

Archetypal Literary Criticism

Archetypal criticism proceeds from the initial assumption that every work of literature can be categorized and fitted into a large framework that encompasses all literature.

BASIC PREMISES OF ARCHETYPAL THEORY:

1. The critic is at the center of interpretive activity, and the critic functions as teacher, interpreter, priest, seer. Criticism is a structure of thought and knowledge in its own right.
2. The critic works inductively by reading individual works and letting critical principles shape themselves out of the literature; that is, the critic examines the individual work to ascertain the archetypes underlying the work.
3. Literary taste is not relevant to literary criticism.
4. Ethical criticism is important; that is, the critic must be aware of art as a form of communication from the past to the present.
5. All literary works are considered part of tradition.
6. Like mathematics, literature is a language that can provide the means for expressing truths. Verbal constructs (i.e., the works of literature) represent mythical outlines of universal truths.

SOME EXAMPLES OF ARCHETYPES

Stated simply, archetypes are universal symbols. As Philip Wheelwright explains in *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), such symbols are

those which carry the same or very similar meanings for a large portion, if not all, of mankind. It is a discoverable fact that certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, light blood, up-down, the axis of a wheel, and others, recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and causal connection among them (111)

Examples of these archetypes and the symbolic meanings with which they tend to be widely associated follow (it should be noted that these meanings may vary significantly from one context to another):

A. Images

1. **Water**: the mystery of creation; birth-death-resurrection; purification and redemption; fertility and growth. According to Jung, water is also the commonest 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; incarnation 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 female or 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 negative context may be associated with death and decay.

c. Blue: usually highly positive, associated with truth, religious feeling, security, spiritual purity (the color of the Great Mother or Holy Mother).

d. Black (darkness): chaos, mystery, the unknown; death; primal wisdom; the unconscious; evil; melancholy.

e. White: highly multivalent, signifying, in its positive aspects, light, purity, innocence, and timelessness; in its negative aspects, death, terror, the supernatural, and the blinding truth of an inscrutable cosmic mystery (see, for instance, Herman Melville's chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby-Dick*).

4. Circle (sphere): wholeness, unity.

a. Mandala (a geometric figure based upon the squaring of a circle around a unifying center; [image] Note that in its classic Asian forms the mandala juxtaposes 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: a Chinese symbol [image] representing the union of the opposite forces of the yang (masculine principle, light, activity, the conscious mind) and the yin (female principle, darkness, passivity, the unconscious).

d. Ouroboros: the ancient symbol of the snake biting its own tail, signifying the eternal cycle of life, primordial unconsciousness, the unity of opposing forces (cf. yang-yin)

5. **Serpent** (snake, 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. (<Graves would question this>)

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 completion of a cycle, perfect order.

7. **The archetypal woman** (Great Mother--the mysteries of life death, 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 (including the negative aspects of the Earth 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. the Jungian anima).

8. **The Wise Old Man** (savior, redeemer, guru): personification of the spiritual principle, representing "knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other, moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help, which makes his 'spiritual' character sufficiently plain. . . . Apart from his cleverness, wisdom, and insight, the old man . . . is also notable for his moral qualities; 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. But since, for internal and external reasons, the hero cannot accomplish this himself, the knowledge needed to compensate the deficiency comes in the form of a personified thought, i.e., in the shape of this sagacious and helpful old man"

9. **Garden**: paradise; innocence; unspoiled beauty (especially feminine); fertility.

10. **Tree**: "In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality"

11. **Desert**: spiritual aridity; death; nihilism, hopelessness.

These examples are by no means exhaustive, but represent some of the more common archetypal images that the reader is likely to encounter in literature. The images we have listed do not necessarily function as archetypes every time they appear in a literary work. The discreet critic interprets them as such only if the total context of the work logically supports an archetypal reading.

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 humankind 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 perfect, timeless bliss enjoyed by man and woman before their tragic Fall into corruption and mortality.

b. Mystical submersion into cyclical time: the theme of endless death and regeneration--human beings achieve a kind of immortality by submitting to the vast, mysterious rhythm of Nature's eternal cycle, particularly the cycle of the seasons.

