

The background features a dark blue gradient with a subtle starfield. On the left side, there are several overlapping circular elements. A prominent one is a large circular scale with tick marks and numbers ranging from 140 to 260. Other circles include dashed lines, solid lines, and arrows, suggesting a technical or scientific theme.

# NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

A WORKSHOP WITH MADELINE DYER

# WHAT IS A NARRATIVE STRUCTURE?

- How the story is organized and told
- The framework that underpins the story
- About the plot and setting and what the driving force of the story is
- Analyses the role of the reader
- Can also extend to the specific emotions explored in a story

# THE SEVEN BASIC PLOTS

Christopher Booker's 2004 book *The Seven Basic Plots* suggests that all stories can be categorized in one of seven plots. Based on psychological analysis of the stories' meanings.

- Overcoming the Monster
- Rags to Riches
- The Quest
- Voyage and Return
- Comedy
- Tragedy
- Rebirth

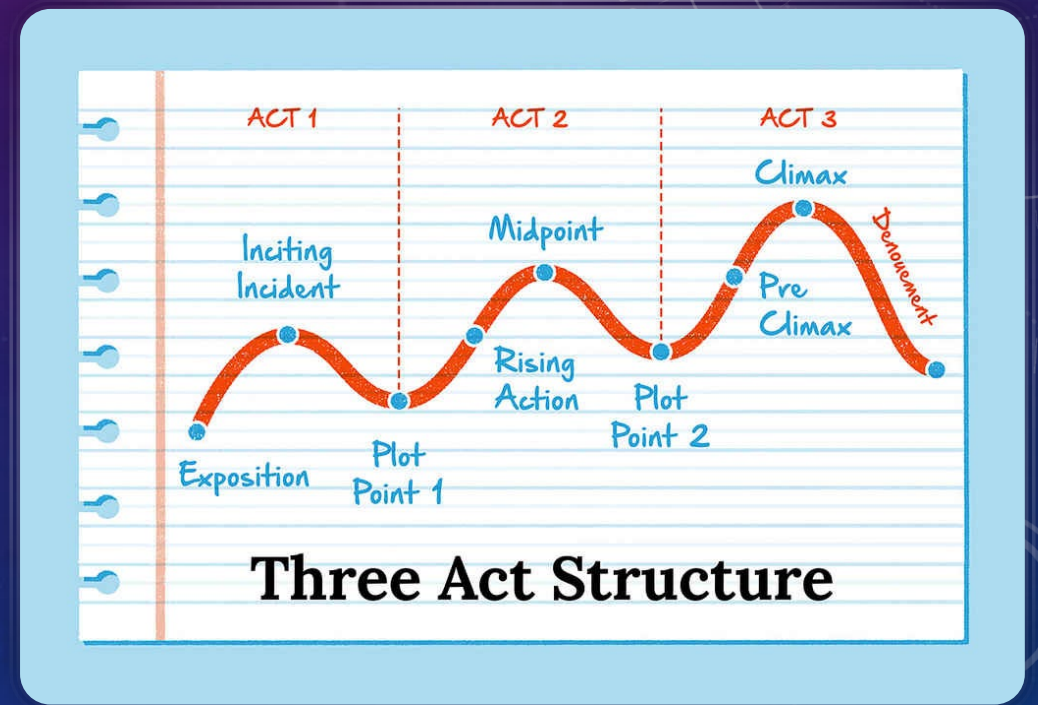
Can all stories be categorized in this way? What about ones that are mixtures/amalgamations of multiple types?

Each of these categories has its own specific expectations and formulae, but each of these stories can also be mapped onto different frameworks and narrative structures.



# THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

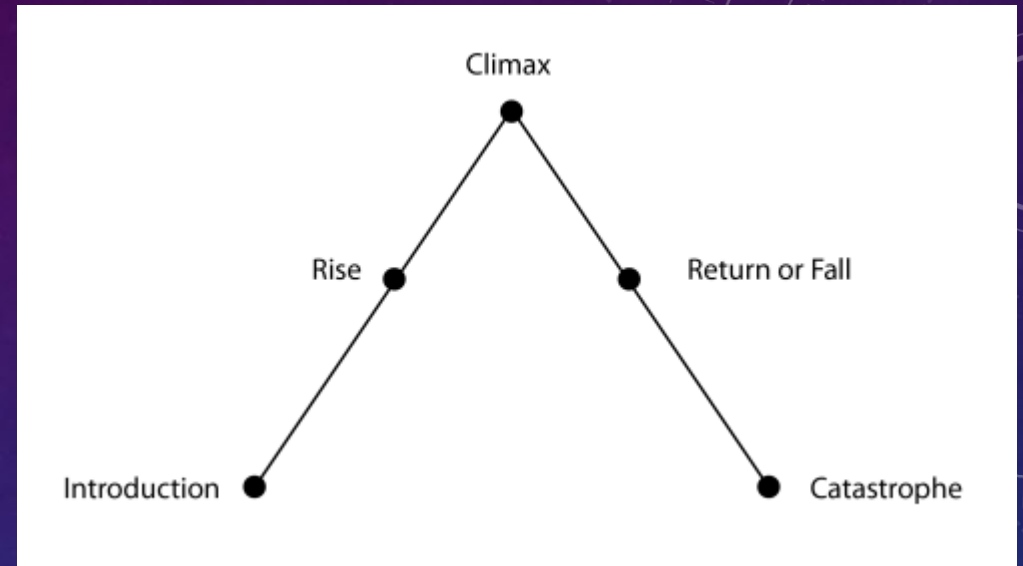
- Probably the most commonly taught narrative structure
- Predominantly a Western structure
- Aristotle first analysed storytelling in three parts – importance of the connecting plot points, cause and effect beats (though Aristotle said morality should be the driving force of a story, while the three-act structure nowadays advocates for conflict to drive the story)
- Commonly used by screenwriters (and taught to novelists as screenwriting theory is often great for working out plot structure)
- Syd Field and Blake Snyder



<https://blog.reedsy.com/guide/story-structure/three-act-structure/>

# FREYTAG'S PYRAMID

- Gustave Freytag, German playwright and novelist
- Mid 19<sup>th</sup> century
- Two halves: play and counterplay
- Climax in the middle
- 5 dramatic elements
- Very focused on tragedy



1) Introduction: exposition and exciting event (inciting incident).

<https://thewritepractice.com/freytags-pyramid/>

2) Rising movement – tension increasing as story progresses. All characters should be introduced by the end of this section.

3) Climax – happens in the middle of the story. Can be thought of as a reflection point. Things will change, either getting better or worse from now on. Most important scene that ‘carries’ the story. (“As Freytag puts it, “This middle, the climax of the play, is the most important place of the structure; the action rises to this; the action falls away from this.” - <https://thewritepractice.com/freytags-pyramid/>)

