

Stories - An Adaptation of the Process of Knowledge Assimilation

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to explore how stories came to become the backbone of human existence and survival. Story is what a speaker tells a listener about what somebody did to get what he wanted, and with whom the listener can identify. Stories have been shaping the mind of humans indicating how one should get along with each other as part of group for its proper functioning; what action would fetch them a reward and what punishment, how the surroundings can be controlled and manipulated to gain status, and also how a flawed thinking can make them lose everything. It is a journey for a character during which they need to change and evolve if they have to attain their goal. Humans, by nature, are goal-oriented and status-obsessed. They may resist the change initially but must give in if they have to regain their control to successfully deal with the world. By giving the audience insights into unexplored aspects of life, stories enrich their experience which they can use to solve problems in real life.

Key Words: Change, control, existence, goal, group, journey, status, story.

As soon as you come across the words ‘once upon a time in so and so place something happened’, and at once you understand that there is a story there right in front of you. A story introduces a main character, the protagonist in such a way that you begin to identify with him. Whatever is experienced by that main character is also experienced by you. Usually, there is a problem and then there is a search for that problem. During this journey the protagonist or the main character undergoes a change and evolves into someone whom everybody appreciates. The activity called storytelling has a shape, and almost all stories can be traced back to very origins of the ‘recorded word.’ It is supposed to be a universal archetype. Storytelling has been around since times immemorial and the reasons for this could have been various. Scientific studies claim that it is the human brain’s tendency to tell and listen to stories or read them in the later times when printing was invented. In the earlier times, stories were related orally and passed on from one generation to the next. As children listened to these stories from elders, especially grandparents, they learned many a thing about life; these stories had a lesson, a moral, life’s experience. This went a long way in shaping the young minds as they stepped into adolescence. These listeners received some form of knowledge or wisdom, but got so in an entertaining way as if they were playing and not being taught as they were in a classroom. The storyteller makes it interesting by giving some information and withholding some, and this drew the audience into the story. They get involved in figuring out the story, but when this activity ceases, the story stops. There have been lots and lots of stories, and they have in them that makes them a story ie they are a ‘communication of a dramatic code’.

The dramatic code, embedded deep in the human psyche, is an artistic description of how a person can grow or evolve. This code is also a process of going on underneath every story... the code of growth is what the audience ultimately takes from a good story. (Truby 8-9)

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Stories don’t show the audience the “the real world”, they show the story world. The story world isn’t a copy of life as it is. It’s life as human beings imagine it could be. It is human life condensed and heightened so that the audience can get a better understanding of how life itself works. (Truby 10)

Though storytelling was not confined to any specific region or area and it was universal, yet there were cultural differences in the stories told around the world. In fact, cultures began to evolve with the lessons stories had in them and how they expected an individual to behave with others in the community. What was common to all stories was teaching loyalty to the group or community. However, there were differences too. In the western stories there was an individual who was strong, self-reliant, who after a courageous struggle was able to change the world. It was always the individual who was at the centre ie in focus, and was more important than the group. And these pieces of the whole, when they were threatened by an outsider, got together and wen to war with that external enemy or threat, defeated and tamed it, and the threat was no longer there. However, in the East, in Asia, especially China, it was not the individual, but his being part of a group which was more important; every individual gave gave his/her whole for the progress of

the group. In the face of a threat, instead getting together for a war for destruction of the outsider, they looked for the causes that gave rise to the threat. They then worked towards a solution which would end the problem and restore back the harmony. They did not believe in elimination of the others, but wanted peaceful coexistence with that outsider other ie they tried to create an environment in which both parties could live in peace. Both these ways are of different types, yet they had one thing in common: at the base of both was the lesson of control.

