



Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

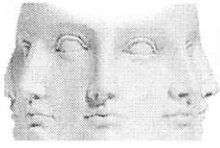


Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Three main points of study:

- archetypal characters
- archetypal images
- archetypal situations

1. Archetypal Characters

- the HERO: a figure, often larger-than-life, whose search for identity and/or fulfillment results in his or her destruction (often accompanied by the destruction of society in general). In the aftermath of the death of the hero, however, is progress toward some ideal. While this applies to modern superheroes such as Superman (Clark Kent, searching for the balance between his super self and his mortal self), it also applies to the Christian faith's Jesus Christ (who must come to terms with his destiny as the Messiah), and thousands of other literary and religious figures throughout history.

Variations of the HERO figure include the "orphaned" prince or the lost chieftain's son raised ignorant of his heritage until he is rediscovered (King Arthur, Theseus).

- the SCAPEGOAT: an innocent character on whom a situation is blamed—or who assumes the blame for a situation—and is punished in place of the truly guilty party, thus removing the guilt from the culprit and from society. For example, in the Christian faith, Jesus's death redeems the sins of the world.
- the LONER or OUTCAST: a character who is separated from (or separates him or herself from) society due to either an impairment or an advantage that sets this character apart from others. Jesus goes into the desert to discern his destiny; Buddha leaves society to perfect his philosophy. Victor Frankenstein travels to remote locales to avoid people when he realizes that he has created a monster. Often, the Hero is an outcast at some point in his or her story.

Two common variations of the LONER are

- the UNDERDOG, the smaller, weaker, less-worldly-wise character, who usually emerges victorious at the end of the story;
- the guilt-ridden figure in search of redemption.



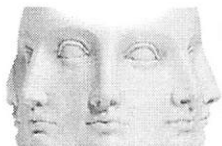
- the VILLAIN: the male or female personification of evil. Note that, while nearly all works of literature include an antagonist to provide conflict with the protagonist, not all antagonists are villains. Villains truly personify evil. Their malice is often apparently unmotivated, or is motivated by a single grievance from the past. The villain's malice is often limitless, and rarely is the villain reformed within the context of the story. Examples of archetypal villains are Satan and Loki (from Norse mythology).

Some variations of the VILLAIN figure include:

- the "mad scientist"
- the bully
- the TEMPTRESS: the female who possesses what the male desires and uses his desire (either intentionally or unintentionally) as a means to his ultimate destruction. Examples are Eve, Juliet, Lady Macbeth.
- the EARTH MOTHER/GODDESS: Mother Nature, Mother Earth—the nurturing, life-giving aspect of femininity.
- the SPIRIT or INTELLECT: the often-unidentified feminine inspiration for works of art and literature. Examples would be Dante's Beatrice, Shakespeare's Dark Lady, etc.
- the SAGE: largely of Eastern origin, the sage is the elderly wise man; the teacher or mentor. Examples from Western literature would be Merlin and Tiresias. Yoda from *Star Wars* and Gandalf from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are contemporary derivations.

Some variations of the SAGE include:

- the wise woman, the witch. Note that, while the male SAGE's wisdom is usually spiritual or philosophical (often with political or military applications), the wise woman's wisdom tends to concern the workings of nature—hence, the connection of the wise woman with witchcraft and all of the associated superstitions.
- the stern, but loving authority figure.
- the oracle: male or female prophet, fortune-teller, sooth-sayer.



