

Story Theory Workshop

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Story Theory

Story Theory Workshop:

I am **Kathleen Scott Goldingay**, John Goldingay's wife. Anything I say that is a repeat of what he's said, he stole from me. I am a retired architect with a Master's in Theology and a UCLA screenwriting certificate – so I am all about every kind of structure that connects us to divine principles.

We are here to explore:

How integral story structure is to our lives.

What makes a story emotionally engaging, and

how does its structure convey meaning and inspire action?

There will be three segments:

Half an hour on **story theory**,

half an hour on **story structure**, and

in the last half-hour we will do **practical application**.

For each segment there will be a short talk, questions, a 10-15 minute exercise.

Enough about me. Anyone with a screenwriting **background**? Aristotle scholars?

Story Grid experts? Been to McKee's Story Seminar? Good, you can back me up with corrections and additions.

Part I: Story Theory 1250

We are steeped in story. Ads, movies, social media. We love stories.

We are all story experts. If something is wrong with a story we intuitively know—even if we can't articulate the reason. If the story is good we become emotionally engaged and can be persuaded to buy a product or believe a lie or go to war.

So, stories are also dangerous.

Your congregation is populated with pre-programmed story experts. Their minds are tuned to listen to stories with certain expectations. Their belief systems are emotionally anchored by powerful stories.

What are some of the dominant obvious stories right now.

(tv serials, movies, media memes, tweets, advertisements, novels, newspaper, newscasts, Netflix, cartoons, sports games.)

Name some more **subtle mediums where people are influenced by** story

(book covers, uniforms, hair styles, consumer packaging, ceremonies around the Queen's Speech).

Why Study Story Theory?

The Story Theory we'll workshop today consists of those **structural elements** that result in an emotionally engaging story and tune our expectations.

Although there are more reasons to study structure, I want to emphasize three

1. **God has chosen to engage with us through stories.**

The Bible contains many levels of stories. Some are **meta-stories** — the forest-- that encompass the entirety of the scriptures, what God is doing for all time.

There are **mid-narratives**- tree stories: The forming of the Israelites as a people, human attempts at government, the prophets' collective efforts to return people to God's way.

There are stories about **individual characters**- branches and leaves: Noah, Abigail, Isaac, Hannah, David, Ruth.

It's helpful to understand how story works so we can see how the leaves, branches, trees **might be related** to the forest and **why we might be reacting** like we do to individual Old Testament stories.

If we know how to look, **we can also find stories in unexpected places**: in the psalms, in the laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, in the wisdom sayings of Ecclesiastes. The histories and genealogies in the Old Testament are edited stories. God says stories work, I'll have them in my book. **God relates to us through story.**

2. Stories are formative.

Stories call us to action and belief- EXAMPLES from above.

They define our identity. All tribes have stories. If you know and believe the tribal story, you can become part of that tribe. Remembering the story and passing it on becomes a crucial part of the survival of the tribe.

Why are they formative? Scientists have shown that, through 'mirror neurons,' we experience a sports event or movie or tv advertisement as if we are in it. Are you familiar with this concept? In Oxford there is always a danger someone in the group is a world renowned neurological expert.

When an athlete scores, a fan's neurons mirror the athlete's neurons. Both brains 'light up' in the same place. You experience the win in your brain just like the athlete does on the field. So after experiencing the same story enough, a tribe lights up and reacts in a proscribed way to situations and challenges.

Aristotle thought that imitation is a deeply ingrained human tendency. It is essential to learning and more importantly to 'becoming'. His theory of story structure relies on this idea and thus on our 'feeling along' with the characters. This 'feeling along', not rational rhetoric, is essential.

We know we accept some stories so naturally that we don't realize we are being led down a path to a particular action. We fail to ask important questions about what we

are feeling. This is what generates manipulation of elections and of consumers. It is what radicalizes terrorists. **Stories are formative.**

3. The third reason to study story theory is that we view stories from our personal addresses, which we can take for granted.

We all come from a certain part of the world, a particular family situation, we have certain physical characteristics and limitations, innate personalities, and we have lifetimes of experiences that impact us. (I get this idea from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the psychologist who defined the concept of flow).

All these 'neighbourhoods' feed into how we feel and how we interpret a story- we experience it from our unique address, our personal point of view.

For example: People who drink alcohol in their culture don't concern themselves about why someone might serve wine at a wedding in a Bible story. Poor cultures might wonder how a wedding feast that includes an extravagances like alcohol can be afforded, suffering alcoholics might focus on why this is encouraged or use it as an endorsement to go on drinking, sober societies might reason such a story corrupts the validity of the scripture.

Understanding how stories work can help us discover how our addresses create our expectations and our prejudices, which affect what we focus on in Biblical stories.

To summarize- We study stories because it's how God has chosen to engage us, they form us whether we like it or not, and awareness of our own point of view- our address- can help us interpret and engage Biblical stories that come from a distant culture and era.

