

Second Edition



Ideas for the Animated Short

Finding and Building Stories

Karen Sullivan
Kate Alexander
Aubry Mintz
Ellen Besen



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Aubry Mintz and Ellen Besen**

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Foreword

MEMO

To: Animated Short Film Directors

From: John Tarnoff, former Head of Show Development, DreamWorks Animation; Adjunct Professor and Head of Industry Relations for Carnegie Mellon University's Masters of Entertainment Industry Management graduate program; Strategic Advisor to the ACME Network.

Short films aren't so different from feature films. The rules of storytelling still apply. But the beauty of short films is their ability to distill, in just a few minutes, the essence of an idea, and concentrate that essence in such a way that the audience is moved and stimulated in as strong a fashion as if it had just sat through a full-length feature film.

Animated short films provide even more opportunity to engage the viewer. Animated films are distinguished by the uniqueness of their artwork, and this completely invented and imagined aspect is what sets animated shorts so resolutely apart from live-action shorts. This is your challenge and your opportunity in the realm of animation—a realm where it takes both a graphical, painterly talent (and skill), in addition to a photographic, cinematic, and narrative inspiration. Because an animated film has so many more visual possibilities than a live-action film, the bar is significantly raised for the animation filmmaker to attempt something truly integral and affecting.

What makes for a good idea for a short animated film?

To fulfill their inspiration, the filmmakers have many options to express the one idea. Just as mash-up videos show how it is possible to create different stories, genres, and styles out of existing material, at the concept stage in developing a short, the filmmakers need to balance their inspiration with a format that, to their mind, best expresses the impact they want to make with their film.

This can mean that the film is narrative or non-narrative (poetic), that it draws from a particular artistic style, uses a particular style of animation, mixes up styles and genres to create something unique . . . the possibilities are endless.

While there are rules of good artistic composition, good storytelling, good character development, good visual design, and of all the large and small elements that go into the creation of a film, filmmakers must not get bogged down by too many conventions that can be creatively stifling.

Animated films are *films* first and foremost. Films exist in five dimensions: the two dimensions of line, tone and color, the third dimension of space, the fourth dimension of time, and the fifth dimension of content. It is this fifth dimension that unites and binds the other four and, if successful, touches an audience and resonates with it in a mental, physical, emotional and artistic (some might say "spiritual") way.

How should fledgling filmmakers proceed? Assuming they have learned the basics, and spent time cultivating their eye, their techniques, their tools and most of all, their own creative voice, there are a few guidelines before jumping in. For me, a good film is always an exercise in contrasts and in the unexpected: a conventional story with unconventional characters or situations, or, conversely, an unconventional story with a conventional character. It can be a conventional story with a surprising punch line, or maybe an unconventional, nonlinear story that concludes in a familiar way. The point is to create a particular, definitive and definable dynamic. Perhaps the film displays a specific, evolving color palette as it unfolds, and that palette reflects the precise evolution of the story or characters as they transform over the course of the narrative.

It is the dynamic (or dynamics) that supports the execution of the film and makes it intriguing beyond merely one's inspiration that it "seems like a good idea."

For the two-dimensional elements, there are centuries of artistic references, and a whole world of physical references for artists to create the look of their film. Care should be taken to draw from multiple sources in synthesizing a single vision, and to weigh those sources in comparison with one another. The filmmaker uses references to build the look of their film, and can create sketches or workbooks of ideas based on these references. This visual development phase is key, no matter what the size of the film is, as it must co-exist with the story in a highly compatible way for the film to work. Various design elements assist the filmmaker in creating a visual script for the ultimate look of the film. Set designs, whether in rough line sketches or fully rendered paintings, establish the locations or environments where the film will take place. Color and lighting keys establish the flow of visual elements over the course of the film. Character designs and turnarounds establish the look of the characters, and their visual relationships to one another. While a short animated film is arguably less complex than a full-length feature, because it is short, it is subject to perhaps increased scrutiny or attention as all of its design elements will be so much more important in proportion to the length of the overall film. People will look more closely at a short film, and expect more from it, merely because it is expected or hoped to be a gem.

