

Module 3 Chapter 1 Lesson 2: Archetypal Characters

English 12



Module 3 Chapter 1 Lesson 2: Archetypes

Now that we have had a look at the "what" of the story, we will quickly examine the "who" - the characters. As with plots, there are **archetypal characters** whom we may recognize in many different stories (in novels, short stories, poems, plays, movies). These characters may also fit into the categories we looked at in Unit 2: protagonist and antagonist, supporting characters, round and flat, developing and static, stock and stereotype, and character foils. This lesson, then, will include a combination of review and new material.

The archetypal characters are many, and there are multiple variations on each one, just as plots may vary slightly in the telling. Some of the characters we will consider include the *hero*, the *villain*, the *trickster*, the *femme fatale*, and the *virgin maid*. The purpose of familiarizing yourself with these archetypes, as with the plot types, is to give yourself a place from which to begin as you examine the characters in your novel of choice. With that in mind, let us move on!

Learning to Write About Character

Archetypes, character types, character roles... Whatever happened to "a character is someone in a story"? Clearly, there is much to think about when we study and write about character.

Thinking about characters in a story can be confusing (Is this character a protagonist or a developing character? Both? What?!), but it may help to consider a more personal example. Each of us carries out multiple roles in our day-to-day lives. For example, I am a mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a

teacher, a writer, a friend... and I am exhausted! Seriously, each of us has multiple roles, and the characters in stories are no different. With this in mind, let us press on.

Analyzing Characters

When we study characters, there are a number of things we need to consider.

How do people learn about you?

People learn about you through things you do, things you say (and how you say them), and through things other people say about you.

How do we learn about characters?

We learn about characters both **directly**, through the narrator, and indirectly, by interpreting the things characters do, the things the characters say, and the things other people say about them. These two ways of learning about characters are called, predictably, **direct characterization** and **indirect characterization**. Typically, interpretive fiction makes use of indirect presentation because it involves the reader more, creating interest and providing an opportunity for intellectual stimulation. Let's consider some examples:

“Jim, always helpful, offered his arm to his elderly neighbor.”

“Jim offered his arm and supported his wobbling neighbor up the stairs.”

In which of these examples does the narrator tell us directly that Jim is helpful? In which does the narrator show Jim's actions and let us deduce that he is helpful? The author **tells us in the sentence on the top**, and **shows us in the sentence on the bottom**.

 Remember, the writer is not the narrator. We can call the “person” telling the story the narrator, or, in poetry, the speaker, but never the writer unless we are referring to an autobiography. You or I could write a book from the perspective of an alien, but that does not make either of us that alien. In the same way, the writer has created a fictional persona to tell the story, but the writer is not that persona.

"Human" Characteristics

Characters are created with "human" characteristics (assuming that they are supposed to be human, of course!). That is, typically, characters are endowed with physical characteristics (height, hair colour, general state of health, for example) as well as characteristics of personality and intellect (such as kindness, a suspicious nature, intelligence). Characters are positioned in a place in the world and in a place in society. They may have jobs or hobbies, they may have families, they may own a nice car or a pocket watch. All of these characteristics are intended to help the reader understand the characters; we relate to other people, and so the more "person-like" a character is, the more easily we will be able to imagine him or her.

Literary Characteristics

In addition to those qualities which make characters seem human, there are literary qualities which inform the characters' functions in the story. These qualities include the character types and roles we talked about in Unit 2 and also the archetypes on which characters may be, more or less, based.

It is important that the characters we see "perform" their literary duties well in order to allow us, as readers, to follow the story and accept the characters as authentic. If a reader identifies a character as a hero, and the hero begins to behave in an "unheroic" way, the reader will look for a reason for the incongruity. If no reason exists, then the reader will typically lose interest in the character because the reader cannot relate to the character.

Motivation

Our final consideration is character motivation. Readers want characters to be believable. That is, they want characters who act in ways which are consistent with their personalities, their histories, and, interestingly, their roles in the story.

Consider an example: cowardly characters do not suddenly take on bullies without a good reason to do so. If our story features a coward and a bully, we will expect certain behaviours on both sides. If the bully is attacking someone the coward dislikes, there is little reason to expect the coward to suddenly become brave. If, however, the bully threatens the coward's love interest, then the reader may see a change in the coward's behaviour; the coward might suddenly find courage to stand up to the bully. If the coward in question is a minor character, the reader probably will not worry either way about how the character reacts; if, however, the coward is the protagonist, the reader will most likely expect the change to occur and be very disillusioned if it does not.

