

Tale-Built:  
The Deep Structure of Story

Sebastian Lockwood

Clickety-clickety-clickety, that inexorable climb above the sea side town of Hull, Mass: you enjoy the view for an excruciating second before... varoom, the breathless plunge. In its day that was the steepest drop of a wooden roller coaster on the east coast. Now add a full interior loop and we have the shape of The Odyssey. The loop is the story within a story.

When I tell The Odyssey I go to my story garage and roll out the Rolls Royce of tales. If the conceit of a story is the chassis, then here is one classy chassis, as S.Stalone said of himself. What the great stories teach us about structure is the elasticity of these works. The perfection of Homer leaves you free as a teller to move within these majestic shapes – to feel the original and archetypal contours. These stories conform to the triangle and the magic rectangle – they are in tune with the patterns of nature and have an organic form as fine as the separations of the leaves on a stalk of corn or on the frets of a guitar: they are the golden mean.

The structure of music we know as the form of the symphony, the themes, repetitions, complications and resolution – or the exponential equation of the fugue. Our minds know and love these deep patterns and follow with delighted expectation as the piece fulfills its intended structure, but with a new verve. One false (not wrong) note and we worry it may fall. It is no surprise that the Goldberg Variations work around the number 32 and come to a crisis at number 16. We feel the perfection of that structure as part of the transcendence of the music.

For pop and rock music we have: ABACAB, that is; verse, chorus, verse, bridge, verse, chorus. Add to that a rhyme scheme and refrain with a simple narrative and you have a structure secure enough that the singer can remember the words and the audience can sing along. The sonnet gives us iambic pentameters with: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG; perhaps the most beautiful structure in the English language. These structures are so familiar, so elegant, that we are unaware of them, unless... we have to perform them.

So it is with the story: we are unaware of the structure until asked to drive.

If we say that a story is a boat, then we have to board the boat, leave the dock, experience the journey with its conflicts and phantasmagoria – then return to the dock.

A storyteller without a strong ending is like a boat without a dock.

The critical point comes three quarters of the way through the story, that point where the forward impulse of the narrative must now turn and face the ending. The story must move from the exponential complication to the initiation of conclusion. It is at that

point that one is so often disappointed by a film that has had a great plot device to get going, but runs out of steam a quarter of the way through, at the turn.

While we are learning a story we are discovering the structure and seeing how the language works. Once we **own** the story, there is a sense of having perfect balance, of being inside a framework so well crafted that we are free: we know how to fly this bird, or, it knows how to fly us. We are free to engage in the other aspects of telling: body language, eye contact, pacing – and we can fully engaging our audience, secure within the architecture of the tale.

When you hear, *Jasu Joy of Man's Desiring*, or, *I am the Lord of the Dance*; you respond with a deep feeling of having always known that tune – it is DNA melody. So with the epics and origin stories: we know we know this yet we knew it not. It is a knowing before knowing where we are engaged with archetypes that are part of the deep structures of our minds.

From the time of its first telling each generation has told The Iliad and The Odyssey to the next generation – when you heard it first you were another link on that ancient chain joined by the teller. If you speak English, then your mind is formed within the structures of those stories. That is why the little boy's eyes get so big when I tell him a story that he knows but never heard before. Each generation gets to walk into the architecture of Homer and feel its magnificent proportions for the first time.

*In the beginning was the word...*

We inherit these structures. I have never bought the idea of frightened primitives making up stories about angry gods to explain thunder. The earliest tales we have, the earliest myths, deep myth, are structures of incredible beauty and sophistication. They have not been getting better, quite the opposite. Look at the creation myth of the Dogon peoples now living east of Timbuctu. Here is a story that explains the complexity of the universe in relation to the complexity of the structure of a granary that is itself a cosmography that reveals an invisible star close by Sirius of incredible weight – not until this century would astronomers be able to confirm that as a White Dwarf there. The Dogon passed that celestial knowledge on within the structure of the story. This is their enculturation. The teller is able to be free to a degree within the structure – to add details and jokes, present day allusions – just don't muck with the bones.