The third dimension is where animation has branched off into a new realm over the last 20 years, and the medium has never been the same. Whether one is creating a 2D film by hand-drawing, or in the computer in Flash, or creating a 3D CG film, the visualization possibilities of working in 3D have irrevocably changed the way animation is made. Audiences are now so much more attuned to seeing animation in virtual three-dimensional space that their expectations have been altered significantly from a time when everything was basically flat. Even Disney's Multiplane system from the 1950s, where layers of animation elements were photographed in real depth, one behind the other, still created an essentially "proscenium" experience, where the audience was looking at a stage-like environment and action was taking place largely in a horizontal, right-to-left-to-right space. In addition to allowing shapes to have a greater sense of weight and dimensionality, 3D animation allows the camera to explore and to light these objects and their environments with a much greater degree of variation and movement.

The fourth dimension is the truly cinematic dimension, the dimension of time. No other art form has worked in the fourth dimension in the same way as cinema. From the early revolving zoetropes to today's high frame-rate digital projectors, the element of time, of beginning, middle and end, is the hallmark of this medium. The editor is the high priest of the filmmaking process, taking the raw elements of shots and scenes, and piecing them together so as to create rhythm, pace, and narrative coherency. Indeed, the juxtaposition of images, as the early master directors like D.W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein discovered, is the highest expression of this art form. This juxtaposition of image, and juxtaposition over time, creates emotions, from joy to sadness to suspense and fear. The addition of sound, both music and sound effects, further dimensionalizes the timeline, making the pace seem longer or slower, punctuating the visuals and improving the flow.

The fifth dimension, content, what the film is about and how it unfolds, is the keystone that brings the other dimensions together and gives them life. Without a compelling visual or dramatic narrative, the graphical elements are static, the 3D elements are distracting, and the timeline is boring or frenetic.

Every film really needs some form of beginning, middle and end, whether it is a short tone poem or a character-driven narrative.

Key images, “movie moments,” establish the tone or the essence of the film: a great opening shot, signature lighting, a musical theme. This tells us what the film is going to be about, about the world we are about to be immersed in. Remember that you are communicating with your audience. For you to touch them, you’re going to have to make your expression understandable, whether this is through your use of visual language, choice of artistic style, cultural reference, or otherwise. So from the first frames, we the audience need to know where we are and feel like something is happening that is engaging. From there, the filmmaker has to stay “on point.” Everything that follows must serve the purpose of the film. This process of choosing and editing what goes into the film is the most painstaking part of the process and will challenge you to really discover what it is you are actually saying in your film.

Having laid down these ground rules, it is now important to say: Break them! Trust your instincts, trust your experience. Don’t get bogged down by anything that stands in the way of your vision. This is perhaps the most important lesson: Dare to fail, because in your failure is always the seed of your eventual success. Be open to the lessons and dare to try again.

Preface

Karen Sullivan

Many things have changed since we wrote the first edition of this book. Brick and mortar video stores have disappeared. Vimeo, YouTube and film festivals are the dominant distribution points for animated shorts. And the quality and quantity of animated shorts have proliferated and improved.

And as much as things change, they also remain the same. Many of the basics for planning and pre-production are the same. Images may be created traditionally or digitally, but the thought process behind them hasn't changed much. In fact, as we polled readers in preparation for the second edition, many implored us to keep much of the information from the first edition. So we did. We reviewed it and tweaked it to clarify the information and make it more specific to the short format. But there were also some things that were clearly missing.

Readers gave us great feedback. To round out the book, we needed more information on sound design. To this end, Perry La Marca provides an interview on creating music to support narrative; Ginny Kopf provides tips on voice and dialects for animators; and student director George Fleming and student composer Stavros Hoplaros describe their collaboration in creating sound for the in-progress short, *The Hoard*, in our web collection on Working in Collaboration.