Each one of the tiny beliefs that make up our neural world is a little instruction that tells our brain how the outside world works: this is how you open as stuck jam lid; this is how you lie to a police officer; this is how behave if you want your boss to believe you're a useful, sane and honest employee. These instructions make our environment predictable. They make it controllable. Taken in sum, the vastly intricate web of beliefs can be seen as the brain's 'theory of control' . It is this theory of control that's often challenged at the story's start. (Storr 65)

Each person in this world has his/her own hallucinated model inside his/her skull, around which they have build their identity, values, and theory of control. Whatever art, media, or story will be in accordance with this rightness of theirs will give them joy or pleasure. And that which goes against their 'rightness' will bring alienation and irritation. To shake this theory of control can have serious repercussions on any individual, and they will go all out to defend their theory of control which they have formed over so many years listening to stories of right and wrong from their elders. They will not accept that they are flawed, because to accept it would mean losing their established way of getting on in the world. All these years they have been believing their theory of control to be true. They are right, and their way of manipulating and controlling their environment is right. Their behavior can become abnormal when they are shown the flaw in what they have been holding for so long as the ultimate truth. It shakes their very foundation.

Correcting our flaws means, first of all, managing the tasks of actually seeing them. When challenged, we often respond by refusing to accept our flaws exist at all... Identifying and accepting our flaws, and then changing into who we are, means breaking down the very the *very structure of our reality* before rebuilding it in a new and improved form. This is not easy. It is painful and disturbing. We'll often fight with all we have to resist this kind of profound change. (Storr 63)

Today, maximum time of humans goes in defending their hallucinated model of the theory of control. In fact, each wants the other to see the things their way, the right way because everyone thinks they are right. So any two human beings with similar hallucinated models will get along well. They will take each other's pictures and keep them in their living rooms and drawing rooms. They will become close friends and fall in love if circumstances permitted. On the contrary, those with a different theories of control will fight each other. Religious fanaticism is a classic example. The followers of a particular religion believe that only they are right; only their God is the real God; only those humans who adopt their belief systems or their hallucinated model have the right to live because the rest are infidels who are meant to be killed as soon as there arises a chance.

We spend a phenomenal amount of our lives following stories: telling them; listening to them; reading them; watching them being acted out on the television screen or in films or on stage. They are far and away one of the most important features of our everyday existence... our news is presented to us in the form of 'stories'. Our history books are largely made up of stories. Even much of our conversation is taken up with recounting the events of everyday life in the form of stories. These structured sequences of imagery are in fact the most natural way we know to describe almost everything which happens in our life. (Booker 2)

This is no way means that humans are permanently shaped according to the hallucinated model inside their skull which they defend at all cost from any external threat and danger lest they lose their control of the external reality. Yet, time and again their theory of control is proved flawed by the somebody else and they realize that they are no longer in that earlier position of strength, and they may regret what they have done in the past. Even if flawed their theory of control gave them whatever they wanted - success in all their endeavors which could include things which they might not have liked to do but did any way. This is to say that humans have multiplicity in them: at different times, under different circumstances they area different version of themselves out of which one is dominant and this becomes their neural narrator which guides them to respond and act according to their situation and personality. There is a constant interplay between the conscious and the unconscious, the text and the subtext, and between one character and the other in a story. It is these inner versions/vices that get expressed as anger, lying, lust, etc at different times. They may assist one in controlling the things and giving them what they want. This is their conscious part, but their unconscious part later on may indicate their wrong doing bringing up emotions of regret, and they may listen to this voice and decide to change . But very next moment walk the same path when someone in the outer world reinforces in their conscious part their earlier theory of control likewise each character may influence the other including the protagonist to indulge in the same behavior s/he wants to leave and change. Eventually the story always shows the good winning against the evil.

So whatever works in the outer world may not be suitable or appropriate in the inner world causing indecision or dilemma. Eventually, every story is an expression of various inner selves of a human being. These include both positive

and negative, and theory of control teaches to keep that version on the top which helps manipulate and control the environment around. This is precisely the reason that most of the stories have a happy ending where justice prevails in the end with the good defeating the evil. Story is all about the character; it is not about the objects as nobody is interested in mere objects. It is the effect of these objects on humans which is more important and worth telling about in the form of stories. This does not mean that there can be no objective description, but it won't interest that much unless it has some effect on human beings.