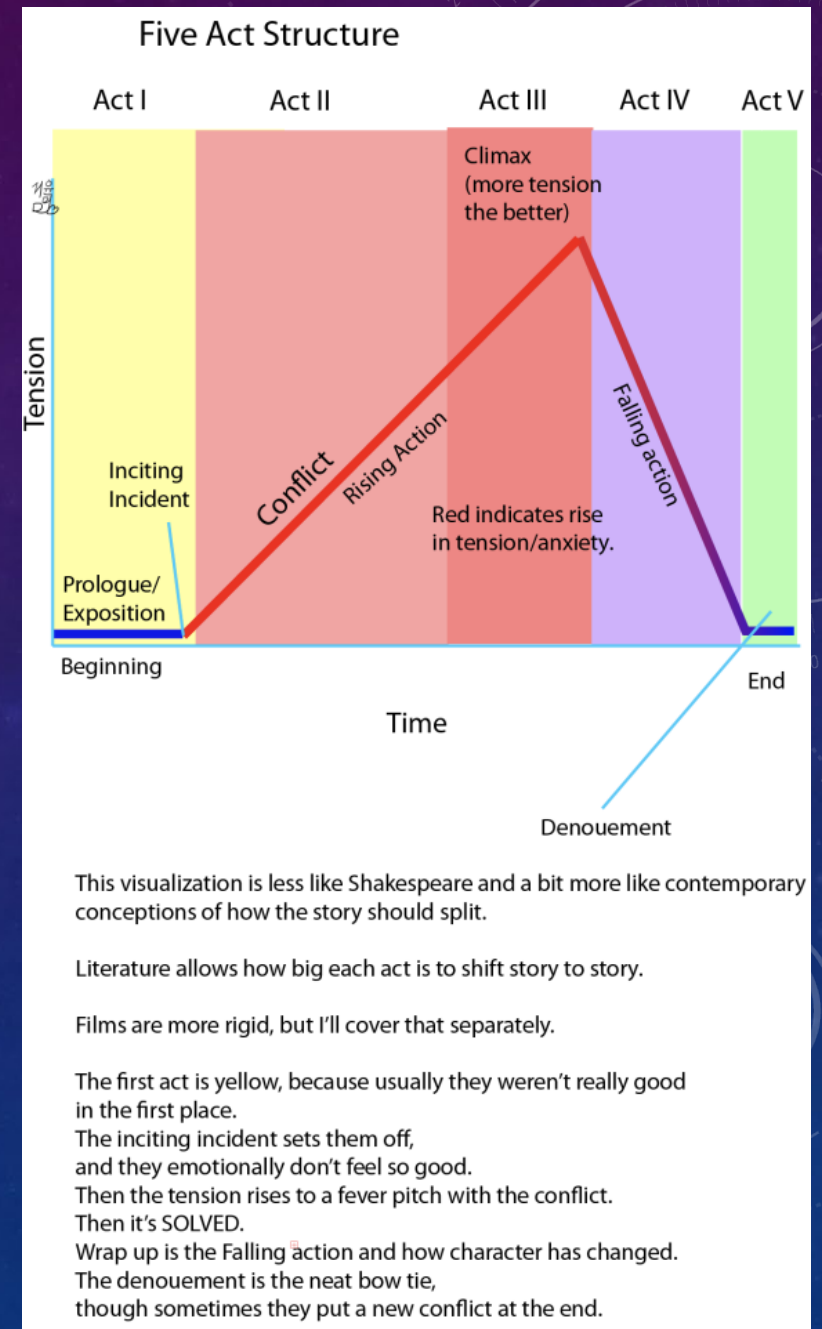
4) Return or fall – things get worse (or better), and audience are preparing for the catastrophe. Foreshadowing of the catastrophe, but there must be a moment of suspense here where it looks like things could go the other way.

5) Catastrophe – the main character’s actions and events lead to their ultimate downfall.

# FIVE-ACT STRUCTURE

- 1) Exposition
- 2) Rising Action
- 3) Climax
- 4) Falling Action
- 5) Denouement

- Original shape of this structure was also created by Freytag but it's usually wrongly attributed to Shakespeare (and there are sources to suggest that Freytag himself said it was created by Shakespeare as he needed this structure to have more 'validity'. Kind of problematic context. Based on/influenced by Christianity, capitalism, and imperialism.
- But since Freytag, it's been developed by a lot of other people.
- It lends itself well to linear stories that involve a sequence of events, but there is only one 'line'. No branches.
- Events and conflict are seen as the main drivers of the story and prioritised above all else. Yet traditionally this structure focuses on events at the expense of character. (Stories that are morality-based or emotion-based lend to a lot of characterisation work, this one not as much.)
- Some think it's too commercial. (Kim Yoonmi examines this.)
- A lot of contemporary US movies follow this, including most of the Marvel Movies.