In addition, more case studies were requested. Aubry Mintz discusses the preproduction of his in-progress short, *Countin' on Sheep*; Karen Sullivan discusses the preproduction process of *A Good Deed, Indeed*; and Brandon Oldenburg and Adam Volker of Moonbot Studios generously discuss the making of the Academy Award winning short, *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*.

To supplement this, Steve Hickner and Nilah Magruder provide detailed analysis of staging choices.

And finally, more emphasis is placed both on linear and nonlinear structure. The chapter on Building Story is completely revised and additional discussion on nonlinear narrative and nonlinear narrative structure has been provided by Ellen Besen.

The most useful change has been the addition of an accompanying website (www.ideasfortheanimatedshort.com). On the website we have been able to expand our Case Studies. New films have been added. These are featured in a section called Designing for a Skill Set, where examples are given to focus your planning to result in productions that emphasize different jobs in animation and the need to work collaboratively. Here you will find examples and interviews from new graduates who are now working in their desired fields, as well as an interview with Terry Moews from the Disney Associates Program and Bert Poole from DreamWorks on lighting. Kate Alexander has provided a new series of Acting Workshops. And finally, we also were able to archive all of the films and interviews from the first edition.

The goal of the book remains the same: To provide a guide to help you make good stories for the animated short. It is not a "how to book" that will provide a step-by-step process for a successful story. There is no magic formula for story. This book covers the things you need to think about and consider so you will

be able to recognize a good idea, make a good story, produce good designs, make functional storyboards, and productively plan your animated short.

The animated short is one of the most enjoyable forms of entertainment. It doesn't take too long, but it can be as poignant, humorous, and moving as any other form of storytelling. Doing it well constructs meaning and creates memories.

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Bee Sting

Demetri Martin

Maureen

I was in the park, having a picnic with some friends. All of a sudden, a bee started to circle around my head. Then the bee attacked me. I calmly attempted to shoo it away, but it would not leave me alone. Then it became even more aggressive. I then tried to move away, but the agitated bee followed me. Hoping to stop its assault, I attempted to gently swat it away with a magazine. I missed, and, sure enough, the bee stung me. I'd never been stung by a bee before. It hurt, but I did my best to grin and bear it. I put some ointment on the bee sting, and after that I felt fine.

Brenda (Maureen's Friend)

I was on the phone when Maureen got stung by the bee. I felt bad for her. But I think she overreacted a little bit if you ask me, especially when she started to scream and wildly swing her arms around. It was really pretty embarrassing.

Bee

I was in the middle of another busy workday, flying my usual route. I was on my way back to the hive, minding my own business, when an enormous, fleshy monster began to scream, and then it spastically lunged at me. At first I thought I might have flown into the middle of a medical emergency or some sort of tribal dance that the monster was performing. But then it quickly became clear that the monster was trying to kill me. I turned around and started to fly away. But the monster became even more enraged and began to chase me. I could not escape it. I flew faster, but the wailing beast pursued me and kept swinging its rolled-up paper weapon at me. As much as I didn't want to, I had no choice but to sting the monster. It was the only thing I could do to stop it from following me home and threatening the wellbeing of the hive or worse, the safety of my family. I hoped that if I stung the monster I could thwart its assault enough to save my kids. I knew that I would die soon after administering the sting, but I really had no other option. What a tragedy it is to be forced by a senseless, hysterical beast to take one's own life.

Magazine

I'm not sure what happened. I was being held and slowly read by some woman when all of a sudden she rolled me up and started to choke me and violently whip me around. After having my face smashed into the arm of a lawn chair a couple times and then into the surface of a picnic table, I was tossed to the ground. It was a terrible and demeaning experience that I'll never forget.

Lawn Chair

I don't know what his problem was, but the magazine I was hanging out with abruptly got up and smacked me twice for no reason.

Brenda's Phone

Brenda was talking into me when the incident happened. I didn't get to see or hear anything because Brenda is such a loud and obnoxious phone talker. Whenever she uses me it's like I'm cut off from the world. If I had enough power in my lithium battery to electrocute her face, I would. Seriously, I would do it. She is that annoying.

Lithium Battery

I second that.

