

WEBSITE RESOURCE W3.2

Alastair Daniel on storytelling

This is an extract from a blog posted by Alastair, who is a professional storyteller and lecturer, where he discusses why folk and fairy tales 'stick'.

Sticky Stories – and what makes them stick?

Jack Zipes has dedicated a whole volume to this question in his book, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of Genre* (2006), so in this short section, I can really only skim along the surface, but I will start with a quote from his work that will, to some extent, set the agenda:

... the fairy tale creates disorder to create order and, at the same time, to give voice to Utopian wishes and ponder instinctual drives and gender, ethnic, family and social conflicts.¹ (Zipes, 2006: 15)

We are very vulnerable to the power of story, and the ability of that coin of culture (Bruner, 2002) to stick to our palms. If you ask someone in the UK how many fairy tales they can name, the list will possibly include 'Snow White', 'Beauty and the Beast', 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'Rapunzel', 'Cinderella', 'The Little Mermaid', 'The Three Billy Goats Gruff' and 'Jack and the Beanstalk'. With the exception of the last two, all of these stories are sourced either from the versions from the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault or Hans Christian Anderson. When I give talks on folk and fairy tale, it is often a surprise to people that these collections have richer contents than the stories with which they are familiar – the Brothers Grimm's collections contain over 200 tales alone. So, the question is what makes the tales that we remember stick?

Cultural relevance

Zipes goes into some depth as to why particular stories have survived and have retained their popularity, suggesting that they have 'memetic qualities' (2006: 96) - memes being definable units of culture that can be passed on. These stories, then, explain social behaviour and the way in which we respond to our environment (Zipes, 2008) and, because

there are fundamental norms that are regarded as important across cultural and generational boundaries, fairy and folk tale provide a means of transporting these 'units of culture'. Hence, the danger of the innocent becoming victims of violence is conveyed through the variations of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. The unit of culture, then is fairly stable, and this stability means that the narrative core of fairy and folk tales can be easily repeated and therefore remembered. And this repetition itself means that it 'has been deemed worthy of repetition because it is loved, and it is loved because it tells us something about ourselves that we want and need to know' (Swann Jones, 1995: 5).

Familiarity

While previous generations have relied on print media and spoken word to transmit story, the memes of traditional tale are passed on today through a range of media including gaming, film and TV. Of course, it is impossible to consider the impact of modern media on people's familiarity with fairy tales without mentioning Disney and its animated and live-action versions of these stories. The ubiquity of Disney versions means that, for many children, 'Cinderella' is Disney's film of the story, and it is not uncommon for storytellers to experience children's confusion when sharing a different version with them.² In Part 3 of this blog, I will discuss Disney and its films in the context of taking a critical approach to choosing and using folk and fairy tales but, whatever the desirability of Disney versions of folk and fairy tales, their influence cannot be denied, and stories such as 'Cinderella', 'Snow White', 'Rapunzel', and 'Sleeping Beauty' have a continuous profile because of the corporate power of 'The Magic Kingdom'.

Simplicity

Umberto Eco refers to traditional tales as 'simple forms' (1994), and we can see how a story such as 'Little Red Riding Hood' lacks the complexity of the twists and turns of a novel or adventure film. Lacking the gaps in the narrative that an audience would be expected to fill in a developed narrative, fairy and folk tales are structured quite simply, event to event, making them easy to work with in the classroom, both in terms of investigation (themes, character, structure etc.), and as a stimulus for children to create their own stories. To understand the connection between traditional tales and children's story making, we can look to the work of Brian Sutton-Smith in the 1970's. Sutton-Smith and his research team collected and analysed children's oral and written stories and came to the conclusion that 'children's stories may be less well-structured than fairy tales, folktales, legends, and myths, and they may be replete with modern content, but they nevertheless have the same basic plot structures and the same general concerns with fate, fate overwhelming, and fate nullified as do those other genres' (1981: 2). This is perhaps not surprising when the underlying structure of folk and fairy tales is considered.

A quick online search will reveal multiple versions of a basic story structure that fits that of the folk or fairy tale, but the conceptual content remains the same for most of these versions. I have summarised this content in Figure 2, which is based on the model first suggested by Freytag in his 1863 publication, 'Technique of the drama'. To me, this model

makes perfect sense, simply from the experience of overcoming obstacles in life, and how one naturally organises ideas when communicating events to someone else: When you describe an event, you talk about someone who wanted to do something, but hit problems, tried various solutions and either succeeded or failed in doing what they wanted.

Take, for instance, the time my mother and I were locked out of the house when we returned from shopping. I had to be pushed upside down through the fanlight at the top of the window, so that I would drop down feet first onto the Window-sill on the other side, jump to the floor and go and open the door from the inside:

- Introduction: mum and I returned home from shopping
- Problem: we were locked out
- Rising action: mum found the open window and worked out how we could get in the house
- Climax: I balanced upside down on my mother's hands and she pushed me up through the fanlight
- Falling action: I lowered myself onto the window sill and jumped to the floor
- Resolution and ending: I went through the house and unlocked the door

In other words, the simple story structure matches our own experiences in the world. In Figure 3, I have plotted 'Little Red Riding Hood' against this structure - a more complex narrative, such as the novel or adventure film can be seen as a development of this model, with multiple points of crisis and resolution.



