

Archetypal Symbols

Cautionary note: The archetypes and symbolic meanings that follow are merely common and representative, that is, by no means exhaustive. These images do not function as archetypes each time they appear in literature; rather, their meaning will vary somewhat according to their contexts.

A. Archetypal images:

1. Water: the mystery of creation; birth-death-resurrection; purification and redemption; fertility and growth. According to Carl Jung, water is most common symbol for the unconscious.
 - a) The Sea: the mother of all life; spiritual mystery and infinity; death and rebirth; timelessness and eternity; the unconscious.
 - b) Rivers: death and rebirth (baptism); the flowing of time into eternity; transitional phases of the life cycle; incarnations of deities.
2. Sun (fire and sky are closely related): creative energy; law in nature; consciousness (thinking, enlightenment, wisdom, spiritual vision); father principle (moon and earth tend to be associated with the mother principle); passage of time and life.
 - a) Rising sun: birth; creation; enlightenment
 - b) Setting sun: death
3. Colors:
 - a) Red: blood, sacrifice, violent passion, disorder
 - b) Green: growth, sensation, hope, fertility, in ironical context may be associated with death and decay
 - c) Blue: usually highly positive, associated with truth, religious feeling, spiritual purity, security
 - d) White, highly multivalent; signifying in its positive aspects light, purity, innocence, and timelessness; signifying in its negative aspects, death, terror, the supernatural, and the blinding truth of an inscrutable cosmic mystery as in "The Whiteness of the Whale" chapter in Moby Dick
 - e) Black (darkness): chaos, mystery, the unknown, death, primal wisdom, the unconscious, evil, melancholy
4. Circle (sphere): wholeness, unity
 - a) Mandala (a geometric figure based upon the squaring of a circle around a unifying center; the desire for spiritual unity and psychic integration. In classical forms features the juxtaposition of the triangle, the square, and the circle with their numerical equivalents of three, four, and seven.
 - b) Egg (oval): the mystery of life and the forces of generation
 - c) Yang-Yin- the Chinese symbol representing the union of opposite forces of the Yang (masculine principle: light, activity, the conscious mind) and the Yin (the feminine principle: darkness, passivity, and the unconscious mind).
 - d) Ouroboros: the ancient symbol of a snake biting its own tail, signifying the eternal cycle of life, primordial unconsciousness, the unity of opposing forces (as in Yang-Yin).
5. Serpent (snake or worm): symbol of energy and pure force (cf. libido); evil, corruption, sensuality; destruction; mystery; wisdom; the unconscious.
6. Numbers:

- a) Three: light; spiritual awareness and unity (cf. The Holy Trinity); the male principle.
 - b) Four: associated with the circle, life cycle, four seasons; female principle, earth, nature; four elements (earth, air, fire, water).
 - c) Seven: the most potent of all symbolic numbers – signifying the union of three and four, the complement of the cycle, the perfect order.
7. The archetypal woman (Great Mother- the mysteries of life, death, and transformation):
- a) The Good Mother (positive aspects of the Earth Mother): associated with the life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, abundance (for example, Demeter, Ceres).
 - b) The Terrible Mother: the witch, sorceress, siren, whore, femme fatale – associated with sensuality, sexual orgies, fear, danger, darkness, dismemberment, emasculation, death; the unconscious in its terrifying aspects.
 - c) The Soul Mate: the Sophia figure, Holy Mother, the princess or “beautiful lady” – incarnation of inspiration and spiritual fulfillment (cf. Jungian *anima*)
8. The Wise Old Man (savior, redeemer, guru): personification of the spiritual principle, the representing, Carl Jung says, “ knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other hand, moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help, which make his “spiritual” character sufficiently “plain.” What is more, he even tests the moral qualities of others and makes gifts dependent on this test. The old man always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea can extricate him. For internal and external reasons, though, the hero can not accomplish this himself; the knowledge he needs to compensate for his deficiency comes in the form of a personified thought, i.e., in the shape of his sagacious and helpful old man.”
9. Garden: paradise; innocence; unspoiled beauty (especially feminine); fertility.
10. Tree: denotes life of the cosmos; its growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is, therefore, equivalent to immortality.
11. Desert: spiritual acidity; death; nihilism, hopelessness

B. Archetypal Motifs or Patterns

1. Creation: perhaps the most fundamental of all archetypal motifs – virtually every mythology is built on some account of how the Cosmos, Nature, and Man were brought into existence by some supernatural Being or Beings.
2. Immortality: another fundamental archetype, generally taking one of two basic narrative forms:
 - a) Escape from time: “Return to Paradise, the state of timeless bliss enjoyed by man before his tragic Fall into corruption and mortality.
 - b) Mystical submersion into cyclical time: the theme of endless death and regeneration – man achieves a kind of immortality by submitting the vast, mysterious rhythm of Nature’s eternal cycle, particularly the cycle of the seasons.
3. Hero archetypes (archetypes of transformation and redemption):
 - a) The quest: the hero (savior, deliver) undertakes some long journey during which he must perform impossible tasks, battle with monsters, solve

unanswerable riddles, and overcome insurmountable obstacles to save the kingdom and, perhaps, marry the princess.

- b) Initiation: the hero undergoes a series of excruciating ordeals in passing from ignorance and immaturity to social and spiritual adulthood, that, is in achieving maturity and becoming a full-fledged member of his social group. The initiation most commonly consists of three distinct phases: (1) separation, (2) transformation, and (3) return. Like the quest, this is a variation of the death-and-rebirth archetype.
- c) The sacrificial scapegoat: the hero, with whom the welfare of the tribe or nation is identified, must die to atone for the people's sins and restore the land to fruitfulness.

Examples of heroes: Moses, Hercules, Siegfried, Luke Skywalker, and Arthur. In the "standard the story" some of the following occur: (1) the hero is the child of distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. (2) His origin is preceded by difficulties such as prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of due to external prohibition or obstacles. (3) During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy in the form of an oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). (4) As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, often in a box of some sort. (5) He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds, for instance), and is suckled by animals or a humble woman – literally or figuratively. (6) After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in highly versatile fashion. (7) He takes revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged on the other. (8) Finally, he achieves rank and honors.

C. Archetypes as Genres

In addition to appearing as images and motifs, archetypes may be found in even more complex combinations as genres that conform with the major phases of seasonal cycle

The correspondent genres for the four seasons follow:

- a) The mythos of spring: comedy.
- b) The mythos of summer: romance.
- c) The mythos of fall: tragedy.
- d) The mythos of winter: irony.

Finally, consider the following idea concerning. Myth is the organizing principle of literary form, providing a diagram or blueprint of what literature as a whole is about, that is, an imaginative survey of what is imaginatively conceivable in the human condition - from the beginning to the end, from the height to the depth.