

Archetypes in Literature

Situational Archetypes:

The Quest - search for someone or something which when found and brought back will restore land

The Task - to save the kingdom, to win the fair lady, to identify himself so that he may resume his rightful position, the hero must perform some nearly superhuman deed.

*The Task is not the same as the Quest. The Task is one function of the ultimate goal, the restoration of the land.

The Initiation - Usually takes the form of an initiation into adult life. The adolescent comes into his/her maturity with new awareness and problems along with new hope for the community. This awakening is often the climax of the story.

The Journey - The journey sends the hero in search for some truth or information necessary to restore the kingdom. Usually the hero descends into some real or psychological hell and is forced to discover the blackest truths, quite often concerning his faults. Once the hero is at this lowest point, he must accept personal responsibility to return to the world of the living. A second use of this pattern is the depiction of a limited number of travelers on a sea voyage, bus ride, or any other trip for the purpose of isolating them and using them as a microcosm of society.

The Fall - Describes a descent from a higher to a lower state of being. The experience involves a defilement and/or loss of innocence and bliss. The fall is often accompanied by expulsion from a kind of paradise as penalty for disobedience and moral transgression.

Death and Rebirth - This motif grows out of the parallel between the cycle of nature and the cycle of life. Thus morning and springtime represent birth, youth, or rebirth; evening and winter suggest old age and death.

Nature vs. Mechanical World - Nature is good while technology and society are often evil.

Battle between Good and Evil - This is the battle between two primal forces. Mankind shows eternal optimism in the continual portrayal of good triumphing over evil despite great odds.

Unhealable Wound - The wound is either physical or psychological and cannot be healed fully. The wound also indicates loss of innocence. These wounds always ache and often drive the sufferer to desperate measures.

The Ritual - These are actual ceremonies the initiate experiences that will mark his rite of passage into another state. The importance of these rites cannot be over stressed as they provide clear signs of the character's role in society as well as our position in this world.

The Magic Weapon - This symbolizes the extraordinary quality of the hero because no one else can wield the weapon or use it to its full potential. It is usually presented by a mentor figure.

Symbolic Archetypes:

Light vs. Darkness - Light usually suggests hope, renewal, or intellectual illumination; darkness implies the unknown, ignorance, and despair.

Water vs. Desert - Because water is necessary to life and growth, it commonly appears as a birth or rebirth symbol. Water is used in baptismal services, which solemnizes spiritual battle.

Heaven vs. Hell - Man has traditionally associated parts of the universe not accessible to him with the dwelling places of the primordial forces that govern his world. The skies and mountain tops house his gods; the bowels of the earth contain the diabolic forces that inhabit his universe.

Innate Wisdom vs. Educated Stupidity - Some characters exhibit wisdom and understanding of situations instinctively as opposed to those supposedly in charge. Loyal retainers often exhibit this wisdom as they accompany the hero on the journey.

Supernatural Intervention - The gods intervene on the side of the hero or sometimes against him.

Fire vs. Ice - Fire represents knowledge, light, life, rebirth while ice like desert represents ignorance, darkness, sterility, death.

* The unconscious mind tends not to make fine distinctions, but thinks in terms of polarities. Thus when archetypes appear in literature, they usually evoke their primordial opposites. Good is in conflict with evil; birth symbols are juxtaposed with death images; descriptions of heaven are counted with depictions of hell; and for every Penelope, there is usually a Circe to act as a character foil and therefore balance the archetypal scales.

Character Archetypes:

The Hero - Life of the protagonist can be clearly divided into a series of well-marked adventures which strongly suggest a ritualistic pattern. Traditionally, the hero's mother is a virgin, the circumstances of this conception are unusual, and at birth some attempt is made to kill him. He is however, spirited away and reared by foster parents. We know almost nothing of his childhood, but upon reaching manhood he returns to his future kingdom. After a victory over a king or wild beast, he marries a princess, becomes king, reigns uneventfully, but later loses favor with the gods. He is then driven from the city after which he meets a mysterious death, often at the top of a hill. His body is not buried, but nevertheless, he has one or more holy sepulchers.

The Young Man from the Provinces - The hero is spirited away as a young man and raised by strangers. He later returns to his home and heritage where he is a stranger who can see new problems with new solutions.

The Initiates - These are young heroes or heroines who, prior to their quest, must endure some training and ceremony. They are usually innocent and often wear white.

Mentors - These individuals serve as teachers or counselors to the initiates. Sometimes they work as role models and often serve as a father or mother figure.

Father-Son Conflict - Tensions often result from separation during childhood or from an external source when the individuals meet as men and where the mentor often has a higher place in the affections of the hero than the natural parent.

Hunting Group of Companions - Loyal companions willing to face any number of perils in order to be together.

Loyal Retainers - These individuals are somewhat like servants who are heroic themselves. Their duty is to protect the hero and reflect the nobility of the hero.

Friendly Beasts - This implies that nature supports the hero.

The Devil Figure - Evil incarnate, this character offers worldly goods, fame, or knowledge to the protagonist in exchange for possession of the soul.

The Evil Figure with a Big Heart - A redeemable devil figure saved by the nobility or love of the hero.

The Scapegoat - An animal or more usually a human whose death in a public ceremony expiates some taint or sin that has been visited upon a community. Their death often makes them a more powerful force in the society than when they lived.

The Outcast - A figure who is banished from a social group for some crime (real or imagined) against his fellow man. The outcast is usually destined to become a wanderer from place to place.

The Star-Crossed Lovers - These two characters are engaged in a love affair that is fated to end tragically for one or both due to the disapproval of the society, friends, or family, or some tragic situation.

The Creature of Nightmare - A monster usually summoned from the deepest, darkest part of the human psyche to threaten the lives of the hero/heroine. Often it is a perversion or desecration of the human body.

The Woman Figure:

The Earth Mother - Symbolic of fruition, abundance, and fertility, this character traditionally offers spiritual and emotional nourishment to those with whom she comes in contact. She is often depicted in earth colors and has large breasts and hips symbolic of her childbearing capabilities.

The Temptress - Characterized by sensuous beauty, this woman is one to whom the protagonist is physically attracted and who ultimately brings about his downfall.

The Platonic Ideal - This woman is a source of inspiration and spiritual ideal, for whom the protagonist or author has an intellectual rather than a physical attraction.

The Damsel in Distress - The vulnerable woman who must be rescued by the hero. She often is used as a trap to snare the unsuspecting hero.

The Wise Fool

The Elf God