

Common Archetypes and Symbols in Literature

SITUATION ARCHETYPES

1. The Quest – This motif describes the search for someone or some talisman which, when found and brought back, will restore fertility to a wasted land, the desolation of which is mirrored by a leader's illness and disability.
2. The Task – This refers to a possibly superhuman feat that must be accomplished in order to fulfill the ultimate goal.
3. The Journey – The journey sends the hero in search for some truth of information necessary to restore fertility, justice, and/or harmony to the kingdom. The journey includes the series of trials and tribulations the hero faces along the way. Usually the hero descends into a real or psychological hell and is forced to discover the blackest truths, quite often concerning his faults. Once the hero is at this lowest level, he must accept personal responsibility to return to the world of the living.
4. The Initiation – This situation refers to a moment, usually psychological, in which an individual comes into maturity. He or she gains a new awareness into the nature of circumstances and problems and understands his or her responsibility for trying to resolve the dilemma. Typically, a hero receives a calling, a message or signal that he or she must make sacrifices and become responsible for getting involved in the problem. Often a hero will deny and question the calling and ultimately, in the initiation, will accept responsibility.
5. The Ritual – Not to be confused with the initiation, the ritual refers to an organized ceremony that involves honored members of a given community and an initiate. This situation officially brings the young man or woman into the realm of the community's adult world.
6. The Fall – Not to be confused with the awareness in the initiation, this archetype describes a descent in action from a higher to a lower state of being, an experience which might involve defilement, moral imperfection, and/or loss of innocence. This fall is often accompanied by expulsion from a kind of paradise as penalty for disobedience and/or moral transgression.
7. Death and Rebirth – The most common of all situational archetypes, this motif grows out of the parallel between the cycle of nature and the cycle of life. It refers to those situations in which someone or something, concrete and/or metaphysical dies, yet is accompanied by some sign of birth or rebirth.
8. Nature vs. Mechanistic World – Expressed in its simplest form, this refers to situations which suggest that nature is good whereas the forces of technology are bad.
9. Battle Between Good and Evil – These situations pit obvious forces which represent good and evil against one another. Typically, good ultimately triumphs over evil despite great odds.
10. The Unhealable Wound – This wound, physical or psychological, cannot be healed fully. This would also indicate a loss of innocence or purity. Often the wounds' pain drives the sufferer to desperate measures of madness.
11. The Magic Weapon – Sometimes connected with the task, this refers to a skilled individual hero's ability to use a piece of technology in order to combat evil, continue a journey, or to prove his or her identity as a chosen individual.
12. Father-Son Conflict – Tension often results 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. Sometimes the conflict is resolved in atonement.
13. Innate Wisdom vs. Educated Stupidity – Some characters exhibit wisdom and understanding intuitively as opposed to those supposedly in charge.

