Plot

DEFINITION

What is plot? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> Plot is the sequence of interconnected events within the story of a play, novel, film, epic, or other narrative literary work. More than simply an account of what happened, plot reveals the cause-and-effect relationships between the events that occur.

Some additional key details about plot:

- The plot of a story explains not just *what* happens, but *how* and *why* the major events of the story take place.
- Plot is a key element of novels, plays, most works of nonfiction, and many (though not all) poems.
- Since ancient times, writers have worked to create theories that can help categorize different types of plot structures.

Plot Pronounciation

Here's how to pronounce plot: **plaht**

The Difference Between Plot and Story

Perhaps the best way to say what a plot is would be to compare it to a story. The two terms are closely related to one another, and as a result, many people often use the terms interchangeably—but they're actually different. A story is a series of events; it tells us *what happened*. A plot, on the other hand, tells us *how* the events are connected to one another and *why* the story unfolded in the way that it did. In *Aspects of the Novel,* E.M. Forster uses the following examples to distinguish between story and plot:

> "The king died, and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: "The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king." This is a plot with a mystery in it.

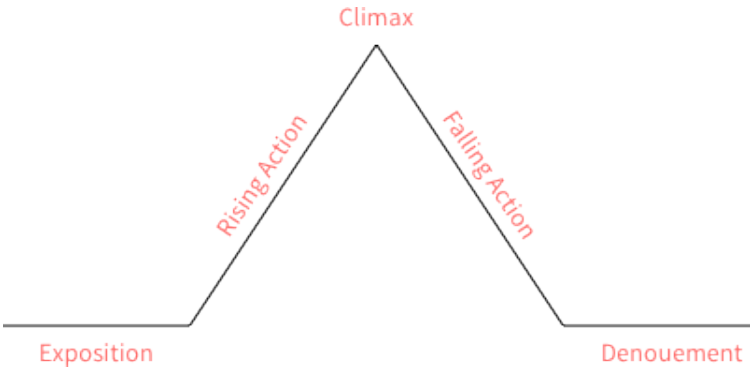
Therefore, when examining a plot, it's helpful to look for events that change the direction of the story and consider how one event leads to another.

The Structure of a Plot

For nearly as long as there have been narratives with plots, there have been people who have tried to analyze and describe the structure of plots. Below we describe two of the most well-known attempts to articulate the general structure of plot.

Freytag's Pyramid

One of the first and most influential people to create a framework for analyzing plots was 19th-century German writer Gustav Freytag, who argued that all plots can be broken down into five stages: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement. Freytag originally developed this theory as a way of describing the plots of plays at a time when most plays were divided into five acts, but his five-layered "pyramid" can also be used to analyze the plots of other kinds of stories, including novels, short stories, films, and television shows.



1. **Exposition** is the first section of the plot. During the exposition, the audience is introduced to key background information, including characters and their relationships to one another, the setting (or time and place) of events, and any other relevant ideas, details, or historical context. In a five-act play, the exposition typically occurs in the first act.
2. The **rising action** begins with the "inciting incident" or "complication"—an event that creates a problem or conflict for the characters, setting in motion a series of increasingly significant events. Some critics describe the rising action as the most important part of the plot because the climax and outcome of the story would not take place if the events of the rising action did not occur. In a five-act play, the rising action usually takes place over the course of act two and perhaps part of act three.
3. The **climax** of a plot is the story's central turning point, which the exposition and the rising action have all been leading up to. The climax is the moment with the greatest tension or conflict. Though the climax is also sometimes called the *crisis*, it is not necessarily a negative event. In a tragedy, the climax will result in an unhappy ending; but in a comedy, the climax usually makes it clear that the story will have a happy ending. In a five-act play, the climax usually takes place at the end of the third act.
4. Whereas the rising action is the series of events leading up to the climax, the **falling action** is the series of events that follow the climax, ending with the *resolution,* an event that indicates that the story is reaching its end. In a five-act play, the falling action

usually takes place over the course of the fourth act, ending with the resolution.

5. **Dénouement** is a French word meaning "outcome." In literary theory, it refers to the part of the plot which ties up loose ends and reveals the final consequences of the events of the story. During the dénouement, the author resolves any final or outstanding questions about the characters' fates, and may even reveal a little bit about the characters' futures after the resolution of the story. In a five-act play, the dénouement takes place in the fifth act.

