

## The Story We Tell Ourselves

“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again;  
there is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>1</sup>

WHEN YOU READ A BOOK, WATCH A MOVIE, OR LISTEN TO SOMEONE drone on about their vacation, you are an audience to a story. The hope of all audiences is that the time invested will be well spent. This hope stems from more than a desire to be entertained, though entertainment is certainly part of the equation.

People like to be preached at during a movie the same way they want to have an animal rights activist give them a tour at the zoo. The last thing most people want when they watch a movie is to be told what or how to think. We do not crack open a Dickens novel or toss in a Francis Ford Coppola movie and think, “Good. I’m gonna learn something,” but learn something we will. While we sit back and enjoy that movie, book, or television show we are also delivered a moral message. Ever heard of ‘the moral of the story’?

How can we be preached at and not even know it? In this case it is because we are being entertained. The entertainment aspect of movies sweetens the moral message, but the lesson is there and it is delivered in a surprisingly systematic way.

Each story begins with a Central Question—Will the boy get the girl? Can the hero learn to forgive? Can you fight city hall? The hero struggles through

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1. Ecclesiastes 1:9–14 (NIV)

various trials on his way to learning the moral of the story—and in that ending we see the Answer to the Central Question.

We inherently recognize this structure and unconsciously expect to hear it when we hear a story. When the structure is broken, we lose interest and begin to grumble. If the middle of the story is too long, we become bored. If the Central Question is not posed clearly enough, we are confused. When the final Act does not answer the Central Question or does not show the Central Answer in practice, we feel the ending was a letdown. As naturally as we expect food to taste good and sleep to revitalize us, we expect stories to be delivered in this systematic, fulfilling way.

All cultures tell stories. Ancient Mayans, Chinese, Chaldeans, and Inuit made storytelling central to their cultures—transmitted one generation’s wisdom to the next, all infused with valuable lessons. Even in many of today’s tribal societies the office of storyteller is sacred and holds religious weight. In both Middle-Eastern and modern Western society this is seen, to a certain degree, through Biblical stories—stories accurately passed from one generation to the next until recorded by Moses or Samuel or John. Through storytelling, people consolidated their beliefs and an identity was created.

Why do we tell tales of great heroes and terrible villains? Our answer may lie within the astounding fact that across all times and cultures, people not only told stories, they told the same story.

From Gilgamesh to Cinderella to Harry Potter, all stories follow the same path. In effect, they are the same story. Yes, I am saying that *The Count of Monte Cristo* follows the same narrative path found in *Fletch*. From Native American myths, to centuries-old Sub-Saharan African folktales, to Norse legends, our stories have the same foundational structure and characters. No matter the place or the time, in its essence Story remains the same and, collectively, tells the same narrative. Its repetition connects all of mankind. We are compelled by a strange urge to repeat this identical story, in one form or another, to all who will listen. This is what I call The Great Story.

## The Great Story

Ultimately, the only differences between one story and another are ornamental. Each is nearly identical in structure.<sup>2</sup>

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2. While I call this structure The Great Story, much of this material is not original to me. The classic three-act structure can be traced back to Aristotle. It has been fleshed out by numerous intellectuals such as Joseph Campbell who, himself, lifted the term *monomyth* from James Joyce to describe the structure.

**Read the entire book!**

*You Are What You See: Watching Movies Through a Christian Lens*

available now at [YouAreWhatYouSee.com](http://YouAreWhatYouSee.com).

Great minds have spent decades of research in attempts to define the structure of Story. Luminaries such as Joseph Campbell, Otto Rank, Lord Raglan, Phil Cousineau, Georges Polti, Christopher Vogler<sup>3</sup>, and Alan Dundes have all written books and essays on the subject, explored the subject with academic poise. Despite all the relentless, dry writing and stuffy talk, the work of these men produced fascinating results.

The Great Story is a simple story we react to positively whenever we encounter it. Like a house, this story has a framework that keeps it stable. The common way this structure is expressed is that it has three parts: a beginning, middle, and an ending. In practice, it looks like this:

Having reached the end of my rope, I decided to make a change.  
I went to the store and bought a flamethrower. I came home to  
get rid of those pesky squirrels once and for all.

