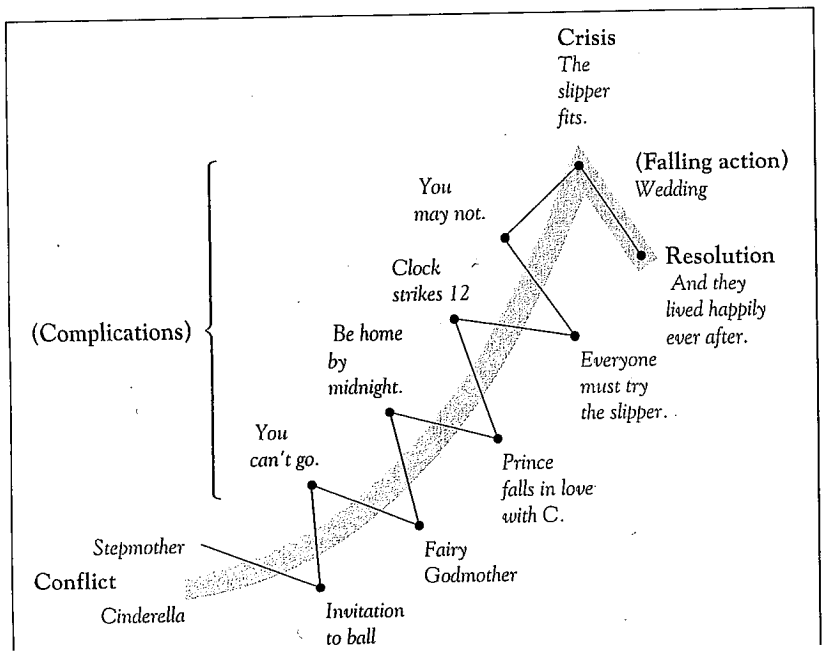
> Structure is the art that conceals itself—you only *see* the structure in a badly structured story, and call it formula.
>
> Stephen Fischer

Story Form as a Check Mark

The nineteenth-century German critic Gustav Freitag analyzed plot in terms of a pyramid of five actions: an exposition, followed by a complication (or *nouement*, "knotting up," of the situation), leading to a crisis, which is followed by a "falling action" or anticlimax, resulting in a resolution (or *dénouement*, "unknotting").

In the compact short story form, the falling action is likely to be very brief or nonexistent, and often the crisis action itself implies the resolution, which is not necessarily stated but exists as an idea established in the reader's mind.

So for our purposes it is probably more useful to think of story shape not as a pyramid with sides of equal length but as an inverted check mark. If we take the familiar tale of Cinderella and diagram it on such a shape in terms of the power struggle, we can see how the various elements reveal themselves even in this simple children's story.



At the opening of the tale we're given the basic conflict: Cinderella's died, and her father has married a brutal woman with two waspish dau derella is made to do all the dirtiest and most menial work, and she weep cinders. The Stepmother has on her side the strength of ugliness and ev powerful qualities in literature as in life). With her daughters she a strength of numbers, and she has parental authority. Cinderella has only goodness, but (in literature and life) these are also very powerful.

At the beginning of the struggle in "Cinderella," the power is very cl Stepmother's side. But the first event (action, battle) of the story is tha tion arrives from the Prince, which explicitly states that *all* the ladies of invited to a ball. Notice that Cinderella's desire is not to triumph ove mother (though she eventually will, much to our satisfaction); such a c diminish her goodness. She simply wants to be relieved of her mistrea wants equality, so that the Prince's invitation, which specifically gives equal to the Stepmother's and Stepdaughters' rights, shifts the power to l

The Stepmother takes the power back by blunt force: You may not g get us ready to go. Cinderella does so, and the three leave for the ball.

Then what happens? The Fairy Godmother appears. It is *very* powe magic on your side. The Fairy Godmother offers Cinderella a gown, gl and a coach with horses and footmen, giving her more force than she l

But the magic is not all-potent. It has a qualification that portends l will last only until midnight (unlike the Stepmother's authority), and must leave the ball before the clock strikes twelve or risk exposure and d

What happens next? She goes to the ball and the Prince falls in love and love is an even more powerful weapon than magic in a literary war. I sions of the tale, the Stepmother and Stepsisters are made to marvel at th the Princess they don't recognize, pointing to the irony of Cinderella's

And then? The magic quits. The clock strikes twelve, and Cinderella the steps in her rags to her rats and pumpkin, losing a slipper, bereft of h every way.

But after that, the Prince sends out a messenger with the glass slipper tum (a dramatic repetition of the original invitation in which all ladies w to the ball) that every female in the land is to try on the slipper. Cindere her rights again by royal decree.

What happens then? In most good retellings of the tale, the Stepmot peats her assumption of brute authority by hiding Cinderella away, while tation of triumph is tantalizingly delayed with grotesque comedy: one sist toe, the other a heel, trying to fit into the heroine's rightful slipper.

After that, Cinderella tries on the slipper and it fits. *This is the crisis acti* love, and royalty join to recognize the heroine's true self; evil, numbers, a ity are powerless against them. At this point, the power struggle has bee the outcome is inevitable. When the slipper fits, no further action can will deprive Cinderella of her desire. Nothing will be the same again: the the lives of all concerned is significant and permanent.

The tale has a brief "falling action" or "walking away from the fight":