



Tools for Shaping Stories? Visual Plot Models in a Sample of Anglo-American Advice Handbooks

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INTRODUCTION

In 2009, narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan pointed out that, despite half a century of narratology and more than a century of literary advice, we still have not significantly advanced our knowledge of what constitutes a good story. She observes that:

Narrative is said to consist of story and discourse, but the vast majority of narratological work has focused either on the latter, or, with socio-linguistic approaches, on the pragmatics of narrative communication, leaving “storyology”—the study of the logic that binds events into plots—mostly to scriptwriters and authors of “How To” manuals”. What Jerome Bruner wrote in 1986 unfortunately still holds largely true, despite the attention given in the meantime to the notion of tellability: “In contrast to our vast knowledge of how science and logical reasoning proceeds, we know

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precious little in any formal sense about how to make good stories.” (Ryan 2009, p. 73)

Yet, one of the few things that storyologists agree on is that a well-structured, strong plot is a basic story element. In the present chapter, I will therefore examine the storyological advice with regard to plot in sixteen popular Anglo-American handbooks for both novels and screenplays, published since 1979 and still in use today. The corpus is representative of what is on offer for today’s aspiring author, looking for guidance on plot. The selection has been made on the basis of the top twenty lists of recommended books on plot, screenwriting and novels on Amazon and Goodreads.¹ Five handbooks deal directly with plot, four books focus on novel writing. For the selection of seven screenwriting manuals, I used the list of 32 most influential screenplay manuals provided by Bridget Conor in “Gurus and Oscar Winners: How-To Screenwriting Manuals in the New Cultural Economy” (Conor 2012, p. 126).

<i>Year</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Handbook focus</i>
1979	<i>Screenplay</i>	Syd Field	Screenplay
1982	<i>Writing Fiction</i>	Janet Burroway	Novel
1983	<i>The Art of Fiction</i>	John Gardner	Novel
1987	<i>How to Write a Damn Good Novel</i>	James N.Frey	Novel
1988	<i>Plot</i>	Ansen Dibell	Plot
1992	<i>Story</i>	Robert McKee	Screenplay
1992	<i>The Writer’s Journey</i>	Christopher Vogler	Screenplay ^a
1993	<i>20 Master Plots</i>	Ronald B. Tobias	Plot
2002	<i>The Plot Thickens</i>	Noah Lukeman	Plot
2004	<i>Plot & Structure</i>	James Scott Bell	Plot
2004	<i>The Sequence Approach</i>	Paul Joseph Gulino	Screenplay
2005	<i>Save the Cat!</i>	Blake Snyder	Screenplay
2007	<i>Alternative Scriptwriting</i>	Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush	Screenplay
2010	<i>The 21st Century Screenplay</i>	Linda Aronson	Screenplay
2011	<i>The Plot Whisperer</i>	Martha Alderson	Plot
2012	<i>Writing 21st Century Fiction</i>	Donald Maass	Novel

^aVogler’s screenwriting handbook can be seen as a plot handbook as it is the leading handbook on the Hero’s Journey model for both screenwriting and novel writing

VISUAL PLOT MODELS AS CENTRAL NODES

Since their emergence in the late nineteenth century, literary advice handbooks have often used visual plot models to aid in constructing plots. As Andrew Levy notes:

By far the most popular scientific trope was the plot diagram, which became such a frequent feature of the handbooks (and such a frequent object of criticism) that authors often apologized for their appearance. (Levy 1993, p. 94)

These plot models are not mere illustrations, but rather are presented as tools for structuring a story. Some of the models have become so commonplace nowadays that even when they are not depicted, they are still referred to, so we can assume that the images somehow operate in the back of handbook authors' minds when they describe plot and explain how to create one. In that sense, visual plot models function as central nodes in clusters of ideas, metaphors, and terms related to specific models. Furthermore, plot models usually define a preferred kind of plot or an ideal type of story, while excluding other options to structure stories.

In this chapter, the visual models will be the starting point of the analysis, supplemented by textual analysis of the surrounding text to discern the most common and dominant ideas about plot. Our discussion of the visual plot models is based on Johanna Drucker's concept of "graphesis" (Drucker 2011, 2014), and Marie-Laure Ryan's work on "visual narratology" (Ryan 2003, 2007). Drucker proposes the concept "graphesis" to indicate the study of the visual production of knowledge, where the graphical representation is both the means and object of study. Like Drucker, Ryan argues that graphic representations "are not merely a tool for representing narratological knowledge, but an important way to produce this knowledge. At their very best, they can be the seed of a new theory" (Ryan 2007, p. 12). For this purpose, Drucker distinguishes between "representations," which are static in relation to what they reference, and "knowledge generators," that have a dynamic, open-ended relation to what they can provoke (Drucker 2014, p. 65).² Combining these two approaches, our study seeks to contribute to a further understanding of how visual depictions construct certain influential ideas about plot and about making stories, as part of an attempt to look at plot from the writer's perspective. In other words, we will examine potential and

emerging plots, rather than the existing and finished plots that are the main focus of narratology.

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS... ARISTOTLE

When looking at the most common and influential plot models in our corpus, it is immediately evident that linear models are dominant, with the exception of one model with a polar origin and one with a circular origin. These linear models can be traced back to what is termed the Aristotelean three-act structure. This classical model is cited or referred to in nearly all of the creative writing handbooks and is based on Aristotle's ideas in his *Poetics*: "tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Aristotle 1898, p 31).³ Next to this three-act structure, Aristotle defines five "quantitative" parts of the tragedy: prologue, episode, exode, parode, and stasimon, which have become the model for the classical five-act play.⁴ Finally, he describes two movements, "complication" and "unraveling" which are separated by a reversal of fortune for the protagonist, called the "peripeteia." While Aristotle did not necessarily visualize this model, the way in which the three-act model is used in handbooks is linear, showing the three acts as consecutive stages of the story.

This structure is deemed to be the dominant paradigm for screenplays and novels alike. Most handbook authors, however, consider a definition of beginning, middle, and end not specific enough to be of much help when constructing a story. When referring to the Aristotelian three-act structure, authors, often unknowingly, refer to further elaborations of the model by playwrights and scholars, like Eugene Scribe's idea of the "well-made play" formulated around 1825 (Lanouette 2012), or the ideas of Freytag or Field (both discussed below). One common elaboration is that of the "master plots," or story patterns with similar content and story development, supposed to reoccur throughout history and different cultures.⁵ Even when authors discuss alternative story structures, most of them try to fit them into the three-act paradigm. Aronson, for instance, undertakes a comprehensive study of what she terms "parallel plots," structures with multiple protagonists or time jumps, but she insists on using the three-act paradigm as a tool, which leaves her with either partial visualizations or virtually illegible models (Aronson 2010, pp. 275, 283–284, 323, 326, 393).

