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## The Essence Of Story By James Bonnet

What is the essence, or heart and soul, of a great story? There are seven critical elements: the change of fortune, the problem of the story, the complications, crisis, climax and resolution of the classical structure, and the threat, which is by far the most important. In this article, we will examine the threat and its relationship to the other six critical elements that constitute the very essence of story -- that without which there would be no story.

The first element is the change of fortune. There is an entity (i.e. an individual, a family, a town, a country, the world, etc.) and that entity goes from a desirable to an undesirable state or condition or the reverse. Or as Aristotle put it: 'The proper magnitude (of a story) is comprised within such limits that the sequence of events, according to the laws of probability and necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good or from good fortune to bad.'

In 'The Exorcist,' a little girl is possessed by the Devil and a state of misfortune exists. Then, the principal action, casting out the Devil, brings about a state of good fortune. In stories that end unhappily, it's the reverse. In 'Othello,' a state of good fortune exists at the beginning. The principal action, perpetrated by Iago, destroys the Moor with jealousy and a state of tragic misfortune is the result.

The second element, the problem, brings about these changes of fortune. This problem is a prerequisite in all stories. You have a problem and that problem is



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resolved. No matter how big or small the story, it will be focusing on, or related to, a problem. And everyone in that story will somehow be involved in that incident. And everything everyone does in that story will in some way affect the outcome of that incident. And revealing how that problem was created and how it can be resolved is at the very heart of a story.

In 'Kiss The Girls' and 'The Silence Of The Lambs,' a serial killer is on the loose. That is the problem that brings about the change of fortune and that is the problem that has to be resolved. The solution to those problems will be the principal actions that give a unity of action to these stories.

In 'Gladiator,' a tyrant has usurped the Roman Empire, preventing the restoration of the Republic. In 'The Sixth Sense,' there are two problems: a murdered child psychologist is stuck in limbo, and the spirits of dead people are haunting a little boy's mind. In 'Independence Day,' aliens have invaded the Earth. In 'Star Wars,' the Evil Empire has taken possession of the galaxy. In 'The Iliad,' the Greek army is being decimated because their best warrior has dropped out of the fight. In the legend of King Arthur, the kingdom is in a state of anarchy and has to be reunified. In 'Jaws,' it's a shark problem. In 'The Mummy,' it's a mummy problem. In 'The Perfect Storm,' it's a weather problem. In 'Traffic,' it's a drug problem. In 'Armageddon,' it's an asteroid problem. In 'Indecent Proposal,' it's a temptation problem. In 'Erin Brockovich,' it's an environmental problem. Each of these stories, and hundreds of others I could name, revolve around a problem that has to be resolved.

Can any problem be a story? Technically, any problem can be a story if its solution contains a classical story structure -- i.e. complications, a crisis, a climax and a resolution. Generally speaking, however, an audience wouldn't be interested in a story about some minor problem, like finding your lost keys, unless something truly funny or horrendous like the end of the world would happen if you didn't find them. Story is especially interested in problem-solving actions that involve crises -- critical events that threaten life, health, wealth, freedom, love, security, happiness, etc. while testing the limits of human endurance and ingenuity.



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Story focuses on problems for the same reason the news only reports the bad things that are happening in the world -- and not the good -- because problems are where it's at. If everything is in perfect harmony, and there are no problems to worry about -- we're in Paradise. And that's one of the functions of story: to help guide us to higher, more desirable, less problematic states of being. One of the ways that a story does this is by revealing the truth and nature of problems and their solutions.

Next, there's the super important element called the threat. The threat is the agent or perpetrator that creates the problem that brings about the negative state. In 'Kiss the Girls,' the serial killer is the threat, and the act of murder is the inciting action that creates the problem that brings about the change to a state of misfortune.

Equally significant in a great story is the fact that this threat will become the source of resistance that opposes the action when someone tries to solve this problem and restore a state of good fortune. This resistance will create the classical structure that occurs when a problem-solving action encounters resistance.

In 'Harry Potter,' Voldemort is the threat. His efforts in the seven books to take possession of the wizard world create the problem that brings about an undesirable state. And he will be the source of the resistance that creates the classical structure whenever Harry tries to solve these problems and restore a state of good fortune.

In 'The Exorcist,' the Devil is the threat. He takes possession of a young girl and that is the inciting action that creates the problem and brings about the change of fortune. He is also the source of resistance that creates the complications, crisis, climax and resolution when the priest tries to solve that problem.

In 'Ordinary People,' the mother is the cause of the problem that has brought about the negative state, and she will be the source of resistance when the psychiatrist, played by Judd Hirsch, and the boy's father, played by Donald Sutherland, attempt to solve the mystery of the boy's suicidal tendencies.



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In 'Jaws,' the shark is the threat that causes the problem. In 'Dracula,' it's the Count. In 'On the Waterfront,' it's Johnny Friendly. In 'Gladiator,' it's Commodus. In 'Braveheart,' it's the British. In 'The Iliad,' it is the Trojan, Paris. In the Egyptian myth of Osiris, it's Osiris' brother Set.

In all of these cases, the threat performs the action that creates the problem that brings about the change of fortune. It also is the source of resistance that creates the classical structure when someone tries to solve the problem and reverse the state of misfortune.

You can see this same pattern at work in real life as well. In World War II, Hitler was the threat, and his 'taking possession of Europe' created the problem and the state of misfortune. He was also the source of the resistance that created the complications, crisis, climaxes and resolutions of the classical structure when the Allies tried to solve this problem.

In our latest war, this is also very evident. Osama Bin Laden, his Al Qaeda terrorist network and the Taliban are the threat. Their attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon is the inciting action that created the problem that brought a very undesirable state of fear to the United States. And they will be the source of resistance that creates the classical structure as we try to solve this problem.

In all of these examples, the threat is the cause of the problem that brings about a change of fortune and is the source of the resistance that creates the classical structure when the good guys try to solve the problem. The problem, change of fortune and components of the classical structure constitute the very essence of story -- that without which there would be no story.

If you think about it, this is easy to see. Without a problem and change of fortune, there is no story. If the story ends in the same place it began, without some significant progress up or down, the audience will wonder what the point of it was. It will be a



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very unsatisfactory experience. Without complications and a crisis, there is no story. If Cinderella goes to the ball, falls in love with the prince and marries him without a single hitch, or if Indiana Jones goes after the Holy Grail and finds it without running into any difficulty whatsoever, there is no story. The audience is left muttering: So what? If there are complications and a crisis, but no climax and no resolution, you will have the same problem. You will leave your audience feeling completely unfulfilled. They will have the distinct feeling that the story was left unfinished.

The threat, then, is not only the heart of the high concept great idea, (see our eZine article on the high concept dated July 21, 2001), it creates the problem that brings about the change of fortune and provides the resistance that creates the classical structure, all of which make up the very essence of story. An element that does all of that is an element worth thinking about and understanding.

**James Bonnet, [www.storymaking.com](http://www.storymaking.com), is an internationally known writer, teacher and story consultant. He was elected twice to the Board of Directors of the Writer's Guild of America and has written or acted in more than forty television shows and features. The radical new ideas about story in his book *Stealing Fire from the Gods: A Complete Guide to Story For Writers And Filmmakers* are having a major impact on writers in all media.**

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