This is what makes the story worth reading. It also says what object can have what effect and then how to deal with it, and if possible minimize it's effect if it is negative and maximize if it's positive. Hence the poems/stories hence the poems/stories are based on subjects like nature, god, love, death, war, monuments etc because each of these produces effects. Further, a character may want something at conscious level and need something entirely different at the subconscious level. It is after deep focus that they may realize that the thing which they actually want is not that which they are running after at the surface level. So this interplay between the conscious and the subconscious level continues in the story. Sometimes the character does not know what is right, but the reader or the audience are able to see through and read the deeper level. Secondly, much can be known about the character through dialogue; the conversations that he has with either himself ie monologue or that which he has with other characters. In each case we get to know the type of personality the character has, his likes, his dislikes, his interests, his hobbies, his profession, his love life etc.

What he says about himself or speaks to others is the conscious level. But the analysis of this character can also be done by other characters through their conversations, gossip etc. It is through the gossip also that we come to know the reality of a character no matter how well he speaks about himself. It is ultimately what the others make of him through their analysis which brings to light his real inner self. Stories evolved when humans used to be a part of hunter-gatherer tribes and used to live in groups where full cooperation with each other and the group was essential for it's functioning. So there developed a practice in which selfless service towards the group was considered heroic, and selfishness that is ie putting oneself before or against the group was taken as something evil or a mistake that needs to be rectified. So deliberately such stories in the form of gossip emerged in which selflessness was considered good, and the selfless was always rewarded; he earned the respect of the group while the selfish one who went against the group was to be punished. Usually he was ostracized which was eventually death. This is the universal tussle between the selfless and the selfish, which even the pre-verbal babies understand. During an experiment where puppets were shown as helping others and some were shown as disrupting this help causing trouble to others. When these puppets were placed before the babies, almost every baby chose the puppet who was seen helping the others. This only reinforces the fact that those primal cravings still exist in humans, and the entire universe works according to this selfless-selfish aspect. Though humanity has come a long way from that time yet those primal instincts are deeply embedded in humans who, while they live in a modern age their brains still belong to that Stone Age.

Even crickets keep a tally of their victories and failures against cricket rivals. Researchers into bird communication have revealed the astonishing fact that not only do ravens listen to the gossip of neighboring flocks, but they pay especially close attention when it tells of a reversal in another bird's status. If many animals are similarly status obsessed, our special interest in it comes partly because human hierarchies are not static but fluid. We have this common with chimpanzees who, along with bonobos, are our closest cousins. We can infer from this closeness that any habits we share with them probably stretch back to the ancestor we have in common and with whom we split between five and seven million years ago. Chimpanzee alphas have a lifespan at the top of about four to five years. Because status is of existential importance (benefits for chimps and humans include better food, better mating opportunities and safer sleeping sites) and because everyone's status is in flux, it's near-constant obsession. This status flux is the very flesh of human drama; it creates running narratives of loyalty and betrayal; ambition and despair; loves won and lost; schemes and intrigues; intimidation, assassination and war. (Storr 144-145)

Even in our mythological stories, the selflessness was always foregrounded, acceptable, appreciable, and rewarded; the selfish evil was looked down upon, condemned, and punished. Today, when we read stories or watch movies, and see the selfish getting the upper hand against the selfless, our primal instincts make us restless. We yearn for the selfish to be punished; we don't want to leave the book or the movie until we've seen the destruction of the evil. Not only this, the selfless should also live happily, which is where the story ends. This is because here our primal instincts have been satisfied and once again the age-old principle of selflessness has been reinforced in us. So basically gossip is the story, which intern is a process to know who we actually are. However, such moral outrage is not the only emotion that story telling induces; it also tells us how to get along in life, in society, with people, and in fact, how to get ahead of them this primal feeling is there in humans ; they want to get ahead of each other and gain status in the group. This craving for status is universal and forms the basis of all the work that humans do no matter what. They want to be acknowledged, appreciated, and be considered of a high rank. This primal craving for status is well known; so, there are people who can manipulate the things, and decide what their status is. They will tell others stories (even made up) for their own benefits in order to get ahead of them in life. For instance, the capitalist forces publicize stories showing a man driving a specific model of a car; this man is hailed as high ranking; a man wearing a specific brand of clothing is considered well off; that person who volunteer to enroll in the army is seen as heroic because they are defending their

people against any potential enemy/threat/danger, and who are even acknowledged publicly by presenting them with gallantry awards. Obviously, these people become the role models whom everybody wants to emulate.