Not only Aristotelian thought, but also drama theory in a broader sense has unmistakably influenced the discourse about plot in the handbooks. Central in most handbooks is, for instance, the notion of “dramatic writing” or dramatic tension. “A ‘DAMN GOOD NOVEL’ is intense, and to be intense a novel must be dramatic” (Frey 1987, p. xiii). Like Frey, many other authors of manuals (including Aronson, Dancyger and Rush, Field, Gulino, and Vogler) agree that dramatic writing is the topic of their book. Others like Bell, Burroway, Gardner, Maass, McKee, and Tobias claim that dramatic writing is writing which achieves the best possible effects, or just assume that every good story is dramatic. The term “dramatic writing” can probably be traced back to William Archer’s *Play-Making* (1912). Archer here distinguishes between “dramatic writing,” with a central rapidly developing crisis which is appropriate for plays, and “undramatic writing,” suited for the writing of novels, which describe a gradual development. The definition of dramatic writing in the selected handbooks is not attributed to Archer, however, but is best presented by what McKee calls the “arch plot” or “classical design”:

Classical design means a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change. (McKee 2004, p. 45)

This dramatic writing paradigm is best suited for telling stories that can be resolved within the limited time frame of a play or a movie, but it is also dominant in handbooks that focus on novel writing, the very medium excluded from Archer’s term “dramatic writing.” Moreover, it can be linked to the most dominant mode of visual representation found in handbooks, which is linear.

A DEVELOPMENT OF LINEAR PLOT MODELS: FROM “FREYTAG’S PYRAMID” TO “FIELD’S PARADIGM”

Linear plot models in advice handbooks presume a unidirectional and uninterrupted flow of time from the beginning to the end of the story. The plot model is constructed as a diagram with an X-axis representing the flow of time from beginning to end and the Y-axis representing that

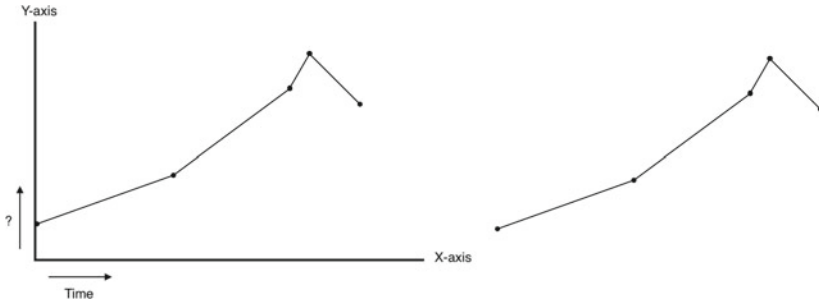


Fig. 7.1 Left: underlying structure of most linear plot models, with fictive plotline; Right: the most common appearance of linear models only features a plotline, without context or axes

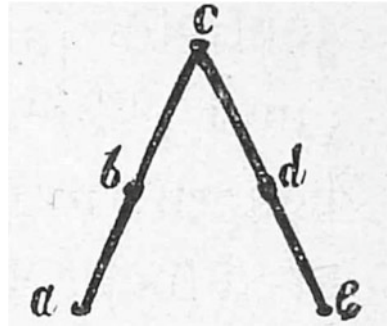
which changes over the course of a story. This results in a line that represents the plot: the plotline (Fig. 7.1).

Linear models differ from each other in two main respects. Firstly, the most important distinctions are found in what these models represent on the Y-axis, which represents the feature of the story that is measured as changing during the story. Secondly, some of the authors suggest only one possible plotline found in all stories. Others will argue that the actual plotline is (slightly) different for every story and is thus a variation on an ideal type of plotline.

One of the most influential and older linear models is the pyramid of Gustav Freytag, which is an elaboration of the Aristotelean five-act drama. Freytag's Pyramid, therefore, is not a tool for constructing plots, but rather a description of the most popular five-act plays of his era (Lanouette 2012; James 2013). Especially the associated "rising action toward a climax" can be found in almost all contemporary manuals. Freytag depicts it as such (Fig. 7.2):

These parts of the drama, (a) introduction, (b) rise, (c) climax (d) return or fall, (e) catastrophe, have each what is peculiar in purpose and in construction. Between them stand three important scenic effects, through which the parts are separated as well as bound together. Of these three dramatic moments, or crises, one which indicates the beginning of the stirring action, stands between the introduction and the rise; the second, the beginning of the counteraction, between the climax and the return; the third, which must rise once more before the catastrophe, between the

Fig. 7.2 Freytag's original version (Freytag [1863] 1911, p. 183)



return and the catastrophe. They are called here the exciting moment or force, the tragic moment or force, and the moment or force of the last suspense. (Freytag 1896)

The concept of time within a story is conceived in terms of action and counteraction. But what is actually meant by the “rising” and “falling” of action? Freytag describes rising and falling as the “complicating” action and the consequent “unraveling” of this complication, much like Aristotle’s two movements. Contemporary handbooks interpret this rising and falling motion as the rising and waning of tension, either for the protagonist, or tension for the reader or audience. The fact that this distinction is seldom explicitly made implies that the tension of the reader is presumed to equal that of the protagonist.

While Freytag’s model intends to describe a five-act structure, this is not always evident, because some of the parts are represented by lines, indicating periods of time, whereas others are depicted by dots, that represent moments in time. As a consequence, all contemporary handbooks use the model as if it is a three-act structure with the introduction as the first act and rising and falling as the second act and the catastrophe or *dénouement* as the third act. Moreover, whereas Freytag situates the climax at the exact midpoint of the story, most authors in our corpus consider this midpoint climax to be outdated and rather place the climax later in the story, making the rising action more prominent, as in Burroway’s version (Fig. 7.3).