Ointment

I am effective at temporarily relieving pain and itching associated with insect bites, minor burns, sunburn, minor skin irritations, scrapes, and rashes due to poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac.

Squirrel in Nearby Tree

I am still too upset to talk about what happened. I was good friends with Chris. I can't believe what that woman did to him. He was a hardworking, God-fearing bee, who had a family and a good job. What that woman had against him, I'll never know. To tell you the truth I don't even think she knew him. What a bitch. I'm going to find out where she lives, go to her yard, and act crazy on her fence.

Tree

No comment.

God

Forcing a bee to commit suicide is one of my biggest pet peeves. This is not good for this Maureen person.

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Why Do We Tell Stories?

The purpose of Demetri Martin's *Bee Sting* is **to entertain**. It takes the simple act of swatting a bee away and escalates that action into a situation where nothing less than life, death and eternal salvation are at stake.

In this story Maureen **relates** what would be the **ordinary situation** for most of us. But then the other characters are allowed to **share their experiences**. We get to **see the situation through their eyes**. We learn that Maureen's friend Brenda is not really such a good friend. And because of this we **create sympathy** for Maureen. The bee's experience explains to us that a bee only stings as a last resort—to save his family—to preserve his species. It **tells us things we didn't know**. The ointment **delivers facts**. The squirrel expresses the loss of the bee and helps us to **process the problem**. And God's perspective helps us to **understand the consequences of** Maureen's actions. The next time we are tempted to swat a bee, we might pause and not even do it. If this happens then we have **learned something** about the act of killing bees. And if enough people read this story and learn the same thing we could create **a tradition** of celebrating the bee. Stories become a map for living.

There are many reasons to tell stories, but all of them have one purpose: to show us something about ourselves. Stories are about people.

Chapter 1

Story Background and Theory

We live in story all of the time. We all have stories to tell every day. But telling our personal stories to each other and constructing a story from scratch are two very different things. Usually when we tell stories on a daily basis, we are relating events to one or two other people. When constructing story, we are trying to communicate with a mass audience. When we tell stories to a friend it is because it is important to us or to them. When we construct story, we are moving not just an individual, but an audience. The goal then becomes to make the personal universal.

Before we can begin, we need to understand the background of story and how that background lays the foundation for what we want to make: a story for an animated short film.

WHAT IS A STORY?

Screenwriter Karl Iglesias has a very simple definition of story: "A story has someone who wants something badly and is having trouble getting it."¹

This definition determines the three base elements necessary for a story: character, character goal, and conflict. Without these elements, story cannot exist.

1. *Character*. This is whom the story is about and through whose eyes the story is told.
2. *Goal*. This is what the character wants to obtain: the princess, the treasure, the recognition, and so on.
3. *Conflict*. Conflict is what is between the character and his goal. There are three forms of conflict:
 - Character vs. Character
 - Character vs. Environment
 - Character vs. Self

Conflicts create problems, obstacles, and dilemmas that place the character in some form of jeopardy, either physically, mentally, or spiritually. This means that there will be something at stake for the character if they do not overcome the conflict.

The other elements of story include:

- *Location*. This is the place, time period, or atmosphere that supports the story.
- *Inciting Moment*. In every story, the world of the character is normal until something unexpected happens to start the story.
- *Story Question*. The inciting moment will set up questions in the mind of the audience that must be answered by the end of the story.
- *Theme*. Themes are life lessons. Stories have meanings. A theme is the deeper meaning that a

story communicates. Common themes include: be true to yourself; never leave a friend behind; man prevails against nature; and love conquers all.

- *Need.* In story there will be what a character *wants*—his goal. Then there will be what the character needs to learn or discover to achieve his goal.
- *Arc.* When a character learns there will be what is called an emotional arc or change in the character as the character moves from what he wants to what he needs.
- *Ending/Resolution.* The ending is what must be given to the viewer to bring emotional relief and answer all of the questions of the story. The ending must transform the audience or the character.

WHY DO ALL STORIES SEEM THE SAME?