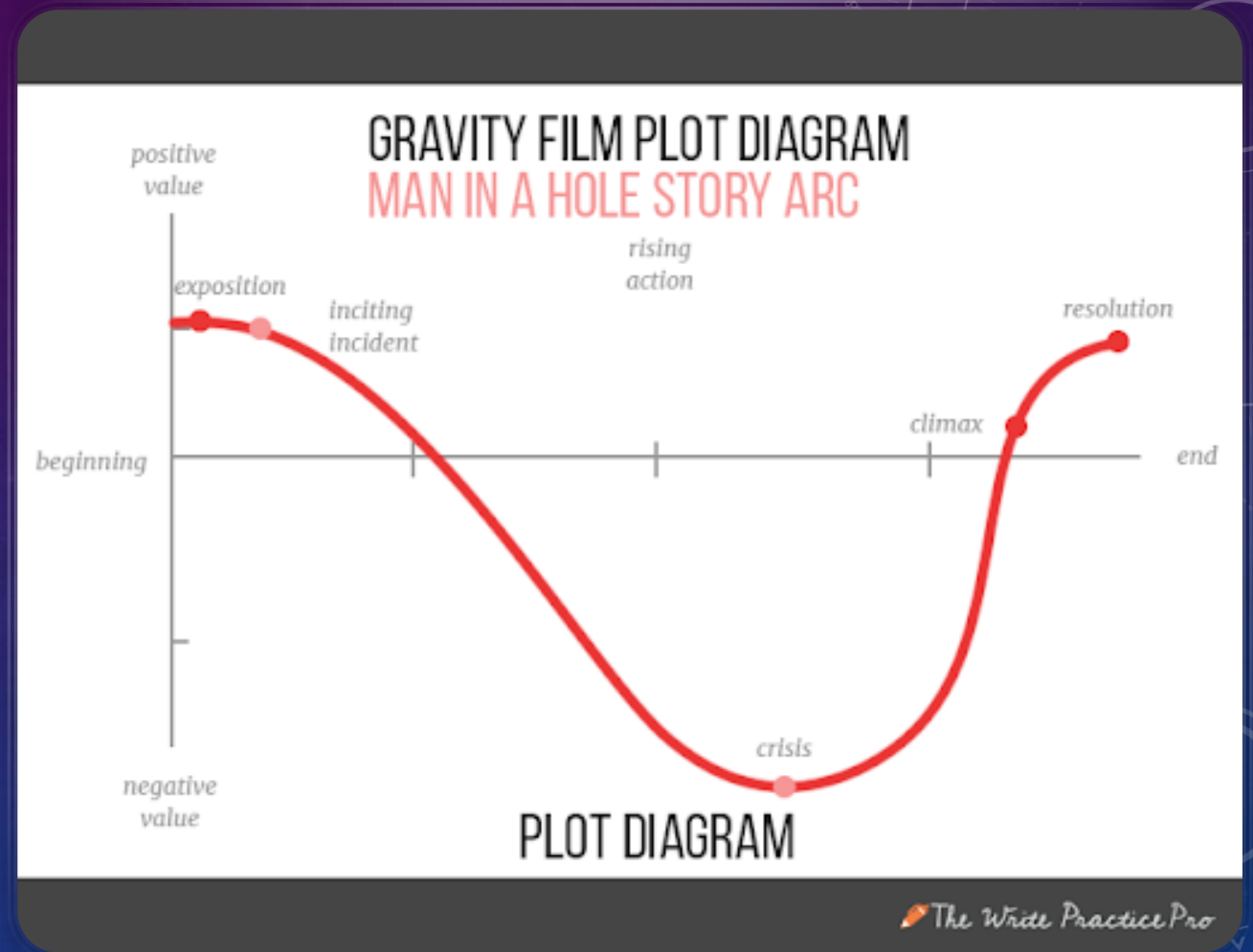
# FRAME

- A story within a story. Used in conjunction with another narrative structure. Also called the: Never-ending Story, Sandwich Narrative, and Intercallation.
- The introductory story is there to lead readers into a second story (usually the main story) but it can lead you into multiple stories.
- Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; Charlotte Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*; *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* (some of the oldest examples of this form are from Ancient Egypt)
- “the form echoes in structure the thematic search in the story for something deep, dark, and secret at the heart of the narrative. The form thus also resembles the psychoanalytic process of uncovering the unconscious behind various levels of repressive, obfuscating narratives put in place by the conscious mind. As is often the case (and Shelley's work is no exception), a different individual often narrates the events of a story in each frame. This structure of course also leads us to question the reasons behind each of the narrations since, unlike an omniscient narrative perspective, the teller of the story becomes an actual character with concomitant shortcomings, limitations, prejudices, and motives. The process of transmission is also highlighted since we often have a sequence of embedded readers or audiences, A famous example in film of such a structure is Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*”  
<https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/narratology/terms/framenarrative.html#:~:text=Definition%3A%20Frame%20Narrative,the%20heart%20of%20the%20narrative.>

# EMOTIONAL STORY STRUCTURE

- A different way of examining structure or deciding what makes a structure.
- Whereas the three-act structure and five-act structure uses its axis on the left to represent tension and along the bottom to represent time (showing how tension rises and falls across the story), the emotional story structure uses different axis. “Happy” is on the left axis and “sad” on the bottom axis.
- Any story can be looked at in this way as it prioritised emotion over events/tension.
- “Kurt Vonnegut argued that this was the way stories should be thought of and came up with a thesis for it, but was rejected. (Because you know, worship conflict more.) But since, there have been arguments by some scholars that one should look at emotionality in plot structure and this is a different sort of structure than the typical analyses about events. But how does it make the reader and the character feel during the course of the story.”