Figure 1 Simple Story Structure

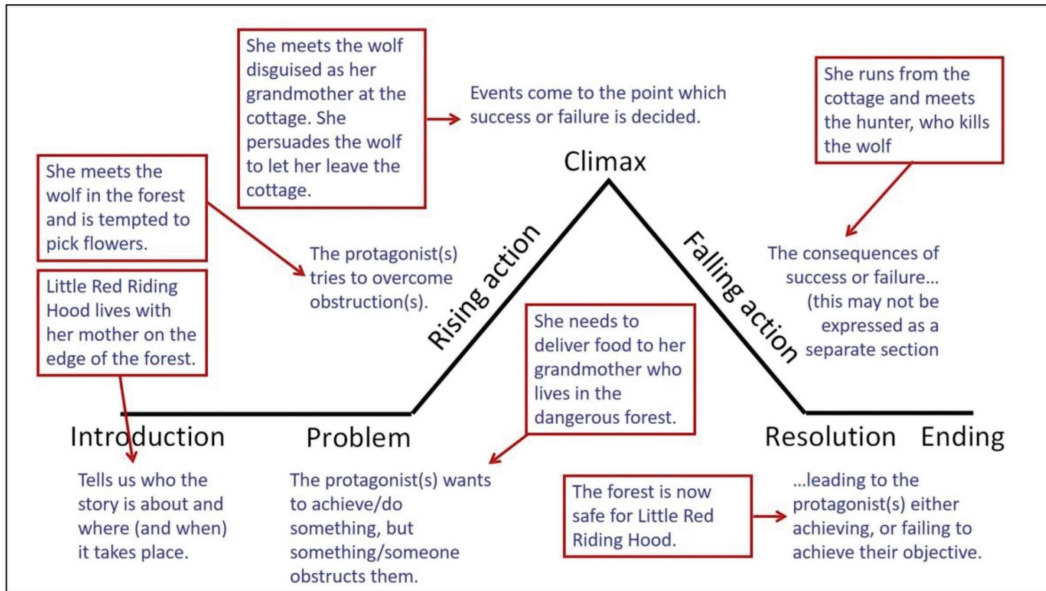


Figure 2 Simple Story Structure – ‘Little Red Riding Hood’

Thematic relevance

Returning to Sutton-Smith’s point (quoted above) about the alignment of themes of fairy and folk tales with the stories that children tell, thematic relevance is also an important aspect of such stories’ accessibility and suitability for the classroom. Whilst the stories may have a ‘simple form’, there is nothing superficial about the themes of folk and fairy tales, and, for many years, I have drawn on the work of the Czech émigré, Aldus Greimas, to understand how ideas are connected in a particular story. Greimas’s method of analysis can be used in the classroom through considering the following questions:

- Who is the story about
- What do they want to do/achieve?
- What makes them want to do/achieve this?
- If they succeed whom will it benefit?
- What/who is working against them?
- What/who is working for them? (Greimas and Courtés, 1979, summarised in Daniel, 2012)

In ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ we could answer:

- Who is the story about – Little Red Riding Hood
- What do they want to do/achieve – To visit her grandmother with comfort foods
- What makes them want to do/achieve this – Her grandmother is sick
- If they succeed whom will it benefit – Her grandmother
- What/who is working against them – The Wolf

- What/who is working for them – Either the hunter/woodcutter or Little Red Riding Hood’s intelligence and courage (depending on the tradition).

This approach to narrative does not identify the events of a story, but it summarises the relationships between the forces that drive the narrative. To understand a more complex narrative (such as a novel) one would need to ask these questions multiple times, but the ‘simple form’ of the folk tale means that they can be used to grasp how the story works with relative ease. By thinking about the relationship between Little Red Riding Hood and her helper (who or what is working for her), we can see how different versions of the story affect the thematic drive towards the story’s resolution. The two options for the helper presented above are either the hunter (or woodcutter) and Little Red Riding Hood’s intelligence and courage: the former is about the young girl waiting for the older man to rescue her; the latter is about a young girl having the personal resources to control her own destiny.

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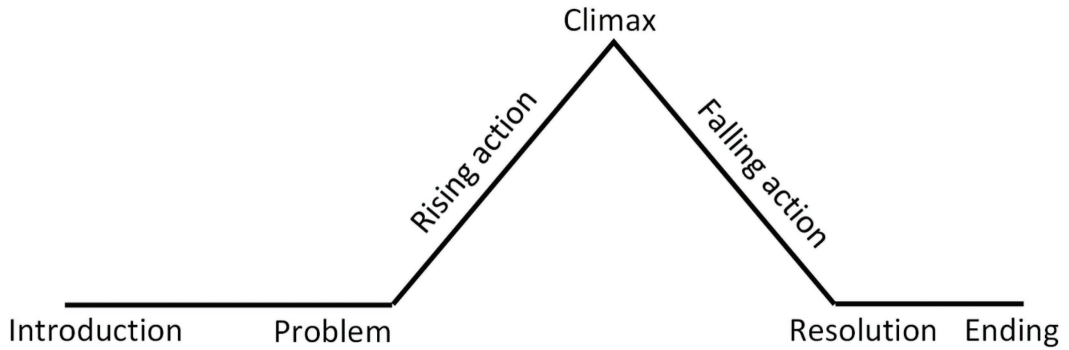
Notes

1. It is important to note that Zipes is primarily concerned with the literary fairy tale (such as those collected by Perrault and Grimms, or the literary creations of Hans Christian Andersen), rather than the broader category of traditional or folk tale. However, I would suggest that the point he makes in this quote is equally applicable across the wider category.
2. Long before I took up storytelling as a profession, I was attending a workshop with storyteller Sandra Pollerman. She described how children would correct her and say, ‘But that’s wrong! The story goes like this. . . .’ and then provide a correction which was grounded in a popular version of the tale that she was telling, usually Disney. To overcome this, she adopted a formula to start and end her storytelling which embedded the possibility of multiple versions: ‘This is the story of _____, and this is how I will tell it’
‘That was the story of _____, and that was how I told it.’

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