

13. Deep structure

The vast majority of plays (like the vast majority of short stories, novels and narrative poems) contain a *story* – a sequence of linked chronological events – although the play itself may not depict all the events or necessarily depict them in chronological order. Plays, like any narrative form, often start at or just before a key event in the story, and the back-story (what happened before the play started) emerges, where necessary, as the play progresses. (It should be noted, however, that not all plays contain a denouement or any backstory at all. Some Beckett, Chekhov or Brecht has little except unrealised or realised dramatic tensions or silences.)

At its most basic, a story consists of a central character in a situation (often involving other characters) which produces some form of conflict (most often as the result of human interaction) that requires a resolution. There are many different stories that can be told – the exact number of possibilities varies, depending on the source – but I would contend that there are really only two *deep* structures underlying them and most audiences are psychologically predisposed to expect these. They are:

The Quest

in which the main character – the traditional hero or heroine suits this particular structural form well – is given a task (the situation), achievement of which is obstructed by a number of obstacles to be overcome (the conflict) before the goal is reached (resolution). At its simplest level, this structure underlies such stories as *Jason and the Golden Fleece*, and *Lord of the Rings* – not to mention the vast majority of ‘action’ movies. – but it is by no means limited to physical situations and obstacles. Think of Willy Russell’s *Educating Rita*, for example, where the quest is for self-realisation and the obstacles largely take the form of other people’s preconceptions.

The Unwelcome Guest

in which the main character(s) find(s) that their status quo (the situation) is threatened by an intruder (the conflict) that must be battled until the status quo is either reinstated or refashioned (the resolution). This structure underlies *Beowulf*, for example, as well as a thousand western movies (think of *High Noon*) but, again, neither the threat nor the situation need be so physical. Consider David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*, for example, where the already tough world of real estate salesmen is made dramatically worse by the introduction of a new cut-throat sales drive competition. How each man responds to this – and how individual responses impact on colleagues – makes up the dramatic action of the play and brings it to its tragic denouement.

(It is sometimes said that the traditional romance – the meeting of two individuals, whose lives intertwine for a while, and who then either stay together or go their separate ways – is a third deep structure, but it can usually be described in terms of the Quest or the Uninvited Guest, so is something of a hybrid.)

If you can analyse your own story in these simple structural terms, you should be able to tell if you have tried to incorporate elements of both structures at the same time, thereby failing to meet audience expectations at a very basic level. (There is nothing wrong with testing your audience’s expectations, but you should always be aware *that* you are testing them, *why* you are testing them and, hopefully, your audience should ultimately be aware of this too.) You might also gain an insight into the best point at which to start your play. It should start just before the conflict point – too early and you risk boring your audience, too late and you risk having to catch up on too much backstory.