

Archetypes in the Hero's Journey

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It is important to note the first word here: ARCHEtypes and not STEREOtypes. We all know what stereotypes are: those two dimensional characters that have no life, no personality. After all, how many times have we been cautioned not to use the stereotype of the Other Woman?

The term Archetype was first significantly employed by Carl G Jung to signify ancient patterns of personality and relationships that appear across the world's myths, legends and folk tales. These patterns may be familiar to anyone who has read fairy tales or mythology: questing heroes, the heralds who call them to the adventure, the wise old men and women who give them advice and magical gifts, shapeshifters who alternately assist and interfere with the quest, dark villains out to destroy the hero and those foolish sidekicks who cause trouble but also bring comic relief.

Individual characters acting as archetypes carry pivotal roles in your novel: to aid, to hinder, to teach and to show the darker side of your protagonists. They are functions any character can perform. They may be separate characters within your novel, or some of the many aspects of your protagonist.

In many romances, the number of active characters is very limited because of space or plotting considerations. In these cases, your protagonist may change from one archetypal behavior to another as the situation requires. Perhaps it can be expressed as different masks that the character wears temporarily.

Whether they are a mask your protagonist wears or a separate character, archetypes are familiar to you because they work. They give characters a purpose within the work, and act as a framework within the work on which you can hang the action.

You can deliberately choose to place an archetype within your story to serve a specific purpose. I tend not to use the archetypes deliberately, even though I'm a huge fan of the Hero's Journey style of writing. Rather than say, "It's time to cross a threshold so I need a guardian for my heroine to cope with," I tend to let this happen organically. Many writers have learned the patterns and pathways of the journey by reading hundreds of stories, and so it doesn't need to be a conscious decision. It just feels right.

On the other hand, knowledge of archetypes can be extremely beneficial during the rewrite process. If a scene or chapter isn't working, you can analyse the characters within it to see if they are being true to their personalities and purpose. And if they don't have either... they may have to suffer the worst fate of all, the delete key.

The Mentor:

In the traditional tales of swords and sorcery, the mentor was often a crusty old man who could wield magic and always had a pithy word of advice for the protagonist. In historical romances, this may still be the case, but the mentor could also be the knowledgeable cook or the master of the stables. In regencies, the mentor is usually a wed or widowed woman of character and station. In contemporaries, the mentor could be a doctor or therapist, the protagonist's secretary (Jennifer Crusie, [Sizzle](#)), even a parent. And there may be a series of mentors in a protagonist's life, something that has room to develop in the larger books.

The mentor serves a number of purposes: source of wisdom, gift giver, and conscience. The role of gift-giver comes out most strongly in the subgenres that reflect mythology and fairytales. An example of this is Cassandra, the Learned woman in Elizabeth Lowell's historical romance [Enchanted](#). Cassandra gifts the heroine Ariane with a magical dress that reflects

Ariane's moods, heals her and acts as a weapon. The dream-and-hope-interwoven dress is a vital element of the novel. It helps to show Ariane's change of heart and emotional growth throughout the book at the same time it saves her life several times. Typically such a gift is given after the protagonist has earned it, by passing a test, by learning, sacrifice or commitment.

Other Mentors can act to motivate the protagonist and help overcome fear. Still others act as initiators of love. In romance novels, sexual initiation usually occurs between the hero and heroine, with the more experienced character taking on the momentary role of mentor.

Mentors may have appeared and passed out of the protagonist's life before the novel begins. They are brought into the story by way of the character saying "I remember Mother always used to say..." Objects, animals and forces of nature may also act as Mentors. In Justine Dare's [Wild Hawk](#), Jason Hawk is reluctantly guided by a magical book that cannot be destroyed, lost or discarded. The family history's messages guide him through a realisation of his heritage and true feelings for the heroine, Kendall Chase.

Another form of Mentor is the internal one. Some protagonists have no need or no contact with another character who can act as Mentor. Such experienced heroes and heroines carry their own Mentor in the form of their conscience and code of honor.

