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# *The Atlantic*

## **All Stories Are the Same**

From *Avatar* to *The Wizard of Oz*, Aristotle to Shakespeare, there's one clear form that dramatic storytelling has followed since its inception.



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**JOHN YORKE**

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A ship lands on an alien shore and a young man, desperate to prove himself, is tasked with befriending the inhabitants and extracting their secrets. Enchanted by their way of life, he falls in love with a local girl and starts to distrust his masters. Discovering their man has gone native, they in turn resolve to destroy both him and the native population once and for all.

*Avatar* or *Pocahontas*? As stories they're almost identical. Some have even accused James Cameron of stealing the Native American myth. But it's both simpler and more complex than that, for the underlying structure is common not only to these two tales, but to all of them.

Take three different stories:

A dangerous monster threatens a community. One man takes it on himself to kill the beast and restore happiness to the kingdom ...

It's the story of *Jaws*, released in 1976. But it's also the story of *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon epic poem published some time between the eighth and 11th centuries.

And it's more familiar than that: It's *The Thing*, it's *Jurassic Park*, it's *Godzilla*, it's *The Blob*—all films with real tangible monsters. If you recast the monsters in human form, it's also every James Bond film, every episode of *MI5*, *House*, or *CSI*. You can see the same shape in *The Exorcist*, *The Shining*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Scream*, *Psycho*, and *Saw*. The monster may change from a literal one in *Nightmare on Elm Street* to a corporation in *Erin Brockovich*, but the underlying architecture—in which a foe is vanquished and order restored to a community—stays the same. The monster can be fire in *The Towering Inferno*, an upturned boat in *The Poseidon Adventure*, or a boy's mother in *Ordinary*

*People*. Though superficially dissimilar, the skeletons of each are identical.

Our hero stumbles into a brave new world. At first he is transfixed by its splendor and glamour, but slowly things become more sinister . . .

It's *Alice in Wonderland*, but it's also *The Wizard of Oz*, *Life on Mars*, and *Gulliver's Travels*. And if you replace fantastical worlds with worlds that appear fantastical merely to the protagonists, then quickly you see how *Brideshead Revisited*, *Rebecca*, *The Line of Beauty*, and *The Third Man* all fit the pattern too.

When a community finds itself in peril and learns the solution lies in finding and retrieving an elixir far, far away, a member of the tribe takes it on themselves to undergo the perilous journey into the unknown ...

It's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Morte D'Arthur*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Watership Down*. And if you transplant it from fantasy into something a little more earthbound, it's *Master and Commander*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Guns of Navarone*, and *Apocalypse Now*. If you then change the object of the characters' quest, you find *Rififi*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Ocean's Eleven*, *Easy Rider*, and *Thelma & Louise*.

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So three different tales turn out to have multiple derivatives. Does that mean that when you boil it down there are only three different types of story? No. *Beowulf*, *Alien*, and *Jaws* are ‘monster’ stories—but they’re also about individuals plunged into a new and terrifying world. In classic “quest” stories like *Apocalypse Now* or *Finding Nemo* the protagonists encounter both monsters and strange new worlds. Even “Brave New World” stories such as *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Witness*, and *Legally Blonde* fit all three definitions: The characters all have some kind of quest, and all have their own monsters to vanquish too. Though they are superficially different, they all share the same framework and the same story engine: All plunge their characters into a strange new world; all involve a quest to find a way out of it; and in whatever form they choose to take, in every story “monsters” are vanquished. All, at some level, too, have as their goal safety, security, completion, and the importance of home.

But these tenets don’t just appear in films, novels, or indeed TV series like *Homeland* or *The Killing*. A 9-year-old child of my friend decided he wanted to tell a story. He didn’t consult anyone about it, he just wrote it down:

A family are looking forward to going on holiday. Mom has to sacrifice the holiday in order to pay the rent. Kids find map buried in garden to treasure hidden in the woods, and decide to go after it. They get in loads of trouble and are chased before they finally find it and go on even better holiday.

