Archetypes in Literature

Definition of Archetype:

“A universally recognizable element . . . that recurs across all literature and life (Latrobe 13). Psychologist Carl Jung called these elements a kind of “collective unconscious” of the human race, prototypes rather than something gained from experience. The word is derived from the Greek: arche, original, and typos, form or model; thus, original model (Latrobe 13).

An archetype is the first real example or prototype of something (as the Model T is the prototype of the modern automobile). In this sense an archetype can be considered the ideal model, the supreme type or the perfect image of something (Brunel 111-112, 114).

A key to understanding folk literature is to understand archetypes. “An archetype is to the psyche what an instinct is to the body. . . . . Archetypes are the psychic instincts of the human species.” (Edinger as quoted in Knapp 10). Archetypes are universal in human beings.

“Archetypes are repeated patterns that recur in the literature of every age” (Sloan 48).

Examples of Archetypes

Characters:

Hero (think of the classic hero journey & qualities of hero)

Mother figure

• Fairy Godmother (surrogate mother)—comforts and directs child, especially when he or she is confused and needs guidance. Represents powers that can be called on for help when it is needed. Helps young person to solve own problems (Knapp 71).
• Earth Mother
• Stepmother

The great teacher/mentor

• Wise old men/women

The innocent

• Child/Youth
• Inexperienced adult

Underdog

Double
• Split personality—the other side of an individual

Helping animals

Scapegoat/Sacrificial Victim

Enchantress/Temptress

The Giant/Monster/Ogre

Villain
  • Wolf

Trickster

Evil figure
  • The Devil
  • Serpent

Settings

Garden
  • Cultivated and carefully planned. Restricted to certain vegetation.

Forest
  • Habitat of the Great Mother (Mother Nature), the lunar force. Fertility. The vegetation and animals flourish in this “green world” because of the sustaining power of the Great Mother. Symbolically the primitive levels of the feminine psyche, protective and sheltering. Those who enter often lose their direction or rational outlook and thus tap into their collective unconscious. This unregulated space is opposite of the cultivated gardens, which are carefully planned and are restricted to certain vegetation.

Tree
  • Represents life and knowledge

Caves and tunnels

Mountains and peaks

The River

The Sea

Fountain
• Stands for purification; the sprinkling of water (baptism) washes away sin. Water of fountain gives new life (Knapp 32).

Islands

**Actions/Events:**

**Journey**
- Linear
- Circular
- Quests
  - Quest for material wealth
  - Quest for security, as a secure place to live
  - Quest for kin
  - Quest for global good, such as when a kingdom is threatened
  - Quest for self, for self-identity or self-assurance

**Rites of initiation**

**Coming of age**

**Sleep**
- Crucial for physical and/or psychological healing. During dreams, person can grow. Person can fantasize freely in sleep. A transitional and beneficial period. In dream sphere can descend to the sphere of the Great Mother. Person awakens with a greater understanding of human nature (Knapp 88).

**Sacrificial rites**

**Transformation**

**Death and rebirth**