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Archetypes and the Archetypal Lens

An Introduction

Recognized as “universal primordial images and ideas” (Britannica), archetypes are distinct patterns that repeatedly appear in creative works, such as art and literature. Archetypes, which include thoughts and behaviours, form a part of the most rudimentary elements of the psyche that transgress the boundaries of time and culture (Buchanan). Likewise, distinct images and symbols, considered to be embedded in the deepest layer of an individual's memory, are presumed to be universal to human nature (Calhoun). Archetypes present themselves in all facets of life including religion, mythology, fairy tales, and dreams (Calhoun). For example, many modern religions centre their faith on an omnipotent God figure, disregarding cultural, socio-economic, or geographic differences that might be present. In terms of literature, archetypes refer to motifs or plotlines that have a tendency to reoccur in different texts (Fletcher).

Influential Proponents

The earliest definition of an archetype is found in Plato’s *Theory of Forms* as “a form [existing], for objects like tables and rocks and for concepts, such as beauty and justice” (Bruce). Plato effectively explained the universality of archetypes as memories that have resided in the soul since their conception. He concluded that the tangible world of man is finite and often ignorant of higher concepts while the ethereal archetypal plane remains infinite and thus of “true knowledge”.

In 1890, George Frazer published *The Golden Bough*, a voluminous study of the myths and beliefs across cultures. Soon after, Carl Jung explored deeper into the cross cultural connections and developed his theory of the "collective unconscious". The collective unconscious transcends cultural barriers and links all individuals to similar experiences and mental predispositions. Each mind is a leaf rooted to its own branch. While each branch may be dissimilar, however, they are all rooted to the same trunk that is the collective unconsciousness. As a result of this discovery, he derived the Jungian Archetypes. Similar to Plato, Jung defined archetypes as “an unlearned tendency to experience things in a certain way” (Boeree). Jung developed only a few basic archetypes (e.g. the mother figure, the persona, the shadow) and stated that they could be furthered by each person’s own imagination. He asserted that because basic archetypes stem from the collective unconsciousness and therefore are universal, they have the ability to reappear in a wide range of literature. Moreover, how each archetype is used acts as a gateway into the mind of the author and his/her individual predispositions and inner instinctual biases.

Distancing archetypes from psychoanalysis, Northrop Frye, a famed Canadian literary critic, explored archetypes on a Romantic level in a series of essays collected in the *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye concluded that literature and art are manifestations of a series of archetypes. Like Jung, Frye took great interest in the study of archetypes and their manifestations in an individual. However, unlike Jung, Frye analyzed the role of the imagination, and its effect on readers' interpretations of archetypes. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye describes the four mythos: Spring: Comedy, Summer: Romance, Autumn: Tragedy, and Winter: Irony and Satire. Each mythos shares 3 characteristics with the mythos preceding it and 3 characteristics with the mythos succeeding it; thus, making each mythos only slightly altered. He asserts that any narrative will generally fall into one of the mythos categories. For example, “Little Red Riding Hood” would fall under Summer: Romance, as the hero undergoes a ritual death, deception, and defeat by the wolf, but returns in the end as victorious and improved in knowledge. Again, like Jung, Frye asserts the archetypal lens as a valid and useful literary criticism tool because of its universal application. Frye proposes that archetypal criticism is a twofold interaction between the author and the audience. The author provides familiar archetypal symbols while the readers’ imaginations will naturally expound on them further, thus, adding depth to the work.

Questions Raised through Archetypal Analysis

Literary analysis through an archetypal lens often leads to questions about the author’s intended meaning when using certain language, colours, characters, etc. Using archetypes, an author can communicate using subtler references in the text.

Archetypes have the ability to be studied from both a psychological and anthropologic perspective. Using a psychological approach, archetypal analysis can be focused on the individual’s response to common themes. Jung dedicated much of his time to questioning the distinct behaviour of archetypes and their supposed effects on the individual.

“…[W]e are confronted, at every new stage in the differentiation of consciousness to which civilization attains, with the task of finding a new interpretation appropriate to this stage, in order to connect the life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present, which threatens to slip away from it” (Jung)

In contrast, anthropologists often compare the common themes, myths, ritualistic practices, etc. that exist between different cultures. In his book *The Golden Bough*, George Frazer explores the primitive origins of religion, magic, ritual, and myth.

“Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place; in substance they were the same” (Frazer 6)

Archetypal Analysis of *Little Red Riding Hood*

Archetypes found in children’s fairy tales have proven to have a profound effect on early childhood development, in terms of the unconscious interpretations of symbols. For example, the iconic children's story, *Little Red Riding Hood*, is an initiation fairy-tale which possesses a multiplicity of archetypes and symbols.

