Voyage and Return stories: main features

The essence of the Voyage and Return story is that its hero or heroine (or the central group of characters) travels out of their familiar, everyday "normal" surroundings into another world completely cut off from the first, where everything seems disconcertingly abnormal. At first the strangeness of this new world, with its freaks and marvels, may seem diverting, even exhilarating, if highly perplexing. But gradually a shadow intrudes. The hero or heroine feels increasingly threatened, even trapped: until eventually they are released from the abnormal world and can return to the safety of the familiar world where they began.

There are two obvious categories of stories where the Voyage and Return plot is particularly familiar. The first describes a journey to some land or island beyond the confines of the known or civilized world. The other describes a journey to some more obviously imaginary or magical realm closer to home. [...]

Again these stories fall generally into two main types: those where the hero is marooned on some more or less deserted island and those where the land he visits is the home of some strange people or civilization. In the early eighteenth century two of the most famous of such stories were published within two years of each other: one in each category.

The first *, in 1719, was that paradigm of all "desert island" stories, *Robinson Crusoe*. The plot of Defoe's novel follows the now familiar pattern: as a young sailor whose ship is wrecked, the hero finds himself all alone on a seemingly deserted island. The first half of the story, after Crusoe has recovered from the initial shock, is dominated by his growing confidence as he comes to terms with his plight and with the simple wonders of his unfamiliar new world (e.g. discovering his ability to grow corn and bake bread). Then a shadow intrudes as he sees the imprint of a strange human foot. As Crusoe realizes that he may not be alone on the island, he begins to experience a sense of threat which grows progressively more acute as he finds that his little kingdom is in fact regularly visited by bands of cannibals to pursue their horrid practices. The second half is dominated by the measures Crusoe takes to protect himself; by his gradual recruiting of a little army of runaways (Friday being the first) and finally, as the climax of the tale by leading his followers into a successful battle against the mutinous sailors on a Portuguese ship which has anchored offshore. This culminates in his joyful release, when the grateful captain takes him off the island and back to civilisation. [...]

The pattern of such a story is likely to unfold like this:

1. **Anticipation stage and "fall" into the other world**: when we first meet the hero or heroine or central figures, they are likely to be in some state that lays them open to a new shattering experience. Their consciousness is in some way restricted. They may be just young and naïve with only limited experience of the world. They may be more actively curious or looking for something to happen to them...

2. **Initial fascination or Dream stage**: at first their exploration of this disconcertingly new world may be exhilarating because is it so puzzling and unfamiliar. But it is never a place in which they can feel at home.

3. **Frustration stage**: gradually the mood of the adventure changes to one of frustration, difficulty and oppression. A shadow begins to intrude which becomes increasingly alarming.

4. **Nightmare stage**: the shadow becomes so dominating that it poses a threat to the hero or heroine's survival.

5. **Thrilling escape and return**: just when the threat closing in on the hero or heroine becomes too much to bear, they make their escape from the other world, back to where they started. At this point, the real question posed by the whole adventure is: how far have they learned or gained anything from their experience? Have they been fundamentally changed or was it all "just a dream"?

Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2004)

* The second is *Gulliver's Travels*, by Jonathan Swift (1721)