With so many different story elements and seemingly infinite ways to combine them, why do all stories seem familiar? Nearly every story told follows the same structure and formula with similar characters, themes, and conflicts.

The Universal Story

From the turn of the nineteenth century on, there are documented discussions between writers and theorists who noticed that the similarities in story went beyond specific regions, cultures and time periods.² Some of them theorized that this was because mankind had similar natural phenomena that needed to be explained. This might be the reason for similarities in theme, but didn't explain the similarities in story and plot.

All of these stories followed a three-act structure that Aristotle, nearly 2,300 years ago, called plot. Plot is the sequence of events and the emotions necessary to move the audience through the story. In the first act, pity and empathy must be established for the hero so that the audience cares about him and will engage in his pursuit. The second act is the scene of suffering and challenge, creating fear and tension surrounding the hero and his challenges. In the final act, fear and tension are released by catharsis, the emotional release that allows for closure to end the story.³

In the twentieth century, Joseph Campbell, an American mythology professor, writer and orator, found that there were universal images and characters in *one* story shared by all cultures over time. Because this story occurred again and again, he called it the monomyth—the one story, the universal story.

The monomyth is appropriately called the *Hero's Journey*. Campbell's theory has many stages, but they can be summarized as follows:⁴

- *Introduce the Hero.* The hero is the character through whom the story is told. The hero is having an ordinary day.
- *The Hero has a Flaw.* The audience needs to empathize with the hero and engage in his pursuit of success. So the hero is not perfect. He suffers from pride or passion, or an error or impediment that will eventually lead to his downfall or success.
- *Unexpected Event.* Something happens to change the hero's ordinary world.
- *Call to Adventure.* The hero needs to accomplish a goal (save a princess, retrieve a treasure, and so forth). Often the hero is reluctant to answer the call. It is here that he meets with mentors, friends, and allies who encourage him.
- *The Quest.* The hero leaves his world in pursuit of the goal. He faces tests, trials, temptations, enemies, and challenges until he achieves his goal.
- *The Return.* The hero returns expecting rewards.

- *The Crisis*. Something is wrong. The hero is at his lowest moment.
- *The Showdown*. The hero must face one last challenge, usually of life and death against his greatest foe. He must use all that he has learned on his quest to succeed.
- *The Resolution*. In movies this is usually a happy ending. The hero succeeds and we all celebrate.

Example:

Table 1.1 Feature Film Plots Against the Hero’s Journey

	Shrek	Mulan	The Incredibles	Howl’s Moving Castle	Rango
Introduce the Hero	Shrek is an ogre who lives in a swamp and just wants to be left alone.	Mulan is the only child of the honored Chinese family, Fa.	Former Superhero, Mr. Incredible—now Bob Parr—is stuck in a dead-end job where he tries to help people, be a good dad and fit into “normal” society.	Sophie is a girl who lives in a magical land. At a parade she is accosted by soldiers and saved by a wizard. Her friend warns, “Wizards steal the hearts of beautiful girls.”	A chameleon lives in an aquarium. He has a large imagination, loves theater and is the hero in his own imaginary life.
Hero has a Weakness	Shrek is an ogre.	She’s a girl. She is smart, headstrong and loud. This is not a good combination for an honorable Chinese female.	Bob wants to fight crime—and lies about it to do so. Bigger problem: He likes to work alone.	Sophie doesn’t see herself as beautiful. There are esteem issues.	He has no real identity.
Unexpected Event	Shrek’s swamp is invaded by fairy tale characters displaced by Lord Farquaad. Shrek wants his swamp back. Donkey knows where Farquaad lives. Shrek is forced to go with Donkey.	Mulan’s weakened father, Fa-Zhou, is called to join the army and fight the Huns.	Mr. Incredible gets a secret message calling for his services to defeat a government robot gone haywire.	The Witch of the Waste visits Sophie’s hat shop after hours. When Sophie won’t help her, she turns Sophie into an old hag.	The aquarium is in the back of the family car. The brakes are hit and he flies out onto the pavement and into real life. Uh oh.
Call to Adventure	Farquaad gives Shrek a choice: Rescue the princess or die. Well, OK. Shrek goes to rescue the princess, but only after Farquaad promises to give him his swamp back if he does.	Knowing her father would never survive, Mulan disguises herself as a man and joins the army.	Bob takes the bait. Come on, Bob—her name is MIRAGE. He answers the call, defeats the robot, and accepts a new job—all while deceiving his family.	Unable to tell anyone she is cursed, Sophie leaves to find a way to remove it. She meets a scarecrow who gets her a job in Howl’s moving castle. There she cuts a deal with a cursed fire: I’ll free you if you free me.	He ends up in a town called Dirt, proclaims himself to be a gunslinger, Rango, kills a hawk. Mayor makes him sheriff and he loses the water supply to gophers.

