Archetypal Criticism for Students:
Finding the Mythic Resonance
By Tim Gillespie

Old myths, old gods, old heroes have never died. They are only sleeping at the bottom of our mind, waiting for our call. We have need for them. They represent the wisdom of our race.
—Stanley Kunitz

An Overview and Benefits

The conviction of archetypal literary critics is that there is a realm of human experience expressed in many myths and fantasy stories that goes deeper than any rational or intellectual thinking. These critics—we can call them myth critics for short—believe the great literature that has proved to be of enduring appeal to humans over the centuries is the literature that best reveals and expresses this magical realm. The job of archetypal criticism is to identify those mythic elements that give a work of literature this deeper resonance.

By their universality, myths seem essential to human culture. However, many modern folks view myths as mere fables, expressing ancient forms of religion or primitive versions of science. But myths have traditionally served many other crucial cultural functions, not only explaining the natural world but also using stories to present guidance on proper ways to behave in society and offering insight into enduring the inevitable milestones of a lifetime (such as birth, passage through puberty, marriage, and death). Since ancient times, people have invested the most basic transitions and other universal aspects of the human condition with mythic rituals and stories to help them understand and cope. As Joseph Campbell says in his popular book The Power of Myth, "[Myths] deal with great human problems. I know what to do when I come to a threshold in my life now. A myth can tell me about it, how to respond to certain crises of disappointment or delight or failure or success. Myths tell me where I am" (1988, 15).

Myths do much of this work at a symbolic and metaphorlic level, because the ultimate mysteries of life are not entirely graspable by the intellect alone, say scholars such as Campbell. Myths are thus dramatized representations of the deep instinctual life of people.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of myths is how similar they are across peoples and ages. Although every society weaves its own distinctive tapestry of myth, we discern
common threads and patterns. Even in the myths of cultures widely separated in time and locale, common elements with common meanings recur—symbols, motifs, story arcs, and themes—and elicit similar responses. So that small shiver of recognition we experience when encountering these elements expresses the timeless, universal myths that all humans share.

Literature can cause that shiver. When we become caught up in the atmosphere of a compelling book, say myth critics, it is usually because of the mythic elements.

Because of the powerful draw of myths, some writers say they consciously incorporate mythic elements into their works, while others surely tap that deep vein of meaning unconsciously. Either way, the myth critic believes a literary text's effectiveness to be primarily a function of its mythic resonance.

Archetypal literary criticism took root in the rich soil of other academic fields, most notably cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis. These disciplines may seem far removed from the reading of literature, but this reading approach does have both cultural and psychological dimensions.

On the cultural side, the work of Scotland's Sir James Frazer (1854–1941) set the cornerstone. At Cambridge University, Frazer undertook a massive cross-cultural study of the origins of religion in primitive myth and ritual. Eventually this tome, which Frazer titled *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, stretched to a dozen volumes. Unlike most anthropologists, Frazer, a historian of classics and religion, did not travel to other places to conduct fieldwork; his knowledge of other cultures was secondhand, gleaned from his reading and from questionnaires he sent to missionaries working among “primitive” peoples. Though subsequent scholars consider some of Frazer's descriptions of local myths unreliable, some of his conclusions inaccurate, and some of his attitudes toward other cultures demeaning, *The Golden Bough* is still considered a classic, the first great work of comparative mythology.

Because of his extensive observations of remarkable likenesses in stories and rites of cultures that had never had contact, Frazer's main conclusion was, as he says at the end of *The Golden Bough*, the “essential similarity of man's chief wants everywhere and at all times” (1994, 804). Most societies, for example, have core stories about the death and rebirth of an important god-figure, stories that Frazer says reflect the yearly seasonal pattern of winter's decay and spring's revival. Though the stories and rituals differ in detail from time to place, Frazer notes, in substance they are the same. We spin the same stories our primitive ancestors shared over the tribal fire, only with changed settings and costumes.

