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The Four Elements

Writer Orson Scott Card reminds us that all stories contain four basic elements that can determine structure. They are, milieu, idea, character and event. While each is present in every story, there is generally one that dominates the others.

STRUCTURE 1: THE MILIEU STORY

The milieu is the world—the planet, the society, the weather, the family, all the elements that come up during your world-creation phase. Every story has a milieu, but when a story is structured around one, the milieu is the thing the storyteller cares about most.

For instance, in *Gulliver's Travels*, it mattered little to Jonathan Swift whether we came to care about Gulliver as a character. The whole point of the story was for the audience to see all the strange lands where Gulliver traveled and then compare the societies he found there with the society of England in Swift's own day—and the societies of all the tale's readers, in all times and places.

Milieu stories always follow that structure. An observer who sees things the way we'd see them gets to the strange place, observes things that interest him, is transformed by what he sees, and then comes back a new person.

STRUCTURE 2: THE IDEA STORY

Idea stories are about the process of seeking and discovering new information through the eyes of characters who are driven to make the discoveries. The structure is very simple: The idea story begins by raising a question; it ends when the question is answered.

Most mysteries follow this structure. The story begins when a crime takes place. The question we ask is, “who did it and why?” The story ends when the identity and motive of the criminal are revealed.

STRUCTURE 3: THE CHARACTER STORY

Character stories focus on the transformation of a character’s role in the communities that matter most to him. In one sense, stories are almost always “about” one or more characters. In most stories, though, the tale is not just about the who the character is

A character story begins when the main character becomes so unhappy, impatient or angry in their present role that they begin the process of change; it ends when the character either settles into a new role (happily or not) or gives up the struggle and remains in the old role (happily or not).

STRUCTURE 4: THE EVENT STORY

In the event story, something is wrong in the fabric of the universe; the world is out of order. In classic literature, this can include the appearance of a monster (*Beowulf*), the “unnatural” murder of a king by his brother (*Hamlet*) or of a guest by his host (*Macbeth*).

The event story ends at the point when a new order is established or, more rarely, when the old order is restored or, rarest of all, when the world descends into chaos as the forces of order are destroyed. The story begins not at the point when the world becomes disordered, but rather at the point when the character whose actions are most crucial to establishing the new order becomes involved in the struggle.