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SYMBOLIC ARCHETYPES

1. Light vs. Darkness – Light usually suggests hope, renewal, OR intellectual illumination; darkness implies the unknown, ignorance, or despair.
2. Water vs. Desert – Because water is necessary to life and growth, it commonly appears as a birth or rebirth symbol. Water is used in baptism services, which solemnizes spiritual births. Similarly, the appearance of rain in a work of literature can suggest a character's spiritual birth.
3. Heaven vs. Hell – Humanity has traditionally associated parts of the universe not accessible to it with the dwelling places of the primordial forces that govern its world. The skies and mountaintops house its gods; the bowels of the earth contain the diabolic forces that inhabit its universe.
4. Haven vs. Wilderness – Places of safety contrast sharply against the dangerous wilderness. Heroes are often sheltered for a time to regain health and resources.
5. Supernatural Intervention – The gods intervene on the side of the hero or sometimes against him.
6. Fire vs. Ice – Fire represents knowledge, light, life, and rebirth while ice like desert represents ignorance, darkness, sterility, and death.
7. Colors
 - a. Black (darkness) – chaos, mystery, the unknown, before existence, death, the unconscious, evil
 - b. Red – blood, sacrifice; violent passion, disorder, sunrise, birth, fire, emotion, wounds, death, sentiment, mother, Mars, the note C, anger, excitement, heat, physical stimulation
 - c. Green – hope, growth, envy, Earth, fertility, sensation, vegetation, death, water, nature, sympathy, adaptability, growth, Jupiter and Venus, the note G, envy
 - d. White (light) – purity, peace, innocence, goodness, Spirit, morality, creative force, the direction East, spiritual thought
 - e. Orange – fire, pride, ambition, egoism, Venus, the note D
 - f. Blue – clear sky, the day, the sea, height, depth, heaven, religious feeling, devotion, innocence, truth, spirituality, Jupiter, the note F, physical soothing and cooling
 - g. Violet – water, nostalgia, memory, advanced spirituality, Neptune, the note B
 - h. Gold – Majesty, sun, wealth, corn (life dependency), truth
 - i. Silver – Moon, wealth
8. Numbers:
 - a. Three – the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Ghost); Mind, Body, Spirit, Birth, Life, Death
 - b. Four – Mankind (four limbs), four elements, four seasons
 - c. Six – devil, evil
 - d. Seven – Divinity (3) + Mankind (4) = relationship between man and God, seven deadly sins, seven days of week, seven days to create the world, seven stages of civilization, seven colors of the rainbow, seven gifts of Holy Spirit.
9. Shapes:
 - a. Oval – woman, passivity
 - b. Triangle – communication, between heaven and earth, fire, the number 3, trinity, aspiration, movement upward, return to origins, sight, light
 - c. Square – pluralism, earth, firmness, stability, construction, material solidity, the number four
 - d. Rectangle – the most rational, most secure
 - e. Cross – the Tree of life, axis of the world, struggle, martyrdom, orientation in space
 - f. Circle – Heaven, intellect, thought, sun, the number two, unity, perfection, eternity, oneness, celestial realm, hearing,

Common Archetypes and Symbols in Literature

sound

- g. Spiral – the evolution of the universe, orbit, growth, deepening, cosmic motion, relationship between unity and multiplicity, macrocosm, breath, spirit, water

10. Nature:

- a. Air – activity, creativity, breath, light, freedom (liberty), movement
- b. Ascent – height, transcendence, inward journey, increasing intensity
- c. Center – thought, unity, timelessness, spacelessness, paradise, creator, infinity,
- d. Descent – unconscious, potentialities of being, animal nature
- e. Duality – Yin-Yang, opposites, complements, positive-negative, male-female, life-death
- f. Earth – passive, feminine, receptive, solid
- g. Fire – the ability to transform, love, life, health, control, sun, God, passion, spiritual energy, regeneration
- h. Lake – mystery, depth, unconscious
- i. Crescent moon – change, transition
- j. Mountain – height, mass, loftiness, center of the world, ambition, goals
- k. Valley – depression, low-points, evil, unknown
- l. Sun – Hero, son of Heaven, knowledge, the Divine eye, fire, life force, creative-guiding force, brightness, splendor, active awakening, healing, resurrection, ultimate wholeness
- m. Water – passive, feminine
- n. Rivers/Streams – life force, life cycle
- o. Stars – guidance
- p. Wind – Holy Spirit, life, messenger
- q. Ice/Snow – coldness, barrenness
- r. Clouds/Mist – mystery, sacred
- s. Rain – life giver
- t. Steam – transformation to the Holy Spirit
- u. Cave – feminine
- v. Lightning – intuition, inspiration
- w. Tree – where we learn, tree of life, tree of knowledge
- x. Forest – evil, lost, fear

11. Objects:

- a. Feathers – lightness, speed
- b. Shadow – our dark side, evil, devil
- c. Masks – concealment
- d. Boats/Rafts – safe passage
- e. Bridge – change, transformation
- f. Right hand – rectitude, correctness
- g. Left hand – deviousness
- h. Feet – stability, freedom
- i. Skeleton – mortality
- j. Heart – love, emotions
- k. Hourglass – the passage of time

CHARACTER ARCHETYPES

- 1. The Hero – In its simplest form, this character is the one ultimately who may fulfill a necessary task and who will restore fertility, harmony, and/or justice to a community. The hero character is the one who typically experiences an initiation, who goes the community's ritual (s), et cetera. Often he or she will embody characteristics of YOUNG PERSON FROM THE PROVINCES, INITIATE, INNATE WISDOM, PUPIL, and SON.