3. **Hero archetypes** (archetypes of transformation and redemption):

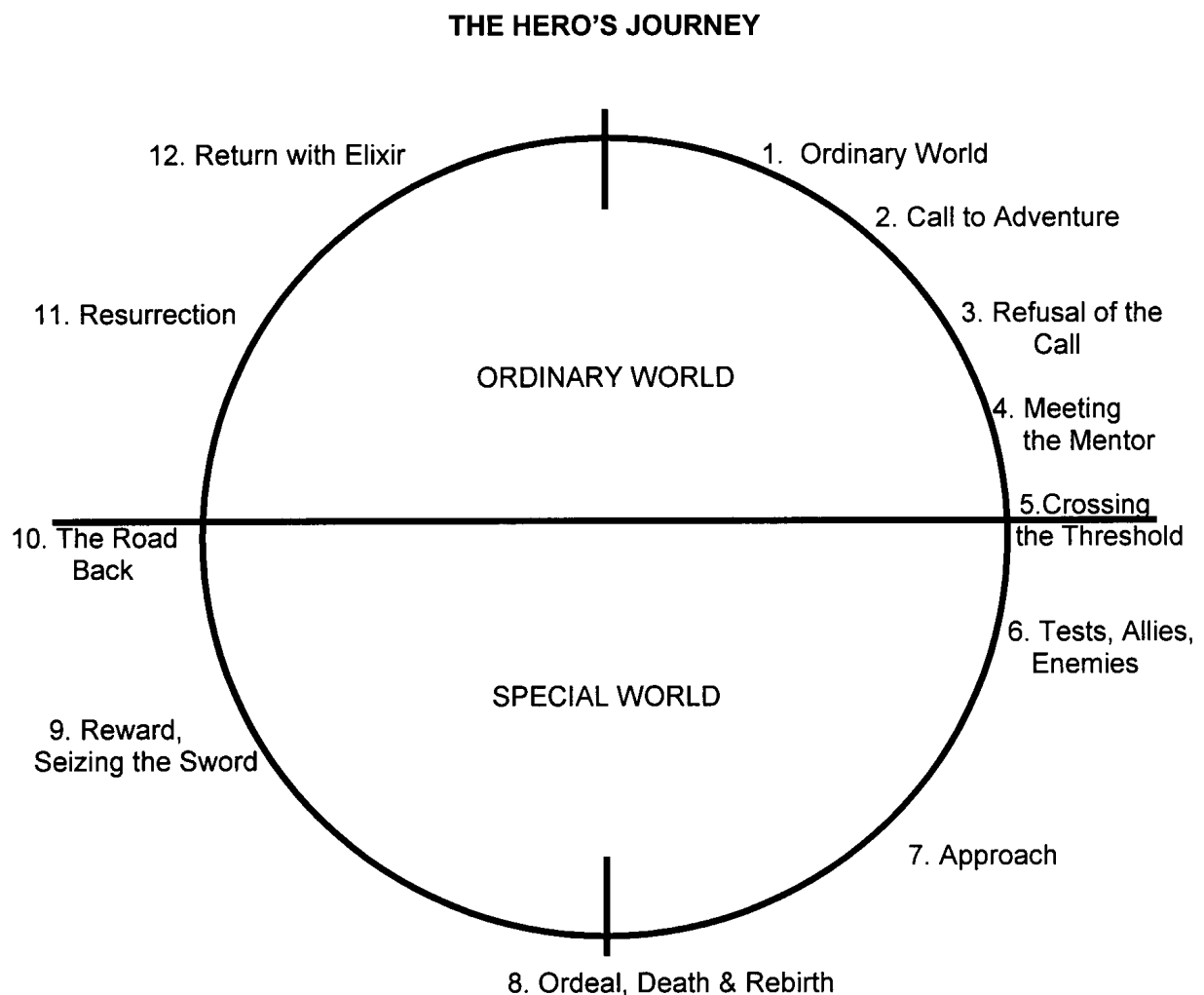
a. The quest: the hero (savior, deliverer) undertakes some long journey during which he or she must perform impossible tasks, battle with monsters, solve unanswerable riddles, and overcome insurmountable obstacles in order to save the

kingdom.

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 or her 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.