If that didn't convince you, maybe this story from Jesus about the Old Testament will:

See handout #1 Lazarus and the Rich Man story LUKE 16:19-31 (NIV)

Hollywood, Aristotle, and the Old Testament

Where does current popular story theory come from? Hollywood. Where does a Hollywood story structure come from? From Aristotle's *Poetics*. So let's briefly look at where Aristotle was coming from in his Lyceum in Athens from 336-323BCE.

He studied all the lauded plays and rhetoric known at the time.

He praises poets, the playwrights, for their ability to

excavate human character,

for their ability to dissect the ways in which fortune tests character, and

for their ability to display how human foibles are amplified in challenging circumstances.

Aristotle did not believe that drama contemplated character primarily for entertainment value. He purported the function of a story is to **mimic life**. In Aristotle's view, tragedy (story) teaches us about ourselves, and more specifically, **how we "become" ourselves, and how our virtues develop**.

Many writers in Hollywood work from the premise that the purpose of a story, according to Aristotelian structure, is to provide the audience with a 'catharsis' at the end. Aristotle did not leave us specifics on how he defined catharsis. There is a big scholarly debate on what catharsis is, but I'm going to avoid getting involved with that and assume we know one when we "feel" one.

It's personal and emotional, and it's what we are used to

— whew, the bravery of a 'good guy' pilot overcame the skills of the 'bad guy' pilot and won the battle,

an abused woman overcame her fears and brought down her tormentor,

an ordinary man worked hard to overcome his circumstances and become a billionaire CEO or Oxford don.

In addition, to be a '5 star story', the journey and its catharsis must reinforce the **thesis** the writer has chosen- a certain theme about a value- crime doesn't pay,

turning the other cheek has a limit, acting on big dreams results in big rewards. The outcome can go either way, crime can pay, the abused rarely leave, dreams can be crushed. There is a hope and a fear in every scene.

If our emotions are engaged, we learn how the hero did it, and buy into the writer's thesis about the virtue or value examined. Through the catharsis we can actually acquire, in our neurons, some bravery for ourselves, some inspiration to do the right thing. If our emotions are not engaged, we don't buy the story or the thesis and we can become cynical about the virtue.

So, our goal today is to understand how the Aristotelian/Hollywood story structure brings about a personal emotional engagement and catharsis.

[What is an Aristotelian/Hollywood story?](#)

It is a battle.

Aristotle was challenging Plato's theory of perfect Forms, which he regarded as inadequate because of its inability to account for change, growth, and generation of new things.

Aristotle observed that nothing becomes actual, does not reach its potential, of its own accord. No pile of bricks, for instance, spontaneously organizes itself into a house or a wall. An operative agent, a force, is required for every instance of change. Actualizing is the result of agency. A person must be able to act to grow. And people do not act unless compelled to do so by an opposing force.

Actualizing agency is a battle against an internal or external force.

If I want a cup of tea and I easily go make one, that is not actualizing or a story.

If I want a cup of tea but all the water is behind enemy lines, that is the beginning of a story.

A story first raises a question.

For a Hollywood story, that question most often is: **What if?**

What if I want a cup of tea and the water is behind enemy lines?

A story should be able to be dramatized in one sentence.

Hollywood calls this a logline, publishers call it a hook, television calls it a preview.

It goes like this:

Someone wants something and is having a hard time getting it.

Kathleen wants a cup of tea but must get past the co-worker she's avoiding to get to the kitchen. Notice there are internal and external forces in play. The logline engages us because it raises questions.

A closed story is where we know if she got what she wanted (most Movies),

An open story is where we must provide the ending or we are left with a cliff hanger that keeps us coming back (TV).

Is the Old Testament a story? Is it an open story?

It can seem open but it's closed. The meta story invites your congregation to live in the full story of creation to the day of the Lord.

But we are not living after the end of the story, after the day of the Lord or the new Jerusalem, but somewhere in the middle.

Individual closed stories like Ruth or Jonah give some clues to how to live there.

[Logline exercises](#) See Handout #2

Let's try to create one liners for the meta story of the Old Testament.

Someone wants something and is having a hard time getting it/ God wants to walk in the garden in the evening breeze with his beloved creatures but they respond in shocking ways

For a mid-narrative story- the people of Israel/ Yahweh designated a special group of tribes to be a light to the world but they keep enslaving themselves to darkness

For the Lazarus story /God wants us to hear the law and the prophets before we suffer but we aren't listening /Jesus wants us to pay attention to the law and the prophets before it's too late and he has to be crucified

Part II Story Structure 1250

Let's look at the key elements of a story that emotionally engages and brings catharsis. The protagonist/antagonist conflict, the POV, and the shape- the beginning, middle, end.

The Hero's Journey to Catharsis

Protagonist/Antagonist Conflict

The **protagonist** wants something and is having a hard time getting it because of **antagonism**.

Antagonism can come in the form of a person, a character flaw, a force of nature, a societal norm.

Give me some examples- Goldfinger versus James Bond, the king who needs to give a speech versus his stutter, a sheriff versus a shark.

