STORY, STRUCTURE, AND PLOT

As you feel your way to your story, it may prove useful to draw a distinction between “story” and “plot.” The words are often used as near synonyms, and they obviously are intimately linked. But for our purposes, let's focus on what distinguishes them.

A *story* is an account of any real or fictitious sequence of linked events. As such, a story can be collapsed into a sentence or it can be told at length in its full complexity. That complexity can be configured in many different ways and still remain more or less the same story. Its shape, its movement from beginning to end, can be suggested rapidly and felt intuitively. In other words, it is subject to paraphrase.

Yet in order to be fully told, every story must also have a *plot.* That plot will consist of whatever makes the story move: It is made up of the twists and turns that give focus to the precise way the reader is induced to participate imaginatively in whatever is supposed to be happening; it organizes and gives focus to the reader's curiosity and comprehension; it determines when and how the reader will be engaged emotionally or intellectually, and through what kind of suspense—all in order to propel her or him from the story's beginning through its middle and into its outcome. Since any plot will consist of the storytelling methods that organize narrative energy and drive it forward, plot is often described with metaphors of machinery: We speak of plot “mechanisms.” They are nothing if not concrete.

Let me illustrate. At this very moment, you are probably pretty sure that you “know” the story of *Hamlet*, and you doubtless could tell that story, in loose summary, in under a minute. The only reliable way to test that knowledge, of course, would be to go ahead, take that

minute, and summarize *Hamlet.* In the process, you might fumble or misremember some twist or turn in the events, but you would not be wrong in your original claim: You *do* “know” the story of *Hamlet.* If you were to see the play tonight, it would “all come back.”

The *plot* of *Hamlet*, on the other hand, consists of all the causes and effects, recognitions and reversals, incentives and accidents, intrigues and counterintrigues that Shakespeare uses to drive Hamlet's story forward as a dramatic experience on the stage, starting at that first moment, late at night, when sentinels guarding the chilly parapets of Elsinore speak of having seen on the late watch a seeming apparition of the recently dead king and ending when Hamlet's lacerated and poisoned corpse is solemnly lifted up and Fortinbras says, “Go, bid the soldiers shoot.” These are quite complex. To remember them all, you would probably have to check the text. They are filled with concreteness and energy. They lift the story out of the audience's vague and shifting summary awareness and into the detailed, vital, visualized, energized forward movement of a complete narrative, the play itself, as it works on the stage and screen.

So you “know” the *story* of Hamlet in a quite different way than you “know” its *plot.* They feel almost like two different kinds of knowledge, and in fact they work a little like the au-thor's own two ways of “knowing” the story. One is highly intuitive, and the other is carefully calculated. One is quite vague and summary; the other is precise and concrete. Both will be at work in any story you ever tell. You must have a feeling for both and, above all, for how they work together.

Plot and story naturally reinforce each other at every stage of their development, but the rule of thumb has to be that, generally speaking, just as intuition tends to precede calculation, so *story precedes plot.* YOU CANNOT “PLOT” A STORY THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW. That would be like trying to sing that tune you've never heard or tell the dream you've not yet dreamed. Yet at the beginning, no aspect of writing is more highly intuitive than story formation. Your story is likely to present itself first in an obscure intuited shape, with only this or that fragment of the whole—the end, maybe, or the beginning, or a character—clear in your mind. Like that dream, your

story has to be unearthed in the depths of your imagination. You may uncover it bit by bit, or you may glimpse it suddenly in a flash, as Truman Capote described it: “a long sustained streak of lightning that darkens the tangible, so-called real world, and leaves illuminated only this suddenly seen pseudo-imaginary landscape, a terrain alive with figures, voices, rooms, atmospheres, weather.” But whether the story first hits you complete or in fragments, it will probably take a form at first so intuitive that it will be located on the extreme outer edge of what can be put into words. Plotting becomes possible when—and only when—this intuitive knowledge has emerged with enough clarity for you to identify its details. Once that has happened, the two processes—*feeling* the story, followed by *figuring* the story—can start working together in a dynamic reciprocity from which the real shape of the story can emerge in an alternating shimmer of certainty and surprise.

Capote describes the difference between these two kinds of “knowing.” “I invariably have the illusion that the whole play of a story, its start and middle and finish, occur in my mind simultaneously—that I am seeing it in one flash. But in the working-out, the writing-out, infinite surprises happen. Thank God, because the surprise, the twist, the phrase that comes at the right moment out of nowhere, is the unexpected dividend, that joyful little push that keeps a writer going.”

So *story precedes plot.* Always. Story precedes plot even in “formula fiction”—although most people miss that fact, because in formula fiction, the story starts out as a given, a cliché so familiar that the writer knows it before she or he even begins. The story is a formula so familiar that the writer doesn't “invent” it at all—prefabricated, standard-issue stuff. All its principal characters, along with its beginning, middle, and end, are known by rote before the writer even starts. Writing such a formula is really a variety of *re*writing: You tilt the story a little this way or that; you change names and places and a certain number of details, and you use the same weary “plot mechanisms” to generate the same weary tale for the ten thousandth time. At best, the reader gets a “new twist” here or there—not too many, though!