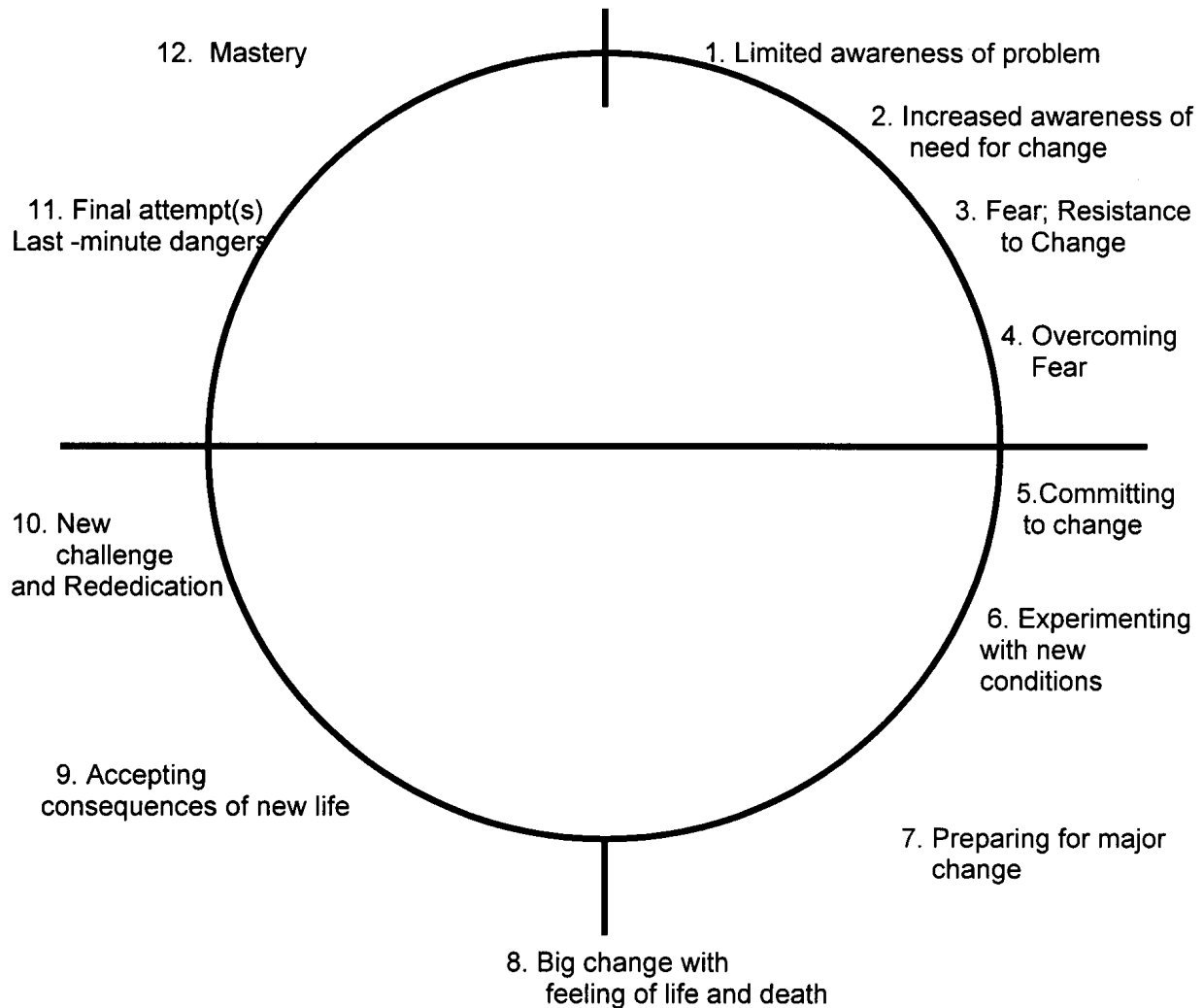
c. The sacrificial scapegoat: the hero, with whom the welfare of the tribe or nation is identified, must die to atone for the people's sins and restore the land to fruitfulness.

Here's what it looks like:



But the hero also has an inner journey to self discovery which looks like this:

THE HERO'S INNER JOURNEY



C. ARCHETYPES AS GENRES

Finally, in addition to appearing as images and motifs, archetypes may be found in even more complex combinations as genres or types of literature that conform with the major phases of the seasonal cycle. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957), indicates the correspondent genres for the four seasons as follows:

1. The mythos of spring: comedy
2. The mythos of summer: romance
3. The mythos of fall: tragedy
4. The mythos of winter: irony

With brilliant audacity Fry identifies myth with literature, asserting that myth is a "structural

organizing principle of literary form" (34) and that an archetype is essentially an "element of one's literary experience" (365). And in *The Stubborn Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1970) he claims that "mythology as a whole provides a kind of diagram or blueprint of what literature as a whole is all about, an imaginative survey of the human situation from the beginning to the end, from the height to the depth, of what is imaginatively conceivable" (102)

B. Jungian Psychology and Its Archetypal Insights

The second major influence on mythological criticism is the work of C.G. Jung, the great psychologist-philosopher and onetime student of Freud who broke with the master because of what he regarded as a too-narrow approach to psycho-analysis. Jung believed libido (psychic energy) to be more than sexual; also, he considered Freudian theories too negative because of Freud's emphasis on the neurotic rather than the healthy aspects of the psyche.

