Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story

John Yorke
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Review By John Fraim

Often, the most interesting, innovative and fresh perspectives on topics come from those who are situated a little distance from the topic. For example, one of the most interesting books on screenwriting does not emerge from another Los Angeles screenwriting guru but rather from a London film director, not from another Los Angeles publisher of screenwriting books but a New York publisher called The Overlook Press.

The book *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story* by Londoner John Yorke sets out to wrap screenplays into a larger narrative context. Yorke certainly has the credentials for this ambitious task. A former head of BBC Drama Production and current Managing Director of Company Pictures in London, he has championed some of the defining works of British television including *Life on Mars*, *The Street*, *Shameless* and *Waterloo Road*. In 2005, he created the BBC Writers Academy and is a Visiting Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Yorke's aim is not to supplant the works of the great dramatists and screenwriting gurus such as McKee, Lagri and Mamet but rather to extend examination of narrative into a historical, psychological and philosophical context. His major method of extending the examination of narrative is to consider it based on a five-act structure rather than the current three-act paradigm.

It is a revolutionary theory because almost all gurus of screenwriting base their systems on the basic three-act structure of Act I (set-up), Act II (confrontation) and Act III (resolution). While many screenwriting gurus suggest various "steps" in story narrative (John Truby has 23 steps, Blake Snyder 15 steps and Chris Vogler 17 steps) they all expand out from three-act structure. Consideration that the main structure of story narrative consists of five-act structure rather than three-act structure offers a huge paradigm shift.

There is a good reason for the three-act paradigm of narrative. Yorke observes the popularity of the three-act structure is closely related to the dialectic method of thesis (Act One), antithesis (Act Two) and synthesis (Act Three). Storytelling, Yorke notes, can be seen as a codification of the method by which we learn about the world expressed in a three-act shape. "The dialectic pattern – thesis, antithesis, synthesis – is at the heart of the way we perceive the world." We cannot accept chaos Yorke says and have to order it. The three-act structure is our way of ordering the chaotic world.

However, Yorke asks, if the three-act form allows us to access the root structure of storytelling, why does so much theater prior to the twentieth century (particularly Shakespeare) use five acts? While tempting to see the five-act form as a historical idiosyncrasy, exploring how it evolved and underlying its structural traits, he feels it reveals itself as something far more important than that. It provides a clue as to how all narrative really works.

Yorke observes that it is important to note that five-act structure isn't really different from three-act structure but rather a detailed refinement of it. "Simply put, five acts are generated by inserting two further act breaks in the second act of the traditional 'Hollywood' paradigm. The first and last acts remain identical in both forms."

The five-act structure offers a tool for analyzing successful films and screenplays of the past. In other words, Yorke argues that the deep structure many classic films can be better understood by viewing them as five acts rather than three acts. As he observes, "Hollywood movies aren't traditionally thought of as five-act pieces, so it's striking how beautifully films built on a three-act template fit the five-act form. Five acts help to illuminate not only how the second act in three-act dramas actually works, but in the process highlight the nature of dramatic structure itself. The mid-point shows us, in combination with the second and fourth act breaks, a very clear shape."

More than a tool for analysis, though, Yorke argues the five-act structure also offers a method for giving screenwriters more control over that constant "antagonist" to all screenwriters: the middle section of screenplays. As Yorke notes, writers who struggle with the Hollywood paradigm often find the five-act shape gives them control over their middle section they otherwise find hard to deliver. It does this, Yorke observes, by imposing a much stronger structure by creating more gripping turning points, increasing narrative tension.

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In building his argument for five-act structure, Yorke brings forth a tremendous amount of supporting evidence in one of the more erudite books ever written on screenwriting. He uses many examples from classic films and television shows and shows how their underlying structure is better elucidated by looking at them through the lens of five-act structure rather than three-act structure. And, the Notes and Bibliography section of his book is one of the largest of any screenwriting book ever published. His "Lightning Guide to Screenwriting Gurus" in Appendix VII shows a clear understanding of structural systems of Hollywood's leading screenwriting gurus.

For screenwriters convinced by Yorke's five-act structure, or at least willing to experiment with it, there is much more to be done than simply dividing narrative into five major pieces. For one thing, they need to give much more importance to the "midpoint" of a narrative (occurring in the third act) than they have done in using a three-act structure. Yorke notes that understanding the true significance of mid-points "unlocks a door, behind which lies the reason stories are the shape they are." Ultimately, the "mid-point" serves as a type of "mirror" inserted into the narrative that reflects the opposite of the first part of the narrative. In effect, the protagonist's character created in the first half of the narrative is "reflected" back through its opposite character in the last half of the narrative.

One of the effects of this opposition is that it enlists audience involvement in creating the story rather than presenting it to them fully formed. A "thesis" is presented and then an "anti-thesis" is presented. It becomes the job of the audience to create a synthesis. Rather than reject this method, Yorke argues that this is exactly what audiences want.

This is born out by the structure behind one of the greatest narrative stories in modern times, HBO's *The Wire* created by David Simon. When pitching *The Wire* to HBO, Simon realized the extraordinary duality inherent in his idea. "Suddenly, the police bureaucracy is amoral, dysfunctional; and criminality, in the form of the drug culture, is just as suddenly a bureaucracy."

It is something that *The Wire* "shows" the audience rather than "tells" them by logical argument by the juxtaposition of the police bureaucracy against the bureaucracy of the drug culture. Simon provides a fascinating elaboration on audience involvement piecing oppositions together noting:

"(A viewer) loves being immersed in a new, confusing and possibly dangerous world that he will never see. He likes not knowing every bit of vernacular or idiom. He likes being trusted to acquire information on his terms, to make connections, to take the journey with only his intelligence to guide him. Most smart people cannot watch most TV, because it has generally been a condescending medium, explaining everything immediately, offering no ambiguities, and using dialogue that simplifies and mitigates against the idiosyncratic ways in which people in different worlds actually communicate."

One is here reminded of Marshall McLuhan's dichotomy of "cool" media requiring participation and "hot" media not requiring participation. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan observes:

"Francis Bacon never tired of contrasting hot and cool prose. Writing in 'methods' or complete packages, he contrasted with writing in aphorisms, or single observations such as 'Revenge is a kind of wild justice. The passive consumer wants packages, but those, he suggested, who are concerned in pursuing knowledge and in seeking causes will resort to aphorisms, just because they are incomplete and require participation in depth."

Similar to the dynamics of a story that asks for reader participation, Yorke does not hand everything to screenwriters on a silver platter. There is still work to do in putting together the pieces he gives us in his book. Similar to what David Simon says about *The Wire*, the reader needs to do some work and take his or her own journey into the "woods" to find the "elixir" offered by Yorke. It will be interesting to see the future reception of Yorke's argument for a five-act structural paradigm. It already had a number of leading British dramatists and screenwriters singing its praises. The response in Hollywood will be interesting to see.