The sympathetic plot
Identifying and explaining a narrative universal

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Abstract

For over a century, scholars have compared stories and proposed universal narrative patterns. Despite their diversity, nearly all of these projects converged on a common structure: the sympathetic plot. The sympathetic plot describes how a goal-directed protagonist confronts obstacles, overcomes them, and wins rewards. Stories with these features frequently exhibit other common elements, including an adventure and an orphaned main character. Here, I identify and aim to explain the sympathetic plot. I argue that the sympathetic plot is a technology for entertainment that works by engaging two sets of psychological mechanisms. First, it triggers mechanisms for learning about obstacles and how to overcome them. It builds interest by confronting a protagonist with a problem and induces satisfaction when the problem is solved. Second, it evokes sympathetic joy. It establishes the protagonist as an ideal cooperative partner pursuing a justifiable goal, convincing audiences that they should assist the character. When the protagonist succeeds, they receive rewards, and audiences feel sympathetic joy, an emotion normally triggered when cooperative partners triumph. The psychological capacities underlying the sympathetic plot are not story-specific adaptations. Instead, they evolved for purposes like learning and cooperation before being co-opted for entertainment by storytellers and cultural evolution.
The sympathetic plot

Once upon a time, a strong, attractive hero lost one or both of his parents. He then overcame a series of obstacles and faced off against a monster that had terrorized his community. The hero vanquished the monster and was celebrated.

This is the story of Harry Potter, Superman, James Bond, Luke Skywalker, and The Lion King’s Simba. It’s the story of the Sotho hero Litaolane (Lesotho: Casalis 1861:347-350), the Garo hero Jereng (India: Rongmuthu 1960), the Ainu mythological hero Yayresu:po (Northeast Asia: Ohnuki-Tierney 1974), and the heroic twins Kototabe and Kelokelo of New Guinean folklore (Ker 1910:61-63). If the hero is a youngest-born sibling rather than an orphan, this becomes the story of the ancient Greek god Zeus (in his confrontation with Kronos: Hard 2004:67-69), the ancient Chinese heroine Li Chi (Kao 1985:105-106), and the princely main character of the Serbian tale Baš Čelik (Petrovitch 1915:247-267).

Here’s another story:

Once upon a time, a poor girl lived with her abusive stepsiblings or stepparents. She embarked on a journey, received gifts from a big-hearted helper, and eventually escaped her destitution. Her terrorizers, jealous of her success, were punished.

This is the story of Cinderella (Perrault 1697). Similar tales have been told across Europe (Cox 1893), as well as in Burma (Lwin 2010:39-42), Hausaland (West Africa: Alidou 2002), Japan (Whitehouse 1935), and the Malay world (Donaldson 2014), among many other places (Dundes 1982). If the story features a little boy rather than a little girl, this becomes the Himalayan “Story of the Black Cow” (Dracott 1906:83-87); if the heroine is tormented by older blood-siblings rather than step-siblings, this becomes the tale of the girl with a marred face, told by peoples throughout northeastern North America (e.g., Mi’kmaq: Olcott 1917:17-22; Algonquian: Rafe 1992; Ojibwe: San Souci 1994).

The orphaned monster-slayer and the Cinderella story are both examples of what I term the sympathetic plot.¹ The sympathetic plot is a ubiquitous and popular narrative structure defined here on the basis of five core features:

1. A protagonist, sometimes referred to as a hero or heroine, has a goal.
2. The protagonist’s goal is relatable or justifiable, like marrying a prince, escaping poverty, killing a monster, or procuring a magical item.

¹ In this paper, I refer to the sympathetic plot, sympathetic joy, and sympathetic characters. By sympathetic plot, I mean stories featuring a goal-directed protagonist who confronts an obstacle, overcomes it, and reaps rewards. By sympathetic joy, I mean the pleasure we experience at another person’s good fortune. By sympathetic characters, I mean characters whom audiences like, feel for, and want to help. I use sympathetic in all three contexts partly because of precedent (at least for joy and character) and partly because theoretical reasons justify a common term. As I argue, the sympathetic plot seems designed to engender audience sympathy towards protagonists (i.e., audiences feel for protagonists and want to help them; see Table 1 in Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas 2010 for definitions of sympathy). When the character succeeds, audiences experience sympathetic joy.
3. The protagonist confronts an obstacle in pursuit of their goal, sometimes in the form of mean opponents.
4. The protagonist prevails. This might be due to their own virtue or outside assistance.
5. The protagonist reaps rewards. These can include wealth, power, an attractive spouse, new parents who are loving and kind, or a boon that they bestow on humanity.

Stories with these core features, referred to here as sympathetic tales, frequently exhibit at least six secondary features. These elements do not appear in all sympathetic tales, but they are common:

6. The protagonist is appealing. They might be strong, clever, attractive, generous, humble, skillful, or considerate.
7. The protagonist is alone and suffers early misfortunes. They might be orphaned, abandoned, or the child of poor rural-folk.
8. The protagonist is high-status, or at least tied to high-status individuals. They might be orphaned but then adopted by royalty. They might be abandoned but also the offspring of deities. They might be the child of poor rural-folk but known throughout the land because of prophecies about them.
9. The protagonist journeys to distant places to achieve their goals. On the way, they encounter foreign and fantastical obstacles.
10. The protagonist’s opponents are repulsive and formidable. They might be dragons, callous step-sisters, or pompous rival princes.
11. Characters who oppose the protagonist eventually suffer or are reformed.

The sympathetic plot has been recognized by folklorists and mythologists for the last 150 years, although nearly all comparative scholars organized these basic features within more elaborate narrative templates. Von Hahn (1876), Rank (1914), and Raglan (1936) documented the sympathetic plot in their studies of mythical heroes from Europe, West Asia, and the Middle East (see also Cook 1965). Propp (1968:50, 92) uncovered it in his study of Russian folktales. Thompson (1946:23) saw it in complex Eurasian fairy tales, while Kimball (1999) described it in her cross-cultural study of orphan tales. When Jobling (2001) compared hero-ogre stories from around the world, he focused on elements such as the virtuousness of heroes and the repulsiveness of monsters, but underlying these parallels was the sympathetic structure.