Why would a child unconsciously echo a story form that harks back

centuries? Why, when writing so spontaneously, would he display knowledge of story structure that echoes so clearly generations of tales that have gone before? Why do we all continue to draw our stories from the very same well? It could be because each successive generation copies from the last, thus allowing a series of conventions to become established. But while that may help explain the ubiquity of the pattern, its sturdy resistance to iconoclasm and the freshness and joy with which it continues to reinvent itself suggest something else is going on.

Storytelling has a shape. It dominates the way all stories are told and can be traced back not just to the Renaissance, but to the very beginnings of the recorded word. It's a structure that we absorb avidly whether in art-house or airport form and it's a shape that may be—though we must be careful—a universal archetype.

Most writing on art is by people who are not artists: thus all the misconceptions.

—Eugène Delacroix

The quest to detect a universal story structure is not a new one. From the Prague School and the Russian Formalists of the early 20th century, via Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots*, many have set themselves the task of trying to understand how stories work. In my own field it's a veritable industry—there are hundreds of books about screenwriting (though almost nothing sensible about television). I've read most of them, but the more I read the more two issues nag away:

1. Most of them posit completely different systems, all of which claim to be the sole and only way to write stories. How can they all possibly claim to be right?
2. None of them asks “Why?”

Some of these tomes contain invaluable information; more than a few have worthwhile insights; all of them are keen to tell us how and with great fervor insist that “there must be an inciting incident on page 12,” but none of them explains why this should be. Which, when you think about it, is crazy: If you can’t answer “why,” the “how” is an edifice built on sand. And then, once you attempt to answer it yourself, you start to realize that much of the theory—incisive though some of it is—doesn’t quite add up. Did God decree an inciting incident should occur on page 12, or that there were 12 stages to a hero’s journey? Of course not: They’re constructs. Unless we can find a coherent reason why these shapes exist, then there’s little reason to take these people seriously. They’re snake-oil salesmen, peddling their wares on the frontier.

I’ve been telling stories for almost all my adult life, and I’ve had the extraordinary privilege of working on some of the most popular shows on British television. I’ve created storylines that have reached over 20 million viewers and I’ve been intimately involved with programs that helped redefine the dramatic landscape. I’ve worked, almost uniquely in the industry, on both art-house and populist mainstream programs, loved both equally, and the more I’ve told stories, the more I’ve realized that the underlying pattern of these plots—the ways in which an audience demands certain things—has an extraordinary uniformity.

Eight years ago I started to read everything on storytelling. More importantly I started to interrogate all the writers I'd worked with about how they write. Some embraced the conventions of three-act structure, some refuted it—and some refuted it while not realizing they used it anyway. A few writers swore by four acts, some by five; others claimed that there were no such things as acts at all. Some had conscientiously learned from screenwriting manuals while others decried structural theory as the devil's spawn. But there was one unifying factor in every good script I read, whether authored by brand new talent or multiple award-winners, and that was that they all shared the same underlying structural traits.

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**In stories throughout the ages there is one motif that continually recurs—the journey into the woods to find the dark but life-giving secret within.**

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By asking two simple questions—what were these traits; and why did they recur—I unlocked a cupboard crammed full of history. I soon discovered that the three-act paradigm was not an invention of the modern age but an articulation of something much more primal; that modern act structure was a reaction to dwindling audience attention spans and the invention of the curtain. Perhaps more intriguingly, the history of five-act drama took me back to the Romans, via the 19-century French dramatist Eugène Scribe and the German novelist Gustav Freytag to Molière, Shakespeare, and Jonson. I began to understand that, if there really was an archetype, it had to apply not just to screenwriting, but to all narrative structures. One either tells all stories according to a pattern or none at all. If storytelling does have a universal shape, this has to be self-evident.

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When it comes to structure, how much do writers actually need to know?  
Here's Guillermo Del Toro on film theory:

You have to liberate people from [it], not give them a corset in which they have to fit their story, their life, their emotions, the way they feel about the world. Our curse is that the film industry is 80 percent run by the half-informed. You have people who have read Joseph Campbell and Robert McKee, and now they're talking to you about the hero's journey, and you want to fucking cut off their dick and stuff it in their mouth.

