Stories can be about anything. Anything at all. Think about your favourite story, and I guarantee it will be completely different from that of the person next to you. Different characters, different settings, different endings, and so on. But do all of these different stories have anything in common?

Christopher Booker argues that yes, yes they do. In his book, The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories (2004) he explains that “there are indeed a small number of plots which are so fundamental to the way we tell stories that it is virtually impossible for any storyteller ever to break away from them”.

We’re going to look at these seven plot archetypes that Booker believes inform all stories, and explore how they can be used to help you shape a relevant narrative in advertising.

The Seven Basic Plots

1. Overcoming the Monster
There is an evil force threatening our hero/their world/mankind. The hero must fight and slay this monster, which often isn’t easy, but they come out triumphant, and receive a great reward. Think Beowulf, Dracula and King Kong. We see this plot popping up over and over again in the advertising world. Think of the ‘monster’ as an obstacle (very rarely an actual monster!), which the hero has to fight to overcome, usually with the help of a brand.

2. Rags to Riches
This one is fairly self-explanatory: at the beginning, our hero is insignificant and dismissed by others, but something happens to elevate them, revealing them to be exceptional. Think The Ugly Duckling, Aladdin and Superman. In marketing, how could discovering a product/brand be seen to elevate someone, transforming his or her life?

3. The Quest
In the quest, our hero must set out on a long, hazardous journey, and will battle all obstacles until they are triumphant. Think The Lord of the Rings, The Wizard of Oz and Harry Potter. In advertising, we might see our hero channelling the values of the brand as they forge to do good and achieve its goals.

4. Voyage and Return
While also based on a journey, the Voyage and Return is very different from The Quest. Here, the hero travels out of their ‘normal world’ into the overwhelming and unknown, before escaping back to the safety of their home. Think Alice in Wonderland, Finding Nemo and Gulliver’s Travels. How could a brand take you to another world? Can you represent the experience of a product through a journey?

5. Comedy
A story made up of comedic events, normally involving mistaken identity, misunderstanding or confusion, resulting in hilarious chaos. Think A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Bridget Jones’ Diary and Some Like It Hot. Comedy in advertising is often used to show the unfortunate alternative situation that your customer might find himself or herself in if they don’t use your brand/product.

6. Tragedy
This is the story without the happy ending. While our other archetypes have seen triumphant heroes and slain monsters, this plot takes a different turn, and ends in loss or death. Think Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet and Breaking Bad. Used with caution, we tend to see tragedy most frequently used hand-in-hand with shock tactics in charity advertising.

7. Rebirth
Our final plot type, rebirth, sees our hero ‘falling under a dark spell’ – whether this is sleep, sickness or enchantment – before breaking free and being redeemed. Think Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast and The Secret Garden. When applying rebirth to advertising, you might think of “the dark spell” as time away from your brand/product, or maybe your brand can reconnect or re-inspire people?

You don’t have to use these archetypes as a hard-and-fast guide, but it’s interesting to understand the different patterns that narrative can follow, and when and why we might use them. Of course, stories don’t always use one clear-cut plot. They can be a complicated combination of lots of different archetypes.