Perhaps the best known hypotheses of universal narrative structure are those by Campbell (1949), Booker (2004), and Hogan (2003; 2011). All three provide further evidence for the sympathetic plot’s ubiquity. Citing fragments of myths and performances, Campbell (1949) claimed that stories everywhere recount adventurous rites of passage. His template was complex, involving 17 events organized into three main stages (departure, initiation, and return), but he summarized the basic pattern as follows:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Campbell 1949:30)
Starring a protagonist who overcomes obstacles, achieves a goal, and enjoys rewards, Campbell’s hero’s journey is a version of the sympathetic plot.2

Booker (2004) reviewed 450 (mostly European and American) stories, spanning films, plays, novels, novellas, ancient epics, and fairy tales. He then organized those stories into seven plots: (1) Overcoming the Monster; (2) Rags to Riches; (3) The Quest; (4) Voyage and Return; (5) Comedy (defined broadly to include many romantic stories); (6) Tragedy; and (7) Rebirth. Table 1 presents short descriptions of the seven plots with some of Booker’s examples.

**Table 1. Booker’s (2004) seven basic plots: With the exception of the Tragedy, all are examples of the sympathetic plot**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples (from Booker 2004)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Overcoming the Monster</td>
<td>A monster threatens a community. The protagonist destroys it.</td>
<td>Dracula (Irish novel; 1897)</td>
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<td>Dr. No (English film; 1962)</td>
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<td>Star Wars (American film; 1977)</td>
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<td>The Magnificent Seven (American film; 1960)</td>
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<td>Theseus and the Minotaur (Ancient Greek myth)</td>
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<td>2. Rags to Riches</td>
<td>The protagonist lives in lowly circumstances. They undergo a transformation and emerge in dazzling splendor.</td>
<td>Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp (Middle Eastern folktale)</td>
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<td>Cinderella (widespread folktale)</td>
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<td>David Copperfield (English novel; 1850)</td>
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<td>The Gold Rush (American film; 1921)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>The Ugly Duckling (Danish fairy tale; 1843)</td>
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<td>3. The Quest</td>
<td>The protagonist learns of a priceless object far away. They set out on a journey, encounter perils, and secure the prize.</td>
<td>Aeneid (Roman poem; 19 BC)</td>
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<td>Lord of the Rings (English novel; 1955)</td>
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<td>Prince Ivan, the Firebird, and the Gray Wolf (Russian folktale)</td>
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<td>Raiders of the Lost Ark (American film; 1981)</td>
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<td>Watership Down (English novel; 1972)</td>
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<td>4. Voyage and Return</td>
<td>The protagonist travels to a foreign world. The strangeness is appealing, but eventually it turns</td>
<td>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (English novel; 1865)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Goldilocks and the Three Bears (English fairy tale; 1837)</td>
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2 Screenwriting guides outlining effective stories have reshaped Campbell’s plot (Vogler 2007; Klick 2013; Yorke 2014). They purge the hero’s journey of most of its 17 sections and often incorporate both an external goal and an internal flaw that needs to be overcome. At their simplest, however, these stories are sympathetic tales — Klick (2013) even suggested that screenwriters use an orphaned protagonist.
threatening. The protagonist escapes.

5. Comedy
People (including one or more protagonists) are separated from each other by confusion or illusions. It dissipates and they are brought together.

(The Comedy includes many romantic stories.)

6. Tragedy
The protagonist pursues a forbidden course of action. They enjoy fleeting success but eventually suffer disastrous consequences.

7. Rebirth
A good character is trapped under a dark spell. Another character saves them. (Either can be the protagonist.)

Six of Booker’s plots — that is, all of them except the Tragedy — are sympathetic plots. They tell of goal-directed protagonists who confront obstacles, overcome them, and enjoy prizes. In fact, they differ almost solely on what the protagonist’s goal is, whether it be destroying a monster, overcoming hardship, procuring a priceless object, returning home, finding love, or escaping a dark spell. Booker’s plots also exhibit many of secondary features listed above. Some protagonists start out in distressing circumstances, some are honorable and strong, some face off against terrible opponents, and some go off on far-away journeys.

Finally, there are the patterns proposed by Hogan (2003). Hogan read pre-colonial literature from every inhabited continent and suggested three narrative universals: romantic, heroic, and sacrificial. Romantic and heroic works are often sympathetic tales. In romantic works, two people fall in love, although forces prevent their union. Eventually, they are united. In heroic works, a legitimate leader’s position is usurped. The usurped leader vanquishes an out-group enemy, re-establishing their authority. Hogan crucially pointed out that both plots can be truncated before they resolve, turning them into tragedies and thus violating the sympathetic structure.

Hogan’s (2003) third narrative universal is less clearly an example of the sympathetic plot. In sacrificial works — “perhaps the least obviously prototypical” (Hogan 2011, p. 133) — a deity punishes a society’s sins, most often with famine. The society responds by sacrificing an innocent person, leading to restoration and even agricultural abundance. Systematic cross-cultural research
will confirm whether sacrificial stories are ubiquitous, although regardless, their existence underscores that sympathetic tales, while ubiquitous, do not exhaustively cover all stories (see also trickster stories and origin myths: Long 2005; Scheub 2007).

Why do people everywhere tell stories with such similar features? Here, I propose an explanation. I argue that the sympathetic plot is a technology for producing pleasure that develops from a cultural selection for entertainment. It works by triggering two sets of psychological mechanisms:

1. It builds interest, narrows attention, and delivers satisfaction. It does this by describing a character trying to solve a problem, exploiting mechanisms for learning about obstacles and how to overcome them.
2. It evokes sympathetic joy. It does this by convincing the audience that a protagonist is someone they want to help. The protagonist appears as an ideal cooperative partner – competent, warm, in need, and available – and they pursue a daunting goal. When they succeed, they receive rewards, and the audience feels sympathetic joy. Sympathetic joy usually occurs when a cooperative partner succeeds, and it likely exists to proximately motivate helping. Given the audience’s attachment to the protagonist, however, the mechanism misfires, and they feel their fictive friend’s fortune.

Of course, this account doesn’t deny that other psychological mechanisms contribute to literary experiences. Stories may draw up old emotions (Hogan 1996). They may engross through dazzling imagery and captivate through sex and coalitional conflict (Nettle 2005; Green and Brock 2000). But these and many other studied mechanisms (e.g., Mar et al. 2011) are unimportant for explaining the recurrence of the sympathetic plot. Instead, I claim, the sympathetic plot recurs because it triggers systems adapted for learning about obstacles and allocating cooperative investment.