From this machine, pulp pours out. Pulp fiction is often denounced for putting “story” before “character.” It does nothing of the kind. Pitting “story” against “character” is a contradiction in terms, and speaking of it is an intellectual bad habit that has done incalculable damage to the art of fiction. Formula fiction does not invent its own story at all, but uses mechanisms of the plot to repeat a preexisting story *ad nauseam*, changing only details, usually trivial ones. There are publishers of pulp romances who send aspiring writers work sheets explaining exactly on which *pages* of the manuscript each and every stock character must appear and precisely what those stock characters must do, when, and why.

This is not writing. This is typing.

So when Stephen King tells us that for the fiction writer the story is always “the boss,” and then turns around to call “plot” the “good writer's last resort and the dullard's first choice,” is he contradicting himself? Not once you grasp that a story and its plot are two different albeit intimately connected things. The “dullard's first choice” is the cookie-cutter formula that stamps out a preexisting story yet again, or that uses a plot formula to generate movement in a story that is otherwise inert. “Plot” in this sense—a formula forcing a story—is what everyone from Henry James to Stephen King disdains. “Plot,” says King, “is … the writer's jackhammer. You can liberate a fossil from hard ground with a jackhammer, no argument there, but you know as well as I do that the jackhammer is going to break almost as much stuff as it liberates. It's clumsy, mechanical, anticreative.” Yes, Henry James did indeed repeatedly refer to “plot” as “vulgar.” Yet *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Wings of the Dove* tell carefully plotted stories, and I assure you that James did not view them as “vulgar.” *Every story*, once written, has to be plotted. It will not move otherwise. What James found “vulgar” was a mechanical formula substituted for the integrity of an authentically invented and discovered tale. And so does Stephen King.

And yet—isn't there something formulaic in every story? Aren't the very concepts of comedy and tragedy, in some real sense, “formulas”? If you follow Richard Rhodes's advice and hone your sense of narrative by reading Northrop Frye's great study *Anatomy of*

Criticism, you may conclude that all fiction, always and everywhere, is in some measure "formula fiction." You may even deepen that view by wondering if both life itself and our vision of it are likewise formulaic, but that the "formula," so far from being debased, is the most exalted thing that we can ever hope to know.

Any time you create drama, you will use devices that can be derogated as "formulas." Don't let the issue be whether there is or is not some "formula" in your story. What matters is the kind of imaginative authenticity you find for that story, formula or no. That authenticity must be the work of your hands. You must find it —"invent" it—in your imagination and on the page, again and again and again. The very parables of the Bible are shaped *in order* to be in a state of continuous development. The truth of fiction is imaginative truth partly to remind us that authenticity is a changing stream; that every new generation, and every group and individual within every generation, must rediscover it. We never reach the Last Word.

STRUCTURE

When it comes to shaping a narrative, structure joins story and plot as the third force that must be at work. In order to be told, a story has to have a plot. And in order for that plot to be coherent, it must have some structure.

Structure consists in the large units that organize the movements of your story and supply them with their overall shape. The broad outlines of a given structure are not necessarily specific to their stories. In fact, the basic, universal, and invariable structural sequence of *every* story, as Aristotle noted in his dry, definitive way, consists of a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is a truism; it is also profound. The structure of *Hamlet* consists of five acts, each composed of a number of scenes. That structure is not unique to *Hamlet:* It is the structure of all of Shake-speare's tragedies. Every one of Mozart's piano concertos, for all their sublime inventiveness and intricacy, operates within the same structure: three distinct movements that go, every single time, *fast-slow-fast.* Most modern plays—and most screenplays and novels—consist of three acts. It is the simplest of all structures: introduction, complication to crisis, and resolution. And that simple structure can be used to tell an infinite number of stories, some of them very, very complicated.

This means that any story you're likely to tell will have a “natural” end and a “natural” beginning, and that what makes that end and beginning “natural” is a middle, which will usually (not always) take the shape of an arc, at the apex of which will likely come some crisis or climax. This sounds prescriptive: It is actually wonderfully loose. A feeling for a story's structure can offer you a shape vaguely

envisioned long before you have a firm grasp on the plot, and even before you have much of a grasp on the story itself.

Structure is likely to give you your first dim glimpse of your story's *wholeness.* Russell Banks describes the role of structure in his process with exceptional clarity: “Usually, with a novel, I have a pretty good idea of the arc of the narrative and its breaking points. I know if it's going to be a five-act or a three-act novel, or to drive right through to one place or require a reversal, come this way for a while, then reverse and go that way. I do work that out. I also have a short-term outline that covers the next fifty or sixty pages, which I keep rewriting as I work. Of course, it's all tentative; I can change it at will as new ideas, plot turns, characters appear and develop. The trick, I suppose, is to find the point between control and freedom that allows you to do your work.…

“With a short story, I never know where I'm going until I get there. I just know where I entered. That is what comes to me: the opening, a sentence or phrase, even. But with a novel, it's like entering a huge mansion: It doesn't matter where you come in, as long as you get in. I usually imagine the ending, not literally and not in detail, but I do have a clear idea whether it's going to end with a funeral or wedding. Or if I am going to burn the mansion down or throw a dinner party at the end. The important question—the reason you write the novel—is to discover how you get from here to there.”