While Freytag's pyramid is very handy, not every work of literature fits neatly into its structure. In fact, many modernist and post-modern writers intentionally subvert the standard narrative and plot structure that Freytag's pyramid represents.

Booker's "Meta-Plot"

In his 2004 book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories,* Christopher Booker outlines an overarching "meta-plot" which he argues can be used to describe the plot structure of almost every story. Like Freytag's pyramid, Booker's meta-plot has five stages:

1. **The anticipation stage**, in which the hero prepares to embark on adventure;
2. **The dream stage**, in which the hero overcomes a series of minor challenges and gains a sense of confidence and invincibility;
3. **The frustration stage**, in which the hero confronts the villain of the story;
4. **The nightmare stage**, in which the hero fears they will be unable to overcome their enemy;
5. **The resolution**, in which the hero finally triumphs.

Of course, like Freytag's Pyramid, Booker's meta-plot isn't actually a fool-proof way of describing the structure of every plot, but rather an attempt to describe structural elements that many (if not most) plots have in common.

Types of Plot

In addition to analyzing the general structure of plots, many scholars and critics have attempted to describe the different types of plot that serve as the basis of most narratives.

Booker's Seven Basic Plots

Within the overarching structure of Booker's "meta-plot" (as described above), Booker argues that plot types can be further subdivided into the following seven categories. Booker himself borrows most of these definitions of plot types from much earlier writers, such as Aristotle. Here's a closer look at each of the seven types:

- **Comedy:** In a comedy, characters face a series of increasingly absurd challenges, conflicts, and misunderstandings, culminating in a moment of revelation, when the confusion of the early part of the plot is resolved and the story ends happily. In romantic comedies, the early conflicts in the plot act as obstacles to a happy romantic relationship, but the conflicts are resolved and the plot ends with an orderly conclusion (and often a wedding). *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *When Harry Met Sally*, and *Pride and Prejudice* are all examples of comedies.
- **Tragedy:** The plot of a tragedy follows a tragic hero—a likable, well-respected, morally upstanding character who has a tragic flaw or who makes some sort of fatal mistake (both flaw and/or mistake are known as *hamartia*). When the tragic hero becomes aware of his mistake (this realization is called *anagnorisis*), his happy life is destroyed. This reversal of fate (known as *peripeteia*) leads to the plot's tragic ending and, frequently, the hero's death. Booker's tragic plot is based on Aristotle's theory of tragedy, which in turn was based on patterns in classical drama and epic poetry. *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, and *The Great Gatsby* are all examples of tragedies.
- **Rebirth:** In stories with a rebirth plot, one character is literally or metaphorically imprisoned by a dark force, enchantment, and/or character flaw. Through an act of love, another character helps the imprisoned character overcome the dark force, enchantment, or character flaw. Many stories of rebirth allude to Jesus Christ or other religious figures who sacrificed themselves for others and were resurrected. *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Snow Queen*, and *A Christmas Carol* are all examples of stories with rebirth plots.
- **Overcoming the Monster:** The hero sets out to fight an evil force and thereby protect their loved ones or their society. The "monster" could be literal or metaphorical: in ancient Greek mythology, Perseus battles the monster Medusa, but in the television show *Good Girls Revolt*, a group of women files a lawsuit in order to fight discriminatory policies in their workplace. Both examples follow the "Overcoming the Monster" plot, as does the epic poem *Beowulf*.
- **Rags-to-Riches**: In a rags-to-riches plot, a disadvantaged person comes very close to gaining success and wealth, but then appears to lose everything, before they finally achieve the happy life they have always deserved. *Cinderella* and *Oliver Twist* are classic rags-to-riches stories; movies with rags-to-riches plots include *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Joy*.
- **The Quest:** In a quest story, a hero sets out to accomplish a specific task, aided by a group of friends. Often, though not always, the hero is looking for an object endowed with supernatural powers. Along the way, the hero and their friends face challenges together, but the hero must complete the final stage of the quest alone. The Celtic myth of "The Fisher-King and the Holy Grail" is one of the oldest quest stories; *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is a satire that follows the same plot structure; while *Heart of Darkness* plays with the model of a quest but has

the quest end not with the discovery of a treasure or enlightenment but rather with emptiness and disillusionment.

- **Voyage and Return:** The hero goes on a literal journey to an unfamiliar place where they overcome a series of challenges, then return home with wisdom and experience that help them live a happier life. *The Odyssey*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Eat, Pray, Love* all follow the voyage and return plot.

