

Literary Archetypes

Archetypes are fundamental “building blocks” of storytelling. Carl Jung, a (primarily) Twentieth century German psychologist, came up with the term ARCHETYPE. He thought that most people fell into certain categories. Later, English teachers noticed that the way Mr. Jung described people were also the same as certain characters that showed up in stories. The term changed and students now study Literary Archetypes.

Certain characters, plots and settings show up over and over in stories from all over the world and in all time periods. These archetypes have special symbolic meanings. Archetypes represent universal symbols of bigger ideas, just like a baby represents youth and innocence. A road may represent not just a trip, but the journey through life.

Here is a partial list of common Archetypal Settings, Archetypal Characters, and Archetypal Plots.

ARCHETYPAL SETTINGS

1. The River – Almost any source of water will focus on the importance of life. Without water there is no life. A journey on or down a river is often a metaphor for life’s journey or a character’s journey, especially if the river is shown as a road or means of travel – pulling or pushing a character through changes. (Twain’s Huck Finn) Rivers can also be a metaphor for the passage of time (Big Fish) or the stages of a human life (creek, roaring river, sea; or the crossing of the river Styx in Greek myths). Since rivers are often used as political borders or boundaries, crossing one may be seen as a “passing over” or a decision that cannot be taken back. In Africa, and thus African literature, rivers are the largest sources of income and commerce and so have additional meaning leaning toward the source of life and morality and the where the fight for good and evil happens.
1. The Garden – In ancient times, across many cultures (Sumeria, Greece, Rome) the garden was seen as a place of earthly delights. Often stories about young love had couples meeting in gardens. Gardens came to symbolize love, fertility and the female body – until the spread of Christianity. With increased teachings of the Bible the “garden” (Eden) became a symbol of an eternal, forbidden paradise. The walled gardens of later Christian art show the Madonna/Virgin Mary figure with baby Jesus protected behind the garden walls, which implies that garden walls protected virginity in young women. William Shakespeare in Romeo and Juliet manages to blend the old and the new in his balcony scene. Japanese gardens, as in Japanese literature, have a totally different cultural history. Intricate landscaping and water features were used to create a place of harmony for people to find balance in their energies and help to rejuvenate the mind and body. A more modern literary concept of the garden is where a person must “tend” (to the garden and their own business) an orderly place of tranquility where a person retires to.



1. The Forest/Wilderness – The thick forest imagined in children’s fairy tales have usually represented a dangerous world full of beasts and darkness. The forest, or sometimes the jungle, is a wild, uncontrolled place. The forest, as a setting, has a rich history of characters who find themselves leading a solitary life (Hester Prynne, Red Riding Hood, Tarzan, Dracula). Christian values depict the forest as where sinners lose themselves in the “wilderness” or stray from the “path” of righteousness. A developing modern approach, perhaps influenced by Native American culture and current environmental awareness, shows the forest as a precious resource where new animals and medicinal plants are found and thrill-seekers venture into to “get away” from industrialized life and reconnect with nature.
1. The Sea – Again, water nearly always symbolizes the source or mother of all life. The sea has always had a good and an evil side throughout literature. The Greek god Poseidon could churn up giant whirlpools, storms or tidal waves. Characters have been lost at sea, swallowed by whales, attacked by pirates or drowned. No doubt the sea can be written about as a dangerous force of nature. The sea has also been home to huge pearls, found treasures, and has been the livelihood of many fisherman, especially in Japanese literature. Also since “all rivers lead to the ocean” the sea can symbolize heaven or infinity where all souls “empty” into. The sea has sometimes been represented as the subconscious human mind.
1. Boats – Related to the sea is the boat/ship setting where characters brave the sea and death and return to a type of spiritual, emotional or material rebirth. Journeys on boats are usually long and fraught with dangers that are overcome. Boats are also related to islands, since crew is isolated from the regular rules of society.
1. The Island – The Island is a metaphor for isolation. People on islands are separated from their society. This can have a positive or negative effect on characters (Robinson Crusoe vs. Lord of the Flies) Without the rules of society; the island setting strips away characters down to the very basics of humanity.
1. The Mountain – The mountain in Hindu (India) culture was seen as the center of the universe from which all things could be seen. Since people climb “up” mountains, characters that climb the mountains can be seen as moving upward on a spiritual/emotional journey. Biblically, mountains are places where God reveals his truths to man. In nearly all stories mountains are mysterious, powerful places.
1. The Wasteland – Often a desert, the wasteland represents an emotionally/physically barren place or time in a character’s journey. A character is usually cleansed of fear or doubt and reconnects to his/her sense of faith or inner strength. Characters usually emerge from the wasteland stronger and more focused. Occasionally the wasteland wins and a character emerges from the wasteland insane.



