Archetypes

An archetype is an original pattern, model or symbol, a persistent representation of an idea or concept across cultures which seems to represent common patterns of human life. Copies can be made of this pattern, making it the basis for universal themes. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung believed that archetypes are present in the human unconscious and represent the experiences of our human predecessors. They are the “contents of the collective unconscious.” According to this belief, archetypes are common in dreams, because, according to Jung, they are an unlearned tendency to experience things in a certain way. Jung also called them dominants, imagos, mythological or primordial images.

The study of these archetypes in literature is known as archetypal or mythological criticism. Along with formalist, biographical, historical, psychological, sociological, gender and reader-response (to name a few; these categories can be fluid), it is one of the ways to analyze literature.

There are three or four categories of archetypes: situation archetypes, symbol archetypes (sometimes these two categories are combined), thematic archetypes/archetype motifs and character archetypes. Here are some of the most common archetypes, symbols and motifs found in art and literature:

**Situations:**

1. **The task:** a situation in which a character or group of characters is driven to complete some duty of monstrous proportion.
2. **The quest:** a situation in which the character(s) are searching for something, whether consciously or unconsciously.

**Symbols:**

1. **Water** (and bodies of water like the sea, the river, etc.): the mystery of creation; eternity and timelessness; birth-death-resurrection; purification and redemption; fertility and growth. According to Jung, water is also the most common symbol for the unconscious. The river specifically symbolizes death and rebirth as in baptism; incarnation of deities and transitional phases of the life cycle.

2. **Sun:** (fire and sky are closely related): creative energy; law in nature; consciousness (thinking, enlightenment, wisdom, spiritual vision); father principle (moon and earth are associated with the female principle); passage of time and life (i.e., rising sun = birth, creation, hope; setting sun = death, sorrow).

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

4. **Desert:** spiritual aridity; death; nihilism, hopelessness.
5. **Tree:** life of the cosmos, inexhaustible life and even immortality because of its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes (i.e., the depiction of the cross of redemption as the tree of life in Christian iconography)

6. **Apples:** the forbidden fruit….such as Snow White’s apple.

7. **Colors:**
   a. Red: blood, sacrifice, violent passion, disorder.
   b. Green: growth, sensation, hope, fertility; in negative contexts may be associated with death and decay.
   c. Blue: usually 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: In its positive aspects, light, purity, innocence, and timelessness. In its negative aspects, death, terror, the supernatural, and the blinding truth of mystery.

8. **Circle** (sphere): wholeness, unity (i.e., the Yin-Yang symbolizes the oneness of opposite forces), the eternal cycle of life and death.

9. **Serpent** (snake, worm): symbol of energy, pure force; evil, corruption, sensuality; destruction; mystery, wisdom; the unconscious.

10. **Numbers:**
    a. Three: light, spiritual awareness and unity (i.e., 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 completion of the cycle, perfect order.

**Characters:**

11. **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 (i.e., Jungian anima).
    d. The “Femme Fatale” or Eve.
    e. The Shrew
12. **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 make his ‘spiritual’ character sufficiently plain. Also known for his moral qualities, and the way 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 (the wise old man sometimes appears in personified thought).

13. **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 monster, solve unanswerable riddles, and overcome insurmountable obstacles in order to save the kingdom (or an equivalent).
   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 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.

14. **The Trickster**: Often represented by a clown or a magician. The trickster may hamper the hero’s progress and generally make trouble.

15. **The Outcast**: He/she has been cast out of society or has left it on a voluntary basis. Sometimes can be considered a Christ figure.

16. **The Scapegoat**: The one who gets blamed for everything, regardless of whether he/she is actually at fault.

**Archetypal Motifs, Patterns or Themes:**

16. **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.

17. **Immortality**: another fundamental archetype. Generally taking one of two basic structures:
   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 rhythms or Nature’s eternal cycle, particularly the cycle of the seasons.

18. **The Faustian bargain or the deal with the devil.**