

The Dozen Plots

1. Boy Meets Girl

Any plot involving a romantic interest of one kind or another, most typically male-female. By far and away the most common plot complication.

Examples: *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare, “Hills Like White Elephants”

2. Family Matters

Plots involving a conflict between or among family members.

Examples: “Sonny’s Blues” by Baldwin, “Why I Live at the P.O.” by Welty.

3. Buddy Stories or Rival Stories

Stories involving relations or conflicts between non-relatives without an explicit romantic angle. The “love-triangle” story is a variation and combination of this plot and “boy meets girl.”

Examples: “The Cask of Amontillado” by Poe

4. Internal Conflict

A story where the protagonist’s main problem is mostly self-generated, as in a person trying to overcome mental illness, his or her past, a drinking problem, or something as basic as self-doubt.

Examples: “Babylon Revisited” by Fitzgerald

5. Journey or Quest

Some sort of travel – literal, spiritual, or both – is involved. “Coming

of age” stories are within this category. Some critics argue that “the quest” informs all fiction.

Examples: *On the Road* by Kerouac, *Huck Finn* by Twain

6. Encountering the Other; Dealing with Difference

Plots where one person has to deal with someone he finds alien or different somehow, such as a person from a different social class, race, religion, etc.

Examples: *The Prince and the Pauper* by Twain, *The Chosen* by Potok

7. Encountering the Unusual

Unlike the previous, in this category, the “other” is not just a normal human being that the protagonist just hasn’t had a chance to meet yet, but a genuinely other-worldly sort of thing, such as a ghost or a monster.

Other plotlines will work into this, but the key question is how to deal with this strange thing that has suddenly entered our lives.

Examples: “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” by García Márquez, “Enormous Radio” by John Cheever.

8. Issue Stories

Though many stories have issues, “issue stories” are those in which the issue predominates – stories making a point about abortion, religious liberty, political corruption, etc.

Examples: “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” by Ursula LeGuin

9. Man vs. Nature

Stories where humans are pitted against natural forces, be they hurricanes or sharks or cold.

Examples: “To Build a Fire” by London

10. Individual vs. Society

One against many: One person brave enough to stand up against a town’s injustice, or an “outsider” story.

Examples: “The Mysterious Stranger” by Twain, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by W. Irving

11. Faux Essay Story

There are number of fictions in which a writer purports to write an essay, but it is a fiction because the subject of the essay is wholly or partly fictitious.

Examples: “Remembery Fidelman” by Woodie Allen, a comic parody of a eulogy for a great man; “The Approach to Almotasím” by Borges, a book review of a nonexistent book; “The Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade” by Poe, which also fits into “variations”

12. Variations on Existing Plots

Only a separate category because it is so often done and is a certain way to find a topic for a story, this number encompasses all those stories which are conscious attempts to retell, change, or parody stories already published or well known.

Examples: “The Real Story of the Three Little Pigs” by A. Wolf, a well known “children’s” book where the wolf gets to tell his side of the story; “West Side Story”, a conscious reworking of *Romeo and Juliet*, which of course was also borrowed from earlier sources