Though fairly basic, this fable highlights key archetypes that are important lessons for children to learn at early age. The forest setting, which symbolizes the mystery or lurking dangers of the “real world”, is contrasted with Little Red Riding Hood, who represents the epitome of childhood innocence. Because of her naivety, she fails to see the Wolf as a demonic adversary. Little Red Riding Hood also disobeys her mother’s instructions to “stay on the path”. Oblivious to the Wolf's true objectives, Little Red Riding Hood falls prey to the Wolf’s manipulation. Once Little Red Riding Hood arrives at her grandmother’s house, she must identify the disguised wolf. Little Red Riding Hood plays the damsel in distress who can only be saved by the masculine, heroic Hunter.

This fairy-tale emphasizes the importance of following instructions and being cautious of one’s surroundings. While these archetypes may not appear to be significant when interpreted through the mind of a child, the unconscious mind has the ability to absorb messages and symbols at an alarming rate. Intuitive counsellor, Kim Illig, states that

“I also believe that from the first time I heard this tale [*Little Red Riding Hood]*, I started to become aware of how it is my responsibility for me to watch for those ‘wolves’ out there in the big, bad world.”

The archetypes in *Little Red Riding Hood* are effective as the story has been told and retold countless times throughout the years.

Strengths of Literary Archetypal Analysis

Exploring literature through an archetypal lens offers many advantages to readers. Firstly, archetypes provide a strong foundation upon which to approach and analyze a new reading. When introduced to a completely foreign text, the reader has the ability to compare various characters, events, settings, plots, themes, etc. to material previously studied. As Phillip Wheelwright states, it is necessary to gather "archetypal evidences on a broad base from literature, myth, religion, and art... to understand such evidences on their own terms as far as possible instead of imposing extrinsically oriented interpretations upon them". Using archetypes, readers can cultivate a cross-cultural appreciation for a wide range of literature by being able to identify with an author, regardless of race, culture, ethnicity, or era. By identifying these many patterns that exist in what Jung describes as our "collective unconscious", literature becomes a unifying element that transgresses time and space.

The most significant strength of utilizing an archetypal lens is not for its universality, but rather its potential for personal discovery. Using literature's various standardized archetypes, we can contemplate our own lives and how they might be classified in a literary realm.

"Watching mythic or literary heroes struggle, fail, learn, persevere, and experience all possible forms of joy and sorrow is a rehearsal for all that life may bring to us...studying the mythic roots of literature can be helpful in the endless human quest to find out who we are." (Gillespie)

The study of archetypes makes literature far more accessible for readers, creating common links between themselves and the authors. Archetypal analysis cultivates perspective, and allows readers to seek personal meaning from any given text through reflection upon their own lives.

Weaknesses of Literary Archetypal Analysis

As outlined above, using the archetypal lens is extremely useful and effective in identifying the significance of symbols in literature. Seemingly superfluous elements gain significance, which may be essential to plot or character development, when examined under the archetypal lens. However, the selective use or over-use of this lens can develop misinterpretations, instil restrictive stereotypes, and create overly predictable literature.

Frye asserts that basic archetypes are expanded by the author’s usage and the audience’s imagination. However, if the archetypal lens is over-used, the audience may develop misconceptions about the author’s intentions. For example, the bouquet of flowers that Little Red Riding Hood picks for her grandmother can be interpreted as a thoughtful tribute, a token of affection, and, in rare cases, a symbol of conjoined death. Although the bouquet could be construed as foreshadowing the death of both Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother, in the case of this fable, the bouquet more so represents a devious distraction the Wolf uses to lure Little Red Riding Hood off her path.

Personal bias can also cause misinterpretation of archetypes. Using the archetypal figure of Little Red Riding Hood’s mother, “’Mother’ could be soft, nurturing, or playful. ‘Mother’ could also be strict, punitive, neglectful, or uncaring” (Illig). Her mother’s action of sending Little Red Riding Hood into the forest can be construed as casting the young girl on a journey she is destined to fail or as a simple matronly command of goodwill.

Archetypes are often used to teach basic virtues and warning signs, especially in children’s fairy tales. However, because most archetypal characters are very similar, strict stereotypes may develop in the highly malleable minds of children. For example, in most children’s folklore (e.g. *Snow White*, *Cinderella*), the antagonist is often a woman wearing dark coloured clothing or fur. Children, who possess the innate ability to recognized archetypes, could develop a negative bias towards women wearing dark colors, purely on appearance. This superficial judgment compounded by other stereotypes and generalizations could develop into close-mindedness.

Although the universality and repetition of archetypes makes them accessible to a wide audience, archetypes often create predictability in literature. Because the archetypal lens allows for detailed analysis of symbols, those symbols may foreshadow events to come. Overt foreshadowing may then create an uninteresting ending if the reader can predict the events to come. In the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, she is sent on the quintessential archetypal journey. From that, the reader can predict that she will be tested, possibly fail, and then learn an invaluable skill or lesson through the journey. Further analysis indicates that the mother is the Initiator of the journey, the path is the virtuous way, and the ominous forest is a trial to test and ultimately change Little Red Riding Hood’s skill or morality. These symbols can be found within the first two paragraphs. Because the plot becomes evidently predictable, the reader may become disinterested in the rest of the, albeit short, piece of literature. In this way, the archetypal lens can spoil a plot before the journey and tribulations can even begin.

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