The necessary characteristics to become a human hero mirror those necessary for a chimpanzee to rise to a position of dominance. At the happy ending of an archetypal story, Booker writes, a 'hero and heroine must represent the perfect coming together of four values: strength, order, feeling and understanding.' ... But if a protagonist learns these four values of heroism at the end of the story, and is therefore rewarded with the ultimate price of tribal status, that's not how they begin. When we meet them they are frequently low in the hierarchy... relatively low in status and yet actually, perhaps secretly, possessing the skills and character of someone deserving of a great deal more... this is why we so easily identify with underdog heroes at the start of a story - and then cheer when they finally seize their reward. Because they are *us*. (Storr 146)

One has to act according to what the group or society, and conforming to which gets recognized as selfless behavior. But those who do not conform to the rules and regulations established by such powerful groups are branded as rebels, outlaws, villains - the enemy of the group and the humanity at large because they have acted selfishly; they are seen as evil. The whole society gets united against them, to defeat such forces. It is a different story that a group may wipe out another group in a war under the garb of self defense ie the right to defend one's own group. Behind all the human deeds is the desire to gain status, and it all begins from gossip-storytelling which establishes the theory of control. People's subjective wellbeing, self esteem, physical and mental health is directly related to the concept of status ie their position in society which they are accorded by others. This status is their self, and whenever a human being is deprived of this status, they also get deprived of the self. Their inner world cracks; they are on the verge of losing control which is something they have been holding for years and years, in fact right since childhood. It had been their belief system, and then to be told that what they have been believing as true all these years is false is actually a big setback to them. They don't want themselves to be seen as flawed by others, yet this keeps happening frequently, and this is what is called learning the lessons of life the hard way. When humans are deprived of their land/home and driven out, they lose their status which they may never get again; they get on the edge of losing themselves. In order to save themselves as a group, they begin to preserve their stories, which were being passed on orally until now.

Now the scrolls, scribes have begun to write stories on paper anyhow, whatever the order. Gradually, all these stories get connected and become a sacred thing for the proper functioning of the individuals as part of a group. This is how our stories eventually got their status as scriptures, the holy books which are nothing but principles, axioms guiding people as to how to get along with with each other in this world by telling them what is right and what is wrong; what they ought to do and what they must not. These stories which they have been telling and retelling becomes their identity In almost every story there is the concept of moral outrage as well as status; everybody does try to conform to these criteria because of the basic human craving for getting higher and higher status. If there are those who conform to the established set of norms and values, there are this who refuse to do so and violate the norms going against the group or community in order to achieve their own selfish ends. The former are the protagonists of the story, whereas the latter are the antagonists or the villains as they indulge in evil deeds - wrong from the point of view of the group at large. However, this in no way means that the protagonists or the antagonists were born like that. There is some change in the character which turns an individual into a hero; likewise, there is some damage which transforms a person into anti-hero or a villain. Most stories and films do not explore the past of such characters to the extent that people are able to see the cause which broke them making them behave in the way they are in the present.

The characters in any story not only not only fight the external world circumstances, but they also are at a constant war with themselves, inside their subconscious mind and 'at stake is the answer to the fundamental question that drives all drama: who am I?'

Various writers do tread this avenue trying to explore in a certain character the original damage that changed their direction or made them hate the world (their group or society); they have been caused damage by others in some or the other way; they have felt at some point in their life that pain which they still carry inside their neural model. So, it can be said that a flawed model has a reason to see the reality in a manner different from those who have not gone through such a trauma - normal people. In fact, when the loss of such characters is revealed, the audience or the readers begin to empathize with them because then they understand who the person is actually. The basic dramatic question, 'who are we?' Is answered and the curiosity of the audience/readers is slaked. An antagonist may begin to see his/her flawed model and may try to rectify the flaw; change can happen anytime. But there is no guarantee that it may occur; the damage to the psyche may be too great for any kind of positivity. Writers/dramatists may or may not disclose this; they may leave it to the readers/audience to fill in the gap. The readers/audience cannot cope with not understanding anything; they want a resolution to an issue. Also storytellers can nether afford to confuse or abandon their audience nor indulge in over-explanation. Both are dangerous as they may bore the audience/readers. Storytellers adopt a middle path giving enough hints for the audience to anticipate what is coming next, but can never tell with surety that something is going to happen exactly as they are thinking. Besides, every reader/listener has an inner thought

mechanism different from the other, and so no two readers/listeners may have the same response to the same part of a story.