Informed by the work of Aristotle, Freytag, Scribe, and other sources, screenwriting guru Syd Field proposes one of the most influential plot models in his bestseller *Screenplay* (1979). “Field’s Paradigm” is the

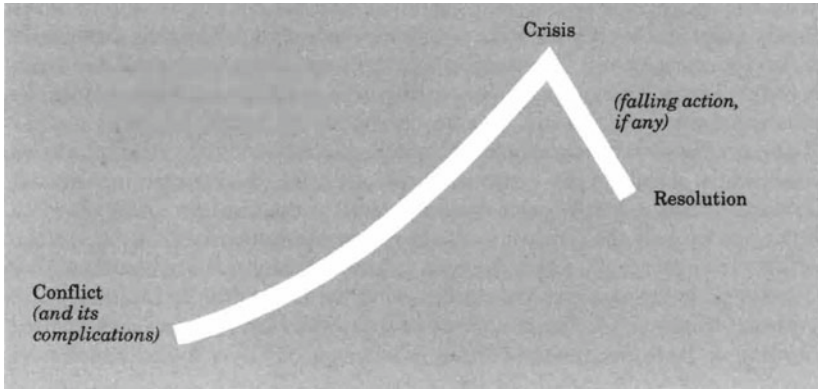


Fig. 7.3 Burroway’s version of Freytag’s Pyramid (Burroway 1982, p. 44)

prototypical Hollywood movie model, but it has also crossed genres from the screenwriting trade, into that of handbooks for fiction and novels. In fact, when handbook authors refer to the Aristotelean three-act structure, they often actually use the three-act structure of Field’s Paradigm (e.g., Bell 2004, p. 32; McKee 1997, p. 218; Snyder 2005, p. 101; Vogler 2007, p. 8). Field’s main additions to existing three-act models are his depiction of turning points, and the addition of a page count, indicating the proportion of the acts (1/4 of the page count for both beginning and end and 1/2 of the page count for the middle) (Fig. 7.4).

Beginning	Middle	End
Act I	Act II	Act III
pp. 1-30	pp. 30-90	pp. 90-120
Set-Up	Confrontation	Resolution
<u>Plot Point 1</u>		<u>Plot Point 2</u>

Fig. 7.4 Field’s Paradigm (Field 1979, p. 21, revised version)

Field's model is thus not descriptive like Aristotle's or Freytag's, but explicitly aims to be a tool to create screenplays. The thoughts or feelings of characters are invisible in a movie, so everything in a story has to be translated into actions, preferably against external forces. This is why Field advocates "visual storytelling" (ibid., p. 3). In the model, terms like "set-up," "confrontation," and "resolution"⁶ add narrative meaning to the otherwise formal structure of three acts, allowing for simpler plot construction for a concrete story.

Following Field, all handbooks in our corpus mention a number of turning points in which the story gains momentum by changing the direction of the plot. Most authors (except Gardner, Maas, and Tobias) introduce more than just the two turning points at the act transitions of Field's Paradigm.⁷ The most common extra plot points are all based on Freytag's work: "midpoint," "crisis," "climax," and similar to the "the stirring action" of Freytag, an event early in the plot which sets the story in motion, called the "inciting incident," "disturbance," or "call to adventure." The influence of Field's Paradigm is not limited to time-constrained Hollywood narratives. Increasingly, it turns up in plot handbooks focused on novels, such as Alderson, who replicates Field's proportions of the acts for novels (Aronson 2010, pp. xii–xiii), and Vogler, who states that the middle is "a hundred pages of your novel" (Vogler 2007, p. 159).

A last variation on the structural linear model is found in *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (1983), where novelist and creative writing teacher John Gardner introduces the "Fichtean Curve" as a model for plotting a novel. He attributes this model to the German philosopher Johan Gottlieb Fichte, although this attribution is probably inaccurate.⁸ This model, which was thought to precede the pyramid of Freytag, is likely of a more recent date and maybe even based on the work of Freytag. Gardner presents "the Fichtean Curve" in the following manner (Fig. 7.5):

Let line a represent the "normal" course of action; that is, the course the character would take if he cared only for safety and stability and so did not assert his independent will, trying the difficult or impossible in the hope of effecting change. Let line b represent the course of action our character does take, struggling against odds and braving conflict. The descending arrows represent forces (enemies, custom, or natural law) that work against the character's will, and the ascending arrows represent forces that support him in his enterprise. The peak of the ascending line (b) represents the

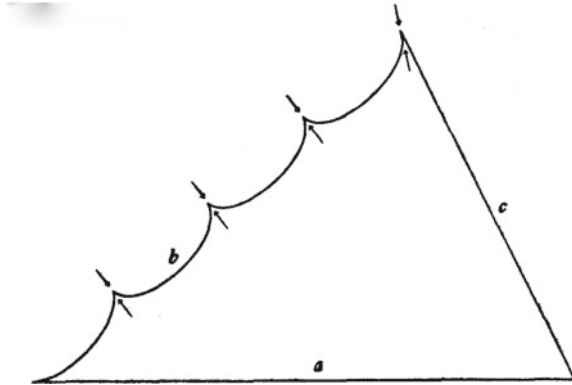


Fig. 7.5 Gardner's refined version of "Fichtean Curve" (Gardner 1983, p. 188)

novel's climactic moment; and line *c* represents all that follows—that is, the denouement: The conflict is now resolved, or in the process of resolving, either because the will of the central character has been overwhelmed or because he has won and his situation is once more stabilizing. A chart of the novel's emotional development (our feeling of suspense, fascination, or anxiety as we read) is, then, Fichte's curve. Since the ascending action is in fact not smooth but moves through a series of increasingly intense climaxes (the episodic rhythm of the novel), a refined version of the curve might be the following. (Gardner 1983, pp. 187–188)

The most puzzling feature of this model is that it is called a curve, despite its undeniable triangular shape. The resemblance to Freytag's Pyramid is unmistakable. Like the pyramid, it builds toward a climax.

In the "Fichtean Curve," the story is set in motion by the exercise of free will of an active protagonist. This is different from Freytag's "stirring action," which is not initiated by the protagonist per se. The space above line *b* is defined as the area of the antagonist and more action, whereas the space under line *b* is defined as the realm of the protagonist and the helpers and less active moments. As the strong-willed character meets more opposition, conflict intensifies, and propels the story forward. At first glance, this presentation seems to be a spatial model, but the text indicates that the trajectory does not represent a movement through space, but rather an emotional development of the protagonist.

In many handbooks this specific kind of plotline is defined as the “character arc” (Aronson 2010, p. 93; Bell 2004, pp. 141–151; Field 2005, p. 51; Gulino 2015, p. 33; Lukeman 2002, p. 92, McKee 1997, p. 103; Vogler 2007, p. 205). This arc is supposed to follow the action as closely as possible, and preferably completely coincides with the action, because action that leads to character change is considered to be a superior way of plotting. The same line that represents the emotional development of the protagonist also traces the emotional development of the reader. This gives us a triple reading of the plotline: it represents the action of the protagonist, the emotional development of the protagonist, and at the same time the emotions of the reader. However, the only way to combine these different readings is to see the emotions of the reader and the development of the protagonist both as a function resulting from the protagonist’s actions.

A POLAR AND A CIRCULAR MODEL BOTH BECOME LINEAR

There are at least two influential models that have neither a three-act structure as their foundation nor follow a linear model from their origin.