Archetypal Characters



There are many examples of archetypal characters which are familiar to us. They appear in many genres, and their actions follow patterns that we recognize. We will look at a few in this lesson; you may wish to check out more archetypes on your own. One great resource is Victoria Lynn Schmidt's book **45 Master Characters** (Writer's Digest Books, 2001); there are also many websites you can check.

Just one word of caution before we begin: beware of mixing up archetypes and stereotypes. Schmidt (p. 10) explains the difference:

"Stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations about people usually stemming from one person's prejudice. Archetypes aren't formed from one individual's view of people but from the entire human race's experience of people. Judgment and assumptions are absent... Stereotypes may be used to describe an archetype but a stereotype is only a shallow imitation, a small piece of the bigger picture...."

The Hero

The hero is wise, strong, physically able, intelligent, ethical, loyal, and resourceful (among other things!)

like hero (ex. Hercules, Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* films). If the hero becomes paralyzed by his or her quest, the villain is assigned to him or her, or carries it out but does not follow through with sharing the benefit for the greater good.



http://images.google.ca/imgres?imgurl=http://www.starstore.com/acatalog/Starstore_Catalogue_STAR_Wars_Luke_Skywalker.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.starstore.com/acatalog/Starstore_Catalogue_STAR_Wars_Luke_Skywalker.jpg

http://www.starstore.com/acatalog/Starstore_Catalogue_STAR_Wars_Luke_Skywalker.jpg

The Villain

The villain's purpose is to work against the hero or protagonist. He or she provides a worthy adversary in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is defeated; we cheer for the members of the Fellowship who were three



<http://www.jfdaily.com.cn/gb/node2/node9140/node43355/node44012/node44775/images/00039711.jpg>

The Seductive Muse/Femme Fatale

The seductive muse and the femme fatale are the "good and bad" versions of the same archetype. The seductive muse may become self serving and use her influence to tempt others down a bad road in order to protect her



<http://images.google.ca/imgres?imgurl=http://www.general-anaesthesia.com/images/cleopatra.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.general-anaesthesia.com/images/cleopatra.html&h=565&w=604&sz=56&hl=en&start=8&tbnid=BnkB5j2VOQAACM:>

<http://www.general-anaesthesia.com/images/cleopatra.html&h=565&w=604&sz=56&hl=en&start=8&tbnid=BnkB5j2VOQAACM:>

The Maiden

The maiden is innocent and naive; others may idealize her as "pure." She depends on others to care for her or may provide a magical gift to the hero which allows him to complete his journey (ex. Ariadne, the Labyrinth).



The Trickster

In early mythology, the trickster is presented as a supernatural creature, a shape changer whose main form is that of a raven or crow (ex. Raven). In literature, the trickster may be human (ex. Tom Sawyer) or supernatural (ex. Shakespeare's Puck). The trickster is often a fairy tale king who seeks a husband for his daughter, offering her to whichever man can complete a specific task (ex. Jack the Giant Killer); he is also very clever (ex. Captain Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*); these attributes allow him or her to



[_ \(http://images.google.ca/imgres?](http://images.google.ca/imgres?)

[imgurl=http://heykelley.com/twitch/foto/misc/capnjack.jpg&imgrefurl=r
me&h=946&w=902&sz=93&hl=en&start=22&tbnid=hQQQ5JdMmRmHAY](#)

The Sage



The sage is a wise old man or woman who helps to guide other characters, especially the hero. He may



http://images.google.ca/imgres?imgurl=http://www.homestead.com/anakin_sky/news

wan.jpg&imgrefurl=http://obinator.blogspot.com/2005/12/liberrian.html&h=537&w=500&sz=23&hl=en&star

Chapter Summary

Completing this chapter has helped you to:

- recognize and identify different archetypal plot types and characters that are commonly found in novels, short stories, movies and television shows:

- identify the specific features of the various plot types and archetypal characters;
 - recognize and identify different devices that are used by authors to help them advance their plots;
 - write about plot
 - write about character.
-



Complete the Module 3 Chapter 1 Lesson 2 Assignment on the next page.

