

## What narrative is and why we like it...

**Narrative** is simply the technical word for 'a told story' (either real or imaginary). Stories are the way we most enjoy hearing and learning about the complex events in the world. Certainly no one can deny that:

- We enjoy **telling** of events we have experienced or have imagined in the form of a story;
- And we enjoy **hearing** of events others have experienced or imagined in the form of a story.

We like to tell and hear stories because:

- they engage us
- they involve us - we can usually relate to one or more characters within them.
- they allow us the pleasure of learning something new
- they allow us to simplify complex aspects of life by making an outcome appear to be the result of a series of "cause and effect" events
- they allow us the pleasure of predicting outcomes (what will happen next...)
- we enjoy being entertained
- they fascinate us

Why they do this is in the realm of psychology, but some reasons seem clear:

- *From childhood, stories have been the best way we have of being able to shape and make sense of experience and the world: a world that (at least to a child) is disordered and potentially hostile.*
- *We enjoy the predictable (and seemingly 'natural' or obvious) chronological and 'cause and effect' coherent structure of narratives.*
- *We enjoy the unified focus a story has on a single idea or event (their 'controlling idea').*
- *We enjoy identifying with a hero who always succeeds in overcoming problems.*
- *We enjoy the finality of a clear-cut ending with all loose ends tied up.*
- *Hearing about how people overcome problems is one way of safely learning about the world.*
- *We can 'experience' new things in a safe and predictable way, i.e. in vicarious ways that are 'once removed' or 'second hand');*
- *We enjoy the emotion that stories offer us: being involved, concerned and having a sense of expectation.*

A narrative is a **simplified representation of a real** (or imagined) **event** told to make the event more **interesting, realistic and, often - very oddly - more believable**. But narratives are made to be far more **economical and coherent** than reality can ever offer:

- **economical** because we only want to hear about details that seem to lead to a final outcome;
- **coherent** because we want to believe that outcomes are the result of a sequence of connected events (i.e. the result of 'cause and effect'); We like to hear narratives in a particular order (beginning - setting and characters in a state of 'equilibrium'; conflict that disturbs the main character's equilibrium; development as the main character faces up to these disturbances; climax as the disturbance reaches a peak; resolution as the main character overcomes, in some way, the disturbance; renewal of equilibrium
- **realistic** because we like to hear stories we can relate to (i.e. believe that we can become a 'part of').

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## To summarise

Narratives interest us because:

- we seem unable to stop believing in the idea of a 'hero' (i.e. 'good') overcoming a 'villain' (i.e. 'evil');
- we seem to want to think that results always arise from a series of previously connected events;
- we enjoyed hearing them as a child and love the comfort they bring even as adults;
- narratives provide a picture of a safe world in which problems are always resolved in a satisfying way;
- they provide us as children with a way of 'ordering' and 'making sense of' the world, thus giving us a sense of control and safety by providing a framework in which world events can be made to seem connected and (because of genre expectations) to some degree, predictable (quite unlike the real world where for much of the time, events are often quite random and beyond our control).

- Narratives **reduce** reality to a single point of view and to a series of connected events - both chosen by the narrator.
- Narratives are often more interesting than reality and seduce us into thinking they are a truthful representation of reality.