

# Archetype

## Archetype Definition

In literature, an archetype is a typical [character](#), an action, or a situation that seems to represent universal patterns of human nature.

An archetype, also known as “universal [symbol](#),” may be a character, a [theme](#), a symbol, or even a [setting](#). Many literary critics are of the opinion that archetypes – which have a common and recurring representation in a particular human culture, or entire human race – shape the structure and function of a literary work.

Carl Jung, Swiss psychologist, argued that the root of an archetype is in the “collective unconscious” of mankind. The phrase “collective unconscious” refers to experiences shared by a race or culture. Such experiences include such things as love, religion, death, birth, life, struggle, and survival. These experiences exist in the subconscious of every individual, and are re-created in literary works, or in other forms of art.

## Examples of Archetype in Literature

Below is the analysis of common archetypes that exist in literature.

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### Archetypes in Characters

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#### Example #1: The Hero

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He or she is a character who predominantly exhibits goodness, and struggles against evil in order to restore harmony and justice to society. Examples of hero include Beowulf, in the book *Beowulf*, Hercules, in the book *Hercules*, and d’Artagnan, from *The Three Musketeers*.

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## Example #2: The Mother Figure

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Such a character may be represented as a Fairy God Mother, who guides and directs a child, Mother Earth, who contacts people and offers spiritual and emotional nourishment, or a Stepmother who treats their stepchildren poorly. Examples of a mother figure include:

In Literature:

Lucy and Madame Defarge, from Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*  
Disely, from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*  
Gladriel, from J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*  
Glinda, from the Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

In Fairy Tales:

The wicked stepmother in Charles Perrault's *Cinderella*  
The fairy godmothers in Charles Perrault's *Sleeping Beauty*  
Mother Goose  
The grandmother in Charles Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood*

In Mythology:

The mythological figures of *Persephone*, *Demeter*, *Hecate*, *Gorgon*, *Medusa*

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## Example #3: The Innocent Youth

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He or she is inexperienced, with many weaknesses, and seeks safety with others. Others like him or her because of the trust he or she shows in other people. Usually, the experience of coming of age comes in the later parts of the narratives. Examples of innocent youth include:

Pip in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*  
Nicholas in Charles Dickens' *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*  
Joseph from Henry Fielding's *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews*

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## Example #4: The Mentor

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His or her task is to protect the main character. It is through the wise

the world. Examples of mentor include:

Gandalf in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*  
Parson Adams in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*  
Senex in Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wind in the Door*

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### **Example #5: The Doppelganger**

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It is a duplicate or shadow of a character, which represents the evil side of his personality. Examples of [doppelganger](#) in popular literary works include:

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*  
Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*  
Edgar Allen Poe's *William Wilson*  
Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

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### **Example #6: The Scapegoat**

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A character that takes the blame for everything bad that happens. Examples of scapegoat include:

Snowball, in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

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### **Example #7: The Villain**

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A character whose main function is to go to any extent to oppose the hero, or whom the hero must annihilate in order to bring justice. Examples of villain include:

Shere Khan, from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* stories  
Long John Silver, from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*

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### **Archetypes in Situations**

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### **Example #8: The Journey**

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The main character takes a journey, which may be physical or emotional, to understand his or her personality, and the nature of the world. Examples of

Dante Alighieri's *The Divine [Comedy](#)*

Henry Fielding's *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams*

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

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### **Example #9: The Initiation**

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The main character undergoes experiences that lead him towards maturity.

Examples of archetypes in initiation include:

Henry Fielding's *History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*

Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

Voltaire's *Candide*

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### **Example #10: Good Versus Evil**

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It represents the clash of forces that represent goodness with those that represent evil. Examples of this archetype include:

William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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### **Example #11: The Fall**

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The main character falls from grace in consequence of his or her own actions. Examples of archetype in fall include:

Oedipus, from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

Lear, from William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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## **Function of Archetype**

The use of archetypal characters and situations gives a literary work a universal acceptance, as readers identify the characters and situations in their social and cultural [context](#). By using common archetypes, writers attempt to impart [realism](#) to their works, as the situations and characters are drawn from the experiences of the world.