Table 1.1 Continued

	Shrek	Mulan	The Incredibles	Howl's Moving Castle	Rango
The Quest	Ogres are like onions. Shrek makes friends with Donkey, crosses rickety bridges above lava, fights a fire-breathing dragon, and rescues the princess.	With the help of a dragon and a lucky cricket, Mulan learns skills to fight the Huns under the leadership of Shang, her captain.	Fighting robots is a trap set by his rejected wanna-be side-kick Syndrome. Mr. Incredible's family finds out and sets out to retrieve him.	Sophie learns Howl is a mess because he has no heart, using his powers for selfish reasons that will destroy him. He keeps turning into a bird and flying away. And there is a war going on that depends on Howl.	If you control the water, you control everything. Rango forms a posse, promises the town that he will bring back the water.
The Return	Shrek has to persuade the princess to go to Duloc, fight Robin Hood, play with spider web balloons, and find a place to sleep because the difficult princess insists and fall in love over grilled rat.	The Huns attack. Mulan starts an avalanche, defeats the Huns, saves Shang, but gets wounded. Mulan is discovered to be a girl.	Syndrome sends a robot that only he can control to the city, defeats it and becomes the greatest superhero of all. He must be stopped.	Howl's hair is a different color. Can't go on if he's not beautiful. Sophie screams she's never been beautiful. Everyone's ugly and they get weaker and uglier.	Rango and the posse return with nothing. Rango accuses the Mayor of taking the water but a rattlesnake, Jake, reveals that Rango is a fake.
The Crisis	Fiona, the princess, is about to marry Farquaad. Shrek has his swamp back, but is miserable. Donkey tells him to go tell Fiona he loves her before it is too late.	She is outcast. On the way home she discovers the Huns are going to attack the Emperor's city. She hurries but no one will believe her.	But, Mr. Incredible is captured. Believes his family is dead. City is in jeopardy.	Howl flies away from the castle (again). It falls apart. Howl is dying. Sophie is desperate.	Rango leaves the town in shame. He believes he is nothing and tries to kill himself crossing the road but no man can walk out on his own story.
The Showdown	Shrek rides the dragon to Duloc, stops the wedding, confronts Farquaad, and tells Fiona he loves her.	Huns kidnap the Emperor. Mulan defeats the Huns. Emperor offers her honor and a job. She just wants to go home. Shang still won't have anything to do with her.	Family isn't dead. They save him. Follow Syndrome to the city. Mr. Incredible wants to take on Syndrome alone. Learns he needs his family. He can't work alone.	The Witch of the Waste has Howl's heart. Sophie asks her for it. She gives it up. Sophie puts Howl's heart back.	Rango finds the source of the water and returns to town. Rango calls out Jake and brings back the water—but the Mayor has Beans.

	Shrek	Mulan	The Incredibles	Howl's Moving Castle	Rango
Happy Ending	Fiona loves Shrek too. She turns into an ogre, Shrek gets his swamp back, Farquaad is eaten by the dragon, the dragon and Donkey fall in love. We all celebrate.	Emperor gives Shang a good talking to. He goes after Mulan. Mulan's father is proud. She has honor and she gets the guy. We celebrate.	They save the city but Syndrome has Jack-Jack, their son. Jack-Jack can hold his own. Syndrome is defeated and the family is a happy unit.	Howl is fine. Loves Sophie. Sophie thinks she's beautiful. The fire is free, but chooses to stay. The scarecrow is a prince who can end the war. True love transforms everything.	With one shot—Rango saves himself and Beans. The Mayor is washed away. Jake and Rango become legends. Rango gets the girl. Water is restored. The town celebrates.