**Existing approaches cannot explain the sympathetic plot**

This question of why stories everywhere exhibit common features has long occupied scholars. Some pointed to common cultural ancestry, arguing that regularities resulted from stories diffusing across cultures or similar tales sharing a common progenitor (Thompson 1946; Witzel 2012; Berezkin 2015; Müller 1873; Watkins 1995). Others saw narrative patterns as scripts or accompaniments for ritual (Raglan 1936) or as metaphors for seasonal or daily cycles (Frye 1957).

Many notable writers have connected narrative patterns to human psychology (Lévi-Strauss 1955; Jung 1959; Dundes 1987; Bastian 2005; Hogan 2003). As Witzel (2012:12) recently wrote, “many if not most scholars… assume that similarities found in myths the world over are due to common, universal features of the human mind that forever produce the same images or ‘archetypes’”. Despite this growing consensus, most major theories – and in particular, those explaining the sympathetic plot – hinge on spurious or untested assumptions about the mind (Dutton 2005). Rank (1914) interpreted the heroic legend as expressing sublimated Oedipal urges in an acceptable form. Campbell (1949) saw hero’s journey myths as conveyors of
wisdom, developed over generations, that arouse the psyche and provide understanding. Booker (2004) concluded that his seven basic plots were the unconscious’s way of reaching out to the conscious self and reminding it of how to achieve a full life. The failure to ground these explanations in contemporary cognitive science is striking given progress in the psychological study of story (Bower and Morrow 1990; Oatley 2011; Tan 1996; Zillmann and Vorderer 2000), as well as the emergence of fields like literary Darwinism (Boyd 2009; Carroll 2011; Gottschall and Wilson 2005) and cognitive literary studies (Zunshine 2006; Keen 2007).

An important exception to the disconnect between cognitive science and narrative universals is Hogan’s recent analysis. Across several works (e.g., Hogan 2003, 2011, 2017), Hogan has proposed a set of narrative universals (reviewed above) and applied insights from cognitive science to explain them.

Hogan’s account is based on three premises. First, pursuing a goal is enjoyable. Second, people everywhere share goals, including having sex, achieving in-group prestige, and enjoying food and security. Third, stories produce emotional responses both by activating remembered emotions and through empathy when mentally simulating the story. Thus, he argues, stories in which protagonists pursue basic goals will produce pleasure across diverse audiences. His proposed universals reflect these shared goals. Romantic stories recur because the protagonist pursues sex and affiliation. Heroic stories recur because the protagonist pursues prestige and superiority over out-groups. Sacrifice stories recur because characters pursue food and security. Prototypes are universal, he maintains, because hearing about someone pursuing a familiar desire feels good.

Hogan’s account establishes an ambitious baseline for scholars interested in explaining narrative patterns. Nevertheless, it suffers from at least two limitations. First, it was developed to explain the three universal prototypes he proposed, but as currently formulated, it fails to explain features of the sympathetic plot more generally, such as why protagonists often start out abandoned or why they are connected to high status. Second, Hogan’s account focuses on empathy and remembered emotions, but as many researchers have demonstrated, our emotional responses to stories vary according to characters’ traits (Raney 2003). Coarsely, we feel good when a liked character succeeds and bad when they fail (Zillmann and Cantor 1977; Trabasso and Chung 2004). Moreover, these shifting responses seem related to how we represent characters as other people. We miss characters, detest them, feel embarrassed for them, cry at their triumphs, and yell instructions at them, like “Run for it!” or “Close the door, stay in there!” (Bezdek et al. 2013; Hoffner and Cantor 1991). These observations do not invalidate Hogan’s account, but they suggest an alternative hypothesis that centers on how we represent and respond to characters.

Drawing on work by media psychologists and communication scholars (Raney 2003; Trabasso and Chung 2004), I here develop this alternative hypothesis. Like Hogan, I posit that universal narrative structures – in this case, sympathetic tales – recur because they induce pleasure. But I argue that they induce pleasure not by stirring remembered emotions but by exploiting mechanisms involved in learning and cooperation. Audiences connect with sympathetic protagonists because their cognitive systems evaluate protagonists to be worthwhile social partners deserving of help. And they feel pleasure when those characters succeed because of misfiring hedonic responses that evolved to proximately motivate cooperation.
The sympathetic plot develops from intentional design and cultural selection

I propose that the function of the sympathetic plot is to provide pleasure (see also Tan 1996; Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfield 2004; Brewer and Lichtenstein 1982). By function, I mean that providing pleasure is a consequence of the sympathetic plot and that the sympathetic plot exists because it provides pleasure (Wright 1973). By pleasure, I mean positive affect. Pleasurable states include the pleasures of food and sex (Georgiadis and Kringelbach 2012; Kringelbach 2015), the amusement of humor (Martin 2007), and sympathetic joy (feeling happy for another person) (Morelli, Lieberman, and Zaki 2015). Although different pleasures have distinct neural signatures, they seem to share neural activity in common hedonic systems (Kringelbach and Berridge 2009).

Functional design can develop through at least two processes: intentional design and selection (Dennett 1995). Intentional design refers to when individuals deliberately craft an entity to serve some end, like when someone fashions a sharp stick to stab prey. Selection refers to when (1) entities have different inheritable traits and (2) entities with certain inheritable traits spread at the expense of those with other traits, over time increasing in frequency. An example of selection is when people experiment with and preferentially maintain weapons that more effectively kill prey, over time producing better hunting technology.

Intentional design and cultural selection likely interact to produce sympathetic tales. Intentional design is a source of variation: As people try to entertain each other, they generate stories of varying entertainment quality. But whereas the space of potential stories is profoundly vast – including, for example, descriptions of ice cubes melting or rocks doing nothing – the space of stories that people concoct is much smaller. When asked to make up stories, for instance, New York City children as young as 2 years old described characters performing actions or experiencing events (Sutton-Smith 1981). Older children, meanwhile, made up stories in which characters pursued a goal, although their stories also featured content from popular tales, leaving it unclear whether kids spontaneously invent goal-directed protagonists (Botvin and Sutton-Smith 1977; Sutton-Smith 1981).