*The Golden Bough* made a mark not only on the study of history, mythology, and anthropology but also on literature. Using Frazer as a resource, literary critics began to seek out mythic elements in masterworks of literature at the same time as some prominent writers, including T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and William Butler Yeats, were consciously incorporating mythic elements into their poems and stories. Ever since, we can find popular artists who purposely employ mythic archetypes, including more
recently George Lucas in his *Star Wars* films and the Disney animators who made the *The Lion King*.

It took another great thinker to conceive of the mythic elements in great literature as reflective not only of natural or cultural phenomena, as Sir James Frazer did, but also of deep-seated psychic meanings.

On this psychological side, the work of Carl Jung (1875–1961) offered a substructure for thinking about literature in mythic terms. Jung (pronounced *Yoong*) was a Swiss psychoanalyst and philosopher. Early in his brilliant medical career, he was a disciple of Freud, but Jung’s thinking soon diverged from that of his older mentor. One difference: Jung believed Freud’s conception of the unconscious too limited. Where Freud focused on negative and neurotic behavior, Jung was interested in what he felt was the health-giving potential of the unconscious. And where Freud saw the unconscious as primarily a personal repository of each individual’s repressed desires and emotions, Jung conceived of the unconscious as having two strata. The shallower level, Jung agreed with Freud, is individual and based on one’s unique collection of personal experiences. But Jung saw a deeper, more universal and ancient layer, a “memory” from our distant ancestors, a psychic inheritance common to the whole human race. Jung labeled this the *collective unconscious*. This layer has contents that are more or less the same in all individuals everywhere throughout history, and Jung used a Greek word to describe these contents: *archetypal*. (Archetype is pronounced *ar-ki-type* and is a joining of the Greek prefix *arche*, beginning, with *typos*, imprint, generally referring to an original pattern on which subsequent representations are based.) Our psychic archetypes are recurring patterns of images, symbols, themes, and stories that help us make sense of our lives. And this mythic level of the unconscious is a source for creativity and health, said Jung.

We can glimpse essential archetypes in dreams and myths, according to Jung. While dreams are personal manifestations of this primeval tribal memory, myths are societal manifestations of it. Myths are not only primitive cultural explanations of the way nature works but also symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche. For example, the ancient Greeks saw the sun’s progress across the sky as the daily ride across the sky of the god Helios in his blindingly bright chariot, for example. However, the story of Helios not only explains the daily solar event but also expresses our unconscious sense of the eternal story—in all its glory and tragedy—of the predictable ascendancy and subsequent fading of our shining heroes and of ourselves. For another example, the myth of Arachne explains the origin of spiders as the Greek gods turn the frank and boastful young weaver Arachne into a spider as punishment. However, the story perhaps expresses our unconscious sense of the dangerous web we weave when we are prideful, or, more disconcertingly, when we are honest. Hence, myths are a public expression of our deepest private experiences.

Jung believed that wisdom and good mental health result when humans are in harmony with the archetypes and universal symbols in the collective unconscious. He worried that modern humans, relying too much on science and logic, intellectualizing
and domesticating their more primitive and nonrational natures, might lose contact with something important, might even lose a sense of essential purpose in life.

Literature fits nicely with this thinking about the collective unconscious. Archetypal images occur in rich abundance in literature, which must be seen as its main unconscious appeal. Thus, a novel such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is not only an expression of the author’s own individual repressed desires, as Freud might assert, but is even more powerfully, as a Jungian might assert, an archetypal manifestation of forbidden desires for power and violence that the whole human race must repress as a condition of civilization. The archetypal images in Conrad's classic—a journey up a river (shaped like a snake) into a dark, unknown territory of forbidden urges—mimic elements of our common imaginative experience. Myth critics simply seek to find the sources of this powerful appeal of literature.