In the case of the 007 series, James Bond would be content sipping his cocktail but a Goldfinger comes along. Who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist? In this case James Bond is already virtuous and doesn't have anything to overcome. It's Goldfinger who needs to learn a thing or two. So going back to our logline format- Goldfinger wants to dominate the world but James Bond, a superhero, stands in his way. We tend to identify the good guy as the protagonist and the bad guy as the antagonist. There is now a trend to mix these up more- the good guy hero has as many problems as a bad guy villain, who might have some virtues. But don't let this confuse you, the writer still should have one virtue in mind, one value to explore.

At UCLA screenwriting school they teach us that the best movies have a well defined antagonist. This can be an internal flaw or external force or person.

If antagonism comes from an internal flaw there is usually an external force that reflects or demands the protagonist activate the opposite of the flaw in order to win the battle.

And vice versa. If the main agonist is an external one, the protagonist needs to develop an internal virtue or overcome a flaw to battle the external one. In the most

universally accepted 5 star movies, external and internal antagonists mirror each other.

This sets up conflict, which is the driving force behind the audience continuing to pay attention- they are emotionally engaged with a fear and a hope.

I recently was reading the sermons of Austin Farrer and pondering why they were so riveting to the last sentence. It's because he proposes a hair-raising challenging question at the beginning, one that does not have an obvious answer- or only cliché answers that he rejects. I am on the edge of my seat wondering, how is he going to resolve that? Then he proceeds to make it even more difficult on himself by asking more and more tricky questions. And worse, he has an audience to his doubts and dead ends, us. He is the protagonist and dilemmas with the text, his experience, and his thinking are the antagonizing force. I watch transfixed as he battles through the arguments and when he reaches a conclusion that satisfies and vivifies him, I'm also satisfied and vivified. He settles for nothing less.

Narrator

So, Austin Farrer is the narrator of his own battle. Every story has a narrator. It might be someone in the story- like Jesus in our Lazarus story. It might be someone writing hundreds or thousands of years later. It can be the antagonist. Identifying who the narrator is can help reveal the purpose of the story. The narrator has an address, and most likely an agenda or tendency towards a position.

One way to break away from rigid thinking about the purpose of a bit of text- or what it means, or what value it is examining- is to rewrite the story from a different perspective. A different POV. Pick a minor character or an angel's viewpoint and rewrite the story. Pick the cynical view of a scientific journalist. We are doing this anyway because we view the story from our own perspective, our own address.

Another way is to interrupt the progress of the narrative- the action- with an assessment of what's not told. This can give clues about what's not important, or what we don't know would be assumed, in the culture of the character or writers. Ask difficult questions of the characters- why did you do that? What did it get you?

We shouldn't always assume the main character is there for us to 'emulate'. Look for antagonists who reflect different values.

Beginning/Middle/End

The things to remember about shape are simple maxims: 'nothing stays the same forever', 'no pain, no gain,' and 'it always gets worse before it gets better.'

Beginning

Status Quo: orientation to the world, someone wants something.

Inciting incident creates a problem - a force comes against them and keeps nibbling at them until what's at stake raises high enough

That the protagonist has no Choice but to do something- to take action

Usually the action is the least they can do to make the problem go away and continue to get what they want.

Middle

Repeated Attempt(s) to fix the problem without changing much

All is lost/can't continue – Dark night of the Soul-- makes decision

End

Takes a new approach- Final attempt

Overcomes problem- wins, or not- loses

Result-How the world or the protagonist has changed

Do you see how this shape fits with Aristotle's idea of actualization? We must take action to become virtuous. We don't take action until confronted with a problem that won't let us move forward towards what we want. Only then do we take action and thus develop the proper virtues to overcome the problem.

Overcoming the problem takes a character with certain virtues. They don't have those virtues in the amount needed at the beginning- they learn this in the middle- and make a final decision at the end that triumphs, they gain the virtue and win.

Summary: “A protagonist and her story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them.” Robert McKee. I would add to that, and as clear as the writer makes the single theme.

In the Old Testament, the question of a narrative might be a ‘what if’ for a specific character but it also might be a different kind of question. This is a trap we can fall into because of our Aristotelian story programming.

John’s lectures expand on this. Some of the stories answer questions for the people that wrote them- how did we, the Naphtali, come to live in the north? What is our tribe’s creation story? Their concern may not be a concern for personal actualization.

But the story is still an integral part or chapter towards in the shape of the meta story- an orientation to the world of the forest.

Exercise Together Use Handout #3

Just do it

Lazarus Story

Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11)

Write a logline- Someone wants something and is having a hard time getting it

Identify a protagonist, an antagonist, a beginning SQ, a middle challenge, an end decision/resulting action

Is there another type of question that might have generated this narrative?

Part III Practical Application Use Handout #3

Lectionary for the next Sundays – Naaman scripture, analyse

Small Groups

Write a logline

Identify a protagonist, an antagonist, a beginning SQ, a middle challenge, an end decision/resulting action

Is there another type of question that might have generated this narrative?

Exercise: Practice analysing using the elements above

Protagonist, Antagonist, Alternate POV

Beginning Middle End

Status Quo

Moment disrupting Status Quo- Problem

Attempt(s) to solve problem

Result of final attempt

Catharses for audience?

What was the theme?