Aside from inventing the basic structure of stories, storytellers also introduce variation by remodeling existing tales. Among the Ojibwe and the Winnebago, “the raconteur who has obtained complete mastery over his technique plays with his material and it is this play that becomes an important factor in the origin of different versions” (Radin 1915:43). Ntsomi story-performers in South Africa commonly tweaked, rearranged, and experimented with their material: “While the performer generally retains the traditional core-image in performance, she is free to rearrange details and incidents that compose the cores, indeed to make major changes and introduce modifications” (Scheub 1975:91).

Inventiveness and experimentation produce variations of stories, but it is through cultural selection that the most entertaining variants proliferate and increasingly entertaining stories develop. As audiences demand their favorites and storytellers re-use what has previously been effective, they maintain the most pleasurable variants and fuel a selection for entertaining tales (see also Nettle 2005).

Scheub (1975:90) observed the selective retention of entertaining techniques among South African ntsomi performers: “[A]n artist includes and emphasizes those elements that she
delighted in during *ntsomi* performances that she has witnessed, and she does not fail to recall those details that particularly delighted her audiences during her own productions.” He even connected this retention and the experimentation mentioned earlier to the development of the *ntsomi* tradition: “Considering that this process of borrowing, influencing, innovating, and combining has been going for decades, there should be no surprise that such an involved form has developed” (Scheub 1975:19).

Although intentional design and cultural selection likely interact to produce entertaining tales, the relative contributions of these processes are unclear. Intentional design explains low-level elements of stories, such as the goal-directed protagonist, while cultural selection explains why some entire tales diffuse across cultures or are maintained over time. But what about meso-level plot elements, such as the orphaned protagonist or punished rivals? Do people intuitively know that they should kill a protagonist’s parents or does discovering the idea require years or generations of iterative experimentation? Future research will help determine precisely which elements of the sympathetic plot are intuitive and which require a search process to discover.

### Obstacles and sympathetic joy: The mechanics of the sympathetic plot

The sympathetic plot seems to provide pleasure by evoking two sets of psychological mechanisms. First, builds interest by confronting a goal-directed protagonist with a problem and induces satisfaction when the problem is overcome. Second, it scaffolds various features onto this basic plot, such as making the protagonist likable, depriving them of parents, and rewarding them at the end of the story, in turn producing a hedonic feeling of sympathetic joy.

### Stories engage audiences through obstacles and resolution

At the basis of most stories is the problem-solving structure: A goal-directed protagonist confronts an obstacle and tries to overcome it (Brémond 1970; Dundes 1962; Propp 1968; Lwin 2010). This structure recurs, I argue, because it encourages people to pay attention to a story and feel satisfied when it ends (see also Black and Bower 1980; Brewer and Lichtenstein 1982; Mandler et al. 1980).

Obstacles intrigue us. We feel suspense when we hear about someone who has difficulty completing a goal and want to learn more. Journalists exploit this predisposition, enticing audiences with stories of climbers missing on mountains, toddlers who fall into wells, and babies in need of medical attention (Fine and White 2002). In fact, obstacles are so potent for producing interest that they can induce suspense even when we know the outcome. Gerrig (1989) reminded Yale undergraduates of familiar outcomes, such as that George Washington was the first president of the United States. He then narrated the events leading up to these outcomes but highlighted difficulties along the way, such as that Washington was exhausted after the Revolutionary War. Even though the participants knew the outcomes and were reminded of them at the beginning of each story, they still felt suspense when they learned about obstacles (see also Delatorre et al. 2018).

Our initial intrigue is satisfied when we learn how a character overcomes an obstacle. Iran-Nejad (1987) documented this feeling in his experiments on reader enjoyment. He found that participants enjoyed stories with positive outcomes, such as if a camper defended himself
against an intruder. But more crucially, readers liked stories more when they read how the character overcame the opponent as opposed to when it was left ambiguous. In another study, schoolchildren and college students reported enjoying stories more when the protagonist’s goal seemed more important or harder to attain (Jose 1988).

Not only are tales about obstacles intriguing and ultimately delightful; they are memorable, too. Studies conducted with American undergraduates have shown that they remember incidents according to a character’s goal and the strategies they used to pursue it (Bower 1978; Black and Bower 1980; Brewer and Lichtenstein 1982; Mandler and Johnson 1977). For example, undergraduates were better at remembering actions that related to a goal, and they regarded the goal as the most important element of a story (Thorndyke 1977; Owens, Bower, and Black 1979; Bower 1982). Crucially, these mental schemas seem to transcend cultural contexts. Mandler et al. (1980), for example, documented similar recall biases across participants in Liberia and the United States, including comparisons with unschooled Liberian children and non-literate Liberian adults.

Why do obstacles intrigue and resolutions delight? And why do our minds encode incidents in schemas organized around goals?

A likely possibility is that we have psychological mechanisms adapted for learning about the problems other people face and the tactics that have been effective for surmounting them. Evolutionary logic predicts that we should have these mechanisms. In the words of cognitive and computer scientist Jerry Hobbs (1990:40), “We are planning mechanisms, continually planning our way towards goals.” We identify goals, like attracting sexy mates, and encounter obstacles in their pursuit, like when sneaky rivals compete for a mate’s affections. Given that other people tackle similar problems, we benefit from learning about others’ hardships and the strategies that have successfully skirted them. Armed with this information, we are better prepared to overcome those problems when we encounter them in the future.

This explanation differs from those presented in the simulation hypotheses of Hobbs (1990) and Gottschall (2012). According to Hobbs, fictional stories serve as thought experiments for solving problems (see also Pinker 1997, 2007). A storyteller identifies a goal, such as securing a romantic partner, and then tries out ways of achieving it under controlled settings. Gottschall (2012), meanwhile, equated fiction with play. According to his hypothesis, stories force audiences to experience protagonists’ struggles, building implicit memories that prove useful in similar circumstances. Both hypotheses agree that fiction is an adaptation that teaches through simulation.

In contrast to simulation hypotheses, I propose that we have general-purpose mechanisms for learning about others’ difficulties. We are intrigued when we encounter someone in difficult straits, because we might end up in a similar situation and it pays to learn about the obstacle and how to overcome it. We are interested in fiction not because it allows us to simulate problem-solving, but because it triggers psychological mechanisms designed to look out for useful information. Given certain input criteria (obstacles), those mechanisms trigger and our attention is redirected, regardless of whether the triggering stimulus promises useful information.