Now, coming to the question, where does a story begin? Regarding this it is generally agreed that it is a point where the tools and principles that are needed to manipulate the world and get along in life go wrong ie they do not seem to fit in. Being in an environment and learning by watching others, learning from teachers, and through experience, humans form an in-built mechanism which they use to get along in their day-to-day life. They very well understand that the surroundings must be manipulated if they are to get what they want, but when this thing fails it is said that the person/human being is flawed or imperfect in his thinking. And the story is not so much about perfection, it is more about flaws and imperfection. It is the presentation of this flawed human being/character in a plausible way, where there is verisimilitude with the real world, which is the job of a storyteller. Every person has an inner world (working system) different from everybody else and so each sees only a part of reality, and each is different because reality is one big whole. Yet, each thinks they are right, although others try to point out the fault in their thinking, but they are unwilling to accept their flaw let alone correct it. With this inner system of the brain each wants to control the external circumstances, the surroundings, and other human beings.

Humans, by nature, want to establish control over things and make them as predictable as possible perhaps, a story begins when the ability of some character/human being to control appears faulty. The readers/audience can realize that a character by acting in a specific way is heading towards disaster, but they can do nothing about it. Even the other characters in that story seem helpless because the flawed one would not listen to anybody. Then they need to give outlet to their feelings because things can't be held inside for long; they must find their way out. So, storytellers not only say about what disappointed them, but also about what they had expected and were denied. So they create a fictional/alternative world where they try to set the wrong right. It is all about how their world was shattered by some external agent, and they have an urge to rebuild that desired world in the form of a story in order to attain certain goals which are unattainable in the real world. One imagines the type of world one wants. Trollope called this daydreaming which is different from the real dream which is created of its own accord and the dreamer has no control over it, neither can it be done intermittently like the daydreaming in which a person could stop in between and then again resume from that point according to the propositions already set. In the former the dream could be a nightmare, but in the latter things would be positive and happy as the person is conscious and in control to shape the world the way they desire.

If the target of the story is the attainment of goals or fulfillment of wishes, what happens when this has been achieved? Perhaps the story has to end there, and new goals set for another story. It may not be one's own story; storytellers may also depict the condition of somebody else with whom the situation is such that they either choose either to conform to the ethics/standards established by a community/society or they may opt to violate the norms. But it cannot be denied that stories are models for people to behave in a one particular way and not the other. No story is an isolated island. In every story/text one can get a glimpse of every other story that has existed before it and which can be traced to its origin. For the West, this original source is the Bible sanctioned as sacred by the ecclesiastical authorities as word from the God. Yet that is also a tapestry of old threads/stories which were there before the Bible, and so not words from God as claimed by the Church. What was before it and is there in it gets reflected in the stories of later storytellers/writers.

'He had likewise projected, but at what part of his life is not known, a work to show how small a quantity of REAL FICTION there is in the world; and that the same images with very little variation, have served all the authors who have ever written.'

Dr Samuel Johnson recorded in Boswell's
Life of Johnson (Booker 1)

This quest to find out a universal structure for any story is not new. As John Yorke says in his book, *Into the Woods* 'from the Prague School and the Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century, via Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots*, many have set themselves the task of trying to understand how stories work.' It has also been said that the ways in which an audience demands certain things has an 'extraordinary uniformity.' No matter how many theories are there about storytelling, there is one central point around which these move: 'the incomplete is made complete; sense is made.' A fine balance is made between the inner selves and the external world. Our inner self is the home, in which if something is not right, we try to set it right using our imagination creating the 'home' we would actually want. In a way every story revolves not around 'I think, therefore I am', but 'I want therefore I am.'

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