

SYMBOLS, ARCHETYPES & MOTIFS

Symbols

Three categories:

Archetypal – The first symbols of humankind that have replicated themselves in stories throughout the ages across all cultures. They appear in the stories of groups from cavemen to 21st century authors. The term “archetype” was coined by Karl Jung who used them as the basis of “collective unconscious” theory.

Cultural – As cultural groups use archetypal symbols to represent their values, fears, beliefs, and expectations, these objects take on meaning specific to that group. For example, the cross is an ancient archetypal symbol. When cultural groups adopt it, the meanings become both universal and specific.

Ex. For most cultures the cross holds spiritual significance; hence its archetypal meaning. For Christians the cross takes on specific representation of Christ’s crucifixion.

Nuance – These objects take on symbolic meaning in the work in which they appear. Modern writers often create their own symbols by repeatedly using the object in meaningful ways. For example, Golding (Lord of the Flies) used the conch shell to represent order and governmental control/the end of reason.

NOTABLE ARCHETYPAL SYMBOLS, CHARACTERS, AND STORY PATTERNS

Characters:

Hero (Epic, Classical, Romantic, Realistic, Anti-Hero) Outcast, Scapegoat, Trickster, Platonic Ideal, Monster, Temptress, Star-crossed lovers, Clown/jester, Prophet

Story Patterns:

Rite of Passage/Initiation, Creation, Fall, Expulsion, Death & Rebirth, Journey, Quest

Symbols:

(Archetypal symbols have dual nature and are often objects that we find in nature)

Water, Fire, Wind, Earth, All colors, Snakes, Birds/Flight, Trees, Gold, Iron, Silver, Sun, Moon, Cross, Seasons

Why study myth & symbols?

1. They enrich our encounters with art & literature as we discover the layers of meaning they hold.
2. We understand the values of cultures different from our own and at the same time discover the universality of the human experience.

You can familiarize yourself with many of the devices authors use to create meaning including symbols, motifs, and archetypes. All of these have become generally accepted as part of the Western canon of literature. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we are ingrained with certain recurring figures that affect the meanings of literature and life. As a “literate” person, you must learn to recognize these tools and determine what purpose they serve. But remember, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Sometimes a blue curtain is just a curtain.

BASIC SYMBOLS

Listed below are some symbols and their meanings. This is not intended as an all-inclusive list, but as a sampling of some of the interpretations of a few common symbols. Let it form the beginning of your own personal list of symbols.

Numbers:

One – unity; individual importance
Two – balance; yin/yang
Three – trinity
Four – order; symmetry
Six – man; harmony, balance
Seven – completion; entirety
Eight – universal order; new beginnings
Nine – harmony; divine perfection
Ten – spiritual achievement
Twelve – universal fulfillment;
Thirteen – death, unlucky
Forty - spiritual order

Colors:

White - purity
Black – evil, death
Gray - ambiguity
Purple - royalty
Blue - serenity
Green – nature, new life
Red – danger, energy, passion
Yellow – happiness

Vegetations / trees:

Apple – temptation	cypress – death
Grapes – abundance	oak – strength
Peach – marriage	olive – peace
Cherry – immorality	palm – protection
Fig – fertility	willow – forsaken love
Plum – independent	cedar – incorruptible
Acorn – potential	yew – resurrection
Poppy – sleep	aspen – lamentation
Lily – purity	
Rose – love	
Daisy – innocence	

Animals and Creatures:

Dog – loyalty	cat – malevolence
Cow – motherhood	bull – fertility
Pig – unclean, greed	donkey – stupidity
Ram – virility	sheep – blindness
Snake – satanic	crocodile/alligator – death
Turtle – perseverance	fish – Jesus
Seahorse – good luck	whale – power
Conch shell – power of sound	snail – renewal
Rooster – morning	peacock – royalty
Ostrich – coward	cuckoo – adultery
Dove – peace	swan – grace
Stork – birth	butterfly – change, rebirth
Ant – industrious	

Shapes & Seasons:

Circle – cycle of life, never ending
Triangle – trinity
Crown – royalty, nobility
Sun – happiness, light, masculine
Moon – light within darkness, cyclical, feminine
Star – divine presence
Rain – life
Clouds & mist – concealment
Fog – unreality
Rainbow – peace, harmony, future promise
Elements – earth, air, fire, water
Seasons: Spring – birth, life
Summer – growth, ripening
Fall – maturity
Winter – death

MOTIFS

A motif is a recurrent device, image, object, phrase, word, incident, situation, or action that is used to unify a work.

