Archetypes in Writing

The following article has been shamelessly copied from "Writing 101: The 12 Literary Archetypes" and filled out with some other bits from Wikipedia, and "Character Archetypes: 8 Examples and How-to Write Them".

Stories, fairy tales, and myths share patterns that are recognized at a gut level by almost everyone, regardless of culture. Distilled to their essence, these patterns are character archetypes, storytelling tools that can be used to create and understand the things that make us tick.

What Is an Archetype?

An archetype is an emotion, character type, or event that is notably recurrent across the human experience. In the arts, an archetype creates an immediate sense of familiarity, allowing an audience member to relate to an event or character without having to necessarily ponder *why* they relate. Thanks to our instincts and life experiences, we're able to recognize archetypes without any need for explanation.

What's the Difference Between Archetypes, Stereotypes, Stock Characters, and Clichés?

Although there is overlap among archetypes, stereotypes, stock characters, and clichés, the words are not synonyms. As a general rule, common archetypes and stock characters provide guidelines for characterization, while stereotypes and clichés are negative labels, used to describe bad writing or shallow thinking.

A **stereotype** is an oversimplified notion or characterization. Some stereotypes are negative ("the dumb jock"), others are positive ("the innocent child"), but all are considered overly simplistic and undesirable in literature.

A **cliché** is an idea, event, or detail that's used so repeatedly in literature or film that used that it becomes predictable and even boring. An example of a cliché might include the TV firefighter haunted by the memory of the one damsel in distress that he couldn't save. An archetype, by contrast, does not imply predictability or intellectual laziness. Most of the time, it suggests that a character or situation will speak to a universal truth. Archetypes will by definition be familiar, but they aren't so predictable that we already know what will happen in their story.

A **stock character** is somewhere between an archetype and a stereotype: a character who intentionally fits a narrow, predictable description. Well-selected stock characters (e.g., a wise old man or a puffed-up military officer) can serve as an effective foil for a main character, particularly in comedy, but they aren't compelling as protagonists. Stock characters originate classic European tradition of commedia dell'arte, in which actors would wear masks and perform over-the-top versions of stock characters.

12 Archetypal Characters to Use in Your Writing

Some archetypal characters are well known—the hero, for instance—while others, such as the sage, are discussed less frequently outside of literary circles. While some archetypes lend themselves most readily to protagonists or villains, it's worth noting that any of these archetypes can apply to good, bad, major, or minor characters.

Here are the 12 common character archetypes, as well as examples of archetype in famous works of literature and film. These have been grouped under the three overarching categories relating to fundamental driving force; *Ego*, *Self*, and *Soul.* Each of the 12 character archetypes is then broken down to five more subcategories.

Ego Type

The Hero

The protagonist who rises to meet a challenge and saves the day.

Strengths: courage, perseverance, honor
Weaknesses: overconfidence, hubris
Hero Archetype Examples: Achilles (The Iliad), Luke Skywalker (Star Wars), Wonder Woman (Wonder Woman), Harry Potter (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone)

1. Hero
2. Athlete
3. Liberator
4. Rescuer
5. Warrior

The Caregiver

A character who continually supports others and makes sacrifices on their behalf.

Strengths: honorable, selfless, loyal
Weaknesses: lacking personal ambition or leadership
Caregiver Archetype Examples: Dolly Oblonsky (Anna Karenina), Calpurnia (To Kill a Mockingbird), Samwell Tarly (The Game of Thrones series), Mary Poppins (Mary Poppins)

1. Caregiver
2. Angel
3. Guardian
4. Healer
5. Samaritan

The Innocent

A morally pure character, often a child, whose only intentions are good.

Strengths: morality, kindness, sincerity
Weaknesses: vulnerable, naive, rarely skilled
Innocent Archetype Examples: Tiny Tim (A Christmas Carol), Lennie Small (Of Mice and Men), Cio-Cio-san (Madame Butterfly), Buddy the Elf (Elf)

1. Innocent
2. Child
3. Dreamer
4. Idealist
5. Muse

The Everyman / Orphan

A relatable character who feels recognizable from daily life.

Strengths: grounded, salt-of-the-earth, relatable
Weaknesses: lacking special powers, often unprepared for what's to come
Everyman Archetype Examples: Bilbo Baggins (The Hobbit), Leopold Bloom (Ulysses), Leslie Knope (Parks & Recreation), Winston Smith (1984)

1. Citizen
2. Advocate
3. Everyman
4. Networker
5. Servant

Self Type

The Ruler

A character with legal or emotional power over others.

Strengths: omnipotence, status, resources
Weaknesses: aloofness, disliked by others, out of touch
Ruler Archetype Examples: Creon (Oedipus Rex), King Lear (King Lear), Aunt Sally (The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn), Tony Soprano (The Sopranos)

1. Sovereign
2. Ambassador
3. Judge
4. Patriarch
5. Ruler

The Magician

A powerful figure who has harnessed the ways of the universe to achieve key goals.