<https://www.kimyooniauthor.com/post/641948278831874048/worldwide-story-structures?fbclid=IwAR13VWec7TL4CUCRjNaJ5pOoJpYuJKO6mvUrabJ1qHfgloy-XGB8qy-BIPc>



<https://thewritepractice.com/story-arcs/>



# HAKAWATI

A form from West Asia, but also contributed to some Northern Egyptian Mythology.

An ancient Arab storytelling mode that combines an epic with a live performance—it's about breathing life into stories and is built on the oral tradition of storytelling. There's a lot of heritage in this form.

Also seen as its own genre.

Strong narrative story line, usually focusing on legends and fables, kings' adventures,

warriors' bravery. Contains multiple stories and the listener is led through these stories. Weaving your way through rich imagery, lots of symbolism and motifs. Patterns are crucial. Allegory and folklore.

Framed narrative. Multiple characters – and these characters often narrate.

Fantastic elements. Many feature journeys (across time and lands). Focus on the dramatic – not just within the story, but the performance needs to be visual too, a great spectacle. Singing and music. Sense of awe and wonder.

Usually an underlying message that teaches viewers/readers how to lead a principled life.

“bringing a piece of the past to life for his avid listeners.” - <https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/arts-culture/hakawati-the-ancient-arab-art-of-storytelling-1.712001>

Leisure activity.

Various groups perform hakawatis. The Hakawati Group. Pictured is their performance based on *1001 Nights*.



<https://gulfnews.com/uae/hakawati-performances-leave-audiences-spell-bound-1.611051>

# BENGALI WIDOW NARRATIVE

- The Bengali Widow Narrative is both a structure and a genre.
- 4 acts:
  - 1) Childhood
  - 2) Marriage
  - 3) Children (or difficulties)
  - 4) Close/Abandonment
- The Circle of Life is seen as the driver of the plot, rather than being neatly classified as either a 'character', 'conflict' or 'morality' story.
- Happy or sad ending.
- 4-act East Asian and Dream Record (Buddhism version) have similar themes, but this one is more heavily Hindu.
- Kim Yoonmi also notes how some Bollywood films fit this narrative as some rom-coms start in childhood.



# VIGNETTE

- “Vignettes—poetic slices-of-life—are a literary device that bring us deeper into a story. Vignettes step away from the action momentarily to zoom in for a closer examination of a particular character, concept, or place. Writers use vignettes to shed light on something that wouldn’t be visible in the story’s main plot.” -- <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-a-vignette-in-literature-defining-the-literary-device-plus-5-tips-on-writing-vignettes>
- These can be single pieces or you can use several to tell a story.



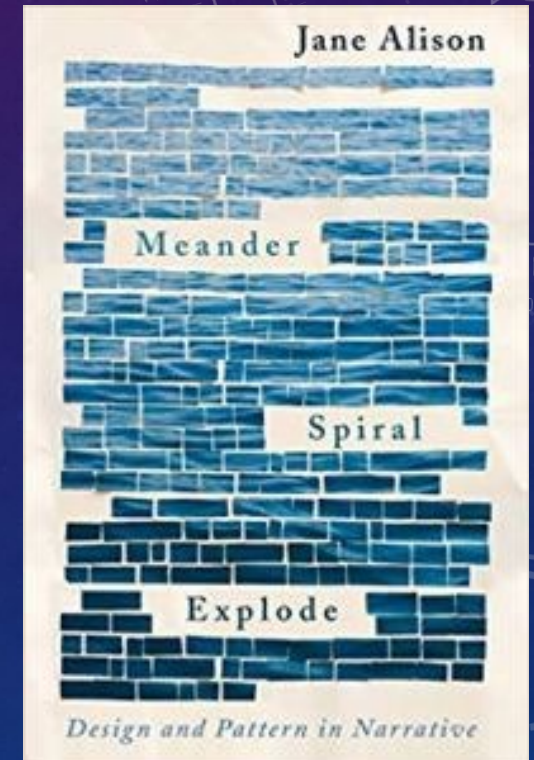
# SPIRALS AND WAVES

## SPIRAL

- A story that has a spiraling pattern, repetition that adds something new each time; the narrative gets larger and wider.
- *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