1. The Pasture/Field – The pasture represents a simple farming life that is predictable and calm. Often referred to as a pastoral setting, many characters either begin here and are thrust into danger and personal growth, or they end up here as a reward for their efforts and struggles. In Christian literature, pastures are where congregations or sheep are watched over by Jesus, or a metaphorical shepherd.
1. The Tower – In ancient times, towers were places of worship, or burial. They were associated with priests, power and the elements. Biblically, towers that reach from Earth toward God are usually seen as a symbol of human pride and folly. Most towers “fall” or are overthrown like the Christian Tower of Babel. Towers, like garden walls, can also be seen as a protection of maidenhood or virginity as seen in many fairy tales.
1. The Castle/Gothic Mansion – This setting, like the sea and the island, has a distinct, two-faced identity. The castle, when set close to the time it was built, is a huge building bustling with life and high ideals. Castle walls are meant to house an entire community of workers and farmers belonging to a mid-ranged lord, or landowner. King Arthur and his ideas of equality, Camelot, are a perfect example. However, on the flip side of this coin, if you add three or four hundred years to the castle you get a story that includes a run-down, gloomy, nearly empty, gothic mansion. The owner of the neglected estate is usually the descendent of a dying royal bloodline. This is a common setting for creepier stories who have characters with family “secrets”.
1. The Inn – A remote roadside setting where traveler and locals interact, the inn is rarely a place of good news. Fear of the unknown often accompanies the tragedies of inn inhabitants. In some stories, a beautiful woman is an unexpected surprise at the inn.
1. The Small Town – Everyone knows and judges everyone else in this archetypal setting. Small towns in literature are notorious for expecting everyone to act just like everyone else. Small towns usually persecute, or run off characters that are different or seen as sinners. The small town often symbolizes intolerance or ignorance.
1. The Underworld – Any representation of a descent/entrapment into hell or the “depths” (caves, belly of the whale, etc.) can be considered an underworld setting. Characters go through a symbolic “death”, travel through an underworld and re-emerge through some kind of rebirth. A variation on this setting involves a passage through a maze, or labyrinth which can symbolize the complex journey through the human mind.



ARCHETYPAL CHARACTERS

GOOD

1. The Hero – The hero in it's modern form is a protagonist character who fulfills a task and restores balance to the community. He/she is a born leader, whether they know it or not. He/she is a real survivor who has faith in good. Others are willing to believe in this hero and will follow him/her. (Odysseus, Theseus, Prince Charming)
1. The Young Person from the Provinces/Orphan – This special kind of hero was orphaned or taken away at a young age and raised by strangers. Later they return home as a stranger who offers a new perspective to some old problems (Harry Potter, Tarzan)
1. The Initiates – An innocent young pre-hero who must go on a quest, or special training before earning the right to be a hero or protector.(King Arthur)
1. Mentors – Mentors are the teachers in literature who counsel initiates almost the way a parent does. They show examples, sometimes magical, to teach the initiate skills and information. (Gandalf, Merlin, Dumbledore, Rafiki)
1. Loyal Companions/Sidekicks – These loyal peers are there to protect the hero at all costs. They are willing to face hardships and dangers and even death either because they believe in the hero, or the cause.
1. The Earth Mother – This female character is symbolic of all things natural and motherly. She is a protector, and a symbol of fertility, emotional and spiritual well-being, abundance and balance. She is usually middle-aged or older OR she shows up at various ages depending on the seasons. (Fairy Godmother)
1. The Librarian/Professor – This role has a male and female side. If male, the professor is usually cool and intellectual. He is a thinker, logical, honest and faithful. He has a tendency to not be flexible. He is often an inventor. If female, the librarian character is also cool and controlled, prim and proper and smart, but underneath her cool exterior she hides an uncontrolled passionate side longing for adventure and can be quite reckless when let out for the day.
1. The Fool/Free Spirit – This character is always optimistic that things will turn out well. He/she is symbolic of blind hope and always has time for silly things, flowers and rainbows and always sees the best in people. The fool wears his/her heart on his/her



sleeve easily giving and getting hurt. Sometimes the fool grows out of this role and into another archetype.

