



Conflict, Schmonflict

A M Carley

You don't have to have conflict for a story to work. You just need a surprise.

I was so excited to come across an essay from [StillEatingOranges](#) putting the Western notion of plot in a larger, more balanced context. Not all stories, it turns out, require a conflict.

An anonymous writer from the Still Eating Oranges collective reminds us that there are more ways to write a satisfying story. You don't **have to** have conflict for a story to work. Using the story structure known in Japan as Kishōtenketsu, you just need to introduce a shift, of some kind. A surprise. It doesn't have to be in opposition to what came before. And then, at the end, you write a

reconciliation, so that the story - pre-shift and post-shift - ends up making some kind of larger sense.

ki = introduction
sho = development
ten = twist
ketsu = reconciliation

In case that's too abstract, check out the [four-panel manga sketches](#) illustrating the two alternatives. Western plot with conflict comes second. I like the first one better:

The Kishōtenketsu shift comes in the third panel.

As the author explains,

*Kishōtenketsu contains four acts: introduction, development, twist and reconciliation. The basics of the story—characters, setting, etc.—are established in the first act and developed in the second. No major changes occur until the **third** act, in which a new, often surprising element is introduced. The third act is the core of the plot, and it may be thought of as a kind of structural **non sequitur**. The fourth act draws a conclusion from the contrast between the first two “straight” acts and the disconnected third, thereby reconciling them into a coherent whole.*

StillEatingOranges

The author goes on to critique Derrida, question how philosophy is written, and suggest there is hope for the world in Kishōtenketsu.

Applying Kishōtenketsu to more traditionally Western stories can be a useful exercise. I like the way this Australian author frames the change that can happen:

I think an answer lies in Kishōtenketsu which by default paints a different picture of

reality. It says the world is sometimes surprising, and that in those complex moments, what you thought you knew has changed. It builds narrative interest not on showing you the bad guy that has to be killed, nor the hero who you hope will win, but by revealing that true resolution is not in conquering, but in enlightenment.

Travis McKenzie in Magickless



Wait! A twist!

Because a twist comes in the third section, I felt it appropriate to introduce one here. [An international business consulting firm](#) recommends its Japanese clients abandon kishotenketsu in their dealings with Americans. Here in the world of Mad Men, we're so accustomed to the

more direct style of storytelling that business communication can suffer because we can't follow the more subtle narrative of a visitor from Japan.

I am so happy to have read about Kishōtenketsu! For me, it's a keeper. It admits the possibility of grace.

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