Thus did the anthropology of Frazer and the psychology of Jung serve as foundation materials for archetypal criticism. But a third scholar, the Canadian Northrop Frye (1912–1991), built the main edifice. Frye decided that the coordinating principle of literature was its grounding in primitive story formulas. Literature, in fact, he declared, is a kind of displaced mythology, and even the most innovative of contemporary literary works reverts to the same patterns we find in old myths, legends, songs, rituals, and folktales. Since all literature arises out of these enduring materials, we can often identify in literature archetypal geographies (edenic gardens or hellish wastelands), character types (heroes, villains, sidekicks, scapegoats), story aspects (journeys as rites of passage, monster-slaying), or themes (good vs. evil, man vs. nature) that give literature its structural unity. Most uniquely, Frye developed a seasonal scheme of archetypal story genres—the *romance* associated with the high point of summer, *tragedy* associated with the fall, bitter *irony* and *satire* associated with bleak winter, and *comedy* associated with spring. Frye’s idea is that even the form of literary works expresses a mythic dimension.

Overall, Frye felt that criticism’s job was to awaken students to the mythologies behind their literature and thus their societies, freeing them from narrow thinking with a vision of universal truths to live by.

So, what do archetypal or myth critics actually do with a work of literature?

The most basic question of a myth critic is, “What archetypal elements can we find in this literary work? Are there any mythic plots, characters, themes, symbols, or recurring images? How do these archetypal elements contribute to the work as a whole?”

Of course, asking such questions assumes a certain level of knowledge about mythology. Countless books about comparative mythology line the shelves in libraries and bookstores, and plastered all over the Internet are elaborate lists, charts, and diagrams of every conceivable archetype with associated meanings dating back to antiquity.

Some say different colors, numbers, shapes, animals, and plants have archetypal meanings. Archetypal patterns also can be found in natural elements (fire, water, air, earth, the seasons, and heavenly bodies) and natural landscapes (gardens, deserts, oceans, wildernesses, and wastelands). We can find archetypal character types (wise old man,
orphan, warrior, dark stranger, beggar, sorcerer, fisher king or wounded king, king’s evil adviser, country bumpkin, good earth mother, terrible stepmother, pure virgin, damsel in distress, witch, femme fatale or siren, and so on), and character conflicts (competing brothers, rebellious children, power-robbing spouses). Or we can find story archetypes. American novelist John Gardner says that all novels are variations on two themes: “A Stranger Comes to Town” or “A Journey Is Taken.” The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges once remarked that there were only two main plots in all narrative art, “The Odyssey” and “The Crucifixion.” An old high school writing textbook asserted that there are only seven basic stories: “The Fish Out of Water,” “Coming of Age,” “Opposites Attract,” “The Comeuppance,” “The King Must Die,” “Mistaken Identify,” and “Crisis of Belief.” The “Man in Conflict” model ascribed to Arthur Quiller-Couch has seven variations: “Man vs. Man,” “Man vs. Nature,” “Man vs. Himself,” “Man vs. God,” “Man vs. Society,” “Man Caught in the Middle,” and “Man and Woman.” In his 2005 volume The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories, Christopher Booker identifies these essential story lines: “Overcoming the Monster,” “Rags to Riches,” “The Quest,” “Voyage and Return,” “Comedy,” “Tragedy,” and “Rebirth.” These are all different thinkers’ ways of classifying archetypal story patterns.

In other words, there is no shortage of mythic elements to locate in works of literature.

At the heart of them all, however, is the heroic quest archetype, which scholar Joseph Campbell in his 1949 text The Hero with a Thousand Faces called the “monomyth,” or the mother of all myths. Campbell felt that this essential story with all its timeworn elements—a lost paradise, a perilous journey by a hero, the accompaniment by comic sidekicks, the help of a mentor, obstacles and villains to face, a triumph and a return home—conveys important universal truths about the relationship of one’s personal journey of self-discovery to one’s role in society. Thus, versions of this story are found repeatedly in literature.