As you can probably see, there's lots of room for these categories to overlap. This is one of the problems with trying to create any sort of categorization scheme for plots such as this—an issue we'll cover in greater detail below.

The Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey is an attempt to describe a *narrative archetype*, or a common plot type that has specific details and structure (also known as a *monomyth*). The Hero's Journey plot follows a protagonist's journey from the known to the unknown, and back to the known world again. The journey can be a literal one, as in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, or a purely metaphorical one. Regardless, the protagonist is a changed person by the end of the story. The Hero's Journey structure was first popularized by Joseph Campbell's 1949 book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Later, theorists David Adams Leeming, Phil Cousineau, and Christopher Vogler all developed their own versions of the Hero's Journey structure. Each of these theorists divides The Hero's Journey into slightly different stages (Campbell identifies 17 stages, whereas Vogler finds 12 stages and Leeming and Cousineau use just 8). Below, we'll take a closer look at the 12 stages that Vogler outlines in his analysis of this plot type:

1. **The Ordinary World:** When the story begins, the hero is a seemingly ordinary person living an ordinary life. This section of the story often includes expository details about the story's setting and the hero's background and personality.
2. **The Call to Adventure:** Soon, the hero's ordinary life is interrupted when someone or something gives them an opportunity to go on a quest. Often, the hero is asked to find something or someone, or to defeat a powerful enemy. The call to adventure sometimes, but not always, involves a supernatural event. (In *Star Wars: A New Hope*, the call to adventure occurs when Luke sees the message from Leia to Obi-Wan Kenobi.)
3. **The Refusal of the Call:** Some heroes are initially reluctant to embark on their journey and instead attempt to continue living their ordinary life. When this refusal takes place, it is followed by another event that prompts the hero to accept the call to adventure (Luke's aunt and uncle getting killed in *Star Wars*).
4. **Meeting the Mentor:** The hero meets a mentor: a wiser, more experienced person who gives them advice and guidance. The mentor trains and protects the hero until the hero is ready to embark on the next phase of the journey. (Obi-Wan Kenobi is Luke's mentor in *Star Wars*.)
5. **Crossing the Threshold:** The hero "crosses the threshold" when they have left the familiar, ordinary world behind. Some heroes are eager to enter a new and unfamiliar world, while others may be uncertain if they are making the right choice, but in either case, once the hero crosses the threshold, there is no way to turn back. (Luke about to enter Mos Eisley, or of Frodo leaving the Shire in *Lord of the Rings*.)
6. **Tests, Allies, and Enemies:** As the hero continues on their journey, they face a series of increasingly difficult "tests" or challenges. Along the way, they acquire friends who help them overcome these challenges, and enemies who attempt to thwart their quest. The hero may defeat some enemies during this phase or find ways to keep them temporarily at bay. These challenges help the reader develop a better a sense of the hero's strengths and weaknesses, and they help the hero become wiser and more experienced. This phase is part of the rising action.
7. **Approach to the Innermost Cave:** At this stage, the hero prepares to face the greatest challenge of the journey, which lies within the "innermost cave." In some stories, the hero must literally enter an isolated and dangerous place and do battle with an evil force; in others, the hero must confront a fear or face an internal conflict; or, the hero may do both. You can think of the approach to the innermost cave as a second threshold—a moment when the hero faces their doubts and fears and decides to continue on the quest. (Think of Frodo entering Mordor, or Harry Potter entering the Forbidden Forest with the Deathly Hallows, ready to confront Lord Voldemort.)
8. **The Ordeal:** The ordeal is the greatest challenge that the hero faces. It may take the form of a battle or physically dangerous task, or it may represent a moral or personal crisis that threatens to destroy the hero. Earlier (in the "Tests, Allies, and Enemies" phase), the hero might have overcome challenges with the help of friends, but the hero must face the ordeal alone. The outcome of the ordeal often determines the fate of the hero's loved ones, society, or the world itself. In many stories, the ordeal involves a literal or metaphorical resurrection, in which the hero dies or has a near-death experience, and is reborn with new knowledge or abilities. This constitutes the climax of the story.
9. **Reward:** After surviving the ordeal, the hero receives a reward of some kind. Depending on the story, it may come in the form of new wisdom and personal strengths, the love of a romantic interest, a supernatural power, or a physical prize. The hero takes the reward or rewards with them as they return to the ordinary world.
10. **The Road Back:** The hero begins to make their way home, either by retracing their steps or with the aid of supernatural powers. They may face a few minor challenges or setbacks along the way. This phase is part of the falling action.