Strengths: omniscience, omnipotence, discipline
Weaknesses: corruptibility, arrogance
Magician Archetype Examples: Prospero (The Tempest), Gandalf (The Lord of the Rings), Morpheus (The Matrix), Darth Vader (Star Wars)

1. Magician
2. Alchemist
3. Engineer
4. Innovator
5. Scientist

The Sage

A wise figure with knowledge for those who inquire. The mother figure or mentor is often based on this archetype.

Strengths: wisdom, experience, insight
Weaknesses: cautious, hesitant to actually join the action
Famous sages: Athena (The Odyssey), Obi-Wan Kenobi (Star Wars), Hannibal Lecter (The Silence of the Lambs), The Oracle (The Matrix)

1. Sage
2. Detective
3. Mentor
4. Shaman
5. Translator

The Jester

A funny character or trickster who provides comic relief, but may also speak important truths.

Strengths: funny, disarming, insightful
Weaknesses: can be obnoxious and superficial
Jester Archetype Examples: Sir John Falstaff (Henry V), King Lear's Fool (King Lear), Frank and Estelle Costanza (Seinfeld), R2D2 and C-3PO (Star Wars)

1. Jester
2. Clown
3. Entertainer
4. Provocateur
5. Shapeshifter

Soul Type

The Lover

The romantic lead who's guided by the heart.

Strengths: humanism, passion, conviction
Weaknesses: naivete, irrationality
Lover Archetype Examples: Romeo and Juliet (Romeo and Juliet), Noah Calhoun (The Notebook), Scarlett O'Hara (Gone With the Wind), Belle (Beauty and the Beast)

1. Lover
2. Companion
3. Hedonist
4. Matchmaker
5. Romantic

The Explorer

A character naturally driven to push the boundaries of the status quo and explore the unknown.

Strengths: curious, driven, motivated by self-improvement
Weaknesses: restless, unreliable, never satisfied
Explorer Archetype Examples: Odysseus (The Odyssey), Sal Paradise (On the Road), Huckleberry Finn (The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn), Sherlock Holmes (Sherlock Holmes)

1. Explorer
2. Adventurer
3. Pioneer
4. Generalist
5. Seeker

The Outlaw / Rebel

The rebel who won't abide by society's demands.

Strengths: independent thinking, virtue, owes no favors
Weaknesses: self-involved, potentially criminal
Outlaw Archetype Examples: Han Solo (Star Wars), Dean Moriarty (On the Road), Humbert Humbert (Lolita), Batman (The Dark Knight)

1. Rebel
2. Activist
3. Gambler
4. Maverick
5. Reformer

The Creator

A motivated visionary who creates art or structures during the narrative.

Strengths: creativity, willpower, conviction
Weaknesses: self-involvement, single-mindedness, lack of practical skills
Creator Archetype Examples: Zeus (The Iliad), Dr. Emmett Brown (Back to the Future), Dr. Moreau (The Island of Dr. Moreau), Dr. Victor Frankenstein (Frankenstein)

1. Creator
2. Artist
3. Entrepreneur
4. Storyteller
5. Visionary

These 12 archetypes, each with highly identifiable traits, populate our books, poetry, films, and theatrical productions.

Joseph Campbell and Character Archetypes

In addition to articulating the concept of "the hero's journey," academic Joseph Campbell helped popularize the idea of character archetypes in literature.

Author of the seminal work The Hero With a Thousand Faces (1949), Campbell applied the ideas of thinkers like Sir James George Frazer and Carl Jung, combining them with his own to distill eight character archetypes found throughout the hero's journey:

1. Hero
2. Mentor
3. Ally
4. Herald
5. Trickster
6. Shapeshifter
7. Threshold Guardian
8. Shadow

Archetypes in Writing

Campbell's ideas resonated with Hollywood filmmakers, particularly George Lucas, who was vocal about crafting the arc of Star Wars' Luke Skywalker around the story beats of the hero's journey. This made Luke more of a "classical" character, since Campbell's theory came out of extensive study of classical literature and theater.

Here are the descriptions of the *Hero's Journey* character archetypes.

The Hero

Often the easiest to identify, the Hero is usually (but not always) the protagonist of the story. The Hero at the beginning of the story is someone unaware of themselves and their place in the world, or simply someone who is satisfied with the status quo. Theirs is a journey of transformation. Once they embark upon adventure, the Hero faces challenges and learns lessons. They often struggle against personal flaws that hold them back from completing their quest.

A Hero absorbs the life lessons taught to him or her by archetypal characters and situations they encounter along their journey. At the climax of the story, they will use what they have learned to show how they've grown and evolved.

The Mentor

In life, it is said that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

Mentors are guides, dispensers of wisdom, opportunity, and tools that will aid the Hero on their quest. They are often depicted as wise old men or women. They may have been Heroes themselves in the past, and are here to share what they've learned, to pass along the lessons of their own experiences to the next generation. John Keating, in *The Dead Poets Society*, plays an inspirational mentor to an entire class of students.

Not all Mentors are the avuncular sort. In the 2014 movie *Whiplash*, jazz conductor Terence Fletcher, played by J.K. Simmons, is a violent and abusive Mentor, slapping and degrading his students in a warped desire to mold a musical genius.

