

## WTheck is this Narrative Technique Called Eucatastrophe?

by Chazda Albright -

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**Eucatastrophe is a very new word actually (only about 70 years old), first coined towards the end of WWII by J. R. R. Tolkien.**

**This is a terrific narrative technique, but one that is often misunderstood, so I want to nail down what it is and also what it isn't.**

### What you'll get here:

- A clear definition of eucatastrophe
- 3 examples of eucatastrophe
- 3 devices that are confused with eucatastrophe
- How eucatastrophe in storybooks is a bit different
- 6 essential things to remember about eucatastrophe

### Let's break it down: Eu + Catastrophe = Eucatastrophe

*Catastrophe* is the simple part of this word. It's when everything goes wrong in the most cataclysmic way. So what happens when we add the "eu" to the beginning? In Greek, "eu" means "good."

So a eucatastrophe is when we end up with a good catastrophe, or more specifically, when we would logically conclude or imagine that an event means our ultimate doom but turns out in fact to save us.

## **Eucatastrophe Examples**

[Tolkien invented this one](#), so it's easy to pull examples from his own writing. In two of his most famous tales, there are two key events that involve eucatastrophe.

### **Lord of the Rings.**

When Frodo finds it nearly impossible to throw The Ring into the fires of the volcano in Mount Doom, Gollum takes the ring from him. We believe, in that moment, that evil has won. But then Gollum, overwhelmed with glee, falls into the fire with the ring. The world is saved.

### **The Hobbit.**

When Bilbo and all the dwarves are being chased up trees at the edge of a cliff and they are about to be killed by orks, giant eagles come. Bilbo is horrified at first, as these huge monstrous birds approach. But these eagles are there to save them all. This is also eucatastrophic.

## **Can you use this even though you're not Tolkien?**

Sure, why not? Tolkien was a professor, a teacher. I'm certain he would want others to utilize this device. And yes, I've got a brilliant example that I'm sure you'll recognize.

In the first Indiana Jones movie, [Raiders of the Lost Arc](#), Marion is held captive by the Nazis who are racing against Indiana in their hunt for the Arc. Belloq does his best to wine and dine Marion, but she outsmarts him.

Right as Marion is about to escape from captivity, the creepy, menacing Toht enters the tent with his thugs. Oh no. He withdraws a strange metal device from his inner coat pocket. The tension rises. All hope is lost. Marion is about to be tortured... and then with a deft twist of his wrist Toht transforms the strange device into a portable hanger. Relief!

The event isn't a pure eucatastrophe (the hanger doesn't save Marion – it just doesn't hurt her at all... she isn't entirely out of danger), but the emotions felt by Marion and Belloq are absolutely eucatastrophic. What seems to be the worst possible end turns out to be a handy traveler's accessory.

## **Are there Eucatastrophic Tropes?**

Actually, there are. Any narrative technique can be used in a cliché way.

When we're not sure about the loyalty of a character, and that character turns a gun (or some other weapon) on the Good Guy... just to shoot GG in the leg or arm so that they can more easily target one of the bad guys, that's eucatastrophic. It's also cliché.

## What Eucatastrophe is NOT

### Not like a Deus ex machine

It isn't the same as Deus ex machine, which is something entirely different.

**Eucatastrophe** is when a specific action is taken to be the *worst thing possible* – and turns out to be the thing that saves everyone.

**Deus ex machine** is when something we *would naturally assume to be really great* for us does turn out to be great for us – and this thing must also come out of the blue, without explanation or expectation. (It's stupid.)

### Not like a Transformational Kiss

Eucatastrophe isn't something like The Transformational Kiss. In many stories, a magical kiss (one of True Love, most often) has a transformative or transformational effect. It awakes the sleeping princess, it calms the beast, it turns the frog into someone you'd want to date.

These are *not* examples of eucatastrophe because only the most cynical mind would consider a kiss to be a catastrophe... unless you're talking spoof or slapstick. There are no kisses that bring about the destruction of the universe. Not yet, anyway.

### Not like a Surprising Life Lesson

If a child cannot get through the day without their pacifier, and that pacifier gets lost... and ultimately shows the child they are happier without it - is that eucatastrophe?

No. It can't be, because the story is then about the child learning that they can do all the things they like to do without their pacifier. That takes time, plot points and story development.

**The eucatastrophic event must be a single plot-point. The "eu" part of the catastrophe has to come pretty quickly.**

## When all hope is lost... you're prepped for a eucatastrophe.

That's the long and short of it. The main characters (and us, right along with them!) must be in dire straights. Just when you couldn't think it could get worse, it does... BUT that same thing you thought would make it worse actually flips everything around in your favor.

## How to use eucatastrophe in storybooks.

It can be a challenge to craft a successful eucatastrophe. Can you do this with an illustrated storybook? Yes, though it's almost certain to be subtler than averting the end of the world.

If a child is doing poorly in class and has been getting into trouble, and they get called into the Principle's Office, believing they're about to get into *real trouble* – only to find that the principle wants to enlist them for a special Anti-Bullying Club (or something else nice and interesting), then that is eucatastrophic. The potential (or presumed) danger doesn't have to be life threatening.

### **To write a eucatastrophe, remember these 6 things:**

- It can involve one character; it doesn't have to be a group or the world.
- It needs to matter **a lot** to those protagonists involved, but not necessarily anyone else.
- It doesn't have to be life threatening to be a eucatastrophe.
- The good that comes from what we initially believe to be all bad has to be revealed *very quickly*.
- The eucatastrophic event doesn't have to come at the story end.
- Emotions can also be described as eucatastrophic, not just plot.

### **What about you?**

Can you think of other eucatastrophic situations – either from a book you've read or a new idea you have? Have you ever had a eucatastrophic event in your life? Write below, let me know – or as ever, just send me an email. That's some of my favorite reading material!

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

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