



## Perspectives on Literature and Film

A year-long series that explores the relationship between literature and film, focusing on the artistic elements and techniques used to tell a story.

### **SYMBOL**

On the most literal level, a symbol is something which is itself and yet stands for or suggests or means something more than itself. For example, language is symbolic. The letters A P P L E create a word which represents a particular object in the world. A flag is just pieces of cloth yet people use it to represent, symbolize a nation. In narrative, a symbol may be a physical object (a cane, an egg, wallpaper), a person, a situation, an action, or some other item, which has a literal meaning in the story but suggests or represents other meanings as well.



This project is funded by a grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum and the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rasmuson Foundation, and Friends of the Haines Borough Public Library.

## ARCHETYPES IN NARRATIVES

An archetype is an original model or pattern from which other later copies are made, especially a character, an action, or situation that seems to represent common patterns of human life. Often, archetypes include a symbol, a theme, a setting, or a character that some scholars think have a common meaning in an entire culture, or universally. Archetypes recur in different times and places in myth, literature, folklore, dreams, art and rituals. The psychologist Carl Jung believed that the archetype originates in the collective unconscious of humanity in shared experiences of a race, such as birth, death, love, family life, struggles—all of which would be expressed in the subconscious of an individual who would recreate them in myths, dreams, and narratives. The study of these archetypes in narrative is known as archetypal criticism or mythic criticism. Archetypes are also called universal symbols.

### ARCHETYPAL SYMBOLS AND ASSOCIATIONS

#### *Light and Darkness*

Light usually suggests hope, renewal or intellectual illumination; darkness implies the unknown, ignorance, despair, evil.

#### *Water and Desert*

Because water is necessary to life and growth, it commonly appears as a birth or rebirth symbol. It's used in baptismal services, which symbolize a spiritual birth. Rain, too, can suggest a character's regeneration. But water can also symbolize death. In Peter Weir's film *The Year of Living Dangerously*, he shows how the polluted water of the river is killing people. In contrast, the aridity of a desert is often associated with spiritual sterility and desiccation.

#### *Heaven and Hell*

Human beings have traditionally associated parts of the universe not accessible to them with the dwelling places of primordial forces that govern the universe. The skies and mountain tops house the gods; the bowels of the earth contain the diabolic forces that inhabit the universe.

#### *Woods or Jungle*

Often associated with the journey of a hero who must face death or danger in the wilderness—probably because they are dark, mysterious, and represent primeval nature where human civilization has not gained control. Think about the Forest Savage in *The Sword in the Stone*.

#### *Ocean*

Also associated with the journey of the hero is the ocean. It represents a primordial force of nature where death is possible, but also a path to new

## ARCHETYPAL PATTERN OF A HERO FROM LORD RAGLAN'S *THE HERO*

- Mother is virgin, royal or chosen by a god
- Father is king, often near relative of mother
- Unusual circumstances surround conception and birth
- At birth, an attempt is made to kill the child
- Child is spirited away
- Reared by foster-parents in a distant land
- On reaching manhood, returns to kingdom
- After a victory over a king/wild beast/dragon/giant, marries the princess
- Becomes King
- For a time reigns uneventfully
- Prescribes laws
- Eventually loses favor with god/subjects
- Driven from throne/city
- Meets a mysterious death often at the top of a hill
- His children, if any, do not succeed him
- His body is not buried but nevertheless has one or more holy sepulchres

## HOW TO IDENTIFY THE HEROIC QUEST ARCHETYPE

The following characteristics heroic quest archetype have been suggested by Peter R. Stillman in *Introduction to Myth*.

Heroes are often of obscure or mysterious origin. They may be sons of gods or of royal parents. Their childhood may be unusual; they may be left to die but then rescued and brought up in poverty or isolation. Often they do not discover their real parentage until they are older and can prove themselves through some sign.

lands, new experiences and knowledge, or self-illumination. The sea is often seen as a mother, but as a mother who must be respected or obeyed, or the hero will be punished.

### *Sun*

Like many symbols, it can represent both life and death. As a giver of heat, light, growth it reveals life, regeneration; when associated with the desert, it can become an enemy.

### *Child-gods*

Often characters of elves, dwarfs, fairies, and other small creatures associated with the forest represent the hidden forces of nature.

### *Circle*

A symbol of perfection, since it is a figure which has no beginning and no end, and is the same distance from the center to all its points. Circular objects often suggest spiritual, religious, or magical events and experiences. (A wedding ring, a halo, the Round Table, a tribal circle)

## ARCHETYPAL CHARACTERS

### *The Hero*

Lord Raglan, in *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*, argues that this archetype is so well defined that the life of the protagonist can be clearly divided into a series of well-marked adventures, which strongly suggest a ritualistic pattern. Raglan 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, 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 the 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 of more holy sepulchres. Characters who exemplify this archetype to a greater or lesser extent are Oedipus, Theseus, Jason, Moses, Elijah, Jesus Christ, King Arthur, Robin Hood, Superman.

