

# The 4 Basic Stories



From award-winning author  
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How many fiction stories have been told? Millions? Billions? We make stories up all the time, don't we? But here's an interesting truth: there are actually only 4 basic stories in fiction that are endlessly told and retold and mixed together in various ways. Only four. All stories are a combination of these four so called archetypes. And by understanding them, and introducing them to your own stories, you will improve your own writing hugely.

## STORY ONE - OVERCOMING THE MONSTER

This is my own favourite archetype. In it someone or something evil has to be overcome. Sometimes it's literally a monster, like Medusa. Or it could be a machine-monster enslaving humanity, as in the *Matrix* films. Most often it's a powerful person we despise, such as Count Olaf in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda* or President Snow in *The Hunger Games*. Whoever the monster is, the storyline always develops the same way. First, the monster or person poses a terrible threat. They're doing awful things, and must be stopped. But luckily a hero or heroine - usually reluctantly at first - emerges to fight them! The hero/heroine goes through all sorts of thrilling trials, and near the end all hope seems lost. But at the last moment the hero snatches victory from the jaws of defeat. They defeat the monster, order is restored and usually the hero/heroine receives a prize.

Readers love the Overcoming the Monster story. The thriller, science fiction, fantasy and crime genres are dominated by it. Horror stories are often about little else. If you want to grip your audience, create a true monster your readers can loathe.

Illustration Arthur Rackman 'The twelfth labour of Hercules' 1903

## STORY TWO - THE DREAM COME TRUE

This is the most beloved story of all. It is any tale where a character has a great dream for something - rags to riches, obscurity to fame - and they miraculously achieve it.

Poor little *Cinderella* dreams of meeting her prince, but how can she? She's just a neglected girl with horrible sisters who keep her stuck inside. Ah, but her fairy Godmother arrives to transform a pumpkin into a carriage, rats into footmen, and she's swept away in the perfect dress to the ball where after one single dance the prince falls in love with her. It's not very believable, is it? But we love it because it's the dream come true ...



Or take Alex Rider in *Stormbreaker* by Anthony Horowitz. Do you really believe an unarmed 14 year-old boy could outrun all the professional adult killers at Herod Sayle's disposal, and guide his parachute (which he's never used before) accurately to his destination and, never having used a gun before, on the move, shoot Herod Sayle? Possibly. But probably not. Yet we accept it because it's the dream come true - brave schoolboy gets to take on all the forces of evil and wins. Writer Ray Frensham even goes as far as to say this is almost the only story. He calls it David against Goliath: the individual against impossible odds who somehow still succeeds. Alex Rider is this type of dream come true story. He can't be kept down. He gets stopped and he just pushes harder. We love characters like this. Harry Potter is just the same - 11 year-old school boy with no knowledge of magic defeats the darkest lord of magic and saves the world. And for all you Bella and Edward fans, *Twilight* is just the romantic version of the dream come true story. Ordinary Bella tames the dreaded vampire and in the process wins the heart of the most gorgeous, unattainable boy in the world. Not very likely. But we accept it because it's the dream come true and that is what we all want from fiction.

Illustration Sir John Everett Millais 'Cinderella' 1881

## STORY THREE - THE LOSS OF SOMETHING IMPORTANT



You might think that this can't be one of the four great archetypal stories. Yet it is. The loss is often something personal, like family members or a close friend. It could be an object. It can be a value, like freedom. It can be the loss of feelings of love, or the loss of hope. So much loss in fiction. And the story which follows is either the tragedy of the loss itself or the search to find it again which follows.

In *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, Tracy has lost her mother, and she's desperate to get her back. In *Lord of the Rings*, Sauron has lost his great ring of power. *Harry Potter* has lost his parents. And Voldemort has lost both his body at first and also his strength. Are you

beginning to get a feel for the power of this storyline? If you want readers to fall in love with your story, find ways of embedding loss deeply into the lives of your characters.

Illustration Kay Nielsen 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon' 1914

## STORY FOUR - THE JOURNEY

Sometimes storytellers give us a real journey, one that takes a character on a long quest, as in *The Lord of the Rings*. We love journey stories. But there's another kind of journey story that's actually more important. It's a spiritual journey. A transformation that takes place over the course of a story in a character's mind and heart.

In this kind of story, the hero or heroine is often *downtrodden* at the start. Think about Harry Potter. At the beginning of the series, he has enough trouble standing up to Dudley. But Harry grows as a character. Gradually he develops a desire to save Hogwart's - and maybe the world itself - from Voldermort. And by the end of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* we realize just how much stronger he's become. It happens when Voldermort offers him a chance to save his skin and even to bring back his parents - Harry's great dream! But when Harry refuses the thing he wants more than anything else in the world and fights on, even knowing he will probably die, we see Harry has grown enormously. He's no longer just the poor little boy we felt so much sympathy for at the start. He's a really strong character, a true opponent for Voldermort.

The other kind of character we see in this personal journey usually begins as a *selfish* one. Mary Reynolds at the start of *The Secret Garden* by Francis Hodgson Burnett is sour-tempered and nasty. But gradually she finds the secret garden. Then she's introduced to Dicken, who opens up her heart to unselfish things. She changes profoundly - from a conceited, bitter girl to someone who makes the whole unhappy family she's living with happy and whole again.



We love to see a character grow as an individual in a story into someone we can really admire. As American scriptwriting guru John Truby says, '**What every audience is really looking for is to see an authentic transformation in a character's heart**'.

Illustration Arthur Rackham 'David' 1906

## WHY ARE THESE FOUR PARTICULAR STORIES SO POWERFUL?

Because real life is all about the four archetypes. In life we constantly face people who don't care about us. Some become real enemies, whom we struggle to overcome. But despite that human beings keep seeking to better themselves, to live the dream. And yes, we lose things all the time, friends and family, possessions, hope and confidence sometimes. But we carry on. And when we are feeling at our best, we try to grow as well, to become stronger, a person others can admire. The four archetypes are at the heart of the most important things in our lives - what it means to be human.

## WHAT DO I DO NEXT?

First, take 5 stories you personally love and study the way all four of the archetypes are woven deeply into the story. And once you are convinced, go to your own writing and ask yourself this question: *How do I deepen my story by including the four archetypes?* I personally promise that when you do so your story will not only feel stronger but it will appeal to a much wider readership as well. Good luck!

To find out more about Cliff McNish's own award winning novels for children and young adults go to [www.cliffmcnish.com](http://www.cliffmcnish.com)



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