Keep in mind that the Mentor need not always have the best interests of the Protagonist in mind. While the Mentor typically acts as a fount of wisdom and an outside conscience for the protagonist, they may have their own agendas. A literary example of this is Madame Merle, the Mentor in *Portrait of a Lady*. Madame Merle's advice leads the protagonist into a torturous marriage to protect her own reputation.

Damaged protagonists may also carry guilt around as a form of negative internal mentor.

The Threshold Guardian:

The Threshold Guardian's job is to ensure the protagonist is worthy of passing the threshold, and thus they act as part of the tests the protagonist must face in the journey. A hero who depends on his strength might attempt to overcome Threshold Guardians, while a hero who depends on his wits might evade, bribe, learn from and even convert the Guardians to his cause. Needless to say, running away from a Threshold Guardian is not a successful way of dealing with one. . As with Mentors, the Guardian can also be an inanimate object, animal or force of nature.

Threshold Guardians are typically the henchmen of the villain or antagonist, but they can also be neutral to either side, simply doing their job. The third type of guardian is a secret helper, there to act as a guide if the protagonist is able to pass the initial test and learn from the result. A delayed form of secret helper is the guardian who turns to your protagonist's side after the protagonist shows them mercy or aids them. The final type of threshold guardian is more difficult to define and fight, because they are the protagonist's own fears, hatred and obsessions

A wise hero or heroine recognises such guardians as signals that they are progressing. Each guardian represents tests of new skills or beliefs, and act as warm-ups for the great confrontation, often known in romance writing circles as The Black Moment.

The Herald: Heralds act to signal change and invite the character to answer the call to adventure. Their job is to motivate the hero into action, despite the hero's frequent desire to maintain the status quo. Heralds can be people, objects or acts of nature. They may be positive, neutral or negative. We usually encounter the Herald in the first stages of the journey, although this archetype can be used to signal major direction changes later in the plot.

The Shapeshifter:

The Shapeshifter archetype is hard to describe by its very nature but in essence it acts to bring uncertainty and tension into a story, by changing appearance, mood, or behavior. In a romance, the hero and heroine can both be shapeshifters, adapting as external and internal demands require.

Secondary characters may be Shapeshifters as well, turning from Mentor to Herald to Trickster to Villain and back through the cycle in turn. Shapeshifters can reflect the protagonist's unspoken desire for transformation, and successful dealings with such shifters can result in new understanding of the opposite sex or restrained energies within themselves.

The other woman is an example of a shapeshifter archetype which has become so overused as to become cliché, or stereotype. While femme fatales are out of favor in our genre, perhaps we will see a growing occurrence of homme fatales?

The paranormal subgenre allows for a more blatant version of this archetype, where a major character might physically change into a wolf, vampire or angel. Within the subgenre, such changes are accepted by readers along with the emotional and integral changes of more mundane characters.

Regardless, a shapeshifter's job is usually to dazzle, confuse, lie to, occasionally help and delay a protagonist. If your heroine is constantly wondering whether a subcharacter is friend or foe, and "Just whose side is she on this week?" you can be sure you have a shapeshifter in your cast of characters. (And the answer to the question is "On their own side, of course!")

The Shadow:

At first thought, you might instinctively peg the term Shadow on the villain of a dark-toned story. While this could be accurate, it leaves out many of the other aspects of this archetype. The Shadow can also be the dark side of the hero, the unexpressed, hidden or suppressed side of their nature. Another aspect of the Shadow can be the light or good side of the villain that the protagonists cannot initially see or that the villain tries to hide. Other Shadows may be people who agree with your protagonist's goals, but disagree with the way they should be achieved. In any of these situations, the Shadow should be a worthy opponent who brings out the best in the hero.

