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List of Frequent Archetypes in Literature

By Josh Patrick, eHow Contributor

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In literature, readers encounter many of the same basic character types. Stories and situations are also apt to be repeated. These predictable and universally understood patterns in art are called archetypes. The word comes from the Greek language and basically translates as "original model." Writers use archetypes because readers are so familiar with them. They speak to something in the human consciousness and provoke an emotional response. That familiarity encourages the reader to continue the story.



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Hero

The hero is the character who conquers obstacles and saves the day. Typically the hero embarks on some quest, either physical or spiritual. The hero could be a knight in shining armor, a police officer or a politician who pushes for bold reforms. Specific examples include Robin Hood, Luke Skywalker and Wonder Woman. The quality that makes a character truly heroic is his willingness to put others ahead of himself.

Villain

Working against the hero is the villain. This character employs either brute strength or cunning to undermine the work of the hero. Often the villain is not recognized for who he is until well into the story. Sometimes a group can stand in place of a villain, as in a corporation that's deliberately polluting the waterways. The villain's role is ultimately to be defeated by the hero.

Mother Figure

In literature, the role of the mother is to care for and guide her family. The archetypal mother figure doesn't have to literally be a mother, nor do those she cares for have to be her family. The fairy godmother from children's literature is a good example. The mother figure is sometimes a spiritual leader, or a source of life for the community. In most instances, the mother figure receives enormous love and respect from the characters in the story.

Father Figure

The leader and protector of a group is usually thought of as a father figure. Moses in the Bible is one example of this archetype, as he led his people out of Egypt. An orphaned



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child may seek a father figure to provide stability in her world. In cultures where gender roles are more fluid, the qualities of father figure and mother figure may be intermingled, or the two roles may be embodied in a single character.

Underdog

The underdog is the character who seems always at a disadvantage. The ugly duckling, for example, was singled out for all of the wrong reasons. By the conclusion of the story, the character has pushed through hardship and won respect. This archetype works best when the reader can relate to the underdog character. The reader invests emotionally in the character, and shares in the eventual success.

The Journey

In "The Lord of the Rings," Frodo and his companions travel hundreds of miles to complete their epic quest. This kind of narrative is known as the journey, and it's a familiar one to most readers. Generally, the hero is required to leave home comforts behind and undertake a mission that has no guarantee of success. The journey is littered with obstacles and distractions, but failure is not an option. Along the way, group members learn more about their world and their place in that world.

The Fall

The Biblical story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden is the archetypal story of a fall from grace. This kind of story involves characters losing some power or privilege. Sometimes the characters who fall are not likable, and the reader enjoys seeing them brought down. In other cases, the characters are generally good, but some mistake on their part has derailed their hopes and dreams. A fall from grace can be an opportunity for the character to learn an important lesson about life and the world.

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