

# 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

Archetypal literary critics think there is a realm of human experience expressed in myths 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. They explain the natural world, offer guidance on proper ways to behave in a given society, and offer insight into enduring the inevitable milestones of a lifetime (such as birth, passage into adulthood, marriage, and death). Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of myths is how similar they are in most times and places. Although every society weaves its own distinctive tapestry of myth, we find common threads and patterns—timeless, universal myths that all humans share. Literature uses these common patterns or archetypes. In fact, say myth critics, whenever we are totally caught up in a compelling book, it's usually because of an author's conscious or unconscious use of mythic elements. Common mythical images, symbols, themes, and stories are usually called *archetypes*, a word derived from ancient Greek that means an original pattern. From ancient writers to modern artists (such as the Disney animators who made *The Lion King* or J. K. Rowling who wrote the Harry Potter series), the use of these universal archetypes is a part of our common human and literary ancestry.

We can easily identify many mythic patterns that show up repeatedly in literature, giving it a remarkable unity. We can find archetypal geographies (paradise-like gardens, hellish wastelands, scary forests), archetypal characters (hero warriors, orphans, sorcerers, dark strangers, fisher kings or wounded kings, evil advisers, country bumpkins, scapegoats, earth mothers or fairy protectors, terrible stepmothers, pure heroines, damsels in distress, witches, or sirens), archetypal character conflicts (competing brothers, rebellious children, power-robbing spouses), archetypal story arcs (a stranger comes to town, fish

out of water, opposites attract, mistaken identity, rags to riches), and archetypal themes (good vs. evil, man vs. nature). 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 archetype of the *heroic quest*, the mother of all myths. 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 wise old mentor, obstacles and villains to face, a triumph as society is restored to its right order, and a return home—connects a personal journey of self-discovery to a sense of responsibility for making society a better place.

Archetypal criticism has many benefits. It's an approach that gives readers another way to think about and analyze literature. It cultivates a cross-cultural appreciation for a common mythic heritage. And it offers tools for personal discovery. We can use literature's archetypes to think about our own lives in mythic terms as a quest or journey of discovery on which we are embarked. 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?

In all these ways, archetypal criticism adds value to a reader's tool kit.

## Limitations and Critiques of Archetypal Criticism

One common critique of archetypal criticism is that it doesn't really give us that much to do with a piece of literature—after we identify the mythic elements in a work, then what? Is that all there is?

Another critique is that archetypal criticism tends to try to interpret all literature as another version of the heroic quest story. Isn't literature too varied to be limited to the endless reexpression of this archetype or to be reduced to a few recurring themes?

A final critique is the overemphasis on mythic elements. Aren't we also drawn to great books by their artistry, their philosophical questions, their historical implications, their political stances, their psychological insights, and so forth? Archetypal criticism slights all these attributes of lasting literature.

## To Sum Up

The archetypal or myth critic asks these questions: What mythic elements or archetypal patterns—themes, characters, settings, symbols, imagery, plots, 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 update old 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 human psyches, seeking the inner spirit that gives the work its vitality and enduring appeal.