A *leitmotif* is a motif, which is specific to a particular work such as the idea of “Big Brother” in *1984* by George Orwell or the phrase “Catch 22” from the Joseph Heller novel of the same name. As some of these become familiar to more and more people, they actually become symbols.

Often motifs are evident in movies. The old “Jaws” movies used music as a motif – every time the “Jaws” theme music resounded in the background and then increased in volume and pace, you knew something treacherous lurked beneath the waves. A movie which uses the motif of a phrase is the James Bond series in which the name “Bond, James Bond” is often repeated.

In *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, the recurring phrase “We got a future,” is used as a motif to express George and Lennie’s hopes for the future. In *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, mist is a motif that clouds Pip’s vision on several occasions. In Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* the pond serves as a motif, especially when it reflects the changing of the seasons.

Remember that a MOTIF OCCURS SEVERAL TIMES WITHIN A WORK whereas a symbol may occur only once.

ARCHETYPES

Archetypes are somewhat more difficult to understand than symbols and motifs. The concept of archetypes was developed by Karl Jung who said that we all have a “collect unconscious” consisting of plots, character types, and patterns common to any culture. Embedded in our past experiences, certain images and patterns we expect to recur. And they often do in our literature. For example, the most common archetypal character is that of the hero. He/she usually must endure some sort of ritual or test, go on a journey, perform a task, and save the day. This hero/heroine, prevalent in fiction and nonfiction, represents a major archetype because we expect him/her to act like a hero. Any deviation from what is expected is unacceptable.

Situations:

Initiation – an individual understands his/her responsibility; often a rite of passage into adulthood

Transcendence – sometimes the initiate undergoes an ordeal and assumes a new role as an adult

Task – an extraordinary feat, which must be accomplished to save the day

Quest – the search for someone or something needed to save the day

Journey – the difficulties the hero must undergo to accomplish the task, usually involves traveling

Ritual – an official ceremony; may be part of the initiation or rite of passage

Fall – loss of innocence or a fall from grace, which often includes expulsion from paradise

Death – like in the cycles of nature, or an actual spiritual death, equated with the season of winter

Rebirth – again like nature, renewal, equated with spring and summer, morning

Sacred marriage – the joining, often of opposites, which restores peace

Battle between good & evil – self explanatory, we want good to win

Natural world opposed to mechanical world – usually nature is good, technology evil

Innate wisdom versus educated stupidity – some characters, though ignorant, exhibit a natural wisdom; Others, though educated, have no “street smarts” and make poor decisions.

Un-healable wounds – may be psychological or physical

Magic weapon – usually bestowed by a mentor to the hero

Supernatural intervention – the gods help or hurt the hero

Light versus dark – light represents hope and illumination; dark indicates hopelessness and the unknown. Light shines from heaven to indicate goodness; characters are often drawn into evil darkness

Heaven versus hell – supreme beings and mythological gods live in the skies; evil forces, including Satan, come from the underworld

Haven versus wilderness – havens are places of comfort and safety; wilderness includes any place of danger

Water versus desert – water is a symbol of life and birth; deserts indicate lack of life or desolation (Jesus is tempted in the desert)

Fire versus ice – fire depicts knowledge and life; ice represents ignorance and death (Frankenstein’s monster begins life with fire – lightning, and disappears in the ice)

Characters:

Hero – usually raised from a rather lowly birth to become a leader or king after facing many trials

Young person from the provinces – taken from home and returns with a new perspective
(Tarzan, Dorothy, Alice)

Initiates – innocents who train for the quest

Mentors – teachers or counselors for the initiates

Benevolent guide – usually an older person who gives the hero wise counsel

Shaman – protector of rituals and traditions

Parent-child conflict – generational tension

Companions – loyal to hero at all cost

Loyal retainer – a true and loyal friend often a servant

Friendly beast – helps hero

Trickster – a wise fool, a rascal, troublemaker

Devil figure – purely evil

Evil figure with ultimately good heart – redeems himself by end of story

Scapegoat – sacrificed animal or human who takes on the sins and punishment of others

Outcast – is banished from society

Star crossed lovers – fate is against them, may end up dead

Earth mother - provides life and nourishment

Temptress – beautiful woman who brings the destruction of the hero

Platonic ideal – the woman on a pedestal who inspires the hero, but with whom the hero has no physical relationship

Unfaithful wife – a married woman involved in illicit affairs

Damsel in distress – maiden who must be rescued by the hero

Creatures – monsters that threaten the hero

