

Archetypes

An **archetype** is a universal symbol: a symbol, image, motif, or pattern that recurs across different cultures and literature and tends to have a common meaning. First of all, an archetype is a pattern from which copies can be made. That is, it is a **universal theme** that manifests itself differently on an individual basis. Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that these archetypes were the result of a *collective unconscious*. This collective unconscious was not directly knowable and is a product of the *shared experiences of our ancestors*. Also, archetypes overlap, so that, for instance, the scapegoat may also be a hero.

Common Archetypes:

Colors, shapes, serpent ,
Numbers, symbols of the Divine,
Animals, symbols of the spirit,
vegetable, nature

Archetypal Motifs:

Birth of a hero
Innocence of youth
The quest
Innocence v. experience
Creation
Immortality

Archetypal Characters

The Hero. Lord Raglan, in *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Dream*, finds that traditionally the hero's mother is a virgin, the circumstances of his conception are unusual, and at birth some attempt is made to kill him. He is, however, carried away and raised by foster parents. We know little or nothing of his childhood, but when he reaches manhood he returns to his future kingdom. After a victory over the king or a wild beast, he marries a princess, becomes king, reigns uneventfully, but later loses favor with the gods. He is then driven from the city and meets a mysterious death, often at the top of a hill. There are many variations on this pattern, of course

The Scapegoat can also be a hero, an outcast or outsider, and a wanderer (e.g., Cain, Oedipus, and Coleridge's Ancient Mariner). He or she is conceived as the alien other. The scapegoat is an animal or more usually a human whose death in a public ceremony or expulsion from the community expiates some taint or sin, the results of which have been visited upon the community. In ancient times the sacrifice of the scapegoat was meant to restore fertility to the land, so that the scapegoat can be a kind of hero. The scapegoats are viewed as aliens.

The Fool is a shadow figure distressed by some unconscious lack of power, often driven by greed or an inordinate desire for fame. The Fool is not always negative, of course. A relatively benevolent form of the fool is the Clown, who is more aware of his or her trickster aspect, perhaps, than is the fool. Indeed, laughter can be a great healing force. That cruelty is often a part of comedy demonstrates a need to displace our own shadow urges to be cruel. The clown is cruel, or suffers cruelty, for us. The trickster often plays this role, for the trickster and the fool or the clown usually embody the same archetype. When such figures have real power, it goes without saying they can and do cause real harm against their own people and especially against others whom they demonize as the enemy

The Star-crossed Lovers - This is the young couple joined by love but unexpectedly parted by fate. Example: Romeo and Juliet from William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet"

The Shrew - This is that nagging, bothersome wife always battering her husband with verbal abuse. Example: Zeena from Edith Wharton's "Ethan Frome"

The Devil Figure is a form of the **shadow**, evil incarnate, a figure who frequently offers the hero (or the individual protagonist in a myth, poem, or story) worldly goods, fame, or knowledge for possession of his soul. The Faust legend is an obvious example, as is Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the protagonist is offered eternal youth and beauty, however obliquely.

Situations/Concepts

The Task - A situation in which a character, or group of characters, is driven to complete some duty of monstrous proportion. Example: Frodo's task to keep the ring safe in J. R. R. Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings trilogy*

The Fall involves going from a higher to a lower state of being, as in *Paradise Lost*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Great Gatsby*, or *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

The Quest - Here, the character(s) are searching for something, whether consciously or unconsciously. Their actions, thoughts, and feelings center around the goal of completing this quest. Example: Christian's quest for salvation in John Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress"

The Loss of Innocence - This is, as the name implies, a loss of innocence through sexual experience, violence, or any other means. Example: Val's loss of innocence after settling down at the mercantile store in Tennessee William's "Orpheus Descending"

The Initiation - This is the process by which a character is brought into another sphere of influence, usually (in literature) into adulthood. Example: Ayla's initiation both into the Clan and into adulthood in Jean Auel's "The Clan of the Cave Bear"

Water - Water is a symbol of life, cleansing, and rebirth. It is a strong life force, and is often depicted as a living, reasoning force. Example: Edna learns to swim in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

Hopefully, you will now be able to recognize and understand archetypes as you come across them in your readings. They help to add depth and underlying significance to some of the world's best literature.