The sympathetic plot induces sympathetic joy

Once the protagonist overcomes the goal, the audience might feel some satisfaction, but most of
the pleasure of sympathetic plots comes from the interaction of features including the ensuing rewards, the orphaning of the protagonist, and the protagonist’s strength or attractiveness. These features, I argue, interact to induce sympathetic joy. They create a protagonist who audiences want to help, appealing to mechanisms designed to find partners and allocate cooperation. The protagonist then succeeds and audiences feel a surge of sympathetic joy. This emotion evolved to motivate cooperation, but it misfires when we represent an imaginary character as a potential social partner.

*People feel happy for people they want to help*

People often feel happy for other people. Or, more specifically, they experience pleasure in response to other people’s good fortune. Researchers variously refer to this feeling as *symhedonia* (Royzman and Rozin 2006), *positive empathy* (Morelli, Lieberman, and Zaki 2015), *vicarious reward* (Mobbs et al. 2009), *empathic joy* (Batson et al. 1991), and *empathic happiness* (Light et al. 2015). Following Royzman and Rozin (2006), I call it *sympathetic joy*.

Some researchers argue that sympathetic joy serves to motivate cooperation (Smith, Keating, and Stotland 1989; Telzer et al. 2010). They point out that if you expect that someone’s success will feel good, then you will be motivated to help them and feel the promised tickle (see also Telle and Pfister 2016). In the same way that the pleasures of sex, sugar, and safety entice us (Rozin 1999), a beneficiary’s success feels good so as to encourage us to reproduce it.

Converging lines of research suggest that we feel happy for people we want to help. US participants reported greater sympathetic joy towards individuals to whom they felt more attached, such as best friends, compared to casual acquaintances (Royzman and Rozin 2006). Similar effects have been documented when studying brain activity. Subjects showed greater activity in hedonic systems when in-group members succeeded compared to out-group members (Hackel, Zaki, and Van Bavel 2017) and when friends benefited compared to antagonists (Braams et al. 2014). Subjects who felt more attached to a target – such as NYU students who identified more with their university, Los Angeles young adults who identified more with their family, and Dutch young adults who reported being closer to their mothers and friends – showed greater hedonic activity when the target benefited compared to subjects who felt less attached to a target (Telzer et al. 2010; Hackel, Zaki, and Van Bavel 2017; Braams and Crone 2017).

A second set of studies has found that people who experience or anticipate joy in others’ successes are more likely to help them. Pittinsky and Montoya (2016) used survey results, expert evaluations of teaching, and student outcomes of 1,200 American teachers to investigate the correlates and consequences of teachers’ sympathetic joy. They found that teachers who reported greater joy in their students’ successes created higher-quality learning environments and had higher achieving students. Batson et al. (1991) and Smith et al. (1989) tested whether the anticipation of seeing a happy beneficiary motivated helping. It did: American undergraduates who expected to see a positive reaction were more likely to help, although in one study, this effect disappeared when the participants were asked to empathize with the recipient.

The small but growing literature on sympathetic joy indicates that people feel happy for a beneficiary when the target is someone they want to help. If stories develop to induce sympathetic joy, then they should feature characters who audiences most want to assist. What should those ideal beneficiaries look like?
People cooperate with individuals for many reasons, but the most important ultimate factors are kinship and reciprocity (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007; Baumard, André, and Sperber 2013). In short, our psychology seems designed to allocate help to relatives and people who will help us in return. Convincing an audience that a protagonist is a family member seems difficult, especially when the same story is told to many individuals. But convincing the audience that the protagonist is an appealing cooperative investment is much easier.

There are at least two sets of traits that make someone a valuable cooperative partner and which people esteem in others (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007; Barclay 2013; Tooby and Cosmides 1996; Kummer 1978):

1. **Competence.** A valuable partner is strong, fast, talented, good-looking, courageous, and clever. That is, they have attributes that reliably produce shareable benefits, both through intentional action (e.g., coalitional support) and positive externalities (e.g., popularity by association).

2. **Willingness to help (or warmth).** A valuable partner is generous, sincere, trustworthy, moral, and genuinely invested in us. That is, they are willing to help us and remain with us when things get difficult. A partnership becomes much easier when the people involved want the same things; it becomes harder when their wants diverge, such as if one partner regards the other’s goal as wrong (and likely to draw disapproval).

People are predisposed to help strangers with appealing traits, presumably to initiate relationships with them (Pisör and Gurven 2018; Pisör and Gurven 2016). Maestripieri et al. (2017) reviewed the vast literature demonstrating people’s biases towards attractive individuals, including that attractive marathon runners receive larger online donations (Raihani and Smith 2015) and attractive waitresses get larger tips from men, regardless of the quality of the service (Lynn 2009; Lynn and Simons 2000). These cooperative biases extend to strangers with appealing traits other than physical attractiveness. Students at UCSB played the ultimatum game (an economic game) with partners who were represented with face photographs (Eisenbruch et al. 2016). A separate group of students rated the same photographs for attributes such as health, dominance, and social status. Despite having no previous relationship with the targets, participants gave more money to partners represented by appealing faces, such as those that appeared healthy, attractive, prosocial, and productive.

The ideal beneficiary should not only be a valuable social partner – they should suffer too. This is because people have compassion: We are motivated to help people in need (see Batson et al. 2002; Goetz et al. 2010 for reviews). This motivation is influenced both by how close we feel towards a target and whether we believe their suffering to be controllable (Greitemeyer 2010). For example, people help needy family members more than needy good friends and needy acquaintances more than needy near-strangers (Cialdini et al. 1997). Meanwhile, an enormous experimental literature, including studies in the United States, Germany, Japan, and Nigeria, has shown that people prefer to help individuals whose suffering is out of their control (Rudolph et al. 2004).

As with our generosity towards appealing would-be partners, compassion likely exists to secure cooperative relationships (Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas 2010). We help the needy,
especially when help is cheap for us and beneficial to them, to secure their gratitude and reap the benefits of their friendship in the future (Trivers 1971).

In summary, a technology designed to produce sympathetic joy should create a character who is capable, warm, and who has goals that are relatable and uncontroversial. They should be in need, arousing our compassion, although their suffering should be out of their control.

Explaining stories

Protagonists of sympathetic tales are ideal beneficiaries and audiences regard them as friends

Stories should most effectively evoke sympathetic joy when audiences want to help protagonists and especially when they regard protagonists as attractive social partners. Narrative patterns and studies of how people represent and respond to characters show that this is the case: Protagonists everywhere are appealing and in distress; audiences, in turn, develop warm feelings towards them.