11. **The Resurrection:** The hero faces one final challenge in which they must use all of the powers and knowledge that they have gained throughout their journey. When the hero triumphs, their rebirth is completed and their new identity is affirmed. This phase is not present in all versions of the hero's journey.
12. **Return with the Elixir:** The hero reenters the ordinary world, where they find that they have changed (and perhaps their home has changed too). Among the things they bring with them when they return is an "elixir," or something that will transform their ordinary life for the better. The elixir could be a literal potion or gift, or it may take the form of the hero's newfound perspective on life: the hero now possesses love, forgiveness, knowledge, or another quality that will help them build a better life.

Other Genre-Specific Plots

Apart from the plot types described above (the "Hero's Journey" and Booker's seven basic plots), there are a couple common plot types worth mentioning. When a story uses one of the following plots, it usually means that it belongs to a specific genre of literature—so these plot structures can be thought of as being specific to their respective genres.

- **Mystery**: A story that centers around the solving of a baffling crime—especially a murder. The plot structure of a mystery can often be described using Freytag's pyramid (i.e., it has exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement), but the plots of mysteries also tend to follow other, more genre-specific conventions, such as the gradual discovery of clues culminating in the revelation of the culprit's identity as well as their motive. In a typical story (i.e., a non-mystery) key characters and their motives are usually revealed *before* the central conflict arises, not after.
- **Bindungsroman**: A story that shows a young protagonist's journey from childhood to adulthood (or immaturity to maturity), with a focus on the trials and misfortunes that affect the character's growth. The term "coming-of-age novel" is sometimes used interchangeably with Bildungsroman. This is not necessarily incorrect—in most cases the terms *can* be used interchangeably—but Bildungsroman carries the connotation of a specific and well-defined literary tradition, which tends to follow certain genre-specific conventions (for example, the main character often gets sent away from home, falls in love, and squanders their fortune). The climax of the Bildungsroman typically coincides with the protagonist reaching maturity.

Other Attempts to Classify Types of Plots

In addition to Freytag, Booker, and Campbell, many other theorists and literary critics have created systems classifying different kinds of plot structures. Among the best known are:

- William Foster-Harris, who outlined three archetypal plot structures in *The Basic Patterns of Plot*
- Ronald R. Tobias, who wrote a book claiming there are *20 Master Plots*
- Georges Polti, who argued there are in fact *Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*
- Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch, who in the early twentieth century outlined seven types of plot

And then there are the more atypical approaches to classifying the different types of plots:

- In 1965, the University of Chicago rejected Kurt Vonnegut's college thesis, which claimed that folktales and fairy tales shared common structures, or "shapes," including "man in a hole," "boy gets girl" and "Cinderella." He went on to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel which subverts traditional narrative structures, and later developed a lecture based on his failed thesis.
- Two recent studies, led by University of Nebraska professor Matthew Jockers and researchers at the University of Adelaide and the University of Vermont respectively, have used machine learning to analyze the plot structures and emotional ups-and-downs of stories. Both projects concluded that there are six types of stories.

Criticism of Efforts to Categorize Plot Types

Some critics argue that though archetypal plot structures can be useful tools for both writers and readers, we shouldn't rely on them too heavily when analyzing a work of literature. One such skeptic is New York Times book critic Michiko Kakutani, who in a 2005 review described Christopher Booker's *Seven Basic Plots* as "sometimes absorbing and often blockheaded." Kakutani writes that while Booker finds interesting ways to categorize stories by plot type, he is too fixated on finding stories that fit these plot types perfectly. As a result, Booker tends to idealize overly simplistic stories (and Hollywood films in particular), instead of analyzing more complex stories that may not fit the conventions of his seven plot types. Kakutani argues that, as a result of this approach, Booker undervalues modern and contemporary writers who structure their plots in different and innovative ways.

Kakutani's argument is a reminder that while some great works of literature may follow archetypal plot structures, they may also have unconventional plot structures that defy categorization. Authors who use nonlinear structures or multiple narrators often intentionally create stories that do not perfectly fit any of the "plot types" discussed above. William Faulker's *The Sound and the Fury* and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* are both examples of this kind of work. Even William Shakespeare, who wrote many of his plays following the traditional structures for tragedies and comedies, authored several "problem plays," which many scholars struggle to categorize as strictly tragedy or comedy: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Timon of Athens*, and *The Merchant of Venice* are all examples of "problem plays."