The polar model (Figs. 7.6 and 7.7) is rarely used independently, but is embedded in many other models. It probably has its origin in Aristotle’s description of the *peripeteia*: “the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good fortune, or from good fortune to bad” (Aristotle 1898, p. 33). It depicts story structure as an alternation of good and ill fortune for the main character and is goal-oriented, focusing on the “dramatic need” (a common term used for the ultimate goal) of the protagonist, or sometimes on the central idea of the story. In order to build up tension for the reader to a climax, the reader is suspended between hope (good fortune) and fear (ill fortune).⁹ The terms “happy” and “sad” endings that are linked to this model not only refer to the fortune of the protagonist, but also to the presumed emotions of the reader.

A further influential model, “the Hero’s Journey,” developed by Joseph Campbell, is based on his study of universal story progression in the myths, legends, and traditions of many cultures.¹⁰ This model is also known as “mythical structure” or “monomyth.” Interestingly, Campbell does not seem to base his theory on Aristotle, hence his resulting circular, rather than linear, model. The original picture can be found in Campbell’s popular book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) (Fig. 7.8).

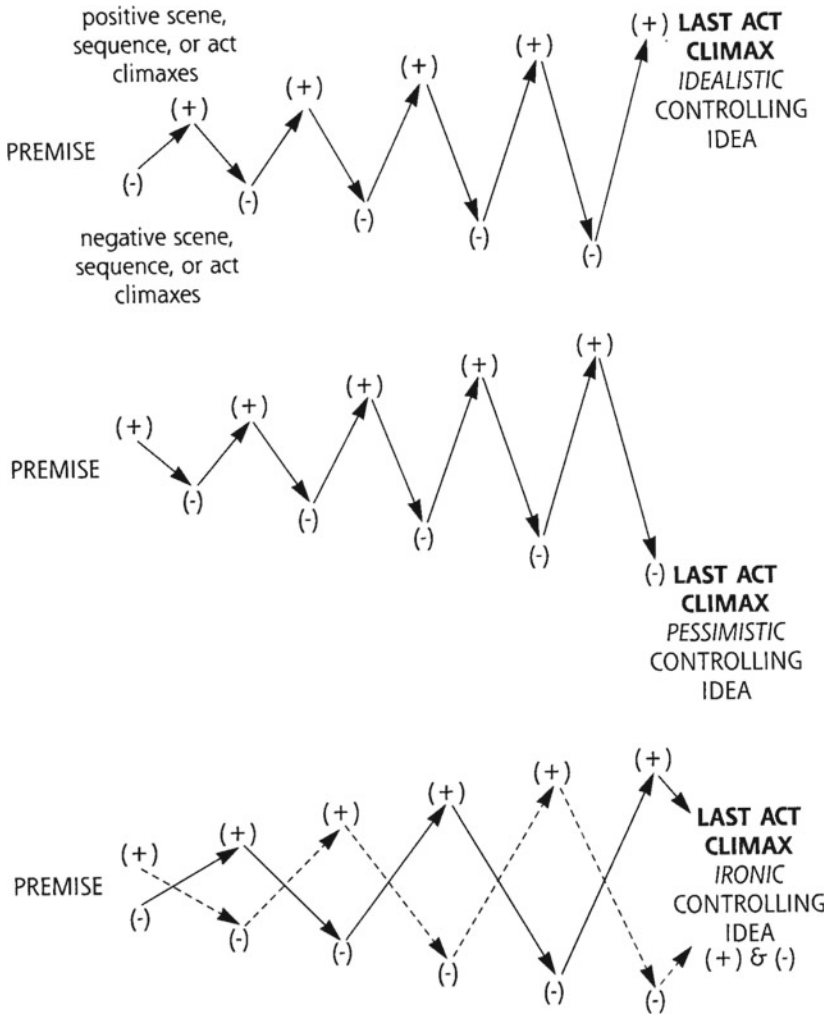


Fig. 7.6 Polar model by McKee (2004, p. 123)

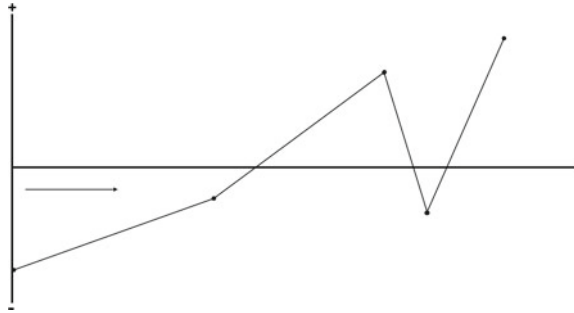


Fig. 7.7 More common linear version with fictive plotline, as for instance used by Kurt Vonnegut in a film about the “shape of stories” (Vonnegut 2004)

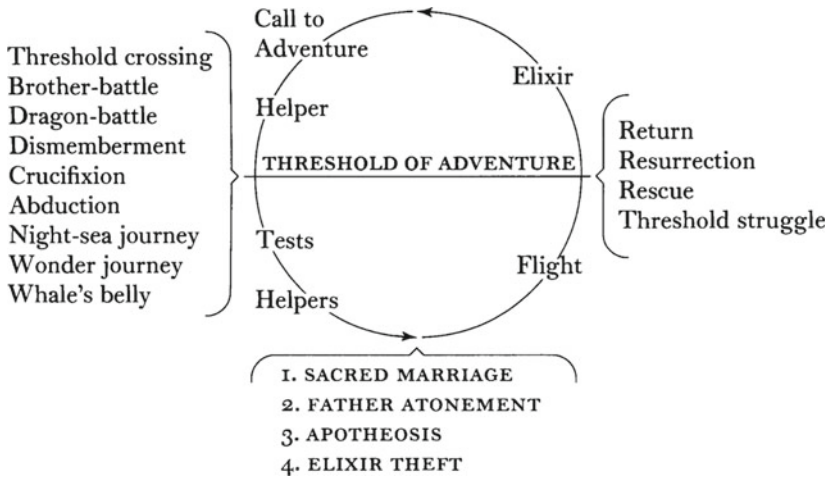


Fig. 7.8 Campbell’s version of The Hero’s Journey (Campbell 2004, p. 227)

The hero’s journey in Campbell’s version consists of nineteen stages which are integrated into three larger movements: “separation,” “initiation,” and “return.”¹¹ The hero is first shown in his everyday environment, when he receives a call to adventure, and leaves on a journey to another world where he has to overcome several trials, eventually returning to the ordinary world a changed man with special gifts or abilities that are useful to his community.¹² Intriguingly, the arrow to indicate

