

# Seven Basic Plots

---

## 1. Overcoming the Monster (and the Thrilling Escape from Death)

*Examples:* Perseus, Theseus, Beowulf, Dracula, War of the Worlds, Nicholas Nickleby, The Guns of Navarone, Seven Samurai/The Magnificent Seven, James Bond, Star Wars: A New Hope.

Meta-plot structure:

1. Anticipation Stage (The Call)
2. Dream Stage (Initial Success)
3. Frustration Stage (Confrontation)
4. Nightmare Stage (Final Ordeal)
5. Miraculous Escape (Death of the Monster)

## 2. Rags to Riches

*Examples:* Cinderella, Aladdin, Jane Eyre, Great Expectations, David Copperfield  
*Dark Version:* Le Rouge et Le Noir (1831), What Makes Sammy Run? (1940)

Meta-plot structure:

1. Initial Wretchedness at Home (The Call)
2. Out into the World (Initial Success)
3. The Central Crisis
4. Independence (Final Ordeal)
5. Final Union, Completion and Fulfilment

## 3. The Quest

*Examples:* The Odyssey, Pilgrim's Progress, King Solomon's Mines, Watership Down

Meta-plot structure:

1. The Call (Oppressed in the City of Destruction)
2. The Journey (Ordeals of the Hero/Heroine & Companions)  
May include some or all of the following:
  - a. Monsters
  - b. Temptations
  - c. The Deadly Opposites
  - d. The Journey to the Underworld

# Seven Basic Plots

---

3. Arrival and Frustration
4. The Final Ordeals
5. The Goal (Kingdom, Other Half or Elixir won)

## 4. Voyage & Return

*Examples:* Alice in Wonderland, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Orpheus, The Time Machine, Peter Rabbit, Brideshead Revisited, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Gone with the Wind, The Third Man (1948)

Meta-plot structure:

1. Anticipation Stage ('Fall' into the Other World)
2. Initial Fascination (Dream Stage)
3. Frustration Stage
4. Nightmare Stage
5. Thrilling Escape and Return

## 5. Comedy

Comedy is dealt with by a less rigid structure. In essence, the comedy meta-plot is about building an absurdly complex set of problems which then miraculously resolve at the climax. There is much discussion of how the comedy plot has developed over time:

Stage one: Aristophanes

Stage two: 'The New Comedy' (comedy becomes a love story)

Stage three: Shakespeare (plot fully developed)

Comedy as real life: Jane Austen

The plot disguised: Middlemarch, War and Peace

The plot burlesqued: Gilbert & Sullivan, Oscar Wilde

Meta-plot structure:

1. **Under the Shadow**  
A little world in which people are under the shadow of confusion, uncertainty and frustration and are shut up from one another.
2. **Tightening the Knot**  
The confusion gets worse until the pressure of darkness is at its most acute and everyone is in a nightmarish tangle.
3. **Resolution**  
With the coming to light of things not previously recognised, perceptions are dramatically

# Seven Basic Plots

---

changed. Shadows are dispelled, the situation is miraculously transformed and the little world is brought together in a state of joyful union.

## 6. Tragedy

*Examples:* Macbeth, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Carmen, Bonnie & Clyde, Jules et Jim, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Julius Caesar

Meta-plot structure:

1. Anticipation Stage (Greed or Selfishness)
2. Dream Stage
3. Frustration Stage
4. Nightmare Stage
5. Destruction or Death Wish Stage

## 7. Rebirth

*Examples:* Sleeping Beauty, The Frog Prince, Beauty and the Beast, The Snow Queen, A Christmas Carol, The Secret Garden, Peer Gynt

Meta-plot structure:

1. **Under the Shadow**  
A young hero or heroine falls under the shadow of a dark power
2. **The Threat Recedes**  
Everything seems to go well for a while - the threat appears to have receded.
3. **The Threat Returns**  
Eventually the threat approaches again in full force, until the hero or heroine is seen imprisoned in a state of living death.
4. **The Dark Power Triumphant**  
The state of living death continues for a long time when it seems the dark power has completely triumphed.
5. **Miraculous Redemption**  
If the imprisoned person is a heroine, redeemed by the hero; if a hero, by a young woman or child.