EXAMPLES

The following examples are representative of some of the most common types of plot.

The "Hero's Journey" Plot in *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien

The plot of *The Hobbit* closely follows the structure of a typical hero's journey.

- **The Ordinary World:** At the beginning of *The Hobbit*, the story's hero, Bilbo Baggins, is living a comfortable life alongside his fellow hobbits in the Shire. (Hobbits are short, human-like creatures predisposed to peaceful, domestic routines.)
- **The Call to Adventure:** The wizard Gandalf arrives in the Shire with a band of 13 dwarves and asks Bilbo to go with them to Lonely Mountain in order to reclaim the dwarves' treasure, which has been stolen by the dragon Smaug.
- **The Refusal of the Call:** At first, Bilbo refuses to join Gandalf and the dwarves, explaining that it isn't in a hobbit's nature to go on adventures.
- **Meeting the Mentor:** Gandalf, who serves as Bilbo's mentor throughout *The Hobbit*, persuades Bilbo to join the dwarves on their journey.
- **Cross the Threshold:** Gandalf takes Bilbo to meet the dwarves at the Green Dragon Inn in Bywater, and the group leaves the Shire together.
- **Tests, Allies, and Enemies:** Bilbo faces many challenges and trials on the way to the Lonely Mountain. Early in the trip, they are kidnapped by trolls and are rescued by Gandalf. Bilbo takes an elvish dagger from the trolls' supply of weapons that he uses throughout the rest of the journey. Soon Bilbo and the dwarves are captured by goblins, but they are rescued by Gandalf who also kills the Great Goblin. Later, Bilbo finds a magical ring (which becomes the focus of the *Lord of the Rings* books), and when the dwarves are captured later in the journey (once by giant spiders and once by elves), Bilbo uses the ring and the dagger to rescue them. Finally, Bilbo and the dwarves arrive at Lake Town, near the Lonely Mountain.
- **Approach to the Innermost Cave:** Bilbo and the dwarves makes his way from Lake Town to the Lonely Mountain, where the dragon Smaug is guarding the dwarves' treasure. Bilbo alone is brave enough to enter the Smaug's lair. Bilbo steals a cup from Smaug, and also learns that Smaug has a weak spot in his scaly armor. Enraged at Bilbo's theft, Smaug flies to Lake-Town and devastates it, but is killed by a human archer who learns of Smaug's weak spot from a bird that overheard Bilbo speaking of it.
- **The Ordeal:** After Smaug's death, elves and humans march to the Lonely Mountain to claim what they believe is their portion of the treasure (as Smaug plundered from them, too). The dwarves refuse to share the treasure and a battle seems evident, but Bilbo steals the most beautiful gem from the treasure and gives it to the humans and elves. The greedy dwarves banish Bilbo from their company. Meanwhile, an army of wargs (magical wolves) and goblins descend on the Lonely Mountain to take vengeance on the dwarves for the death of the Great Goblin. The dwarves, humans, and elves form an alliance to fight the wargs and goblins, and eventually triumph, though Bilbo is knocked unconscious for much of the battle. (It might seem odd that Bilbo doesn't participate in the battle, but that fact also seems to suggest that the true ordeal of the novel was not the battle but rather Bilbo's moral choice to steal the gem and give it to the men and elves to counter the dwarves growing greed.)
- **Reward:** The victorious dwarves, humans, and elves share the treasure among themselves, and Bilbo receives a share of the treasure, which he takes home, along with the dagger and the ring.
- **The Road Back:** It takes Bilbo and Gandalf nearly a year to travel back to the Shire. During that time they e-visit with some of the people they met on their journey out and have many adventures, though none are as difficult as those they undertook on the way to the Lonely Mountain.
- **The Resurrection:** Bilbo's return to the Shire as a changed person is underlined by the fact that he has been away so long, the other hobbits in the Shire believe that he has died and are preparing to sell his house and belongings.
- **Return with the Elixir:** Bilbo returns to the shire with the ring, the dagger, and his treasure—enough to make him rich. He also has his memories of the adventure, which he turns into a book.

