

Choosing and Using Archetypes in Character Development

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(revised from an earlier version created in cooperation with Janelle Schneider)

What are archetypes?

Think of an archetype as a fundamental pattern — a universal theme or character type — that's instantly familiar to everyone, even if we don't know why. Carl Jung first named these patterns in Jungian Psychology, linking them to the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece. To him, these ancient gods represented components of our human psyche, unaffected by time, space, and our conscious control.

These archetypes are universal themes born from thousands of years of shared human experience, passed down from generation to generation. Jung also believed that we all share a collective unconscious, and that these patterns live within that. Because of this, an archetype isn't something we learn in our daily lives or from a teacher; it's part of our inheritance. And you can spot them everywhere: in the heroes of myths, the villains of fairy tales, and even when we casually describe someone as "such a diva" or "a total bully."

Diving Deeper

These everyday examples can feel a lot like stereotypes because they focus on what we see on the outside and how other people perceive them. But when you're building a character, the real magic happens when you go deeper. While stereotypes are basically just surface-level shorthand, archetypes are all about a character's inner motivations and their long-term journey. They are the true foundation and drive that makes a character who they are.

The best part? You don't even have to name archetypes for people to understand them. They are instinctually recognized by everyone. Jung identified classic archetypes like the Rebel, the Ruler, the Innocent, and the Explorer, and many more have been discovered since. As writers, we get to use these patterns to add incredible depth to our characters, because each archetype comes with its own unique set of behaviors, attitudes, and emotions.

Better yet, every archetype has a light side and a shadow side — its strengths and its challenges — positives and negatives. It might be helpful or detrimental — desired or feared. An archetype also has hidden facets that a character is blind to. These blind spots

are where they are most vulnerable and where they'll find the greatest opportunity for growth, transformation, and surprises throughout your story.

Once we have a sense of our character's archetypes (and they usually contain more than one!), we can dig into their inner world by exploring their shadow side.

About That Mask

To really understand our characters, and how other people might interact with them, we need to look at the masks they wear. A character's Mask is the face they show to the world, sometimes consciously and sometimes not. They might even wear multiple masks depending on the situation. As writers, we can explore which masks our character chooses to wear, and what triggers them to slip them on. We need to remember that their choices come from who they are on the inside, not just what has happened to them in the past.

To better understand your character's masks, ask yourself:

1. What is one mask your character wears?
2. Why do they wear it?
3. What does the mask look like to them versus to other people?
4. Do they ever drop the mask? If so, when, for whom, and why?

Putting Archetypes to Use

For our stories to captivate readers, our characters need to grow and evolve from within. Understanding their archetypes helps us map the journey they need to take and the decisions they'll make. How is their fear holding them back? And how do the events of your story force them to finally face their shadow side?

If you feel like archetypes could be a helpful tool for you as a writer, the book *45 Master Characters* by Dr. Victoria Lynn Schmidt is a worthwhile investment. While there are online resources based on her work (ex: https://tropedia.fandom.com/wiki/Master_Characters), nothing else quite matches what this book has to offer.