

“How Is Archetypal Criticism Essential to a Literary Study of the Bible?”

Scholars of ancient hero stories have long recognized that these stories are reenactments of a common pattern. More recently it has become clear that all literature is made up of repeated images and motifs that are known as archetypes.

An archetype is a symbol, character type, or plot motif that has recurred throughout literature. Northrop Frye defines an archetype as “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole.” Leslie Fiedler speaks of archetypes as “any of immemorial patterns of response to the human situation in its permanent aspects.” An example of the archetypal plot pattern is the chase and rescue; an example of an archetypal image is the spring season to suggest rebirth; an example of the archetypal character type is the hero or heroine.

Archetypes are the basic building blocks of literature. Mastering the archetypes of literature thus becomes a prerequisite for understanding literature itself, including the literature of the Bible.

Two features of the archetypal content of literature are crucial. One is that literary archetypes fall into a pattern made up of opposing halves. the second is that the archetypes add up to a coherent, circular whole, which I will call the monomyth.

The dualistic nature of archetypes. The dualistic or dialectical nature of literature becomes evident the moment one begins to organize the archetypes of literature. Virtually all of the archetypal images and character types of literature can be divided into the dual categories of ideal and unideal, comic and tragic. This is why Northrop Frye can say that literature is “two dreams, a wish-fulfillment dream and an anxiety dream.” In other words, literature has two themes: the things that people long for (wish fulfillment) and the things that are wrong in the world around them (anxiety).

The dualistic structure of literature is illustrated in the following list, which catalogs the archetypes of literature.

Category of Experience	The Archetypes of Ideal Experience	The Archetypes of Unideal Experience
The supernatural world	Any beneficent deity; angels; the heavenly society.	Demons (including Satan), or malicious deities; hobgoblins; ogres; blind fate.
Human Characters	The hero or heroine; the good mother or father; the innocent child; the benevolent king or ruler; the wiseman; the shepherd.	The villain; the tempter or temptress; the harlot (prostitute); the witch; the idiot; the taskmaker or tyrant; the wicked father or step-mother; the malicious parent; the outcast or wanderer; the traitor; the malicious giant; the shrewish or domineering women; the sluggard or lazy person; any “blocking character” who stands in the way of happiness; the churl or refuser of festivities.

Human relationships	The community or city; images of symposium; communion, order, unity, friendship, love; the wedding or marriage; the feast, meal, or supper; the family; freedom.	Tyranny or anarchy; isolation among people; images of torture, mutilation (the cross, stake, scaffold, gallows, stocks). slavery, or bondage; images of war, riot, feud, or family discord.
Clothing	Any stately garment symbolizing legitimate position or success; festal garments such as wedding clothes; fine clothing given as gifts of hospitality; white or light colored clothing; clothing of adornment (such as jewels); protective clothing, such as warriors armor.	ill-fitting garments (often symbolic of a position that is usurped and not held legitimately); garments symbolizing mourning (the shroud, dark mourning garments, sackcloth, mourning bands); dark clothes; tattered, dirty, or coarse clothing; any clothing that suggests poverty or bondage; a conspicuous excess of clothing (the overdressed person).
The human body	Images of health, strength, vitality, potency; feats of strength and dexterity; images of sleep and rest; wish fulfilment dreams; birth.	images of disease, deformity, barrenness, injury, or mutation; sleeplessness or nightmares, often related to guilt of conscious; death.
Food	Staples, such as bread, milk and meat; luxuries, such as wine and honey; the harvest.	Hunger, drought, starvation, cannibalism; poison or magic potions.
Animals	A community of domesticated animals, usually a flock of sheep; a lamb; a gentle bird, often a dove; a faithful domesticated animal, such as dog; group of singing birds; the beneficent talking animals of folktales; animals or birds noted for their strength, such as a lion or eagle.	Monsters or beasts of prey; the wolf (enemy of sheep), the tiger, the dragon, the vulture, the cold and earthbound snake, the owl (associated with darkness). the hawk; any wild animal harmful to people; scapegoat.
Landscape	a garden, grove, or park; the mountaintop or hill; the fertile and secure valley; pastoral settings or farms; the pathway.	The sinister or dark forest, often enchanted and in control of demonic forces; the health or wilderness or wasteland, which is always barren and may be either a tropical place of intense heat or a place of ice and intense cold; the dark and dangerous valley; the underground cave or tomb; the graveyard; the labyrinth.
Plants	Green grass; the rose; the vineyard; the tree of life; the lily; evergreen plants (symbolic of immortality); herbs or plants of healing	The thorn or thistle; weeds; dead or dying plants; the willow tree (symbolic of mourning).
Buildings	The city or palace or castle; the temple or church; the house or home; the	The prison or dungeon; the wicked city of violence, sexual perversion, and crime; the tower