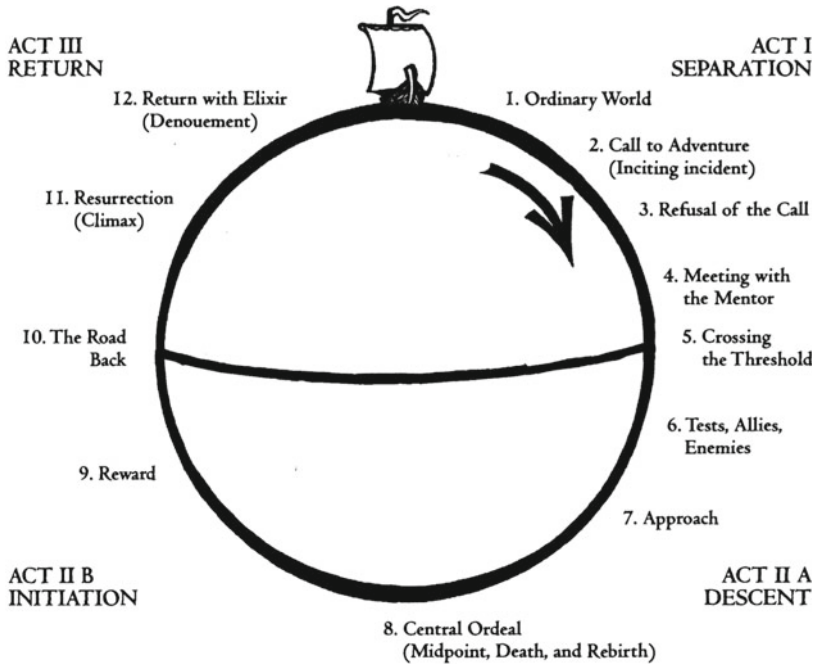


Fig. 7.9 Circular version of Hero's Journey by Vogler (Vogler 2007, p. 9)

the movement of story development is depicted as a counterclockwise movement, but Campbell does not explain why this is the case. This counterclockwise movement emphasizes the circular motion, but the story is not temporally circular, as the end does not return to the events at the beginning; hence, the circularity is likely symbolic.

This model allows for at least three readings. The first is a geographical reading, where the arrows indicate the path of the protagonist through space. The second reading interprets the model as a network of certain events or locations, wherein the lines represent how these events are connected. A third possible reading is to see the model as a flowchart or a depiction of the process of the hero's personal transformation. To complicate matters, instead of Campbell's original, usually a popularized version is used in handbooks, introduced by Christopher Vogler in his

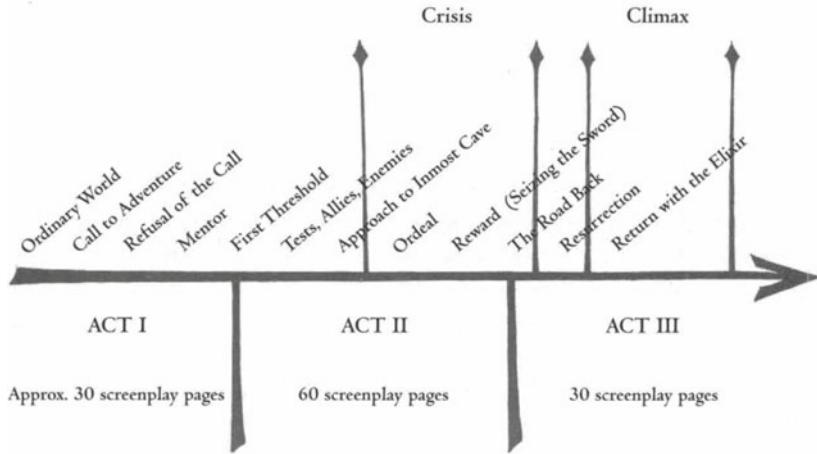


Fig. 7.10 Three-act linear version of Hero's Journey by Vogler (2007, p. 8)

influential handbook *The Writer's Journey-Mythical Structure for Writers* (1992) (Fig. 7.9). Vogler depicts the model in various different ways.

In this version of Vogler's representation, the Hero's Journey is clockwise and the visual metaphor chosen for the geographical interpretation of the model is a globe with a sailing ship. Time passing in this version is equal to travel time (Fig. 7.9).

Because Vogler's handbook primarily addresses screenwriters, although he states that the model is valid for all stories (Vogler 2007, pp. xv, xvii, xix), he integrates Field's Paradigm and Freytag's notions of "crisis" and "climax," and reworks it into a linear model (Fig. 7.10). Thus, the popularized version of the Hero's Journey by Vogler used in most handbooks (Fig. 7.9) becomes a linear model which perfectly fits the three-act structure.

THE MOUNTAIN MODEL, A SYNTHESIS

Although the three-act structure is the underlying model for the large majority of plot structures in handbooks, it does not account for all characteristics attributed to plot, nor can any of the previously mentioned models account for the ideas on plot occurring in single volumes by sole authors. Even when handbook authors present one specific model, they

seldom restrict themselves to that model exclusively in their texts. The greater part of the handbooks, in fact, contain several models merged into one, which is presented as a unified concept of plot. Field himself, for instance, depicts his own paradigm, but refers to Campbell in the text, and also discusses the active protagonist and the centrality of conflict so prominent in Gardner’s model.

While it thus seems that every author concocts their own mix of ideas about plot by borrowing from different models, on closer inspection,

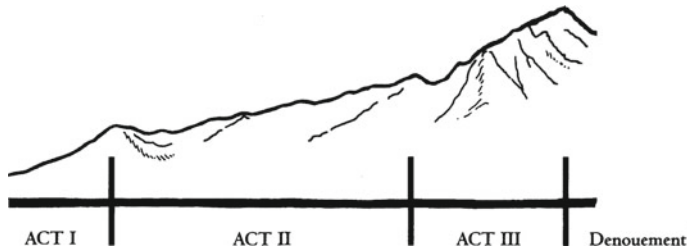


Fig. 7.11 Mountain Model by Vogler (2007, p. 158)

