

Module 3 Chapter 1 Lesson 1: Plot Archetypes

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We will begin our examination of the novel by returning to the events that take place in the story - the plot.

You will remember that plot is the "what" of the story - the sequence of events that comprise the story's action, whether it is external (physical) action or internal (intellectual, emotional) action. It seems like there are as many plots as there are stories, yet we often see striking commonalities between tales. Our first lesson will focus on these commonalities or patterns of plots. We can call them archetypes because they stay the same even as times and styles change.

Learning to Write About Plot

What is plot?



A plot of a work of literature is basically the sequence of events that comprise the "story" of the work. Plot is different from the events of a chronicle of daily life, or from the chaos of all the things that happen in real life. Plot is selective. It cuts out or filters events to highlight only the important events leading up to or from something. Generally, a reader or viewer looks for plausibility of action and character motivation. That is, given the situation and the personalities of the characters involved, is such an action likely or within the realm of possibility? We also frequently use the terms narrative and story when referring to the sequence of events.

In most narratives/plots/stories, the protagonist or hero is motivated to accomplish a task or goal. However, obstacles prevent the character from immediately achieving the task. These complicating actions cause conflict. A character or force that tries to prevent the protagonist from achieving his or her goal is called an antagonist. Some plots do not have actual characters that are antagonists. In the case where there is no character, the antagonist might be a force or collection of forces: society, nature, technology might also act to prevent the protagonist from achieving his goal.

Conflict may be internal or external or both. That is, the protagonist might work against a force of nature or against a villain. These are external conflicts. But frequently a protagonist has to battle with

conflicting emotions or with difficult choices. These are internal conflicts. Often, the protagonist is placed in a dilemma, where he or she must choose between two equally undesirable options.

Throughout the story, as suspense and conflict build, the author may offer clues to help forecast the outcome of the conflict. This technique is called foreshadowing.

Analysis of the central conflict in the plot is the starting point for most works of literature. Ask yourself the question: What is going on? What is the story? If you can paraphrase, summarize or retell the story, then you have begun to understand it. You will find further investigation of other aspects of the work of literature - such as theme, symbolism, character, and setting - are much easier when you have good understanding of plot.

Key Terms Related to Plot

In general in this course and in relation to provincial learning outcomes, knowledge of certain terms is required. The following bolded terms in this section constitute the central vocabulary you should know.

You are responsible for knowing these terms and will be tested on them.

- **Plot** (<https://comoxvalleyschools.instructure.com/courses/1275/files/504395/preview>)

In this activity, you will be looking at plot from a "plot type" perspective.

Plot Types or Archetypes

In some cases, it may be useful to look at a work of fiction or film as representing a particular type of plot. Look at the list below with 20 common plot archetypes that reflect a range of the most common ies. These plots occur in folk tales, in novels, plays, sit-coms, movies, and short stories. In some ways, when a person knows the type of plot he or she is experiencing, a series of expectations are evoked. Whether those expectations are fulfilled or not can lead to the story feeling satisfying or not.

20 Master Plots

In his book **20 MASTER PLOTS (and How to Build Them)**, author Ronald Tobias identifies the twenty primary plots and shows you how to create a good plot for your novel. Here are the twenty master plots Tobias identified:

1. QUEST

The protagonist searches for a person, place or thing, tangible or intangible. It may be Holy Grail, Valhalla, immortality, Atlantis or just a good job away from the Dust Bowl. The main character is specifically (as opposed to incidentally) looking for something that he or she hopes or expects to find that will significantly change his or her life. This plot is one of the World's most enduring. Examples: *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, or *Lost Horizon*.

2. ADVENTURE

The Adventure Plot differs from the Quest Plot in two primary ways. The Quest Plot is a character plot; it is a plot of the mind. The Adventure Plot, on the other hand, is an action plot; it is a plot of the body. The difference lies mainly in the focus. In the Quest Plot, the focus from beginning to end is the person making the journey; in the Adventure Plot, the focus is the journey itself. Examples: *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*, *The Sea Wolf*, or *Gulliver's Travels*.

3. PURSUIT

The Pursuit Plot is the literary version of hide-and-seek. The basic premise is simple: One person chases another. Since this is a physical plot, the chase is more important than the people in it. The structure is simple, too. We must meet the pursuer and the pursued and be told why one is chasing the other. Then, they chase, with near-captures and twists and turns, and then the chase is resolved; either by the person being chased getting caught or by them getting away permanently. Examples: *The French Connection*, *The Terminator*, *The Fugitive*.