2. Archetypal Images

- **COLORS:** red as blood, anger, passion, violence; gold as greatness, value, wealth; green as fertility, luxury, growth; blue (the color of the sky) as peace, serenity; white as purity, goodness, God-like holiness; etc.
- **NUMBERS:** three for the Christian Trinity; four for the four seasons, the four ancient elements (earth, water, fire, air); twelve for the months of the solar year; etc.
- **WATER:** the source of life and sustenance; cleansing or purification; baptism.
- **FIRE:** ambiguously both protective and destructive; on an archetypal level, fire often symbolizes human knowledge and industry (Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind when there were no other gifts left to give.)
- **The FOUR ANCIENT ELEMENTS:** fire, water, air, and earth.
- **GARDENS:** natural abundance; easy, beautiful life; new birth, hope; Eden, the original Paradise from which humankind was expelled.
- **GEOMETRIC SHAPES:** a triangle for the Trinity; a circle for perfection and eternity, wholeness, union.
- **CELESTIAL BODIES:** the sun (masculine) is both the giver and destroyer of life; the moon (feminine) marks the passage of time and controls the course of human events. Seedtime, harvest, etc., are all determined more by the phases of the moon than the progress of the sun.
- **MASCULINE IMAGES/SYMBOLS:** columns, towers, boats, trees, etc.
- **FEMININE IMAGES/SYMBOLS:** bodies of water, caves, doorways, windows.
- **CAVES:** ambiguously can represent the womb (the source of life) and the grave; often represent the entrance to the underworld (related to the grave); as well as to the unexplored regions of the human soul.
- **YIN AND YANG:** any scheme that suggests that each of a pair of opposites partakes of the other's nature, complements the other, and essentially completes the other; the idea that without a balance of opposing forces, the world would erupt into chaos.



3. Archetypal Situations

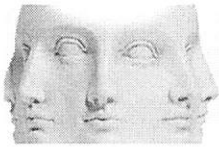
- the QUEST: the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny.

Variations on the QUEST can include:

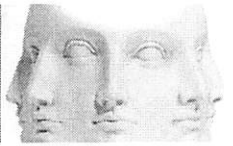
- the Faustian bargain: the selling of one's soul to the devil (metaphorically representing the notion that one would "give anything" in order to...) in exchange for unlimited power, knowledge, wealth, etc. Examples include King Midas.
- the pursuit of revenge for a real or perceived wrong, as exemplified by Captain Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick*.
- the descent into the underworld. (Note that this is usually one part of the quest rather than the entire quest itself.)
- the RENEWAL OF LIFE: death and rebirth, resurrection as seen in the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the day, sleeping and waking. Examples are "Sleeping Beauty," "The Secret Garden," etc.
- INITIATION: coming of age, rites of passage. Some examples include the first hunt, weddings, teenage angst films.
- THE FALL: any event that marks a loss of innocence, a devolution from a paradisaical life or viewpoint to a tainted one.
- REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE: any voluntary loss, especially a loss of life, that results in another's gaining or regaining a desired state.
- the CATALOG OF DIFFICULT TASKS: (labors of Hercules, Cinderella's treatment by her stepmother and stepsisters, etc.).
- the END OF THE WORLD: usually apocalyptic, involving warfare, a huge battle, a metaphoric final battle between good and evil.

Variations on the end of the world include

- Armageddon: the final battle between good and evil according to the Christian New Testament (book of Revelation), in which evil is finally vanquished, evildoers receive their eternal punishment, and God reigns over a newly-created Heaven and Earth;



- Ragnarok: the final battle between two feuding segments of the Norse pantheon. Both sides are largely decimated, as is the human race. Two humans survive to repopulate the human world and worship a new pantheon formed of the gods who survive the battle.
- the Great Flood: found in the Judeo-Christian worldview and other belief systems from around the world, the story of a great deluge that covered the earth with water, killing an entire generation of life forms on earth. A handful survived, repopulating the earth. According to the biblical account, the flood was a punishment for a generation that disregarded God's laws.
- the TABOO: the commission of a culturally forbidden act, such as incest or patricide, often unknowingly or inevitably. Any act or attitude that could be seen as "unnatural," a crime against the ways Nature is supposed to operate.
- the BANQUET: fellowship; nourishment of the body and soul; display of wealth; often used as a symbol for salvation, Heaven. ■



Essential Questions for A Mythological/Archetypal Reading

1. Examine all of the characters—major and minor—and their situations. What archetypes seem to be present?
2. How do any of the characters change over time? What events or people make them change?
3. What is suggested in the setting (time of day, season of year, location—garden, body of water, etc.) that might suggest an archetypal reading?
4. What types of symbols are used? What do they represent?
5. How are the symbols in this work different from the traditional uses of those symbols? What is significant about this difference?
6. What myths are at work in different parts of this work? What features of the story are reminiscent of other stories you know?

Focus of Study

- Universal myths, characters, and situations found in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* establish it as an archetypal work
- McMurphy's function as the archetypal hero
- Chief Bromden's function as the archetypal loner
- How McMurphy's actions and the obstacles he must overcome form an archetypal quest, and how his lobotomy represents a redemptive sacrifice