PLOT STRUCTURE

By Mike Klaassen

Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle described dramatic structure as having three parts: beginning, middle, and ending. Although Aristotle used terms such as *tragedy* and *comedy*, much of what he wrote in *Poetics* applies to our modern concept of plot.[i] From short stories to thousand-page novels, every plot has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. With this in mind, let's analyze the plot of a simple story.

BEGINNING

- In the Kingdom of Greenwald, King Archibald dies of poisoning.

MIDDLE

- Queen Sophia tries to find her husband's murderer, but her efforts are cut short when King Gustav of a neighboring kingdom invades Greenwald, captures the castle, and takes Sophia prisoner.

ENDING

- Sophia discovers that King Gustav had ordered King Archibald murdered, so she kills Gustav.

The beginning, the middle, and the ending are commonly recognized structural units of a plot, and they can be useful in viewing fiction from a broad perspective. More

detailed analysis of a plot requires knowledge of a more intricate conceptual framework—an ideal, a fully developed model, a *prototype plot*.

PROTOTYPE PLOT

The beginning of a prototype plot includes a *setup*, or *orientation*,[ii] which depicts the character's current situation, largely portraying his world as being in a state of equilibrium—his status quo. The beginning also includes a significant event, or *inciting incident*,[iii] [iv] that disturbs the character's stability, maybe even turning his world upside down.

After the inciting incident, the character reels with an emotional reaction, which reflects his state of mind after his world has been disrupted. When the character's emotions settle down, he enters a phase of thinking about what happened, in which he reviews the inciting incident, analyzes the new realities of his situation, and considers possible courses of action to take in order to make his world right again. His options are limited because a physical, mental, social, or moral barrier, or *crucible*, prevents him from ignoring the new problem. Should he just walk away from it? The character experiences a *dilemma* in which he contemplates the situation, weighing the probable cost against the potential reward (i.e., the stakes) of addressing the problem. The character answers this *call to action*, concluding that he must respond, regardless of the potential risk, and he selects a course of action. The character's decision to take a specific course marks the end of the plot's beginning.

The middle of the prototype plot includes an escalation of drama, sometimes called *rising action*[v], as the main character encounters increasingly more difficult

obstacles that thwart his attempts to achieve his goals. Late in the middle of the story, the character faces his most challenging obstacle so far, and his attempt fails miserably. This failure marks the end of the plot's middle.

The plot's ending begins with the character experiencing devastation in an emotional *dark moment*[vi] of despair, also known as the *crisis*.[vii] The character feels intimidated when the forces aligned against him seem too powerful to overcome. As the character thinks about his situation, he makes a discovery, possibly through an epiphany, that helps him see his situation in a new light. *Visualization* helps the character plan one last path to success. The character decides to make this desperate attempt, against all odds, risking everything that's at stake.

The character commences an all-out effort, known as the *climax*[viii], against a seemingly unbeatable force. The character's battle ends in victory, defeat, or some combination of the two, producing the story's *resolution.* A final passage ties up all loose ends, forming the conclusion, or *denouement.*[ix]

Centuries ago, Aristotle identified the broad structure of plot. Today, a prototype plot shows the details.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Third-Person Possessed*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

This article was adapted from an excerpt of *Third-Person Possessed* by Mike Klaassen. Copyright 2020 and 2022. Michael John Klaassen. All rights reserved. You are welcome to share this article with others.

[i] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 13.

[ii] James, *Story Trumps Structure*, 15-16.

[iii] Freytag, *Freytag's Technique of Drama*, 108 (". . . the life of the hero is disturbed . . .").

[iv] McKee, *Story,* 181, 189-194.

[v] Freytag, *Freytag's Technique of Drama*, 66 ("rise of the action").

[vi] Swain, *Techniques of the Selling Writer*, 201.

[vii] Freytag, *Freytag's Technique of Drama*, 35 ("catastrophe").

[viii] Freytag, *Freytag's Technique of Drama*, 34.

[ix] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 37.