Other examples of the Hero's Journey Plot Structure:

- *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse
- *Beowulf*
- *The Epic of Gilgamesh*
- *The Martian* by Andy Weir
- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
- *The Iliad* by Homer

The Comedic Plot in *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare's play, *Twelfth Night*, is generally described as a comedy and follows what Booker would call comedic plot structure. At the beginning of the play, the protagonist, Viola is shipwrecked far from home in the kingdom of Illyria. Her twin brother, Sebastian, appears to have died in the storm. Viola disguises herself as a boy, calls herself Cesario, and gets a job as the servant of Count Orsino, who is in love with the Lady Olivia. When Orsino sends Cesario to deliver romantic messages to Olivia on his behalf, Olivia falls in love

with Cesario. Meanwhile, Viola falls in love with Orsino, but she cannot confess her love without revealing her disguise.

In another subplot, Olivia's uncle Toby and his friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek persuade the servant Maria to play a prank convincing another servant, Malvolio, that Olivia loves him. The plot thickens when Sebastian (Viola's lost twin) arrives in town and marries Olivia, who believes she is marrying Cesario. At the end of the play, Viola is reunited with her brother, reveals her identity, and confesses her love to Orsino, who marries her. In spite of the chaos, misunderstandings, and challenges the characters face in the early part of the plot—a source of much of the play's humor—*Twelfth Night* reaches an orderly conclusion and ends with two marriages.

Other examples of comedic plot structure:

- *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare
- *Love's Labor's Lost* by William Shakespeare
- *Emma* by Jane Austen
- *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen
- *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
- *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

The Tragic Plot in *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* follows the tragic plot structure. The tragic hero, Macbeth, is a Scottish nobleman, who receives a prophecy from three witches saying that he will become the Thane of Cawdor and eventually the King. After King Duncan makes Macbeth Thane of Cawdor, Lady Macbeth persuades her husband to fulfill the prophecy by secretly murdering Duncan. He does, and is named King. Later, to ensure that Macbeth will remain king, they also order the assassination of the nobleman Banquo, his son, and the wife and children of the nobleman Macduff. However, as Macbeth protects his throne in ever more bloody ways, Lady Macbeth begins to go mad with guilt. Macbeth consults the witches again, and they reassure him that "no man from woman born can harm Macbeth" and that he will not be defeated until the "wood begins to move" to Dunsinane castle. Therefore, Macbeth is reassured that he is invincible. Lady Macbeth never recovers from her guilt and commits suicide, and Macbeth feels numb and empty, even as he is certain he can never be killed. Meanwhile an army led by Duncan's son Malcolm, their number camouflaged by the branches they carry, so that they look like a moving forest, approaches Dunsinane. In the fighting Macduff reveals he was born by cesarian section, and kills Macbeth.

Macbeth's mistake (*hamartia*) is his unrelenting ambition to be king, and his trust in the witches' prophecies. He realizes his mistake in a moment of *anagnorisis* when the forest full of camouflaged soldiers seems to be moving, and he experiences a reversal of fate (*peripeteia*) when he is defeated by Macduff.

Other examples of tragic plot structure:

- *Antigone* by Sophocles
- *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles
- *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus
- *The Libation Bearers* by Aeschylus
- *The Eumenides* by Aeschylus
- *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare
- *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare
- *Othello* by William Shakespeare
- *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy
- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald
- *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert
- *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde

The "Rebirth" Plot in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol* is an example of the "rebirth" plot. The novel's protagonist is the miserable, selfish businessman Ebenezer Scrooge, who mistreats his clerk, Bob Cratchit, who is a loving father struggling to support his family. Scrooge scoffs at the notion that Christmas is a time for joy, love, and generosity. But on Christmas Eve, he is visited by the ghost of his deceased business partner, who warns Scrooge that if he does not change his ways, his spirit will be condemned to wander the earth as a ghost. Later that night, he is visited by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come. With these ghosts, Scrooge revisits lonely and joyful times of his youth, sees Cratchit celebrating Christmas with his loved ones, and finally foresees his own lonely death. Scrooge awakes on Christmas morning and resolves to change his ways. He not only celebrates Christmas with the Cratchits, but embraces the Christmas spirit of love and generosity all year long. By the end of the novel, Scrooge has been "reborn" through acts of generosity and love.