Protagonists are appealing

The protagonists of the world's folktales are appealing. Gottschall (2005) coded the features of 568 female protagonists and 392 male protagonists from 658 tales from around the world. The tales, which were selected to build a globally representative sample of folktales, frequently starred studs. Physical attractiveness was mentioned for 22% of male protagonists and 51% of female protagonists – and nearly all of them were attractive. In fact, of the 568 female protagonists coded, only 8 were described as unattractive. Characters were also prosocial: 42% of female protagonists were “primarily motivated to help others”; in contrast, very few antagonists (14% female, 5% male) had prosocial inclinations (data for male protagonists were not reported).

Lastly, characters were competent – that is, they had skills or abilities that produced benefits. A third of male protagonists (and 9% of female protagonists) exhibited heroism, while a fifth of all males were said to be best described as courageous.

Kimball (1999) and Jobling (2001) also noted the appealing traits of protagonists in their cross-cultural studies of orphan and hero-ogre stories. Orphans were sometimes witty (7/50) and often virtuous (29/50). Wend’Yambah of Burkina Faso, for instance, exhibited a saint-like benevolence towards his abusive foster-parents: “His patience is equaled only by his kind heart, and his heart is that of a king” (Guirma 1971:67; cited in Kimball 1999:564). Some orphans were hardworking, industrious, and brave; others’ merits were never explicitly stated, although they were “observable as the orphan endures abuse without complaint” (p. 565). In fact, Kimball only mentioned the negative traits of two orphan-protagonists: The Poor Turkey Girl (Zuni), who refrained from visiting a flock of turkeys who helped her, and Coolnajo (Wabanaki), who acted as a fool to spite his uncle. Notably, these two were the only orphan-protagonists to suffer at the end of their stories.

The heroes of hero-ogre stories around the world were also attractive, exhibiting unique courage and strength (Jobling 2001). They could kill villages of cannibals (Mbundu of Angola), shoot arrows through armor (Apache of American Southwest), and decapitate ogres with a slash
of a thumbnail (Micronesia). And they were good: “While the ogre is vicious and greedy, the hero is always willing and able to protect the lives and happiness of his fellows. In all the stories, the hero’s actions benefit the in-group as a whole” (Jobling 2001:260).

Protagonists are the victims of uncontrollable misfortune

Stories everywhere subject protagonists to tragic, inescapable distress – and perhaps the most common tragic trope is to make the protagonist an orphan. Henneberg (2010:126) observed that “orphans are standard fare” in children’s literature past and present. In support of this claim, she provided a sweeping list of popular examples, including classic fairy tales (“Cinderella”; “Hansel and Gretel”), children’s novels from the late 19th to mid 20th century (Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Nancy Drew, Pippy), recent successful book series (A Series of Unfortunate Events, Harry Potter), and animated films (Finding Nemo, The Lion King). In a sample of 124 award-winning, American children’s novels, 18% featured orphan protagonists; 37% featured protagonists who were removed from their parents in any way (Mattix 2012). The frequency of orphans is so common in stories that the motif wiki TV Tropes includes more than 25 pages describing orphan-related motifs, including “Disappeared Dad” (Forest Gump), “Doorstop Baby” (Harry Potter), “Heartwarming Orphan” (James of James and the Giant Peach), and “Street Urchin” (Oliver Twist) (TV Tropes 2019b). A page on “Death by Childbirth” underscores the narrative potency of the trope by pointing to its statistical improbability:

Parental Abandonment occurs with an overwhelming frequency in fiction. On top of that, an overwhelming number of victims lose their mothers during childbirth. So sad, so tragic, so heart-wrenching... such a goldmine of a plot device. Nothing impossible about it, but the statistics are ridiculously high, especially for any industrialized nation. (TV Tropes 2019a)

Orphan protagonists dominate the stories of non-western societies as well. The element most common in Igbo (Nigeria) stories “was the fact that the heroes and heroines were motherless children, orphans or paupers, who always vanquished the more privileged by miraculous or magical means” (Amadiume 1987:85). In Toraja (Sulawesi) stories, “there is repeated mention of orphans who are neglected and mistreated, only to achieve glory later on” (Adriani and Kruijt 1970:140). In Karen (Burma) folklore, “many tales recount episodes in which an orphan exercises his uncanny powers, usually in defense of some weaker person who he saves or helps to get the better of his foes” (Marshall 1922:269).

Another common sympathy-inducing trope is the youngest sibling protagonist (e.g., Muria Gond of central India: Elwin 1947:237; Nenet of Siberia: Golovnev 1997:149; Ainu of Japan: Batchelor 1927:337-342, 364-365). As with being an orphan, being a youngest sibling is out of a character’s control but subjects them to immediate disadvantage, especially when they are bullied.

Audience members represent characters as people and are attached to appealing characters

People regard characters as other people. They speak to characters, feel sorry for them when they make mistakes, and feel comfortable around characters as they would around friends (Klimmt,
Hartmann, and Schramm 2006; Giles 2010). Readers of Harry Potter and Twilight admit to missing characters after finishing the book series (Harry Potter Forums 2011; Fan Forum 2008), while American viewers of soap operas have physically assaulted actors who play villains (Winsey 1979; cited in Hoffner and Cantor 1991). In 1969, 5,000 viewers gathered at a church in Lima, Peru to watch the filming of a main character’s wedding. According to one newspaper, “People were dressed in their best outfits; several people fainted, gripped by their emotions” (Singhal et al. 1994:8). Bezdek et al. (2013) coded viewers’ participatory responses to films, including replotting (“He should’ve tried to hide behind a seat or something.”) and stated preferences for outcomes (“I hope there’s no one in the house.”). They found that, aside from emotional outbursts (“Oh no!”, “Oh my god!”), viewers’ most common participatory responses were instructions to the characters on how to solve problems, like “Get out of there!” or “Just do it!”

Given that we treat characters (at least partly) as individuals, it should be of little surprise that we find the same traits appealing in story-characters as we do in real-life social partners. Not only do audience members like characters with attractive traits (Zillmann and Cantor 1977; Hoffner and Cantor 1991; Weber et al. 2008; Krakowiak and Oliver 2012), but they develop friendly feelings towards them, too. Elementary schoolchildren in Illinois had stronger one-sided relationships – including missing a character when they’re not around, wanting to meet them, and feeling bad for them if they make a mistake – with characters who appeared attractive, intelligent, and strong (Hoffner 1996). Midwestern American undergraduates, meanwhile, had stronger relationships with characters they considered socially attractive (e.g., amiable, friendly) and competent (e.g., capable of getting things done) (Rubin and McHugh 1987).