Del Toro echoes the thoughts of many writers and filmmakers; there's an ingrained belief for many that the study of structure is, implicitly, a betrayal of their genius; it's where mediocrities seek a substitute muse. Such study can only end in one way. David Hare puts it well: "The audience is bored. It can predict the exhausted UCLA film-school formulae—acts, arcs, and personal journeys—from the moment that they start cranking. It's angry and insulted by being offered so much Jung-for-Beginners, courtesy of Joseph Campbell. All great work is now outside genre."

Charlie Kaufman, who has done more than most in Hollywood to push the boundaries of form, goes further: "There's this inherent screenplay structure that everyone seems to be stuck on, this three-act thing. It doesn't really interest me. I actually think I'm probably more interested in structure than most people who write screenplays, because I think about it." But they protest too much. Hare's study of addiction *My Zinc Bed* and Kaufman's screenplay for *Being John Malkovich* are perfect examples of classic story form. However much they hate it (and their anger I think betrays them), they can't help but follow a blueprint they profess to detest. Why?



All stories are forged from the same template, writers simply don't have any choice as to the structure they use; the laws of physics, of logic, and of form dictate they must all follow the very same path.

Is this therefore the magic key to storytelling? Such hubris requires caution—the compulsion to order, to explain, to catalogue, is also the tendency of the train-spotter. In denying the rich variety and extraordinary multi-faceted nature of narrative, one risks becoming no better than Casaubon, the desiccated husk from *Middlemarch*, who turned his back on life while seeking to explain it. It's all too tempting to reduce wonder to a scientific formula and unweave the rainbow.

But there are rules. As the creator of *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom*, Aaron Sorkin, puts it: “The real rules are the rules of drama, the rules that Aristotle talks about. The fake TV rules are the rules that dumb TV execs will tell you; ‘You can't do this, you've got to do—you need three of these and five of those.’ Those things are silly.” Sorkin expresses what all great artists know—that they need to have an understanding of craft. Every form of artistic composition, like any language, has a grammar, and that grammar, that structure, is not just a construct—it's the most beautiful and intricate expression of the workings of the human mind.

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It's important to assert that writers don't need to understand structure. Many of the best have an uncanny ability to access story shape unconsciously, for it lies as much within their minds as it does in a 9-year-old's.

There's no doubt that for many those rules help. Friedrich Engels put it

pithily: “Freedom is the recognition of necessity.” A piano played without knowledge of time and key soon becomes wearisome to listen to; following the conventions of form didn’t inhibit Beethoven, Mozart, and Shostakovich. Even if you’re going to break rules (and why shouldn’t you?) you have to have a solid grounding in them first. The modernist pioneers—Abstract Impressionists, Cubists, Surrealists, and Futurists—all were masters of figurative painting before they shattered the form. They had to know their restrictions before they could transcend them. As the art critic Robert Hughes observed:

With scarcely an exception, every significant artist of the last hundred years, from Seurat to Matisse, from Picasso to Mondrian, from Beckmann to de Kooning, was drilled (or drilled himself) in “academic” drawing—the long tussle with the unforgiving and the real motif which, in the end, proved to be the only basis on which the real formal achievements of modernism could be raised. Only in that way was the right radical distortion within a continuous tradition earned, and its results raised above the level of improvisory play ... The philosophical beauty of Mondrian’s squares and grids begins with the empirical beauty of his apple trees.

Cinema and television contain much great work that isn’t structurally orthodox (particularly in Europe), but even then its roots still lie firmly in, and are a reaction to, a universal archetype. As Hughes says, they are a conscious distortion of a continuing tradition. The masters did not abandon the basic tenets of composition; they merely subsumed them into art no longer bound by verisimilitude. All great artists—in music, drama, literature,

in art itself—have an understanding of the rules whether that knowledge is conscious or not. “You need the eye, the hand, and the heart,” proclaims the ancient Chinese proverb. “Two won’t do.”

Storytelling is an indispensable human preoccupation, as important to us all—almost—as breathing. From the mythical campfire tale to its explosion in the post-television age, it dominates our lives. It behooves us then to try and understand it. Delacroix countered the fear of knowledge succinctly: “First learn to be a craftsman; it won’t keep you from being a genius.” In stories throughout the ages there is one motif that continually recurs—the journey into the woods to find the dark but life-giving secret within.

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*This article has been adapted from John Yorke’s book, [Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story](#).*

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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