Other examples of "rebirth" plot structure:

- *The Winter's Tale* by William Shakespeare
- *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck
- *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood
- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison
- *Snow White* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm
- *The Snow Queen* by Hans Christian Anderson
- *Beauty and the Beast* by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve

The "Overcoming the Monster" Plot in Beowulf

The Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*, follows the structure of an "overcoming the monster" plot. In fact, the poem's hero, Beowulf, defeats not just one monster, but three. As a young warrior, Beowulf

slays Grendel, a swamp-dwelling demon who has been raiding the Danish king's mead hall. Later, when Grendel's mother attempts to avenge her son's death, Beowulf kills her, too. Beowulf eventually becomes king of the Geats, and many years later, he battles a dragon who threatens his people. Beowulf manages to kill the dragon, but dies from his wounds, and is given a hero's funeral. Three times, Beowulf succeeds in protecting his people by defeating a monster.

Other examples of the overcoming the monster plot structure:

- *Beowulf*
- *The Epic of Gilgamesh*
- *Dracula* by Bram Stoker
- *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson
- *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* by J.K. Rowling

The "Rags-to-Riches" Plot in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* is an example of a "rags-to-riches" plot. The protagonist, Jane, is a mistreated orphan who is eventually sent away to a boarding school where students are severely mistreated. Jane survives the school and goes on to become a governess at Thornfield Manor, where Jane falls in love with Mr. Rochester. The two become engaged, but on their wedding day, Jane discovers that Rochester's first wife, Bertha, has gone insane and is imprisoned in Thornfield's attic. She leaves Rochester and ends up finding long-lost cousins. After a time, her very religious cousin, St. John, proposes to her. Jane almost accepts, but then rejects the proposal. She returns to Thornfield to discover that Bertha started a house fire and leapt off the roof of the burning building to her death, and that Rochester had been blinded by the fire in an attempt to save Bertha. Jane and Rochester marry, and live a quiet and happy life together. Jane begins the story with nothing, seems poised to achieve true happiness before losing everything, but ultimately has a happy ending.

Other examples of the rags-to-riches plot structure:

- *Cinderella* by Charles Perrault
- *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens
- *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens
- *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White
- *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë
- *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw
- *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackery

The Quest Plot in *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse

Siddhartha, by Herman Hesse, follows the structure of the "quest" plot. The novel's protagonist, Siddartha, leaves his hometown in search of spiritual enlightenment, accompanied by his friend, Govinda. On their journey, they join a band of holy men who seek enlightenment through self-denial, and later, they study with a group of Bhuddists. Disillusioned with religion, Siddartha leaves Govinda and the Bhuddists behind and takes up a hedonistic lifestyle with the beautiful Kamala. Still unsatisfied with his life, he considers suicide in a river, but instead decides to apprentice himself to the man who runs the ferry boat. By studying the river, Siddhartha eventually obtains enlightenment.

Other examples of the quest plot structure:

- *Candide* by Voltaire
- *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse
- *Don Quixote* by Migel de Cervantes
- *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster
- *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien
- *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien
- *Perceval* by Chrétien
- *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by J.K. Rowling

The "Voyage and Return" Plot in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* follows what Booker would describe as a voyage and return plot structure. The plot follows the hero, Janie, as she seeks love and happiness. The novel begins and ends in Eatonville, Florida, where Janie was brought up by her grandmother. Janie has three romantic relationships, each better than the last. She marries a man named Logan Killicks on her grandmother's advice, but she finds the marriage stifling and she soon leaves him. Janie's second, more stable marriage to the prosperous Joe Starks lasts 20 years, but Janie does not feel truly loved by him. After Joe dies, she marries Tea Cake, a farm worker who loves, respects, and cherishes her. They move to the Everglades and live there happily for just over a year, when Tea Cake dies of rabies after getting bitten by a dog during a hurricane. Janie mourns Tea Cake's death, but returns to Eatonville with a sense of peace: she has known true love, and she will always carry her memories of Tea Cake with her. Her journey and her return home have made her stronger and wiser.

Other examples of the voyage and return plot structure:

- *The Odyssey* by Homer
- *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens
- *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift
- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll
- *By the Waters of Babylon* by Stephen Vincent Benét

OTHER RESOURCES

- **What Makes a Hero?** Check out this awesome video on the hero's journey from Ted-Ed.
- **The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations:** Visit Wikipedia for an overview of George Polti's theory of dramatic plot structure.
- **Why Tragedies Are Alluring:** Learn more about Aristotle's tragic structure, ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, and contemporary tragic plots.
- **The Wikipedia Page on Plot:** A basic but helpful overview of plots.

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