	tower of contemplation; the capital city, symbol of the nation; the rustic cottage.	of imprisonment or wicked aspiration (the tower of Babel)
The inorganic World	images of jewels and precious stones, often glowing and fiery; the fire and brilliant light; burning that purifies and refines; rocks of refuge.	The inorganic world in its unworked form of deserts, rocks, and wilderness; dry dust or ashes; fire that destroys and tortures instead of purifying; rust and decay
Water	A river or stream,; a spring or fountain of water; showers of rain; dew; flowing water of any type; tranquil; pools 9mn a formal garden.	The sea and all that it contains (sea beasts and water monsters); stagnant pools.
Forces of nature	The breeze or wind; the spring and summer seasons; calm after storm; the sun or the lesser light of the moon and stars; ,light, sunrise, day.	The storm or tempest; the autumn and winter seasons; sunset,darkness, night.
Sounds	Musical harmony; singing; laughter.	Discordant sounds, cacophony, weeping,wailing
Direction and Motion	Images of ascent, rising, height (especially the mountaintop and tower), motion (as opposed to stagnation).	Images of descent, lowness, stagnation or immobility, suffocation, confinement

The circular pattern of the monomyth. In addition to having this dualistic pattern, literature as a whole makes up a single story with circular structure. This composite story ('composite' because it is made up of all the individual works of literature) is called "the monomyth" because it is the "one story" of literature. The monomyth is shaped like a circle and has four separate phases. As such, it corresponds to some familiar cycles of human experience. Such as dawn-zenith-sunset-darkness and spring-summer-autumn-winter.

We can picture the "one story" of literature like this. Romance, which Northrop Frye calls ("the story of summer") pictures idealized human experience and is a wish-fulfillment dream of complete happiness. Its opposite, anti-romance ("the story of winter") portrays unideal experience and is an anxiety dream of total bondage and frustration. Tragedy ("the story of fall") narrates a fall downward from bliss to catastrophe, and comedy ("the story of spring") narrates a rise from bondage to happiness and freedom. These are the four kinds of plot material, and together they make up the composite story of literature.

The earlier list of archetypes takes its place within the framework of the monomyth. Romance and comedy employ the archetypes of ideal experience, while tragedy and anti-romance use the archetypes of unideal experience. The monomyth unifies literature as a whole, including biblical literature. it provides a general outline where every individual story or poem, as well as the imagery and symbolism, can be put.

If the dual list of archetypes is particularly applicable to images and characters. The cyclic patterns of the monomyth is similarly good framework to organizing archetypal plot motifs. these plot motifs usually unfold along the circular pattern of the monomyth. The most important archetypal plot motifs are the following.

1. **The quest**, in which the hero leaves the security of his home, undertakes an ordeal that's tests his powers and temporarily defeats him, overcomes the

obstacles, and either returns home in triumph or achieves a new state of bliss (which still constitutes a return to the initial state). Such a quest story is, like the monomyth, circular in structure: its phases are separated, transformation through ordeal, and return.

2. **The death-rebirth motif**, in which a hero endures death or danger and returns to life or security.
3. **The initiation**, in which the hero is thrust out of an existing, usually ideal, situation and undergoes a series of ordeals as he or she passes from ignorance and immaturity to social or spiritual adulthood.
4. **The journey**, in which a hero passes through threats that test him and lead to his character development.
5. **Tragedy**, or its more specific form of the fall from innocence.
6. **Comedy**, a U-shaped story that begins in prosperity, descends into tragedy, but rises to a happy ending as obstacles to success are overcome.
7. **Crime and punishment**, in which the order of society is destroyed and the criminal undergoes punishment as social order is restored.
8. **The temptation motif**, in which an innocent person becomes the victim of an evil tempter or temptress.
9. **The rescue motif** (or the chase and rescue), in which characters undergo a dire threat and then are rescued.
10. **The Cinderella or rags-to-riches pattern**, in which a character overcomes the obstacles of ostracism and poverty.

The archetypal approach to the Bible. What significance do archetypes have for teaching the Bible as literature? The Bible is *the* great repository of archetypes in Western literature. Frye calls the Bible “the major informing influence on literary symbolism.” Since the Bible is so heavily archetypal in its content, archetypal criticism is an indispensable tool for the literary enjoyment and understanding of biblical literature.

Archetypal criticism does several things to enhance one’s understanding of the Bible. It unifies the Bible: what may appear at first glance to be a heterogeneous collection of fragments turns out to be a single, coherent whole. Since archetypes express what is most basic and elemental in human experience, a study of the archetypes of the Bible unlocks its universality and opens the way for a modern reader to see the relation of biblical literature to his or her own experience. Furthermore, since archetypes are the basic ingredients of literature itself, an awareness of the archetypal dimension of the Bible allows one to relate biblical literature to his whole literary experience, including contemporary literature.