Whereas characters’ likable traits encourage friendly feelings, their difficult circumstances seem to invite compassion. Although there is little to no experimental research on how readers respond to mistreated children protagonists, Keen’s (2007) survey of an online discussion group provides preliminary evidence. She found that “many readers report that novels in which child characters are subjected to cruel or unfair treatment evoke empathy” (69). And notably, readers reported these responses while also acknowledging that they came from different backgrounds. As one reader wrote, “In both [Jane Eyre and David Copperfield] my strongest empathetic responses were aroused by scenes of abuse by cruel relatives and abusive school teachers, even though I was a happy lovingly-nurtured child who adored my teachers and school” (Keen 2007:69-70). Future research should systematically examine how mistreated characters invite emotional responses, as well as whether similar responses occur across cultures.

The hero’s journey provides a series of nested obstacles

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3 In her prompt, Keen defined an “empathetic response” as “one in which you felt with a fictional character or another aspect of the fiction” (emphasis in original), contrasting it with a “sympathetic reading experience, which does not necessarily entail shared feelings” (https://list.indiana.edu/sympa/arc/victoria/2004-11/msg00156.html). But distinguishing between an empathetic response (roughly, feeling as someone else) and a sympathetic response (feeling for them) can be difficult. Consider a father who sees his daughter win a spelling bee. They have a shared feeling (happiness), but there many reasons why they might share this feeling. The father might mirror or simulate his daughter’s emotion, or her triumph may remind him of his own victories, or he may feel happy for her – i.e., knowing about her victory might make me him happy. He would report an empathetic response yet remain ignorant of the mechanism producing the shared feeling. This ignorance also applies to the readers who responded to Keen’s question. They understand their emotional response to the orphan’s plight as “empathetic”, but their shared feeling may occur for many reasons, including being sad for the orphan.
Sympathetic protagonists frequently go on journeys, encountering monsters, gate-keepers, and redirection along the way. The account developed here offers at least two reasons for this trope. First, a journey enhances the perceived difficulty of a goal and, as a consequence, good feelings. If, as Jose’s (1988) findings suggest, we experience greater joy when a character completes a more difficult goal, then forcing the character to embark on a complicated and dangerous series of tasks (e.g., escaping a cyclops, skirting sirens) is a simple way of boosting pleasure when the protagonist finally succeeds.

A second explanation for the frequency of journeys is that they allow stories to include a series of related obstacles. A story might include several obstacles for many reasons, including that (1) the story is longer and requires successive problems to maintain interest, (2) the story describes feats or trials to show off the protagonist’s special abilities, and (3) as just discussed, the story enhances the perceived difficulty of attaining the goal. But unrelated obstacles cannot be piled onto each other. Instead, storytellers must causally connect the conflicts a protagonist encounters, ideally unifying them under a single goal (Bower 1982; Trabasso and Sperry 1985; Trabasso and van den Broek 1985; Zacks et al. 2007). Journeys provide this structure. They establish an overarching goal (like destroying a ring) and string a series of obstacles leading up to it (like avoiding Orcs and escaping a spider), enabling longer, coherent sympathetic tales.

Explaining endings

Throughout this paper, I have reviewed many stories that conclude with the protagonist’s success. Here I review psychological evidence showing that this success evokes pleasure. I then consider tales that seem to violate the sympathetic template: tragedies.

People feel good when characters they like succeed

People feel good when characters they like succeed. A viewer of the Indian soap opera “Hum Log” showed how intense this pleasure can be in a letter she wrote to the television network:

Congratulations on the wedding of Dr. Ashwini and Badki. When the wedding was being telecast, my family and I could not control the tears of joy, and when the newlywed couple was blessed for the first time, our excitement knew no bounds. (Sood and Rogers 2000:400)

Researchers have demonstrated this joy in experiments (Zillmann 1995). In one study, American schoolchildren watched a short film in which a boy was either nice, neutral, or mean (Zillmann and Cantor 1977). Afterwards, the boy either received a new bike and delightfully rode off or fell off his bike and cried. Children felt happy when the nice protagonist got a bike or the mean one fell. They felt sad, in contrast, when the nice protagonist fell or his mean counterpart got lucky. In another study, participants watched Alfred Hitchcock’s Vertigo and Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (Trabasso and Chung 2004; described in Oatley 2011). The experimenters stopped the films twelve times, and at each point, participants either evaluated the success of different characters or reported their emotions. When the protagonist succeeded or the
antagonist failed (as rated by half of the participants), viewers felt positive emotions like happiness and relief. When things went badly for the protagonist or swimmingly for the antagonist, in contrast, viewers felt negative emotions (see also Zillmann, Taylor, and Lewis 1998).

Unsympathetic characters suffer misfortune more often

If the audience’s feelings track how appealing they find the protagonist, then protagonists who fail should often have unappealing traits. This seems to be the case. Literary scholars appreciate that protagonists of European tragedies tend to exhibit a tragic flaw – that is, a misjudgment or moral failing that propels their eventual demise (Bushnell 2008). The failing can manifest as an unacceptable goal, like a taste for pedophilia, or ugly methods for attaining it, like killing a family member. Stories as diverse as Richard III, Macbeth, Anna Karenina, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Hedda Gabler, Lolita, Bonnie and Clyde, Scarface, and many more pair a character’s moral faults with their eventual demise (Booker 2004; Bushnell 2008).

Plots that involve the sympathetic protagonists’ ultimate misfortune often compensate with redemption

Stephen King (2002:169) wrote, “No one likes to root for a guy over the course of three hundred pages only to discover that between chapters sixteen and seventeen the pig ate him.” Yet in rare instances, sympathetic plots end with a likable protagonist’s downfall. An example of one such tragic sympathetic tale is the Ainu story of Kutri and Yai-mah (Batchelor 1927:437-448). Declared the most handsome man, Kutri was also strong, swift, clever, keen-sighted, charismatic, an astute tracker, and a talented fisherman. Yai-mah, in comparison, had a lustrous, moon-round face and a cerulean, well-defined tattoo; she danced, played the harp, brought water without spilling, and maintained a respectable garden plot. The two were instantly enamored with each other, but both were betrothed as children to mean, useless, ugly partners. When Kutri and Yai-mah ran away, their ugly exes pursued them. The exes shot Kutri with a poison arrow; after he died, Yai-mah killed herself.