Ally

Allies function as humanizers. They may bring out dormant aspects of the Hero, sometimes challenging, sometimes modeling changes to the Hero's worldview. At times, the Ally can serve as the audience character when the writer must use the Hero to commit deeds that cannot be condoned. Animals and spirit guides may serve as allies as well. Sidekicks are classic Allies. Other Allies may serve only briefly as helpers, offering assistance and exiting the story. Jorah Mormont is one of Daenerys Targaryen's steadfast allies in *Game of Thrones*. In *True Grit*, the Texas Ranger La Boeuf is a sometimes-confrontational ally to Mattie Ross, but an ally nonetheless.

The Herald

The Call to Adventure is often issued by a character who has assumed the role of the Herald. The Herald also serves to signal challenges and changes that the Hero must face, to let them know that change is coming. The Herald represents the need for change. *Star Wars*' R2D2 is an example of the Herald, as are the winged letters that Harry Potter receives inviting him to Hogwarts.

Trickster

Tricksters function as catalysts for change, while often remaining unchanged themselves. They call attention to imbalance and injustice, prompting action or reaction from the Hero. They may serve to lighten a morally or heavily transformative story. In Norse myth, Loki is a classic Trickster, provoking the other gods and goddesses to become embroiled in often embarrassing misadventures. Doctor Who wears the mask of a

Trickster. The Doctor remains unchanged – at least on the inside – while the lives of his (or her) travelling companions are utterly upended.

Shapeshifter

Whereas the Herald announces the need for Change, the Shapeshifter embodies the urge to change, the psychological or physical process of personal transformation. The Shapeshifter archetype can also be found in characters whose loyalty is uncertain, or whose true nature is unclear.

Threshold Guardian

This archetype serves to test the Hero, to make sure they are truly committed to the ordeals that lay before them. Although they may appear at first as opponents, blocking the way forward, once the Hero passes the test and proves their worth, the Threshold Guardian may sometimes end up as an Ally.

In *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, Woody Harrelson's character, Tobias Beckett, initially plays the role of Threshold Guardian. At first rejecting Han's desire to join his band of outlaws, he becomes a Mentor once Han proves his resourcefulness and tenacity. Later in the film, Beckett dons the mask of the Shapeshifter, leaving the audience to wonder where exactly his loyalties lie.

The Balrog in The Lord of the Rings is a Threshold Guardian, forcing the Fellowship to continue without their Mentor. Without Gandalf, they are on their own and must rise to the occasion or fail.

The Shadow

The Shadow is one half of a polarity, the opposing face of a positive archetype. A lover turning against their partner may become a jealous and vindictive person. A Mentor may become an antagonist if they feel threatened by their protégé.

The Shadow may be an external character, like Gollum in The Lord of the Rings. Voldemort is a Shadow character, linked to Harry Potter in a very personal way.

A Shadow may also be a fatal flaw within the Hero that will bring them to their knees. As a personal demon, the Shadow arises from the place within where one's unique gifts fail to be expressed. It's what happens when you sell your soul for shallow gain or turn your back on your gifts. Tyler Durden in Fight Club, and Mr. Hyde in The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are internal Shadows.

An internal Shadow may also be a talent or quality that remains unexpressed, the mother unable to love her remaining son, deeply wounded by the loss of another child, as in Ordinary People.

The Shadow is an archetypal aspect that prevents the protagonist from moving forward, not simply a villain or antagonist. It represents the things we don't like about ourselves, and the things that hold us back from being our true selves.

Using Archetypes in Your Writing

Characters can express different archetypes at different times, changing roles as if changing masks. Archetypes are a function of character, not a character itself. It is the representational values of the archetype, not the form, that is most important. The symbols of those values vary for individuals, cultures, and time.

You can build complex characters through the selection of consistent contradictory traits, a mother who can be both compassionate and cruel; a doctor who is both fearless and fearful, an actor who is confident yet insecure. In the movie *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, Samuel Jackson's character Richmond Valentine is

motivated by a desire to save the planet, a timely and noble goal, but to do so by using the most villainous means.

Archetypal roles can be combined. A Mentor may also be a Shadow or a Shapechanger at different points in the story, or even at the same time. The juxtaposition of opposing archetypal qualities can spark original ideas that lead to characters will resonate with their audience.

Understanding the functional images of archetypes also aids in the development of a supporting cast. Each character needs to enhance and define the Hero. Yoked to a complex protagonist, secondary characters play foil to the Hero, revealing depth and dimension by action rather than exposition. In this way, too, characters are imbued with a sense of psychological truth. Characters are art, not real life, yet they are born of self-knowledge.

Change it up. Let your creativity shine. Subvert the conventions of archetype to create the unexpected. Employ misdirection to play reader assumptions against them. Innovative interpretation of archetypes is a powerful skill for the writer's toolkit.

Homework

Your challenge should you choose to accept it is to write a story or part-story focused on a single character who has walked into a library. Other characters can join them or be in the library already, but the story needs to be centred around this one character. Use archetypes as you see fit. Bend them, twist them, mix them up.
    Any genre, POV.

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