

# Story and Plot

## Story

Story has been crucial to human evolution.

One of the main ways we understand and construct consciousness is through narrative. We are always writing and revising the story of our experience, even if we mostly do so unconsciously in the recesses of our own minds and imaginations. We impose story on random, unrelated chains of events all the time, and when we can't find a story to impose on those events, we call it "God's plan" or throw our hands up to the fates. Lisa Cron writes in *Wired for Story* that story is part of the evolutionary development of the human species, that "people can go forty days without food, three days without water, and about thirty-five seconds without finding meaning in something" (14). Making stories is about making sense of and making meaning in our world.

Joan Didion explains this well in her essay "The White Album," that "We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience." The job of the writer, from this perspective, is to impose narrative on the chaos we encounter.

Rebecca Solnit claims, "Stories are compasses and architecture, we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice" (*The Faraway Nearby*). In a different essay Solnit explains it like this: "The stars we are given. The constellations we make. That is to say, stars exist in the cosmos, but constellations are the imaginary lines we draw between them, the readings we give the sky, the stories we tell" (*Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*).

Lisa Cron, who has studied the neurobiology of story extensively, argues that "Story is what makes us human, not just metaphorically but literally. Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience reveal that our brain is hardwired to respond to story; the pleasure we derive from a tale well told is nature's way of seducing us into paying attention" (1). Atul Gawande wrote in his book, *Being Mortal*, which is about medicine and aging, that "In the end, people don't view their life as merely the average of all of its moments—which, after all, is mostly nothing much plus some sleep. For human beings, life is meaningful because it is a story."

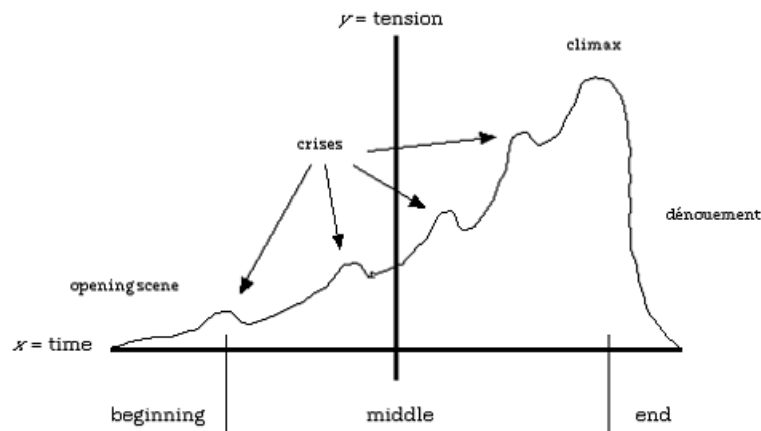
All stories have characters, though those characters need not be human. All good stories have conflicts, both internal and external, that are inextricably meshed together. For a story to have resonance, the consequences of the conflict must be irrevocable. There must be stakes. Something must be at risk or there is no reason for us to pay attention.

For a story to take shape, for it to be a literary story, instead of some other artistic form, there are a variety of constraints. Constraints are echo points that help us situate and make sense of the narrative. Solnit explains that "Language is like a road, it cannot be perceived all at once because it unfolds in time, whether heard or read. This narrative or temporal element has made writing and walking resemble each other." As students of story, we find the constraints of story—like the road and weather and traffic would be when we walk—and use them to ground us. Constraints can be things like point of view, tense, length, genre, etc.

## Plot

Good stories, stories we lose ourselves in and care about, have plots. Martha Alderson, in *The Plot Whisperer*, defines plot as how the events in a story directly impact the main character(s). For her, the main elements of plot are: character emotional development, dramatic action, and thematic significance (which is tying the character's inner experience to universal stories). This is plenty descriptive, yet a very flat concept of what plot is. If you took your favorite movie or book and described exactly these elements to someone else, how interesting would it be?

Possibly the best definition of plot is Cron's, who describes it as "the events that relentlessly force the protagonist to deal with her issues as she pursues her goal, no matter how many times she tries to make an end run around her issues along the way" (28). Do that exercise again, where you describe your favorite movie/book in this way? It's much better now, isn't it. When you read a book blurb or hear a tagline for a movie, this is the gist it is referring to and not the list of elements in the previous definition.



## Theme

We tell all kinds of stories, across time and culture and genre, but most of them aren't new. Those patterns we recognize in story again and again are called universal themes.

According to Cron, theme asks two very important questions of a work:

- what does it tell us about what it means to be human?
- what does it say about how humans react to circumstances beyond their control?

Alderson suggests the main themes we deal with again and again, in life and literature, are:

- belonging and separation (lack/loss)
- resistance and struggle
- transformation (gaining new, regaining lost, returning home, starting over, rebirth)

Paulo Coelho restates Jose Luis Borges, noting "there are only four stories to tell: a love story between two people, a love story between three people, the struggle for power and the voyage. All of us writers rewrite these same stories ad infinitum."