The story of Kutri and Yai-mah violates our expectations. It follows the structure of the sympathetic plot (with almost cartoonishly appealing social partners) but distorts it by leaving the protagonists’ goals unfulfilled, even killing them. Nevertheless, it ends with feel-good justice. After the lovers’ deaths, the ugly exes approached the couple’s house. One of the exes kicked Yai-mah’s dead body, piercing himself with the poisoned arrow. He died immediately. The other ex burned down the house, attracting the attention of the couple’s faithful dogs. They bit the vengeful arsonist, and within days, she began scratching, barking, and foaming at the mouth. Eventually, both ugly exes lived cursed afterlives among demons. Kutri and Yai-mah, meanwhile, enjoyed their afterlives in peace and joy.

The point here is that even violations of the sympathetic plot induce good feelings by offsetting (to some extent) the protagonist’s misfortune with redemption. Romeo and Juliet ended not with the star-crossed lovers’ deaths but with their families concluding their feud and promising to immortalize the children in golden statues. After the blameless, titular character of Antigone hanged herself, the son and then the wife of the king who ordered her death killed themselves too, leaving the king alone and despairing. The film Titanic showed the death of the protagonist’s lover (Jack), but then revealed that her cruel fiancée committed suicide, that she

p. 17
lived a full and adventurous life, and that she was reunited with Jack in a mesmerizing dream-world. Chinese tragedies paired the death of a sympathetic protagonist with cosmic justice, too (Wallace 2013). In the 13th century play *The Injustice to Dou E*, a young widow was framed for murder and forced to confess. She was beheaded, but before her execution, she prophesied unnatural events in the case of her innocence. Her blood did not drip on the ground, snow fell in midsummer, and the region suffered a drought. Three years later, her father ordered a reinvestigation and the perpetrators were properly punished.

**Concluding remarks**

**Why this pleasure but not that pleasure?**

Why is sympathetic joy so important for producing narrative structure when there exist many other ways of inducing pleasure? We enjoy hearing about powerful weapons, magical items, monsters, beautiful landscapes, and sexual gossip, yet these have featured little in the proposed account. Why?

Of course, many stimuli focus our attention or produce hedonic feelings (Kringelbach and Berridge 2009). But sympathetic joy is special, because inducing it requires telling a story. Insofar as we enjoy hearing about fantastical objects, a storyteller can produce good feelings by describing a magical chariot or a powerful hammer. The same goes for monsters and sexual escapades; as long as we are intrigued or delighted by them, a storyteller can include them in a tale and produce the accompanying feelings. Evoking sympathetic joy, in contrast, demands designing a specific narrative. It demands presenting an appealing character, subjecting them to early distress, confronting them with an obstacle, and having them succeed. Sympathetic joy shapes narrative structure more than do other sources of pleasure because inducing it requires organizing a narrative in a particular way.

**Five predictions**

I had two aims in this paper. First, I proposed that a particular narrative structure, the sympathetic plot, is ubiquitous, appearing in books, films, myths, and folk tales everywhere. This proposal yields testable predictions, including the following two:

1. The sympathetic plot should appear in the vast majority of folkloric traditions around the world, regardless of societies’ subsistence strategies or levels of social complexity and controlling for any similarities that might result from diffusion or shared cultural history.
2. For any story with a sympathetic plot that has similar variants over a geographic range (e.g., many versions of *Cinderella* across Europe), the primary and secondary features should vary less across the variants than do other features of the stories.

After proposing the sympathetic plot, I argued that it recurs because it is a technology for producing pleasure. It works by first presenting a goal-directed protagonist with an obstacle, building interest. It then establishes the protagonist as an appealing cooperative partner, so that when they succeed, audiences experience sympathetic joy, a hedonic state that normally occurs to
motivate helping. I used this account to explain the features of the sympathetic plot, summarized in Table 2. This hypothesis also generates a set of predictions, including the following:

1. The hedonic neural activity that occurs at the triumphant end of a sympathetic tale should match the neural activity involved in sympathetic joy more than the neural activity during other hedonic states, such as the pleasure of remembering past instances of one’s own success.
2. People’s desire to help a character should predict their hedonic state when that character succeeds.
3. Protagonists’ traits and goals and the features of opponents should vary according to local cultural contexts. For example, protagonists should exhibit those traits that people in that society prefer in their social partners, while protagonists’ goals should be those considered justifiable. As these preferences change, the stories people tell should transform, too.

Table 2. Features of the sympathetic plot and their hypothesized psychological responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature of the sympathetic plot</th>
<th>Psychological response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary features</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. A protagonist (P) has a goal.</td>
<td>Builds interest by triggering mechanisms for learning about problem-solving (Builds interest); Motivates audience to help P (Motivates helping)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The goal is relatable or justifiable.</td>
<td>Motivates helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. P confronts an obstacle.</td>
<td>Builds interest; Motivates helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. P overcomes the obstacle.</td>
<td>Resolves interest about how to overcome obstacle, delivering satisfaction; Produces sympathetic joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. P reaps rewards.</td>
<td>Produces sympathetic joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary features</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. P is appealing.</td>
<td>Motivates helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. P suffers early misfortunes.</td>
<td>Motivates helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. P is connected to high status.</td>
<td>Motivates helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. P goes an adventure.</td>
<td>[See p. 16]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. P’s opponents are repulsive and formidable.</td>
<td>Motivates helping</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. Anyone who opposes P reforms or is punished. Produces sympathetic joy

Summary

Why do people everywhere tell stories about abused stepdaughters who marry royalty and revel in awarded riches? Why do genre-busters and iconoclasts reproduce archetypal narrative structures even when they attempt to subvert them? The answer, I have argued, is entertainment. Tales such as these – those in which a likable main character overcomes difficulty and reaps rewards – create a compelling cognitive dreamscape. They twiddle psychological mechanisms involved in learning and cooperation, narrowing our attention and inducing sympathetic joy. Story imitates life – or at least the elements of life to which we’ve evolved pleasurable responses.

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