## WAVES

“The wave is one. There’s a reason we’re drawn to it, whether viewing or watching entranced as one wave after another breaks on shore: a wave is a clear instance of energy charging static matter until that energy is spent and equilibrium returns, elegant and satisfying. Arcs or waves exist all around as waves of light and sound. They can create powerful narratives, but it might be more freeing, as writers, if we think not of a story always following an arc, but of a reader’s experience absorbing the story as doing so”  
– Jane Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*



- Also looks at radials, explosions, branching, and cellular stories.

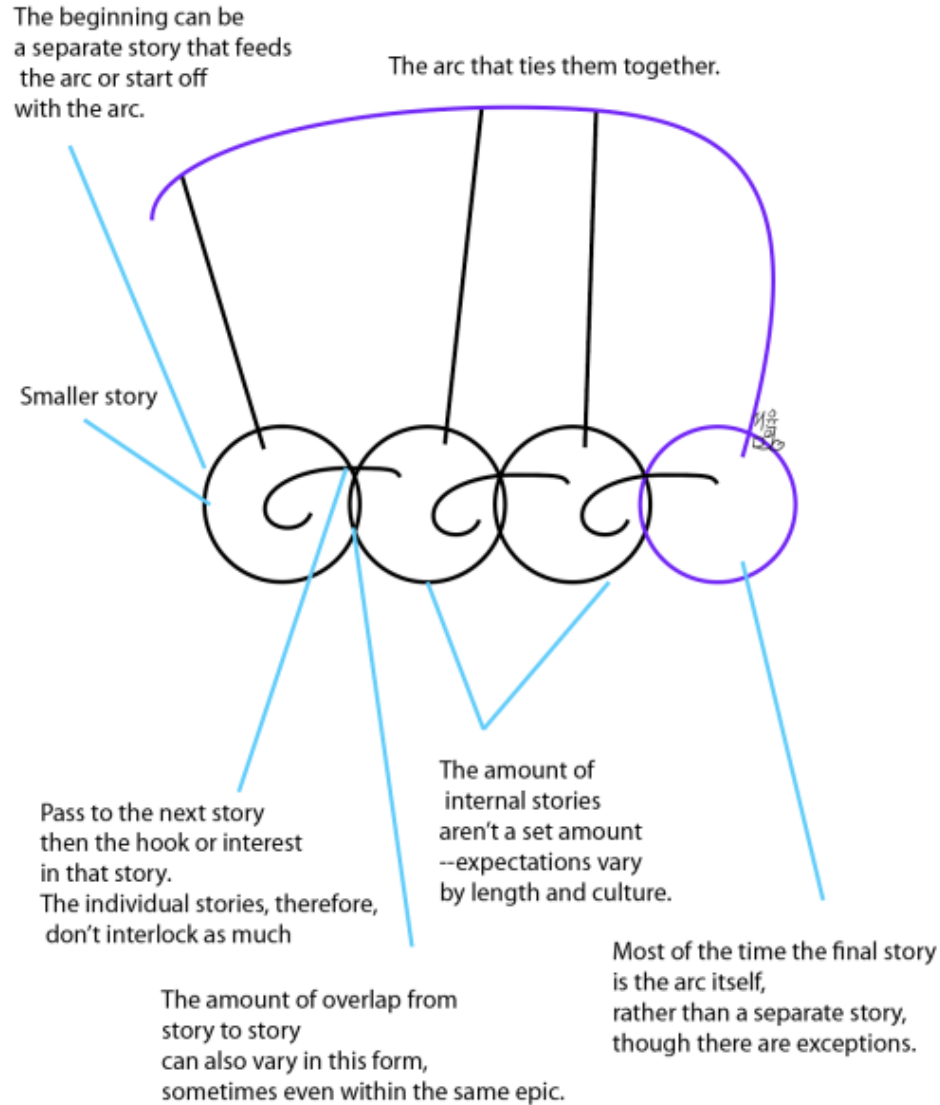
# ABSURDIST

- Humorous or irrational stories. Often considered a 'purposeless' story. There for entertainment.
- Generally believed to originate in Victorian England/the UK, but some scholars say it's earlier than the nineteenth century.
- A series of interlinking stories that don't have a set direction. Generally considered as having one act.
- Protagonist is often frantic, finds themselves in a world of chaos.
- Often the reader is left to judge the characters—reader almost has a crucial role in the story, without the story becoming interactive.
- Characters rarely make judgements on each other.
- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; Monty Python's Flying Circus; Gulliver's Travels.*