In the same way the nephew of a Haida carver who has Raven in his line, can inherit the right to carve Raven, must obey the strict form, but will also find freedom to express his moment. Good translations do that, Pope for his time, Fitzgerald or Fagles for ours.

Imagine the structure of our story is the skeleton of a Dragon.

Now this Dragon has joints that allow the beast to move. I think of these as the refrains, repetitions and formulas. The most famous of these being: ... *the rose tipped fingers of dawn*. When I say that in performance, it functions as intended for the bards of old: it allows me to breathe, to collect my thoughts, shift tone or pace, and then take the plunge into the next section. Homer gives us many of these. So when I reach that three quarter point and have to shift my audience into the *turning point* – I need a piece of language there that will let me shift gears and head for home. By laying down my refrain or formula many times early in the story, I have prepared the audience for this

shift – when they recognize the lines in this context, they turn and go with you. That is structure in action.

So. Beowulf.

Here is our most recent structure in a language on its way to becoming our tongue. In his introduction, Heaney says that, ... *the poem possesses a mythic potency...* and ... *it arrives from somewhere beyond the known bourne of our experience.* Of Tolkein's paper on Beowulf, **Beowulf: the monsters and the Critics**, Heaney shows us how Tolkein portrays the poet of Beowulf as, *an imaginative writer, who, felt his way into the inherited material... and by a combination of creative intuition and conscious structuring, arrived at a unity of effect and a balanced order.* So must we storytellers attempt to do the same with our inherited material.

There are many templates of that balanced order to choose from: Cinderella, Three pigs, Beauty and the Beast, Goldie Locks (that narrative of wild and civilized playing out a dyadic balancing act to return the wild to the wild and re-establish balance through a sequence of 3s). Or, take our four thousand year old beauty of a story, the Epic of Gilgamesh or the gorgeous baroque complexities of, *Monkey: A Journey to the West*. *Monkey* is read on many levels. Thanks to the wonderful translation by Anthony Yu, we find a story that presents a fourth dimension: an allegory that tells a magical tale while teaching the tripartite way and the compassion of Quan Yin.

Monkey, Sandy and Pigsy: three for the yellow brick road.

So. Let us return to Beowulf.

That, **So**, is how the poet starts – this tag is similar to the Native American use of, *They say...* or our, *Once upon a time*.

So. Beowulf has two set pieces that open and close the story while within we work in threes: inside the mead hall, down the poison well, and in the dragon's lair. If I have in my mind these set pieces and those three images – and my set has pieces that are also mnemonic devices – plus the twin sea journeys, the story within a story, the opening catalog of names and closing pyre: then my mind can relax within this fine structure and concentrate on freeing my word-hoard.

So. Look at the several formal boasts in Beowulf and we find this pattern: my credentials, my desire to fight, renunciation of weapons, and the fame I expect dead or alive. When approaching a boast, I know those four parts will form a pivotal structure within the larger form, and will repeat at transition points. Also in Beowulf, as with the other epics, the poet gracefully inserts a story within a story.

We also have the twin sea journeys – *Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank...* and the utterly beautiful pleasure of saying, *away with a will in the wood wreathed ship. Over the waves, with the wind behind her! And foam at her neck, she flew like a bird.*

I will say those words early in the poem and I will say them again at the *turning point* as we head for home and the suicidal battle with the Dragon. When I say those words a second time, I know exactly where I am in my telling, as I cross, with the audience, that bridge to the end section, the turning point.

I tell Beowulf Square Mouth (formal language as opposed to a more colloquial, Round Mouth – (with thanks to the MOOSE tellers who introduced me to that concept)) and am astonished at how much weight my memory has taken on. My word-hoard is so

full, so familiar, yet so alien, as this language comes pouring out, language I didn't know I knew, shaped within the perfect structure of the poet's craft.

Clickety, clickety, clickety – whoosh: when I take my audience for that plunge into the story, we enter Storyland together. My audience will only really go with me if they absolutely trust me as teller and... they trust the structure we are riding on. Then, when the coaster rolls into the dock with a whoosh and knocks you against the safety bar, you get out and say: *Oh, I want to do that again.*