1. The Swashbuckler/Adventurer – Always ready for adventure, the swashbuckler is full of life and risk-taking. He knows little fear and acts with reckless abandon. Some swashbucklers search for gold, or secrets, or love, but one thing is certain – it is the thrill of the hunt that keeps the swashbuckler on the move. (Jack Sparrow)
1. The Warrior/Protector – The original “knight in shining armor”, the warrior is always ready to fight to defend honor, his country, and the helpless. He is chivalrous, an expert in protocol and handy with a sword. In the modern day he may also be handy with technology/computers. (Neo, Sir Percival)

BAD

1. The Rebel – Reckless and fearless, this is what happens when the fool grows up. Once believing in great ideas, he finds that the world is corrupt or uncaring and turns bitter. He is violent, strong and usually in the wrong, but savvy and smart. Sometimes he rebels against something in particular, but most of the time he rebels against everything. Sometimes in literature he will have a loyal streak, still hanging on to the remnants of his old life. (Dallas Winston)
1. The Seductress – A real beauty, this female character always gets her man. Her stunning beauty and ability to manipulate men can cause a hero to fall into her trap. Sometimes this character is just evil, but most of the time this woman has had to use this technique to survive or to get ahead.
1. The Tyrant – This leader, male or female, is obsessed with power. He/she may have started their journey with good intentions, but now they only want power and control and will step on anyone who gets in the way, sometimes violently. Many tyrants have a two-faced quality sending others to do their dirty-work, especially if in the political arena.
1. The Devil – Truly evil, the devil speaks with charm and poise and offers the hero everything he might want in order to tempt him away from his course. The devil is bent only on conquest and destruction of the human soul. He seeks out weakness, and makes contracts and in the end offers only eternal pain.
1. The Traitor – A character who uses words carefully, he/she weaves elaborate plots in order to trap heroes. Most others don't realize how dangerous or manipulative this person is. He often plays people off against each other, but usually likes to be the one to



stab you in the back, then look you in the face and laugh about it. Female traitors often do this to gain possession of a man, or betray friends for their own benefit.

1. The Evil Genius – This archetype was the kid who got bullied on the playground for being smart and is now out to seek revenge. He/she loves showing off his superior brain and inventions of torture. He hates everyone and is usually bent on destruction.
1. The Sadist – This character is truly a loony. Usually male, his only desire is to create pain and suffering, either of the body or of the mind. A true sick-o, he is violent and loves to be in ultimate control of life and death. A psychopath/sociopath, he will never change and cannot be saved. This mind-game torturer is savage and cruel and should be locked up for life.
1. The Creature/Predator – This nightmarish exaggeration of a wild animal plays on our deepest fears of being eaten by something we never quite saw. We see this in literature that includes vampires and werewolves. In the movies we have seen giant sharks, anacondas, spiders – you name it.

NEUTRAL

1. The Matriarch/Patriarch – This mother or father is the strong-armed leader of the family. The dark side of this archetype is controlling, meddlesome and never sees his/her children as quite good enough.(The Godfather) The good side of this archetype is loving, supportive and strong – a real leader, willing to take a bullet for the family.
1. The Star-Crossed Lovers – Victims of a bad situation, the lovers come from backgrounds that destined to not get along because of their histories, or their differences. The bad side of this relationship leads to tragedy and death.(Romeo and Juliet) The good side of this situation can result in all characters learning a valuable lesson about tolerance. (Boo Radley in To Kill a Mockingbird)
1. Evil figure with a good heart – This dark figure who is often portrayed as the devil's right hand man, is often saved by the nobility of the hero. A good guy who at the last minute finds redemption from his evil path, his redemption often causes his death. (Darth Vader)
1. The Damsel in Distress – Again, an archetype with two distinct points of view, the damsel in distress may be a true victim who cannot save herself. (Snow White) Alternatively she may be a weak-minded idiot who is too stupid or vain to save herself. Either way she is vulnerable and must be saved by the hero. Because the hero knows this, the damsel is often used as a trap.