4. RESCUE

Like the Quest Plot, the Adventure Plot, and the Pursuit Plot, the Rescue Plot is a physical plot; it depends more on action than on characterization. But the similarities end there. The Rescue Plot is the first we've looked at that relies heavily on the antagonist. The story depends on a triangle between the protagonist, the victim, and the antagonist. The characters serve the plot (as opposed to the plot serving the characters), which is a condition of a physical plot. The conflict is based on the hero's search and his attempt to gain back what he has lost. Examples: *The Princess Bride*, *Star Wars - A New Hope*, *The Golden Child*.

5. ESCAPE



The Escape Plot is a physical plot. It does not include a plot where the protagonist is trying to escape a personal demon like alcoholism. In the Escape Plot, escape is literal; the protagonist is confined against his or her will and wants to escape. It is important that, unlike the Rescue Plot, the protagonist frees herself in the Escape Plot. Examples: *Midnight Express*, *Papillon*, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

6. REVENGE

Francis Bacon called revenge a wild justice. In literature, the dominant motive for this plot is loud and clear: retaliation by the protagonist against the antagonist for real or imagined injury. It's a visceral plot, which means it reaches into us at a deep emotional level. We bristle against injustice and we want to see it corrected. And almost always, the retaliation is outside the limits of the law. Examples: *Hamlet*, *Death Wish*, *Sudden Impact*.

7. THE RIDDLE

The riddle is often at the heart of a traditional mystery novel. Who did it and how did they do it? It is a challenge to the reader to solve the riddle. The plot itself is physical, because it focuses on events

(who, what, where, when and why) that must be evaluated and interpreted. The Riddle Plot must play fair with the reader (clues are in plain view but are often misinterpreted by the reader) and it must satisfy with a logical but not obvious solution. Examples: *The Maltese Falcon*, *Kafka's The Trial*, *Chinatown*.

8. RIVALRY

What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object - A Rivalry Plot. A rival is a person who competes for the same object or goal as another. A rival is a person who disputes the prominence or superiority of another. Rivalry has existed since before the Earth began (God vs. Satan) and it exists today (look around you). A principle rule of this plot is that the two adversaries should have equivalent strengths (although they can have different weaknesses). Examples: *Moby Dick*, *The Odd Couple*, *Ben Hur*.

9. UNDERDOG

The Underdog Plot is a form of the Rivalry Plot, but it is distinct enough to be a separate category. The premise for rivalry is parity; the matched strengths of protagonist and antagonist. But in the Underdog Plot, the strengths are NOT equally matched. The protagonist is at a disadvantage and is faced with overwhelming odds. Examples: *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, *Rocky*, *Cinderella*.

10. TEMPTATION

The Temptation Plot is the story of the frailty of human nature. If to sin is human, it is human to give in to temptation. But our codes of behavior have established a price for yielding to temptation. The penalties range from your own personal guilt to a lifetime without parole in a state pen. The Temptation Plot isn't about action as much as it is about character. It is an examination of motives, needs, and impulse. Examples: *Fatal Attraction*, *Faustus*, *L.A. Times (The book, not the newspaper)*.

11. METAMORPHOSIS

If any one plot is truly magical, metamorphosis is it. Most of the Master Plots are grounded in reality: They deal with situations and people whom we readily recognize because they're based in our experience. In the Metamorphosis Plot, the physical characteristics of the protagonist must actually change from one form to another. Examples: *Memoirs of An Invisible Man*, *Beauty and the Beast*.

12. TRANSFORMATION

The Transformation Plot is the psychological version of the Metamorphosis Plot: in this plot, the change is not physical but emotional. The key to this plot is that the protagonist goes through a significant emotional transformation: she is a different person at the end of the book than she was at the start. Obviously, it is a character-driven plot. Examples: *Pygmalion*, *Ordinary People*, *The Paper Chase*.

13. MATURATION

Although similar to the Metamorphosis and Transformation Plots, the Maturation Plot - a plot about growing up - is a strongly optimistic plot. It is almost always about a young person growing up and learning valuable lessons as he or she faces the roadblocks that life throws in our way. The actual process of maturation in a young person covers many years. You can pick up at any point, from a young, impressionable child to someone in young adulthood. You may explore one day in the life of the protagonist or you may follow him for months or years. Examples: *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Catcher in the Rye*, *The Kite Runner*.

14. LOVE

The Love Plot is not simply boy meets girl (or even boy meets boy) because fiction with no conflict is no fiction. It must be "boy meets girl but..." The conflict can be a forbidden love (as in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*), a physical obstacle (as in *Splash*, where the girl is a mermaid) or a gimmick (such as the fact that the "man" is a ghost in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*). Remember: a love story without conflict is boring. Examples: *Love Story*, *Bridges of Madison County*, *Jude the Obscure*.