Common Archetypes and Symbols in Literature

2. Young Person from the Provinces – This hero is taken away as an infant or youth and raised by strangers. He or she later returns home as a stranger and able to recognize new problems and new solutions.
3. The Initiates – These are young heroes who, prior to the quest, must endure some training and ritual. They are usually innocent at this stage.
4. Mentors – These individuals serve as teachers or counselors to the initiates. Sometimes they work as role models and often serve as father or mother figure. They teach by example the skills necessary to survive the journey and quest.
5. Hunting Group of Companions – These loyal companions are willing to face any number of perils in order to be together.
6. Loyal Retainers – These individuals are like the noble sidekicks to the hero. Their duty is to protect the hero. Often the retainer reflects the hero's nobility.
7. Friendly Beast – These animals assist the hero and reflect that nature is on the hero's side.
8. The Devil Figure – This character represents evil incarnate. He or she may offer worldly goods, fame, or knowledge to the protagonist in exchange for possession of the soul or integrity. This figure's main aim is to oppose the hero in his or her quest.
9. The Evil Figure with the Ultimately Good Heart – This redeemable devil figure (or servant to the devil figure) is saved by the hero's nobility or good heart.
10. The Scapegoat – An animal or more usually a human whose death, often in a public ceremony, excuses some taint or sin that has been visited upon the community. This death often makes them a more powerful force to the hero.
11. The Outcast – This figure is banished from a community for some crime (real or imagined). The outcast is usually destined to become a wanderer.
12. The Earth Mother – This character is symbolic of fulfillment, abundance, and fertility; offers spiritual and emotional nourishment to those who she contacts; often depicted in earth colors, with large breasts and hips.
13. The Temptress – Characterized by sensuous beauty, she is one whose physical attraction may bring about the hero's downfall.
14. The Platonic Ideal – This source of inspiration often is a physical and spiritual ideal for whom the hero has an intellectual rather than physical attraction.
15. The Unfaithful Wife – This woman, married to a man she sees as dull or distant, is attracted to a more virile or interesting man.
16. The Damsel in Distress – This vulnerable woman must be rescued by the hero. She also may be used as a trap, by an evil figure, to ensnare the hero.
17. The Star-Crossed Lovers – These two characters are engaged in a love affair that is fated to end in tragedy for one or both due to the disapproval of society, friends, family, or the gods.
18. The Creature of Nightmare – This monster, physical or abstract, is summoned from the deepest, darkest parts of the human psyche to threaten the lives of the hero/heroine. Often it is a perversion or desecration of the human body.

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RECOGNIZING PATTERNS

The following list of patterns comes from the book How to Read Literature Like a Professor by Thomas C. Foster who teaches at the University of Michigan. If you are serious about literary analysis, then I highly recommend buying this book. It goes into detail what I just briefly mention and is written in such a lively, witty voice that it does not read like a textbook at all! It will be well worth your time and effort to read it.

Trips tend to become quests to discover self.

Meals together tend to be acts of communion/community or isolation.

Ghosts, vampires, monsters, and nasty people and sometimes simply the antagonists are not about supernatural brew-ha-ha; they tend to depict some sort of exploitation.

There's only one story. Look for allusions and archetypes.

Weather matters.

Violence and be both literal and figurative.

Symbols can be objects, images, events, and actions.

Sometimes a story is meant to change us, the readers, and through us change society.

Keep an eye out for Christ-figures.

Flying tends to represent freedom. What do you think falling represents?

Getting dunked or just sprinkled in something wet tends to be a baptism.

Geography tends to be a metaphor for the psyche.

Seasons tend to be traditional symbols.

Disabilities, Scars, and Deformities show character and theme.

Heart disease tends to represent problems with character and society.

So do illness and disease.

Read with your imagination.

Irony trumps everything!

Remember the difference between public and private symbols.