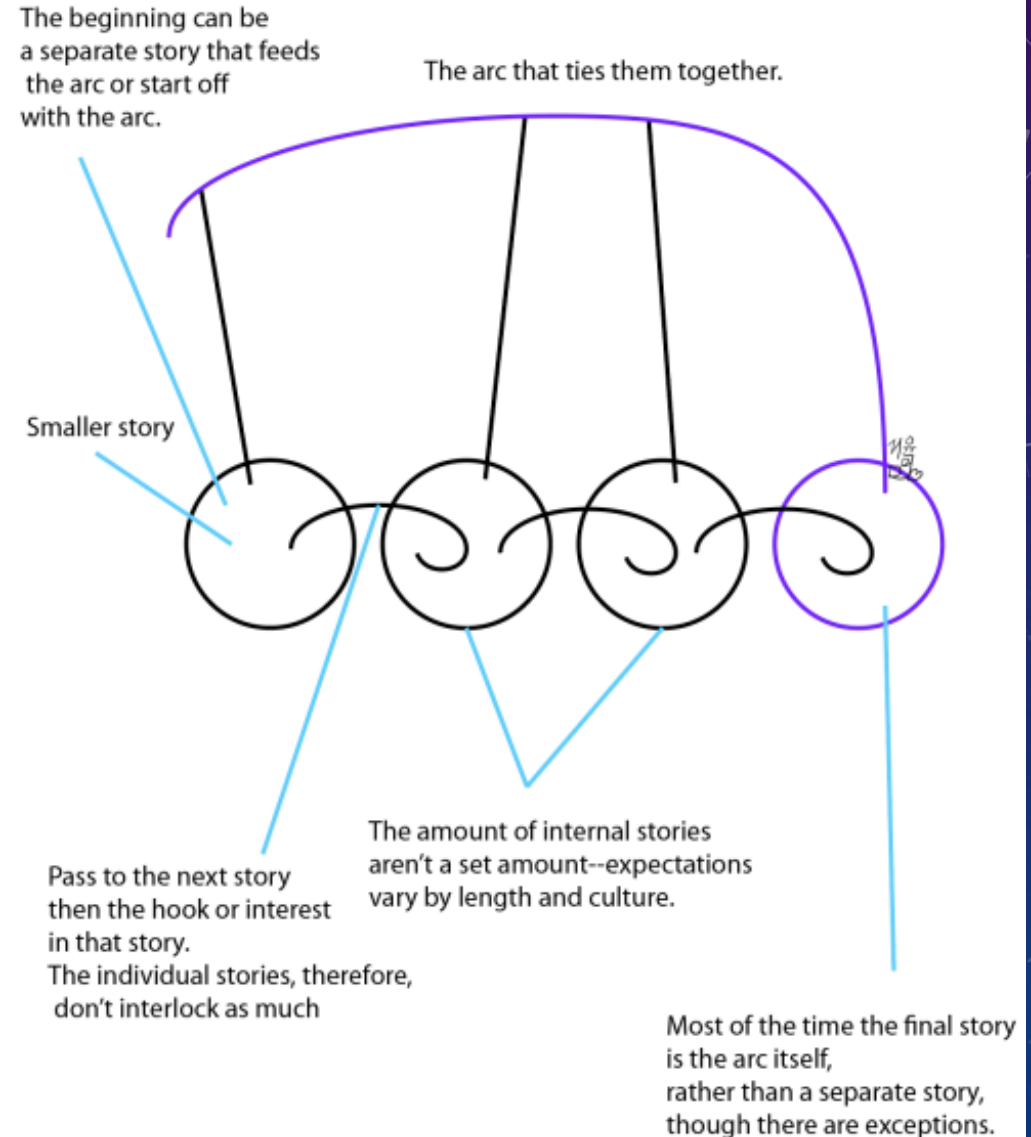
# THE EPIC

- Multiple variations
- Several small stories that are interlinked (or the story goes back to the narrator who then directs you to the next one).
- An overall arc that ties all the stories together.
- Used for longer stories.
- Oral tradition.
- Homer's *The Odyssey*.
- Often fantastical.

## Epic--Hook then Pass



## Epic--Pass then Hook





# GRIOT

- West African. Oral and Poetry tradition handed down by the Griots. (Going on Kim Yoonmi's article here that says this form isn't formally named).
- Three acts. The formula varies by tribe and region, but these are stories about memory to help people remember tribal history and teach them how to live good lives.
- Focus on clear imagery and repetition. There may be conflict in these stories but it is not prominent or something that drives the story.
- Anansi Folktales.

## The Cameroon Formula:

- 1) Opening formula: jokes and riddles. Audience Participation. Story events are presented seriously. Contrast.
  - 2) The body: setting up characters and the conflict. The narration of the story.
  - 3) The conclusive formula: Closing the story. Delivery of or emphasis on the moral.
- Memory is at the centre of the story. Emphasised as something that helps you live a good life. Morality.
  - "Griots had a very, very important influence later on in the African Diaspora such as the Caribbean (noted in Crick Crack), North American, particularly slave and free black people narratives, Creole, and Voudon folktales." --  
<https://www.kimyooniauthor.com/post/641948278831874048/worldwide-story-structures?fbclid=IwAR13VWec7TL4CUCRjNaJ5pOoJpYuJKO6mvUrabJ1qHfgloy-XGB8qy-BIPc>
  - Anansi (Ananse) Folktales.
  - [Cinderella #129 Chinye: A West African Cinderella](http://www.365cinderellas.com/2011/05/cinderella-129-chinye-west-african.html) - <http://www.365cinderellas.com/2011/05/cinderella-129-chinye-west-african.html>