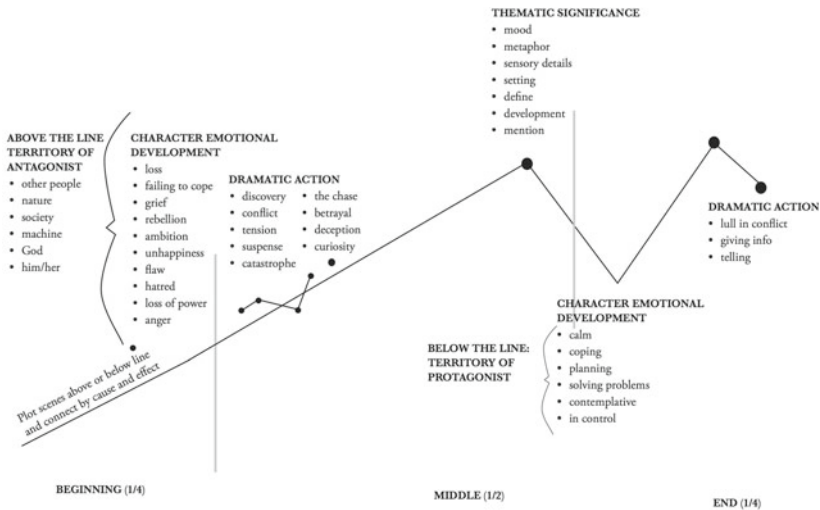


Fig. 7.12 Mountain Model by Alderson (2011, pp. xii–xiii)

one model incorporates all of the proposed plot models into one single representation: the so-called Mountain Model (Figs. 7.11 and 7.12). This model has probably evolved over time and cannot be attributed to any particular author, but the earliest representation of a mountain plot structure in our corpus can be found in the handbook of Burroway in 1982. In 1992 Vogler is the first in the corpus to introduce the name “Mountain Model.” He reconceptualizing plot as a protagonist climbing a mountain or a mountain range with valleys and peaks representing significant turning points in the story.

Rather than foregrounding one single idea about plot, the Mountain Model combines all common influential models into one graphic representation. It incorporates different, and at times even contradictory, interpretations of plot into a single image. In the Mountain Model, the Y-axis and plotline represent different content simultaneously:

1. The three-act structure
2. Freytag’s Pyramid pops up in the picture of a climax peak, with an upward slope for rising action and a downward slope for falling action. These slopes also represent story tension, like in contemporary conceptions of Freytag’s Pyramid.
3. The proportions of the parts of the mountain range resemble Field’s Paradigm and the set-up, confrontation, and resolution are often added. The turning points are integrated in the model as peaks and sometimes as valleys (often at the so-called crisis of the story).
4. John Gardner’s “Fichtean Curve” is found in the protagonist climbing the mountain. The mountain represents the character arc, action line, and emotional development of the reader as one completely synchronous trajectory. The heights are defined as the space of the antagonists, and the lows as the realm of the protagonist and less active scenes.
5. Like in the polar model, the peaks of the mountain represent good fortune, while valleys represent bad fortune.
6. The idea of the plot as a journey with challenges or ordeals that have to be overcome.

The Mountain Model not only integrates all these ideas, but it also envisions a specific position for the reader or audience of the story as an embodied image.

Johanna Drucker emphasizes the embodiedness of the graphic as rhetorical form: “All images have a point of view. They are all drawn from some place in relation to what is shown” (Drucker 2014, p. 149). The embodied view is particularly evident in Vogler’s image of the Mountain Model, where the mountain range is pictured in profile. This perspective suggests that we, as viewers or readers, stand firmly with our feet upon the ground, rooting for the protagonist as we watch her struggle high up in the mountains. However, we are also part of the story world in this picture, since we have the same viewpoint as any observing story character would have. In this way, the Mountain Model entails a spatiotemporal representation of both the protagonist’s and the reader’s process, which depicts the plot from within the world of the story.

Furthermore, the plotline that forms the mountain is ambiguous in its meaning as it represents multiple concepts at the same time. For instance, a peak in the mountain combines the following meanings: good fortune *and* a conflict with antagonists *and* an important step in the emotional development or transformation of the protagonist *and* a highpoint in the story tension. In a well-balanced story, however, these moments do not have to coincide, especially as some of them contradict each other: the protagonist’s good fortune usually does not occur exactly at the same moment as the worsening of conflict with an antagonist. In the Mountain Model, the high and low points of the protagonist, the story tension, the emotions of the reader, the alternation of good and bad fortune, and the character arc coincide, while different story lines collapse into one course, one plotline. As a result, the story is flattened. The possibilities in plot construction are limited, because different story layers are treated as only one single layer.

Still, there are some compelling indications that the Mountain Model is the most dominant model in handbooks. Firstly, the Mountain Model is depicted in a full version in the handbooks of Alderson (2011, pp. xii–xiii), Aronson (2010, p. 54), Dancyger and Rush (2007, p. 6), and Vogler (2007, pp. 157–158). A derived version is found in Burroway (1992, p. 46) and Bell (2004, p. 14, 128). By comparison, the three-act Structure and Field’s Paradigm together appear in six handbooks (Aronson 2010, p. 55; Bell 2004, p. 32, Field 2005, p. 21; McKee 1997, p. 218, Snyder 2005, p. 101; Vogler 2007, p. 8). Secondly, the Mountain Model constitutes a synthesis of all the influential plot models, and it can account for all dominant ideas about plot which can be found in a single handbook. It explains how very different story elements can be presented as

one unified idea comprised in the plot. It even provides an explanation for the use of contradictory ideas and the consequent confusion. An example of this confusion is found in Bell's distinction between commercial and literary plots.

The representation of the commercial plot (Fig. 7.13) is based on Freytag's idea of rising action toward a climax, however, setbacks and problems are depicted as indents in the graph, whereas in Freytag's conception they are part of the ascending line of the rising action. This use is more congruent with the polar model of "bad" versus "good" fortune, or the various climaxes of the Fichtean Curve.

When we look at the model of a literary plot (Fig. 7.14), the rising and falling of the line has nothing to do with Freytag's Pyramid. The line

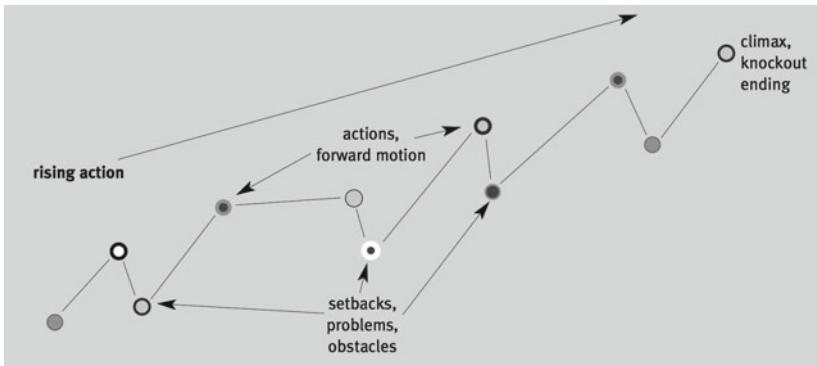


Fig. 7.13 A commercial plot according to Bell (2004, p. 14)

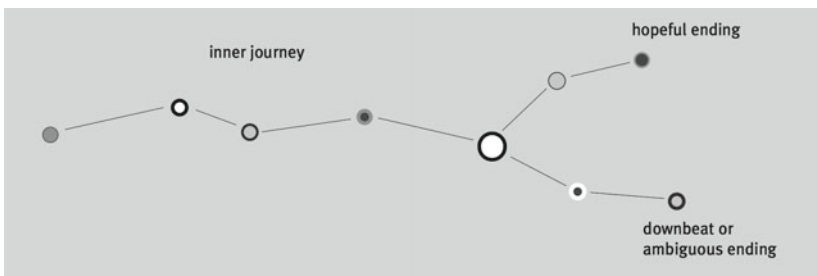


Fig. 7.14 A literary plot according to Bell (2004, p. 15)

traces sad or happy outcomes for the protagonist and the reader, like the polar model of reversal of fortune, and Bell uses the idea of the inner journey referring to Campbell's Hero's Journey. In this way, the same mountainous structure contains different and contradictory meanings that are presented as a unified idea about plot.