Disney films have driven home the opportunity of the individual to succeed, and above all, it is personal success that we celebrate. In Disney films there is a clear hero who fights a clear villain. Nearly all of the classic Disney movies are excellent case studies of the hero's Journey.

On the other hand, Pixar films follow every aspect of the structure except that of the hero. If we define a hero simply as the eyes through which the story is told, then Pixar, too, more or less fits the formula. If we define the hero as the one who succeeds and whose success we celebrate then this changes the dynamics when we look at a Pixar film.

In Pixar films, from *A Bug's Life* on, the role of hero is more often played as if it were a baton passed among characters.⁵ For example, in *Finding Nemo*, it is Marlin's quest to find Nemo. But Marlin fails. He begins to return home without his son. It is Nemo who brings himself home and it is Dory's role to reunite Nemo with his dad. At different times, Gill is the hero and Dory is the hero.

Miyazaki also orders the events in a classic structure. However, in most of his stories, the identification of good and evil is not clear. For Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli, evil, if it can be called that, is that which dwells within us. His stories have conflict that is often more internalized. Success comes through personal resurrection. Through the character's personal transformation, the peace in society is restored.

Character Archetypes

In movies there are definite character roles that appear repeatedly in all of the stories. These roles come from character archetypes. An archetype is a pervasive idea or image that serves as an original model from which copies are made. For our purposes, this means that there are baseline character traits that any surface or costuming can be placed upon. The hero is a baseline that can be an obvious superhero (Mr. Incredible); or a more subtle hero (an ogre, Shrek; a girl, Mulan; a woolly mammoth, Manfred); or a character that grows into a hero (an iron giant; a boy, Hiccup; a lizard, Rango, and so on).

The term first comes from Carl Jung, a twentieth-century psychoanalyst who studied dreams and the unconscious. Jung found that there were recurring images and themes running through the dreams of his patients that were so similar that they could not come from individual conflicts. He believed that these images originated in the collective unconscious of all men. And he called these images *archetypes*.

Jung's four archetypes, attributes common in everyone, are: the female, the great mother; the male, the eternal child; the self, a hero, wise old man; and the shadow, which might be a trickster, and so forth. They were the different ways in which the individual would see themselves. And these formed the basis for the stories that his patients would tell.

In the stories of feature films we find the same thing. There are archetypes that form the basis of nearly all characters we watch. Chris Vogler, in his book *The Writer's Journey*, identifies seven archetypal characters found in most feature films:

1) The Hero—the character through which the story is told.



2) The Mentor—the ally that helps the hero.



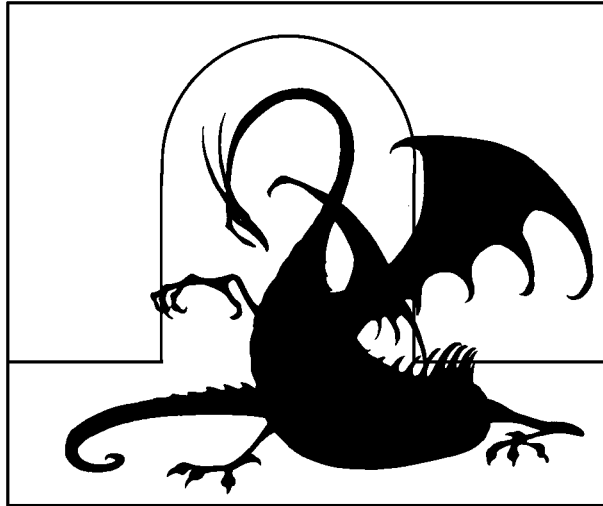
- 3) The Herald—this character announces the “Call to Adventure” and delivers other important information. This role sometimes shifts from character to character.