# EXPERIMENTAL FICTION – BRITISH EXPERIMENTALISM

- *The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson – interactive “book in a box”, reader chooses the order of the 27 chapters. Only the first and last chapter are numbered.
- *London Consequences* – a novel written by 20 writers in 1972. Published for the Festivals of London. Edited by Margaret Drabble and B.S. Johnson (‘founders’ of the novel too). Each of the 20 writers wrote a chapter and passed the story onto the next writer. The Greater London Arts Association offered a prize to readers who could match the chapters to the authors within the first three months.
- *The Waterfall* by Margaret Drabble (1969). Third person but quickly becomes a first-person narration that guides the reader through the MC’s life. Focuses partly on a love affair.
- *Konek Landing* by Eva Figs – she also wrote for London Consequences. Konek Landing is a novel that uses intertextuality and confusion to show the trauma of memories.

# POSTMODERN LITERATURE

- “Postmodern literature is a literary movement that eschews absolute meaning and instead emphasizes play, fragmentation, metafiction, and intertextuality.”  
<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/postmodern-literature-guide#:~:text=Postmodern%20literature%20is%20a%20literary,fragmentation%2C%20metafiction%2C%20and%20intertextuality.&text=Common%20examples%20of%20postmodern%20literature,Catch%2D22%20by%20Joseph%20Heller>
- Books about disorder and randomness. No absolute meaning. Humour. Fragmentation. Collage-style amalgamations. Metafiction. Intertextuality.
- Unreliable narrators
- *Oreo* by Fran Ross (1974) – novel divided into sections like a textbook, includes menus and adverts. Even tests for the reader.



# QUESTIONS?

[MadelineDyerAuthor@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:MadelineDyerAuthor@yahoo.co.uk)

[MadelineDyer.co.uk](http://MadelineDyer.co.uk)