

The Shapes of Stories

by Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut gained worldwide fame and adoration through the publication of his novels, including *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat's Cradle*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and more.

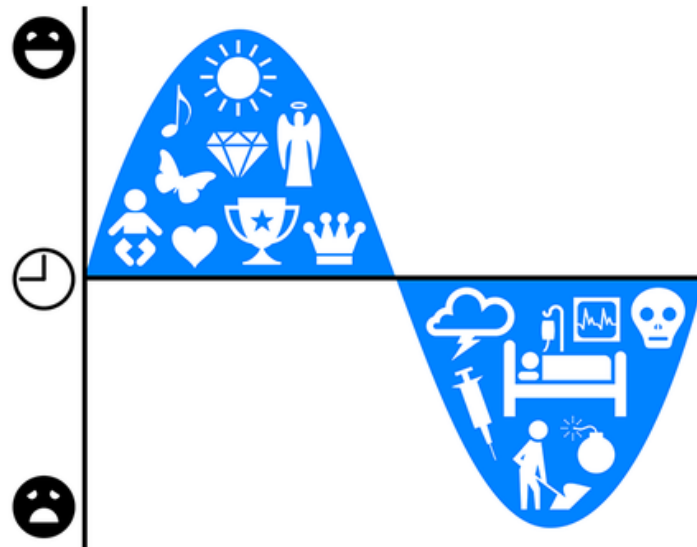
But it was his rejected master's thesis in anthropology that he called his prettiest contribution to his culture.

The basic idea of his thesis was that a story's main character has ups and downs that can be graphed to reveal the story's shape.

The shape of a society's stories, he said, is at least as interesting as the shape of its pots or spearheads. Let's have a look.

Designer: Maya Eilam, www.mayaeilam.com



Sources: *A Man without a Country* and *Palm Sunday* by Kurt Vonnegut



Man in Hole





The main character gets into trouble then gets out of it again and ends up better off for the experience.

 *Arsenic and Old Lace*
 *Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle*

Boy Meets Girl





The main character comes across something wonderful, gets it, loses it, then gets it back forever.

 *Jane Eyre*
 *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

From Bad to Worse



The main character starts off poorly then gets continually worse with no hope for improvement.

 *The Metamorphosis*
 *The Twilight Zone*

Which Way Is Up?



The story has a lifelike ambiguity that keeps us from knowing if new developments are good or bad.

 *Hamlet*
 *The Sopranos*

Creation Story



In many cultures' creation stories, humankind receives incremental gifts from a deity. First major staples like the earth and sky, then smaller things like sparrows and cell phones. Not a common shape for Western stories, however.

Old Testament




Humankind receives incremental gifts from a deity, but is suddenly ousted from good standing in a fall of enormous proportions.

 *Great Expectations*

New Testament



Humankind receives incremental gifts from a deity, is suddenly ousted from good standing, but then receives off-the-charts bliss.

 *Great Expectations with Dickens' alternate ending*

Cinderella



It was the similarity between the shapes of Cinderella and the New Testament that thrilled Vonnegut for the first time in 1947 and then over the course of his life as he continued to write essays and give lectures on the shapes of stories.