- 4) The Shadow—this is the villain or major protagonist. Sometimes, as in Miyazaki’s films, the shadow resides in the character himself.



- 5) The Threshold Guardian—this is a character, passageway or guardian that the hero must get past to proceed on the quest, or to retrieve the object of the quest.



- 6) The Trickster—this character is usually the comic relief. He sometimes leads the hero off track or away from the goal.



7) The Shapeshifter—this character is not who he appears or who he presents himself to be.⁶



Archetype Silhouettes by Gary Schumer, Ringling College of Art and Design

In Table 1.2 we can see how these characters manifest themselves in selected movies. Sometimes more than one role is fulfilled by the same character.

Table 1.2 Character Archetypes in Feature Films

	Shrek	Mulan	The Incredibles	Howl's Moving Castle	Rango
The Hero	Shrek	Mulan	Bob Parr, Mr. Incredible	Sophie	Rango
The Mentor/ Friend	Donkey	Mushu	Elastigirl	The Boy, Markl Calcifer	Beans
The Herald	Farquaad's soldier, the mirror on the wall, Gingerbread Man	The Ancestors	Mirage	The Scarecrow	The Owl, Mariachi Band, The Armadillo, Roadkill, The Spirit of the West
The Shadow	Farquaad	The Huns	Syndrome	Howl	Mayor
The Threshold Guardian	Dragon	Shang	Robot	Witch of the Waste	The Highway
The Trickster	Donkey	Army buddies, Mushu	Kids: Dash, Violet, Jack-Jack	Calcifer Madam Suliman	The town
The Shapeshifter	Fiona	Mulan	This is a story about superheroes—everyone changes form!	Sophie, Howl, the Scarecrow	Rango

It is important to note that an archetype is not a stereotype. A stereotype is a simplified generalization about a specific group. For example: All elderly people are forgetful; all Asians have high IQs; all French are romantic; all African-Americans can dance; etc.

An archetype, on the other hand, is a character attribute that can manifest itself in any human (or in animation, nonhuman) body and that is a recognizable icon by the audience. For example, in *Iron Giant*, the giant is the child that has to be taught. In *Ice Age*, Manfred becomes the great mother—of both the Indian child and the “herd.”

Universal Conflicts

Conflict is the situation or problem in the way of the character’s goal. It is a dilemma that creates tension for the character. It is something that puts the character in jeopardy.

With all the infinite problems and predicaments that face mankind, you would think that the expressions of conflict would be infinite. But again, we find recurring motifs of conflict. In fact, these motifs occur so often that instead of recognizing these as forms of conflict, we categorize them into types of stories:

- *Brains vs. Brawn*. Pitting intelligence against strength.
- *Rags to Riches*. Personal struggle for achievement.
- *Good vs. Evil*. Equal forces against each other.
- *Role Reversals*. Allow us to see through the eyes of the “other” and experience how others live.
- *Courage and Survival*. This conflict is usually environmental. There is a disaster or disease that must be overcome.
- *Peacemakers*. Underdog stories where the “good” are those who protect the weak or stand up for what is right.
- *Tempting Fate*. The conflict arises when the hero goes against the established order (the law, God, nature), sometimes for the greater good, but more often for personal gain.
- *Fish Out of Water*. A character/characters are transported to a different time or place where they must learn how to survive.
- *Ship of Fools*. Several well-defined, but different characters must navigate an adventure together.
- *Buddy Stories*. Focus on the strengths and contrasts of the characters to overcome adversity and become friends.
- *Love Stories*. Study of romantic relationships that focuses on the trials that bring two people together or tear them apart.
- *Quests and Journeys*. In these stories, a hero traverses space and/or time to retrieve an object or person only to find himself changed.⁷

Often, in feature films, there will be one conflict motif that is the main conflict or problem. Then there may be secondary motifs that emerge in the subplots.

Universal Themes

Conflicts are not themes. Stories have meanings. They are not just a series of events. They communicate something to us that is larger than the story itself. The meaning or dominant idea of the story is called the *theme*.