

The Magical Writer

Session 5 — Plot, Story, and Myth

How do we move from the stories in our hearts to a structured narrative that can sustain its energy over the course of a book?

A plot is the scaffolding that allows us to transform the raw energy of our stories into a compelling and emotionally satisfying narrative.

Plots are remarkably simple and repetitive. Christopher Booker says that all of Western literature consists of seven (later he said nine) plots. But to find this limiting is like bemoaning that all of Western music consists of just twelve musical tones. An infinite number of songs can be crafted from those twelve tones, and an infinite number of stories from a small number of plots.

Myths and Plots

Myths embody simple plots, and often share common features such as a Call, a Challenge, a Journey, a Period of Testing, an Initiation, a Climactic Struggle, and a Triumphant Return.

Myths are remarkably supple. I think of a myth as a collection of story-elements — characters, conflicts, situations, possible outcomes — which each storyteller assembles in a unique way. Homer wrote a version of the *Odyssey* — but James Joyce and the creators of *O Brother Where Art Thou* did, too. All were reworking “traditional” material.

Whether it was ancient Greek playwrights, the Roman poet Ovid, or moderns like Bulfinch and Campbell, each version is one possibility among many. None is “the” story, and every new storyteller is entitled to rework the material in their own way.

Myths as Organizing Devices

Myths and folktales can be used explicitly — think of Marion Zimmer Bradley, John Barth, or the film version of *The Iliad*. Ancient and medieval myths and legends have lost none of their power, and lesser-known tales could provide great material for modern narratives.

Myths can also be used as subtle structural patterns — Joyce’s *Ulysses* makes few explicit references to Homer’s work, yet the classical text underlies the structure of the entire novel. Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* mirrors a phantasmagoric journey to Hell, cleverly disguised as America.

Even when we don’t follow a myth so strictly, we can use mythical elements to strengthen the scaffolding of our work. Many stories will benefit from a Journey, a series of Challenges — and of course the Climactic Struggle (which may take place on a battlefield or at a formal wedding).

See page 2 for exercises

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A Writing Intensive
in the Reclaiming Tradition

With George Franklin and Guest Teachers

Want to write a novel, memoir, or other narrative? Want to jump-start your writing, regardless of the style? Let Reclaiming magic help!

We’ll look at the craft of writing and the emotional blocks that keep us from reaching our full artistic potential.

We’ll meet in sacred space, share writing and support over the web, and gain understanding and skill from working with others. Writing can be an isolating practice - we’ll use magic to weave a web of support and encouragement.

With magical tools such as circle-casting, ancestor invocations, trances, and spellwork, we’ll free our

expressive gifts and strengthen our belief in ourselves as artists.

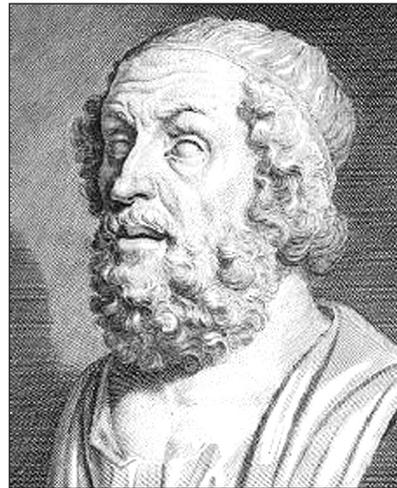
We will also work on writing that expresses our unique voice, creating plot-structures, developing characters, and other aspects of the writers’ craft. Each class includes directed writing time.

Class is suitable for those working on writing projects who want a supportive circle and new inspiration, and those looking to begin the process. Although you’ll determine your own work-pace, be prepared to dedicate time to your writing, and to write for at least ten minutes each day.

For more information, contact George, <george@directaction.org>

George Franklin is a Reclaiming teacher and co-editor of Reclaiming Quarterly. He has written several novels and published one (visit directaction.org), and helped edit work by writers such as Cynthia Lamb, T. Thorn Coyle, and Starhawk. Magic is a key part of his creative process.

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Homer. The Homeric poems were written down c. 800 BCE.

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Exercises — Session 5

Mythical Elements

Whether or not we adopt a myth as our organizing structure (hey, it worked for James Joyce!), we can strengthen our storytelling by integrating mythical elements into our plots.

A Call is a typical way to start a story — whether it is a call to a journey, a task, or an interior awakening, it is this first glimmer of awareness that sets the story in motion.

Challenges, with initial failures and a growing recognition of the need for special preparation, often lead to a decision to undertake a journey and/or seek special training. Action-adventure films often emphasize this arc.

A Journey takes the story into the wider world. Characters gain experience while meeting fresh challenges. A journey can also add color and excitement to the story — the “exotic.”

Testing and Initiation are ways of structuring conflicts and having them lead to a clear outcome. The initiation doesn't need to be formal, but a significant threshold must be crossed and acknowledged — readying the character for the ultimate test.

The Climactic Struggle brings the story-elements and characters into a final showdown — Theseus and Ariadne vs the Minotaur, Dorothy and her friends vs the Wicked Witch, etc.

The Triumphant Return can be shown (as when the princess is restored to her rightful throne amid general acclaim), or simply suggested (as when the gunfighter rides alone into the sunset amid the applause of the moviegoers).

MythCrafting

When we perform magical spells, we speak of “spellcrafting,” the art of envisioning, creating, and charging our intentions.

What if we applied the same approach with our writing — and our lives?

Think of the stories we tell ourselves about our limitations, the likelihood of failure, and the negligible impact of our actions. Can I take these disheartening tales about “how the world is” and transmute them into narratives of empowerment?

What magical tools help me tap into the stories that get buried beneath the clamor of the world? What are the roles of trance, divination, and dreamwork?

In what ways can my storycrafting support my complete emergence into the world?

Some Resources

The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters by Christopher Vogler. Based on the work of Joseph Campbell.

Shakespeare's Game by William Gibson. Dissects the Bard's plays to illustrate plot-construction. The best book I've read on plotcrafting.

Myths and Appropriation

I consider European and Mediterranean myths “fair game.” The only reservation I have about reworking myths is borrowing materials from cultures which traditionally have been exploited by my inherited European culture.

Writing Exercises

My Life as Myth

Choose a favorite myth and rework it as part of a story you are working on, or part of your autobiography.

In your story, what monsters are battled? What special skills are involved? What princes, princesses, or royal children of other genders do we meet?

Does your narrative have a Call? An Initiation? A Triumphant Return?

Transforming a Myth

Choose a myth that annoys you, and rework it in a manner that empowers you. You can reinterpret the myth, introduce new characters or other elements that transform the story, etc.

Change anything you want, but somehow keep the original myth visible.

Modern Pantheons

Create a dozen deities or other magical beings. Be sure to give them superpowers and special areas of influence (e.g., love, war, barbecuing, etc).

Use an arbitrary method — coin-toss, drawing cards, etc — to assign them places in a hierarchical pantheon or family. Draw a chart of their relations.

Once they are assigned places, what conflicts arise? Is a gender or generational rebellion taking shape? Can the top dogs retain their position? Make whatever moves you feel are needed.

Now write a short myth that explains the changes, why they had to happen, and why the world is a better place for it.