15. FORBIDDEN LOVE

The first written version of *Romeo and Juliet* appeared in 1476. *West Side Story* came out in the early 1960s. In between, there were probably sixty million books about forbidden love. The most common kind of forbidden love is adultery. The character triangle in stories about adultery is always the same: the wife, the husband, the lover. Another forbidden love, rarely written about, is incest. Homosexual love used to be a forbidden love but is now more accepted in literature. Although not forbidden in a major way, May-December romances are also ripe with conflict. Examples: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Harold & Maude*, *Madame Bovary*.

SACRIFICE

The Sacrifice Plot used to involve the gods and all of humanity. In modern literature, it usually centers on one person sacrificing something for a concept such as love, honor, or charity. When Terry Malloy in *On The Waterfront* breaks the code of silence of the docks and informs on the union racketeers, he does so because of his belief that he must do the right thing, no matter what the personal cost. When Norma Rae (from the film of the same name) takes her stand against management and for unionism in the cloth mill where she works, she too is motivated by a higher purpose. The characters in a Sacrifice Plot sacrifice themselves for an ideal. Examples: *On The Waterfront*, *Norma Rae*, *Star Wars -The Force Awakens*, *Casablanca*.

17. DISCOVERY

Part of the great appeal of literature is that it tries to translate the meaning of life. The Discovery Plot is linked to the riddle plot in a way because life is, in a sense, a great riddle that begs to be solved. It is a plot of character because discovery is about people and their desire to understand who they are. An absolute master at this kind of plot was Henry James. As a writer he was concerned with people

learning about themselves, exploring their nature. Examples: *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Tootsie*, *Working Girl*.

18. WRETCHED EXCESS

Our fascination for people who inhabit the margins of society is what makes the Wretched Excess Plot so interesting. The real tension inherent in this plot comes from convincing the readers that whatever the excess, it could happen to them, too. This plot is about normal people under abnormal circumstances, and abnormal people under normal circumstances. The villain of a Wretched Excess Plot can be a person (as in the case of Othello's Iago) or it can be a thing, such as a bottle of whiskey (to the alcoholic in *Lost Weekend*). Think of this plot in terms of tracing the stages of a disease. (Wretched excess is in fact an emotional disease.) Symptoms: The character's behavior indicates she isn't normal. Diagnosis: realizing there is a problem and correctly identifying it. Prognosis: the prospect of recovery. Your patient may or may not be cured. But in either case the disease is resolved; either happily with a cure, or unhappily, as the disease overcomes the patient. Examples: *Apocalypse Now*, *The Little Foxes*, *Wall Street*.

19 & 20. ASCENSION AND DESCENSION

Real drama is a story about a person who falls from a high place because of a tragic flaw in character. (Think of Jian Ghomeshi or Bill Cosby) We have equal fascination with people who rise from humble beginnings (Elvis Presley) to great prominence and with people who fall from grace. These plots are about people, first, last, and foremost. Usually the protagonist or antagonist is larger than life: Don Corleone in *The Godfather*, Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane*, King Richard III in the play of the same name. We are fascinated either by how bad they are on their way down or by

 much they accomplish on their way to the top. Examples: *Citizen Kane*, *The Godfather*, *All The King's Men*.

Bibliographical reference for this book:

Tobias, Ronald B. **20 Master Plots (And How to Build Them)**. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1993.



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(<https://comoxvalleyschools.instructure.com/courses/1275/files/505027/preview>) with 20 common plot types explained.

Plot Devices in Literature

The term **plot device** refers to a character or object introduced to a story to advance or influence the turn of events. Frequently, when the plot device is well constructed, the reader or viewer will not notice that the device is a fabrication designed to make events occur. The well-constructed device seems to arise naturally from the setting or personality of the characters in the story.

A good example of a plot device occurs in the film *Shakespeare in Love*. The newly married wife of Lord Wessex is on her way to a ship that will take her to the new world. Yet she loves William Shakespeare, and she believes the play in which she had a role was cancelled. The day of this sad marriage has been windy and stormy. But the wind plays a key role. Supporters of the play have been distributing the playbills announcing that the play will go ahead in a different location. These papers are blowing all around London. One of them blows into Wessex 's face. He tears the paper from him and without looking at it, passes it to his wife, who reads it. She learns that the play will go on. She impulsively escapes her husband to go to the play, where she actually gets to act the role of Juliet.

From the description in the preceding paragraph, a viewer might think that this device is highly contrived and that its implausibility and artificiality would detract from the experience. Yet very few viewers actually notice the device is even used. The following document explains 11 common plot devices.



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(<https://comoxvalleyschools.instructure.com/courses/1275/files/504383/preview>) with 11 common plot devices explained.



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