Additionally, some handbooks depict older models as a mountain. For instance, Burroway presents a mountainous version of Freytag's Pyramid for "Cinderella," while also integrating the Fichtean Curve and the polar model into her version of Freytag's Pyramid (Fig. 7.15).

Dancyger and Rush's depiction of the three-act structure is thus represented (Fig. 7.16).

Even in the context of another model or idea about plot, the mountain shape pops up quite often as the preferred model to explain what plot is and how to construct it.¹³ The last and perhaps most important

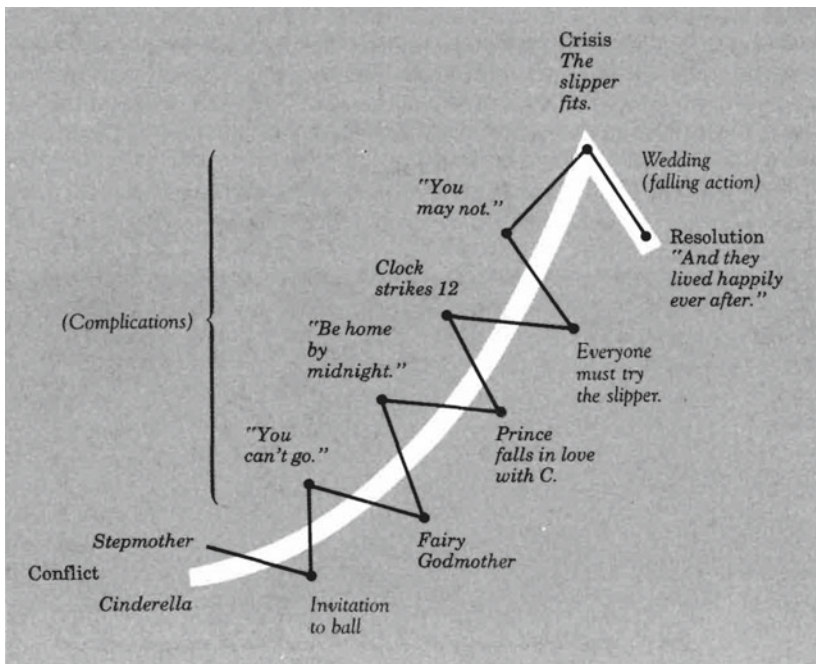


Fig. 7.15 Freytag's Pyramid as Mountain Model (Burroway 1992, p. 46)

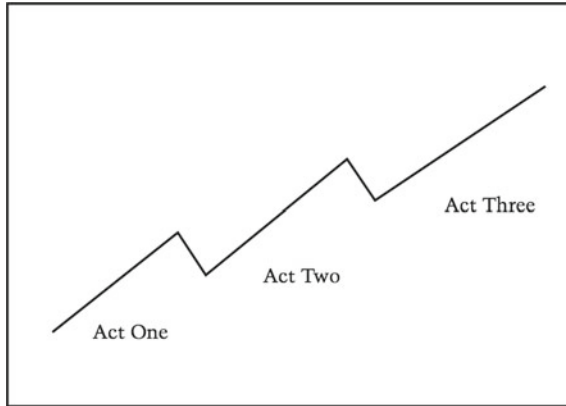


Fig. 7.16 Three-act structure as a Mountain Model (Dancyger and Rush 2007, p. 6)

reason to consider the Mountain Model as the dominant contemporary form for representing plot is that the defining parts of the Mountain Model are congruent with the dramatic writing paradigm heavily featured in writing handbooks, especially in terms of the active protagonist, the struggle against external forces of antagonism, continuous time, and the protagonist's personal transformation, as defined by McKee.

To conclude, the Mountain Model is more versatile than the preceding models, and at the same time allows for diversity of application, given that every handbook author can pick and choose which of the incorporated models they use to interpret the plotline. Aronson (2010), for instance, does not include the Hero's Journey as a part of the model, whereas in the versions of Alderson (2011) and Vogler (2007), the Hero's Journey provides one of the central interpretative frameworks. Moreover, not every mountain has to have the same number and positions of segments. Any number of turning points, peaks, valleys, or slopes can be added, with different angles and positioned at any point in the storyline without losing the integrity of the model. By choosing to depict a turning point as a peak, or inversely as a valley, the author can assign a certain function to a narrative moment. Some of the mountains depict the crisis as a peak, indicating a point of high story tension, whereas others depict the crisis as a low point, as bad fortune for the protagonist.

Although one could argue that every story could or should have a slightly different mountain, some literary advice handbooks still propose one particular mountain as the universal plot or the ideal type of plot. However, this model maintains the constraints of a linear model, especially concerning the temporal order of events. Moreover, the Mountain Model holds the particular restrictions that the protagonist is leading plot development, and that all the story lines collapse into one. It would, for instance, be a challenge to construct a plot based on dramatic irony.¹⁴

PLOT MODELS AS GENERATIVE TOOLS WITH THE HERO'S JOURNEY

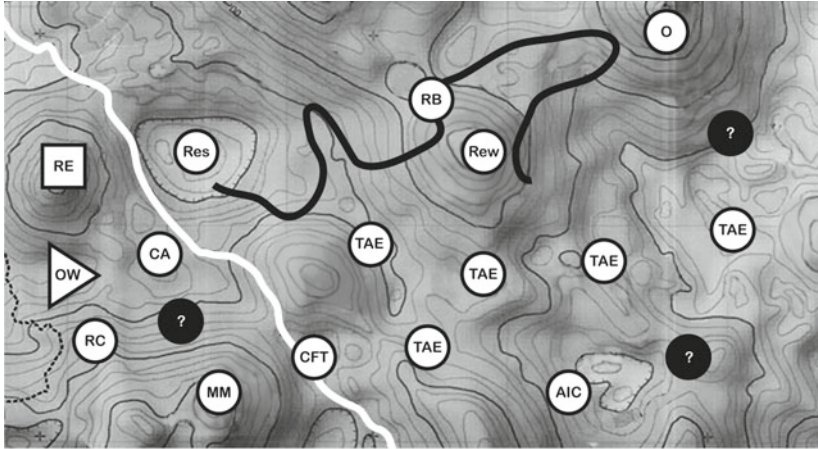
To show that with a few simple adjustments a plot model can become more of a dynamic tool than a visual description of a plot, I will remodel Vogler's Mountain Model version of the Hero's Journey. In his text Vogler describes a model that he does not depict:

