Hamlet* and the underlying pattern of Tragedy at my old school, Shrewsbury, and parts of that lecture have been incorporated into Chapter 30 as the oldest surviving chunk of the book's final text. Within 18 months, having filled a pile of notebooks with synopses, I had completed a first draft outline of 'the seven basic plots', already recognising two general principles on which it would be advisable to choose examples to illustrate the theme.

Firstly, to convey the 'universality' of these recurring patterns behind storytelling it would be necessary to include as wide a range of story-types as possible, from myths and folk tales, through the plays and novels of 'great literature', to the Hollywood films, thrillers and science fiction of the present day. But, secondly, to prevent the argument becoming clogged with endless obscure plot-summaries, it would be desirable wherever possible to use stories which were already familiar to the greatest number of potential readers. This would mean keeping in general within the Western cultural tradition of storytelling, only mentioning instances outside it where this was necessary to underline the ubiquity of a particular theme.

One enormous debt I owed at this early stage was to the Penguin Classics series, launched in 1944 by E. V. Rieu whose translation of the *Odyssey* was a particular