The interplay between structure, story, and plot is incessant and largely intuitive, and so long as you understand that you must give your story a plot and that any plot must have a structure, I advise you to keep it that way. You are going to need to focus on the separate elements more concretely when you get into trouble. The prime test of a good structure will make your story more tellable, and usually more *completely* tellable. Good structure clarifies.

Structure may or may not be complicated. A complicated structure—let's say an episodic structure—will be all wrong for telling a simple love story. On the other hand, suppose you want to tell the story of a big fractious family over several generations. If you think you can keep all those feuds and romances within the structure of one uncomplicated beginning, middle, and end, you are in for trouble.

There's a lot to think about here. Some of the greatest literary criticism of the last hundred years has focused on structure. If you are curious, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is a good place to start: It will wonderfully enrich your understanding of the *kinds* of fiction, the genres of the art. A next step might be to read the great Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin—a very penetrating and useful analyst of novelistic structure. Yet criticism never can replace the feeling for structure that comes from reading lots and lots of the fiction you love, fiction like what you want to write, and taking away from it a developed feel for its possibilities.

Let's take a look at just one variety of narrative structure, the kind we just called "episodic." An episodic structure often looks very complex because it consists of many tight, punchy, intense, and rather short stories—the episodes—each with its own beginning, middle, and near-end, and all held in the embrace of one slow-moving, rather loose, very long story. The most familiar episodic form in the West right now is the weekly television series: Almost all television series and all soap operas without exception are episodic by definition.

But episodic structure is also a thoroughly classical form. Most of Dickens's novels, for example, are highly episodic, and most, like a television series, first appeared in serial form. If you were to string together the weekly episodes of a continuing television series, as John Mortimer points out, the effect would be very much like the Victorian novels for which Dickens is the paradigm. "If you asked anybody what the plot to *Bleak House* was, they would never really be able to tell you, but they *would* be able to tell you all about the funny little things that happened along the way. But if *Bleak House* didn't have a central plot, they wouldn't have gone on reading it and discovered those things along the way."

From the Pentateuch to *The Sopranos*, the great episodic genre is the saga—the chronicle of a family. Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Mario Puzo's *Godfather* novels, and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are all sagas. And if you want to talk about *really* influential literature, the saga also gives structure to much of the Old Testament, including everything from both books of Samuel

through both books of Chronicles, buttressed by long passages from Genesis and Exodus.

Some structural ideas are not, strictly speaking, narrative at all. They are musical. Music is by far the most powerful way human beings have discovered to endow time with structure. Narrative has to be influenced by such a force. That should come as no surprise in an age of instant access, where the very air around us numbs the mind with unheard melodies in every cab and elevator and telephone call on hold. Hemingway once remarked that his writing had been influenced by Mozart and added, “I should think that what one learns from composers and the study of harmony and counterpoint would be obvious.” There is nothing avant-garde in fiction's structural bond to music: It is as old as the art. The earliest great narratives in the Western tradition—Homeric epics, for example—were sung. Writers from Edmund White to Mary Gordon speak of writing against a counterpoint of music. Being able to listen to music hour after hour while working at one's desk is something that came only with the second half of the twentieth century, but many earlier classics are still fully indebted to music. Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* is unimaginable without Mozart's operas. Among the great modernists, Thomas Mann filled his works with echoes of Wagner, and James Joyce's lyrical ironies are steeped in Italian opera. In fact, literary modernism's focus on the guiding lyricism of “the voice” in fiction derives in the twentieth century from Joyce's genius, and in the nineteenth from Whitman's, and it has clear analogies to the bravura of sung arias grounded in recitative that were so addictively important to both those writers. The tendency is obvious in all the great American lyricists of the “voice,” from Faulkner to Welty: Consider only Welty's classic short story, the all-but-sung showstopper “Powerhouse.” Or consider Susan Sontag's novel *The Volcano Lover:* “I had the story in some sense, and the span of the book. And what was most helpful, I had a very strong idea of a structure. I took it from a piece of music, Hindemith's *The Four Temperaments*—a work I know very well, since it's the music of one of Balanchine's most sublime ballets, which I've seen countless times. The Hindemith starts with a triple prologue, three very short pieces. Then come four

movements: melancholic, sanguinic, phlegmatic, choleric. In that order. I knew I was going to have a triple prologue and then four sections or parts corresponding to the four temperaments.… I knew all of that, plus the novel's last sentence: ‘Damn them all.’ Of course, I didn't know who was going to utter it. In a sense, the whole work of writing the novel consisted of making something that would justify that sentence.”