The Shadow character is normally filled with a huge amount of repressed energy and emotion, aspects of the protagonist that have festered from lack of expression. It can be an outside force, or a reflection of part of your protagonist's character. Doubts that cripple the protagonist at the critical moment, or frighten them out of taking crucial steps are the footprints of the protagonist's Shadow.

Villains' own Shadows can humanise them and prevent them from being cardboard characters. Let some of their suppressed good natures out, even if only for a moment, to give your protagonists that crucial moment of doubt. Likewise Shadows can humanise and soften an anti-hero protagonist. And to add another element, Shadows are often shapeshifters, which truly tests your hero.

Shadows can be dealt with in several ways. External ones, such as Villains, can be defeated, exposed or unempowered. Internal ones can be faced and dealt with to reduce their impact. Others can be brought over and transformed, as with Georgette Heyer's villain Duke of Andover in *The Black Moth* who becomes the hero Duke of Avon in *Duke of Avon* in *These Old Shades*.

A more direct change can be found in Justine Davis's Captain Califa Claxton, Shadow and henchman Villain in the futuristic [Lord of the Storm](#), later to become the heroine of [The SkyPirate](#).

The Trickster:

The energy of mischief and the potential for change are the signposts for the Trickster Archetype. They may be as obvious as the clownish sidekick or as subtle as the hidden troublemaker. Tricksters serve important purposes. They can serve to cut egos down to size, be they the egos of your protagonists or the people they encounter. In books with a serious or action-filled tone, they can give moments of contrasting light relief. Tricksters serve as catalysts because they can't stand to see things stay as they are. As catalysts, they affect other lives but remain unchanged themselves. Their entire purpose is to promote change, and by words or action help to shine a light on situations that must be modified for balance.

The Moncat Seri from Pam McCutcheon's excellent futuristic [Quicksilver](#) is an example of an animal trickster. It can even be argued that Leisure's special series featuring dogs uses the archetype of the trickster pet as its lynchpin.

As an element of your protagonist, the Trickster side may reveal unhappiness with the status quo through slips of the tongue or spontaneous and unusual actions. Your protagonist may also deliberately don the Trickster mask to outwit enemies or get around obstacles.

In Conclusion: I hope this article has helped you identify your own archetypal characters within your work. Perhaps it has helped to clarify what a character is intended to do, or you have become aware of a gap within your work that can be successfully filled and the plot assisted by the skills of a Trickster, a Threshold Guardian or a Shadow.

As I said earlier on, with careful consideration, knowledge of archetypes can be extremely beneficial during the rewrite process. I wish you good writing and your characters strength of purpose.

I'd be pleased to correspond with anyone regarding these issues.

Recommended Reading

Bolen, Jean Shinoda. [Goddesses in everywoman : a new psychology of women](#). San Francisco: Harper & Row, c1984. ISBN: 006091291X

Bolen, Jean Shinoda. [Gods in everyman : a new psychology of men's lives and loves](#). San Francisco: Harper & Row, c1989. ISBN: 0060972807

Campbell, Joseph. [The Hero With A Thousand Faces](#) New York: Fine Communications, 1996. ISBN 1567311202

Dare, Justine. [Wild Hawk](#). Topaz, 1996. ISBN: 0451406575

Davis, Justine. **Lord of the Storm** New York: Topaz, 1994. ISBN: 0451404904
(Note: Sadly LOTS is out of print but you may be able to find copies in second-hand book stores)

Davis, Justine. [The Sky Pirate](#). Topaz, 1995. ISBN: 0451404912

Lowell, Elizabeth. [Enchanted](#). Avon Books, 1994. ISBN: 0380772574

McCutcheon, Pam. [Quicksilver](#). Leisure Books, 1996. ISBN: 0505521415

Pearson, Carol S. [Awakening The Heroes Within](#) San Francisco: Harper, 1991. ISBN 0062506781

Vogler, Christopher. [The Writer's Journey: mythic structure for storytellers and screenwriters](#) Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1992. ISBN 0941188132