1. The Cause Fighter/Terrorist – This archetype also can take two paths. Both characters begin their journey with strong commitments to a political or personal cause. They've both decided that there is something worth fighting for. Neither one can be persuaded to change their minds. The Cause Fighter accepts that to change the world one has to stage rallies, make land-mark court cases, call the papers and fight the good fight. The Terrorist, on the other hand, will use whatever means necessary to make a statement, and if that includes hurting the innocent to draw attention to the cause, so be it.
1. The Tragic Artist/Outcast – These characters, like the one above, start in similar places, but have very different destinies. Both archetypes begin with a great deal of creativity and sensitivity. They are often shy but want to belong. The artist takes his creative “weirdness” and puts it to use to create something beautiful, thus gaining a place of acceptance. The Outcast becomes tortured and finds himself/herself willing to hurt others in order to be accepted.
1. The Uncommitted Lover – This Don Juan type is a true charmer. Usually male, this “player” creates every woman’s fantasy. He is romantic, kind, passionate, fun and attends to a woman’s every need – except stability. He cannot be counted on and breezes out of one woman’s life and into another’s. Don’t expect him to stick around to get through life’s hard times.
1. The Best Friend – This loyal companion and regular guy is the moral center of our hero. He never lets the hero get distracted or lost and often pulls his hero friend to the side to counsel him. He is dependable, honest, soft hearted and will always “be there”.
1. The Trapped Spouse – This husband/wife married young. The marriage was based on politics, money, or family contacts and not based on a supportive, loving relationship. This leaves an incredibly boring and dry, but stable and safe relationship. The trapped spouse can either make the best of it, go through trials, and eventually find true love, OR the trapped spouse can take some risks, and make a break of the marriage.
1. The Hag/Witch/Shaman – The hag or witch is always an older woman, sometimes very old who has a great deal of wisdom, and usually a connection with magical forces. People in the community come for advice or information. The Shaman is a male version of this. This archetype always lives alone or with symbolic animals. Usually good or neutral in nature, this character plays a vital part of the hero quest, but is uninvolved with the outcome of events.
1. The Prophet/reporter – The prophet (sometimes physically blind) serves as a way to warn heroes of the perils to come. Many prophets get ignored and the heroes who ignore them are always sorry about it later on. The modern prophet is the reporter who



puts two and two together and predicts how things will turn out without being interested in the outcome.

ARCHETYPAL ***PLOTS***

1. The Quest – This plot concentrates on finding one object, such as the Holy Grail, that will restore fertility to a wasteland, health to the ill, or plenty to the impoverished.
1. The Task – This refers to a certain superhuman feat that must be accomplished in order for the hero to reach his goal.
1. The Journey – Characters must go through a journey or travel which sends the hero through many trials and dangers in which he must face his fears in order to restore happiness, fertility, justice, or harmony to his community. The hero often must endure a wasteland or underworld where he/she is “reborn”
1. The Fall – Many characters who begin this plot line in a high safe place, find themselves suffering from a personal weakness that causes them to fall from grace. A fall is usually accompanied by either a redemption or tragedy.
1. The Battle of Good vs. Evil – This is a common plot that is pretty self-explanatory. Usually good triumphs.
1. The Wound that Never Heals – This wound, of the body or the mind, can never be fully healed, usually from a loss of innocence. Sometimes the wound leads a character to insanity.
1. The Magic Weapon – Often related to a task, this plot relies on the hero’s ability to learn how to use a piece of equipment, possibly a magic sword, or in the modern world, a computer program. The use of this magic Whatever-it-is solves the main conflict and proves the worth of the hero.
1. Boy-meets-girl – The basis of all romantic plot lines.
1. Loss of Innocence – A good person, usually young and inexperienced, sees and experiences something of the world and learns how things really work.
1. The Rite of Passage/Ritual – This is an organized event or ritual in which a young person officially becomes an adult.
1. The Initiation – This situation refers to a moment, usually psychological, in which an individual becomes mature and accepts a certain responsibility. He/she expresses a new understanding of problems and accepts that he/she is an important part of the solution.



Typically, a hero gets a calling or message or sign that sacrifices must be made and he/she has to grow up. (The Lion King)