In developing this concept, Jung expanded Freud's theories of the personal unconscious, asserting that beneath this is a primeval, collective unconscious shared in the psychic inheritance of all members of the human family.

Some Special Archetypes: Shadow, Persona, and Anima

One major contribution is Jung's theory of individuation as related to those archetypes designated as the *shadow*, the *persona*, and the *anima*. **Individuation** is a psychological growing up, the process of discovering those aspects of one's self that make one an individual different from other members of the species. It is essentially a process of recognition--that is, as one matures, the individual must consciously recognize the various aspects, unfavorable as well as favorable, of one's total self. **This self-recognition requires extraordinary courage and honesty but is absolutely essential if one is to become a well-balanced individual.** Jung theorizes that neuroses are the results of the person's failure to confront and accept some archetypal component of the unconscious. Instead of assimilating this unconscious element to their consciousness, neurotic individuals persist in projecting it upon some other person or object. **In Jung's words, projection is an "unconscious, automatic process whereby a content that is unconscious to the subject transfers itself to an object, so that it seems to belong to that object.** The projection ceases the moment it becomes conscious, that is to say when it is seen as belonging to the subject" (*Archetypes*, 60). In layman's terms, the habit of projection is reflected in the attitude that "everybody is out of step but me" or "I'm the only honest person in the crowd." It is a commonplace that we can project our own unconscious faults and weaknesses on others much more easily than we can accept them as part of our own nature.

The **shadow**, the **persona**, and the **anima** are structural components of the psyche that human beings have inherited, just as the chicken has inherited his built-in response to the hawk. We encounter the symbolic projections of these archetypes throughout the myths and the literature of humankind. In melodrama, such as the television or Hollywood western, the persona, the anima, and the shadow are projected respectively in the characters of the hero, the heroine, and the villain. The **shadow** is the darker side of our unconscious self, the inferior and less pleasing aspects of the personality, which we wish to suppress. The most common variant of this archetype, when projected is the Devil, who, in Jung's words in *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), represents the "dangerous aspect of the unrecognized dark half of the personality" (94). In literature we see symbolic representations of this archetype in such figures as Shakespeare's Iago, Milton's Satan, Goethe's Mephistopheles, and Conrad's

Kurtz.

The **anima** is perhaps the most complex of Jung's archetypes. It is the "soul-image," the spirit of a man's life force or vital energy. In the sense of "soul," says Jung, anima is the "living thing in man, that which lives of itself and causes life. . . . Were it not for the leaping and twinkling of the soul, man would rot away in his greatest passion, idleness" (*Archetypes*, 26-27). Jung gives the anima a feminine designation in the male psyche, pointing out that the "anima-image is usually projected upon women" (in the female psyche this archetype is called the *animus*). **In this sense, anima is the contrasexual part of a man's psyche, the image of the opposite sex that he carries in both his personal and his collective unconscious.** (Examples for the animus come less readily to Jung; like Freud, he tended to describe features of the male psyche more than those of the female, even through both analysts' patients were nearly all women.) One other function of the anima is noteworthy here. The anima is a kind of mediator between the ego (the conscious will or thinking self) and the unconscious or inner world of the male individual. This function will be somewhat clearer if we compare the anima with the persona.

The **persona** is the obverse of the anima in that it mediates between our ego and the external world. Speaking metaphorically, let us say that the ego is a coin. The image on one side is the anima; on the other side, the persona. The persona is the actor's mask that we show to the world--it is our social personality, a personality that is sometimes quite different from our true self. Jung, in discussing this social mask, explains that, to achieve psychological maturity, the individual must have a flexible, viable persona that can be brought into harmonious relationship with the other components of his or her psychic makeup. He states, furthermore, that a persona that is too artificial or rigid results in such symptoms of neurotic disturbance as irritability and melancholy.