Besides identifying variations of all these archetypes in what they read, readers can also examine whether the archetypes change over time. Think of the varying portrayals of King Arthur, for example. Sir Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century stories and their countless reversions have given way to contemporary portrayals, including T. H. White’s humanizing 1958 novel The Once and Future King (the source for the Disney movie The Sword in the Stone), Marion Zimmer Bradley’s 1979 feminist retelling from the point of view of Morgan Le Fay in The Mists of Avalon, and the hilarious send-up in the movie Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

Some writers actively subvert archetypes for ironic effect. That wily Greek playwright Sophocles, for example, really put a twist in his hero Oedipus Rex because Oedipus is both the hero and the villain of his own story, simultaneously the savior of the city of Thebes, its sacrificial scapegoat, and its doom-bringer.

Another time-honored angle to this literary approach is to bundle various works that express a particular archetype. Focusing on the archetypal idea of a cleansing flood, for example, we can read the story of the Mesopotamian flood in The Epic of Gilgamesh, refresh our memory of the biblical story of Noah’s ark, listen to Bob Dylan’s song “A
Hard Rain's Gonna Fall,” and assess the flood at the end of T. C. Boyle’s contemporary novel *Tortilla Curtain* in light of these older flood stories.

Finally, we can think about our own lives in archetypal terms as a quest or journey of discovery on which we are embarked. In our writing and thinking, we can consider times we have ventured outside our known realms, undergone initiations, served apprenticeships, received talismanic objects that invest our life with meaning, been tempted to the dark side, experienced transformations, and faced up to our own dragons. Or we can measure our own modern-day heroes against the archetypal heroic mold. What have been their quests, setbacks, temptations, or victories? Do they fit the archetypal patterns? What do any differences communicate about our present-day society?

These are some of the applications of archetypal criticism.

**Benefits of Archetypal Criticism**

Both the anthropological and the psychological aspects of archetypal criticism have value.

On the anthropological side, studying archetypal criticism reinforces our knowledge of mythology, which scholars such as Joseph Campbell believe is foundational information for any educated person, and gets us thinking about all the essential experiences and wishes we share with other people in other times and places. The essence of the hero’s journey crosses all cultural and temporal barriers, for example, thus illuminating our common humanity.

On the psychological side, studying archetypal criticism gives perspective to our lives, putting our trials and triumphs in the context of a personal heroic journey. 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. In other words, studying the mythic roots of literature can be helpful in the endless human quest to find out who we are.

Thus, archetypes, according to their fans, not only take us back to the beginning of humankind’s oldest rituals and beliefs, thus connecting us to others, but also take us deeper into an understanding of our own individual psyches.

**Limitations and Critiques of Archetypal Criticism**

During a class discussion of archetypal criticism, a student said, “It’s so demoralizing to have to reduce *everything* you read to one pattern. It makes you think you’ll never read anything new again.”

This comment expresses one critique of archetypal criticism, that to interpret all literature through a few archetypal patterns is reductive. Isn’t literature too varied,
experimental, and explorative an art form to be limited to reexpressions of a few recurring themes? Some writers think the point of literature is to complicate, deconstruct, and resist old imaginative patterns; this critical method seems to deny that innovative or transgressive capacity of art.

In addition, are mythic elements the only magnets in the energy field that draw us to literature? Aren't we also drawn to aesthetic accomplishments, philosophical questions, historical implications, and many other aspects of literature? Archetypal criticism ignores all these other attractions.

**To Sum Up**

Archetypal criticism ranges across the fields of mythology, cultural history, and anthropology to gain a feel for the archetypes and images that seem to have the greatest meaning for humans over time.

The archetypal, or myth, critic asks these questions:

What mythic elements or archetypal patterns—themes, characters, settings, symbols, imagery, plots, genres, or versions of the hero's quest—are employed in this literary work? What do they contribute to the work as a whole? Does knowledge of these elements add anything to an understanding of the work? Does the work add anything to an understanding of archetypes? Does the work subvert or deconstruct any archetypes?

When reading a work of literature, then, the myth critic examines the form and content of the work, looking for the connection to mythic archetypes that have collected in our tribal psyche, seeking the inner spirit that gives the work its vitality and enduring appeal.