### *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.

### *The Outcast*

A figure who is banished from a social group for some crime or presumed crime against others. The outcast is usually destined to become a wanderer from place to place.

## *The Devil Figure*

Evil incarnate. This character offers worldly goods, fame, or knowledge to the protagonist in exchange for the possession of his soul.

## *The Woman Figure*

**EARTHMOTHER**—Symbolic of fruition, abundance, and fertility, this character traditionally offers spiritual and emotional nourishment to those with whom she comes into contact.

**TEMPTRESS**—Characterized by sensuous beauty, this woman is one to whom the protagonist is physically attracted and who ultimately brings about his downfall.

**PLATONIC IDEAL**—This woman is a source of inspiration and a spiritual ideal for who the protagonist or artist has an intellectual rather than a physical attraction.

**UNFAITHFUL WIFE**—A woman, married to a man she sees as dull and unimaginative, is physically attracted to a more virile and desirable man.

## *The Star-crossed Lovers*

A pair of lovers who enter an ill-fated love affair that ends tragically in the death of either or both.

## **ARCHETYPAL SITUATIONS**

### *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 or order to a society in chaos. (Galahad's search for the holy grail.)

### *The Task*

To save a kingdom, to win the fair lady, to identify himself so that he may reassume his rightful position, the Hero must perform some nearly superhuman deed. (In *The Sword in the Stone*, Arthur must pull the sword from the stone.)

### *The Initiation*

This usually takes the form of an initiation into life, an awakening, a new consciousness. Most often this is seen in stories of an adolescent coming into maturity and adulthood with all the attendant problems and responsibilities this process involves. Often it involves a loss of innocence and an increased perception of human behavior and the way the world works. (Scout in *To Kill A Mockingbird* sees the world differently at the end of the story.)

### *The Fall*

This archetype describes a descent from a higher to a lower state of being. The experience usually involves spiritual defilement or loss of

Heroes are neither fools nor invincible.

The heroes, while they may be partly divine are definitely human in their natures. They are subject to fear and danger; they are not immortal but may suffer harm. Sometimes the hero is invulnerable except for one spot on his body or he may be defeated with only one particular weapon.

Heroes are called upon to make a journey or to follow a goal or quest.

Heroes frequently choose difficult or dangerous adventures.

Sometimes they do not choose, but are chosen for the adventure. They labor for the good of others by ridding a land of a hideous monster or they seek to bring back to their people some object which has been lost or stolen. Their quests may not always be for something noble, but they follow through nobly and refuse to surrender.

The hero's way is not always direct or clear to him.

The way or path of life is never clear; thus the hero frequently becomes lost or must take a detour or solve a riddle.

The hero's way is beset with dangers, loneliness, and temptation.

Cruel kings, horrible monsters, dangerous seas—all these are physical dangers faced by the hero. But far more dangerous may be the feeling of isolation or alienation as the hero goes far from home alone.

He is often tempted to give up or give in. Temptations appeal to his senses rather than to his intellect when he is encouraged to rest, or eat a certain food, or drink a certain wine. Women often appear as the most dangerous temptation of all.

Many quest tales supply friends, servants, or disciples as company to the hero.

When the hero is given

**cont. page 4**

companionship, he is often still alone because the friend or servant does not understand the quest or is not motivated by the sense of mission but by friendship.

The hero has a guide or guides. Frequently the hero receive help from unexpected sources be they fairy godmothers or beautiful/ugly witches or sorceresses. He may be given a magic potion or weapon or simply information. Sometimes the guide is limited by powers stronger than his own word and therefore he can only help up to a certain point.

The hero suffers a wound. The hero's basic humanity is revealed when he is wounded. Though the wound may not be fatal, it often leads to the hero's death and descent, which he does not resist though he may dread it. The wound shows the willingness of the hero to be a sacrifice for the good of his society.

The hero descends into darkness and is not the same after emerging from the darkness.

Usually the final test of the hero is his descent, either physical or emotional, into some hell-like place of suffering or death. The fear, loneliness, or despair experienced by the hero is a type of death-rebirth which leads to enlightenment or maturity, changing the hero in some important way.

What the hero seeks is usually no more than a symbol of what he really finds.

While the goal is usually something tangible, the success or achievement of that goal is somewhat more spiritual. The maturity or growth of the hero becomes more important than the actual object of the quest.

innocence or bliss. The fall is usually accompanied by expulsion of some kind of paradise as punishment for disobedience and moral transgression. (The story of Adam and Eve is a prime example.)

### *Death and Rebirth*

This seems to be the most common situational archetype. It 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. Anthropologists believe that fertility rites and vegetative rituals usually took place in the spring because this is the time of physical regeneration of Nature, an appropriate time to enact ritualistic statements of spiritual rebirth and resurrection. Sir James Frazer cites in *The Golden Bough* many rites celebrating the rebirth of dying gods, especially among peoples of Egypt and Western Asia. Much of human celebrations are tied to the seasons of nature, thus forming death and rebirth images and patterns in narratives across all cultures.

*From Literature in Critical Perspectives, Walter K. Gordon, Ed.*