

Archetypes in Mythology

Although every people has its own distinctive mythology that may be reflected in legend, folklore, and ideology--although, in other words, myths take their specific shapes from the cultural environments in which they grow--myth is, in the general sense, universal. Furthermore, similar motifs or themes may be found among many different mythologies, and certain images that recur in the myths of people widely separated in time and place tend to have a common meaning or, more accurately, tend to elicit comparable psychological responses and to serve similar cultural functions. Such motifs and images are called archetypes. Stated simply, archetypes are universal symbols.

Examples of these archetypes and the symbolic meanings with which they tend to be widely associated follow (it should be noted that these meanings may vary significantly from one context to another):

A. Images

1. Water: the mystery of creation; birth-death-resurrection; purification and redemption; fertility and growth. According to Jung, water is also the commonest symbol for the unconscious.

- a. The sea: the mother of all life; spiritual mystery and infinity; death and rebirth; timelessness and eternity; the unconscious.
- b. Rivers: death and rebirth (baptism); the flowing of time into eternity; transitional phases of the life cycle; incarnation of deities

2. Sun (fire and sky are closely related): creative energy; law in nature; consciousness (thinking, enlightenment, wisdom, spiritual vision): father principle (moon and earth tend to be associated with female or mother principle); passage of time and life.

- a. Rising sun: birth: creation; enlightenment.
- b. Setting sun: death.

3. Colors

- a. Red: blood, sacrifice, violent passion: disorder.
- b. Green: growth; sensation; hope; fertility; in negative context may be associated with death and decay.
- c. Blue: usually highly positive, associated with truth, religious feeling, security, spiritual purity (the color of the Great Mother or Holy Mother).
- d. Black (darkness): chaos, mystery, the unknown; death; primal wisdom; the unconscious; evil; melancholy.
- e. White: highly multivalent, signifying, in its positive aspects, light, purity, innocence, and timelessness; in its negative aspects, death, terror, the supernatural, and the blinding truth of an inscrutable cosmic mystery (see, for instance, Herman Melville's chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby-Dick*).

4. Circle (sphere): wholeness, unity.

- a. Egg (oval): the mystery of life and the forces of generation.
- b. Yang-yin: a Chinese symbol [image] representing the union of the opposite forces of the yang (masculine principle, light, activity, the conscious mind) and the yin (female principle, darkness, passivity, the unconscious).
- c. Ouroboros: the ancient symbol of the snake biting its own tail, signifying the eternal cycle of life, primordial unconsciousness, the unity of opposing forces (cf. yang-yin)

5. Serpent (snake, worm): symbol of energy and pure force (cf. libido): evil, corruption, sensuality; destruction; mystery; wisdom; the unconscious.

6. Numbers:

- a. Three: light; spiritual awareness and unity (cf. the Holy Trinity): the male principle.
- b. Four: associated with the circle, life cycle, four seasons; female principle, earth, nature; four elements (earth, air, fire, water).
- c. Seven: the most potent of all symbolic numbers--signifying the union of *three and four*, the completion of a cycle, perfect order.

7. The archetypal woman (Great Mother--the mysteries of life death, transformation):

- a. The Good Mother (positive aspects of the Earth Mother): associated with the life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, abundance (for example, Demeter, Ceres).
- b. The Terrible Mother (including the negative aspects of the Earth Mother): the witch, sorceress, siren, whore, femme fatale--associated with sensuality, sexual orgies, fear, danger, darkness, dismemberment, emasculation, death; the unconscious in its terrifying aspects.
- c. The Soul Mate: the Sophia figure, Holy Mother, the princess or "beautiful lady"—incarnation of inspiration and spiritual fulfillment (cf. the Jungian anima).

8. The Wise Old Man (savior, redeemer, guru): personification of the spiritual principle, representing "knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other, moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help, which makes his 'spiritual' character sufficiently plain. . . . Apart from his cleverness, wisdom, and insight, the old man . . . is also notable for his moral qualities; what is more, he even tests the moral qualities of others and makes gifts dependent on this test. . . . The old man always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea . . . can extricate him. But since, for internal and external reasons, the hero cannot accomplish this himself, the knowledge needed to compensate the deficiency comes in the form of a personified thought, i.e., in the shape of this sagacious and helpful old man"

9. Garden: paradise; innocence; unspoiled beauty (especially feminine); fertility.

10. Tree: "In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality"

11. Desert: spiritual aridity; death; nihilism, hopelessness.

*****These examples are by no means exhaustive, but represent some of the more common archetypal images that the reader is likely to encounter in literature. The images we have listed do not necessarily function as archetypes every time they appear in a literary work. The discreet critic interprets them as such only if the total context of the work logically supports an archetypal reading.