As clumsy as this is, it replicates The Great Story. Following the three-part structure, it provides a beginning (“Having reached the end of my rope, I decided to make a change.”), follows with the middle (“I went to the store and bought a flamethrower.”), and then seals the deal with an ending (“I came home to get rid of those pesky squirrels once and for all.”).

Every story deemed worthwhile follows this basic structure. Not to say that this particular story is worth telling; it is rather abrupt and unpleasant. However, this is the basic structure for all stories, be they from ancient China, the Roman Empire, or by a Canadian in a Toronto bar explaining how he lost his foot to a badger.

If the storyteller follows the traditional story structure, we instinctively understand the gist of the tale. Comprehension breeds a willingness to agree and, by extension, to enjoy what is being said. Now, the tale I have about purchasing a flamethrower to do away with the pests in my backyard may not strike you as a rational tale (and it is not rational, for those of you still on the fence about that), but by following the set structure, I have laid out a story which explains what I am doing and how I plan to do it.

Each part of this story has a purpose and serves the whole. You, as an audience, expect each part of this structure and react negatively if any parts are missing.

Having reached the end of my rope, I decided to make a change.  
I went to the store and bought a flamethrower.

3. Vogler’s work *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, is a standard text for aspiring screenwriters and film students. Vogler takes Joseph Campbell’s heroic journey and makes it readily accessible, removing the intellectual musings Campbell was prone to allow. Anyone interested in getting a quick but solid understanding of the basics of story structure is well advised to read this popular book.

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The story does not satisfy without the last sentence, does it? It goes from being oddly over the top to being downright threatening. We need each part of a story but, in particular, we need the beginning and the ending.

Notice the change made here:

Having reached the end of my rope, I decided to make a change.  
I came home to get rid of those pesky squirrels once and for all.

The beginning and the ending were kept. We still have a story without the middle.

The beginning of a story is simply a question. At the start of a story, an inciting question is asked—it incites or initiates the drama of the story. That question is the foundational problem that will be resolved by the telling of the story. In the illustration above, the question is, “What is the change?”

Within the ending of a story, we are given the answer to the inciting question. In the example above, the answer to “What’s changed?” is that I have decided to get rid of all of the critters that infest my yard. We only need a beginning and an ending to make sense of a story.

So, what is the deal with that whole middle part? The beginning and ending of a story are the *what* of that story; the middle of the story is the *how*. The middle contains one or more possible answers to the question, and, within the ending, we discover the correct response and can answer our Central Question. This format is how successful stories are achieved.

But let us look deeper. There is a more detailed structure hidden within our myths, legends, parables, and folktales. Careful examination reveals a pattern, and marked similarities begin to appear within these tales. The story of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* is not significantly different than *Robin Hood*; the Chinese folktale “Aniz the Shepherd” is much like the Mayan tale “The Rabbit and the Coyote.” Though these stories are different in time, place, and details, their structures are the same.

In the chapter, author Scott Nehring outlines specific elements of Story and the aspects of story structure which make a good story so compelling to us, as readers or hearers. He concludes the chapter with:

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It should not be surprising to learn that since The Great Story presents the identical series of events in most stories, our stories are also populated with the same heroic character. This singular hero is shades of the same person whether his name is James Bond, Will Kane, or Napoleon Dynamite. The hero retains the same traits and performs the same tasks at roughly the same places in each story told. He is surrounded by a set of characters who also retain consistent attributes and roles within a story.

Recognition of The Great Story pattern and identification of the hero are only the first steps toward becoming a more aware audience member. We must cover a great many details before we even begin to reveal the inner workings of Story. Consider the Four-Act Structure of Story to be our recipe. Now we must become acquainted with the fundamental ingredients.

We will first look at the common cast of characters found in stories then will lay out how these characters work together within The Great Story. Once this recipe and its ingredients are understood, you will likely begin to see the underlying structure of Story in every film, television show, and book you consume.

The remainder of this chapter is available in the book  
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