If you get lost, refer to the metaphor as you would check a map on a journey. But don't mistake the map for the journey. You don't drive with a map pasted to your windshield. You consult it before setting out or when you get disoriented. The joy of a journey is not reading or following a map, but exploring unknown places and wandering off the map now and then. It's only by getting creatively lost, beyond the boundaries of tradition, that new discoveries can be made. (Vogler 2007, p. 233)

None of the plot models in our corpus defines space outside of the graph, allowing no room to wander off. In fact, the models provide an itinerary through a story space that is completely empty apart from the plot itself. So, applying Vogler's spatially oriented description, we may imagine the Hero's Journey as a topographical map of a mountain range (Fig. 7.17).

This topographical model transforms the sideways mountain range into a territory, creating a space instead of a line. The itinerary with a fixed route is transformed into a space that remains open to a diversity of possible journeys.

A topographical representation is more flexible than a linear model in several respects. Firstly, the temporal order of the plot elements is no longer fixed. Here the beginning and end are indicated by a triangle and a square, but that is not even necessary. Secondly, the question marks represent additional stages in the journey, which are made possible because



In the Ordinary World:

OW	Ordinary World (beginning, triangle)
CA	Call to Adventure
RC	Refusal of the Call
MM	Meeting with the Mentor
CFT	Crossing the First Threshold
RE	Return with the Elixir (End, square)

In the Special World

TEA	Tests, Allies, Enemies (multiple)
AIC	Approach to the Inmost Cave
O	Ordeal
Rew	Reward
RB	The Road Back (black line)
Res	Resurrection

In both worlds: black circles with question marks represent elements that could be added

Fig. 7.17 Hero's Journey as a geographical map of possibilities (*Source* Image by Marijn van der Waa and Liorah Hoek)

there is a space within which to wander. Thirdly, these extra points could be scenes or sequences in which the protagonist is not even present, thus, allowing for subplots to be easily integrated. Finally, the hero does not have to travel to all of the places indicated on the map, therefore, it becomes easier to introduce gaps in the timeline of the story or even leave stages out.

In my topographical model, the surface remains a mountain range, but of course it could be any real or imagined landscape, for instance, a map of the story world, or a network of concepts. Remodeling the Hero's Journey as a map of possibilities makes it much simpler to adapt the model to a particular story. Instead of a template, it becomes a tool to create different plots within the same paradigm. From a representation of a plot, it becomes, in Drucker's terms, a "knowledge generator" to create plots. Another visual representation of a plot model could reveal a much

broader scope of plots offered to (aspiring) writers and may show where and how the model can be adapted to serve the needs of a specific story.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have discussed the most common visual plot models that appear in contemporary handbooks, tracing their origin and interconnectedness. Although offered as tools, most of these models are in fact descriptions of finished stories. They are often offered as a one-size-fits-all solution for all stories, at least those published for broad audiences. In general, handbook authors provide little information how to adapt the model for a specific story. Remodeling the linear version of the most dominant Mountain Model into a topographical map of possibilities indicates how, by changing the representation of a model, the possibilities of plot construction can change dramatically. Even a restrictive, descriptive model can become a tool for plot construction, opening up possibilities not only for the common plot models that are proposed by the creative writing handbooks, but also for less common or even alternative story structures described by others.

Critical graphical analysis not only adds to textual analysis, but also provides a method of thinking about plot and narrative, especially when combined with the insight of writers.¹⁵ Imagine if we would conceptualize a plot model meant to be a tool for creating different plots. That could be, to use Ryan's words, "the seed of a new theory" (Ryan 2007, p. 12). A storyology that concentrates on the emergence of stories opens up a spectrum of possibilities for (aspiring) writers, literary theorists, and narratologists alike.

NOTES

1. The corpus consists mainly of American handbooks and is too small to compare American handbooks with English or Australian ones.
2. The analysis is also informed by Jacques Bertin's *The Semiology of Graphics* ([1967] 2011).
3. All of the authors in our corpus acknowledge Aristotle as the origin of their plot ideas, even though Mitch James posits that the Aristotelean origin of plot ideas rarely is acknowledged or even ignored in handbooks (James 2013).
4. The five-act play was considered the classical form for drama, not the three-act structure.

5. See, for instance, Lukeman, Maass, Tobias, and Snyder (who does not use the term, but uses the concept of a limited amount of story patterns). Sometimes these master plots are considered to be plot models or story patterns, but sometimes they are seen as genre models (e.g., Dancyger and Rush 1991; McKee 1997; Snyder 2005; Vogler 1992).
6. The set-up, confrontation, and resolution are known under other names, but the ideas on what must happen in each act are similar.
7. In his later work Field added a midpoint (Field 1984, pp. 131–146).
8. Research into the origins of the Fichtean Curve reveals that it is almost certainly not the work of the German philosopher Gottlieb Fichte, or, as leading Fichte expert professor Daniel Breazeale at the University of Kentucky puts it in an e-mail correspondence: “In any case, I feel quite confident in declaring that [the Fichtean Curve] has nothing at all to do with ‘our’ [philosopher Gottlieb] Fichte or his work. He certainly did not coin the term” (Personal communication 20 February 2019). Since Gardner, like many handbook authors, does not mention a source, the origin is a mystery. The triangular shape and the incorporation of the reader into one model suggest that it is probably a twentieth-century model.
9. The idea of hope and fear can be found in Gulino 2004 and is in my experience part of many writing courses.
10. His work is not based on Vladimir Propp’s formal analysis of the fairy tale, but he seems to employ the same method.
11. Note that Campbell does not depict the three larger stages, nor all of the substages.
12. A critique of the Hero’s Journey is that the whole idea of a journey is masculine, and that Campbell’s phases are based on male initiation rites. Maureen Murdock has rewritten the Hero’s Journey in *The Heroine’s Journey* as a self-help or therapeutic manual for women (Murdock 2013).
13. This seems to be a general trend in contemporary representations of the older models. A simple Google image search with the queries: “three-act structure,” “Fichtean Curve,” or “Freytag’s Pyramid” results in a large diversity of mountain models.
14. With the plotline of the protagonist and that of the reader collapsing into one course, this model does not provide an obvious way to create a difference in knowledge between characters and reader that is important for dramatic irony and similar effects.
15. As a further study, it would be useful to look at the reception of these models by writers and how these models are used in the writing practice.

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