Characters on the Couch

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"Form of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myth and at the same time as individual products of unconscious origin." C.G. Jung

A Jungian approach to characters for Writers

How do you get inside a character and understand what makes them tick? How can you use their desires, history and motivation to create memorable personalities? One possible technique is to draw on archetypal characters found in mythology that many writers use when creating characters.

These archetypes can be found in a wide range of fiction including Greek mythology, Charles Dickens' novels, Star Wars and Star Trek. Many films use archetypical characters to drive their story. Some game shows and reality TV shows profile potential contestants and select those who fit into specific archetypes.

Amongst the archetypes are characters as diverse as heroes, rulers and sages. Each archetype has a set of core desires that they aspire to. They also have a shadow form or dark side (a term borrowed by George Lucas from this theory). This is their villainous form that they may become if they take the archetype to its worst extremes.

As with many theories about the structure and elements of good stories it is only a guide to producing better characters. It can, however, be a useful way of considering, shaping and developing characters.

So Tell Me About Your Dreams

The psychologist Jung first suggested the theory of archetypal characters in the early part of the twentieth century. By studying myths and legends from across the world he identified a set of cross-cultural archetypal characters that appeared even though the stories themselves were quite different. He suggested that this was because all people have a set of common psychic drives, a sort of deep-seated software in our brains. As a result of this we are able to identify with the characters from stories from cultures radically different to our own.

Joseph Campbell, famous for the hero's journey plot structure that the Star Wars films are based on, and many others, have taken Jung's work and developed it further. From these a variety of different suggested sets of archetypes exist, some with more and some with less archetypes. Their use of Jung's work is widely taught on writing courses and repeated in books on writing. This technique, although related, isn't the same. Campbell's hero's journey focuses on a series of plot points through which a hero passes during a story and is good for plot-focused stories of a particular kind. Some writers will tell you that every successful film ever made fits this structure. Sometimes, however, their efforts to prove this may seem rather forced.

This technique focuses on a method for developing strong well-defined characters. By understanding the archetypes you can set up conflicts between characters and within characters. You can see opportunities to add characters who will move your story in different directions. It uses a set of twelve that aren't divided into different gender specific versions. It also has the advantage that the good and bad versions aren't separated into distinct archetypes, making it easier to see the variations possible within an archetype.
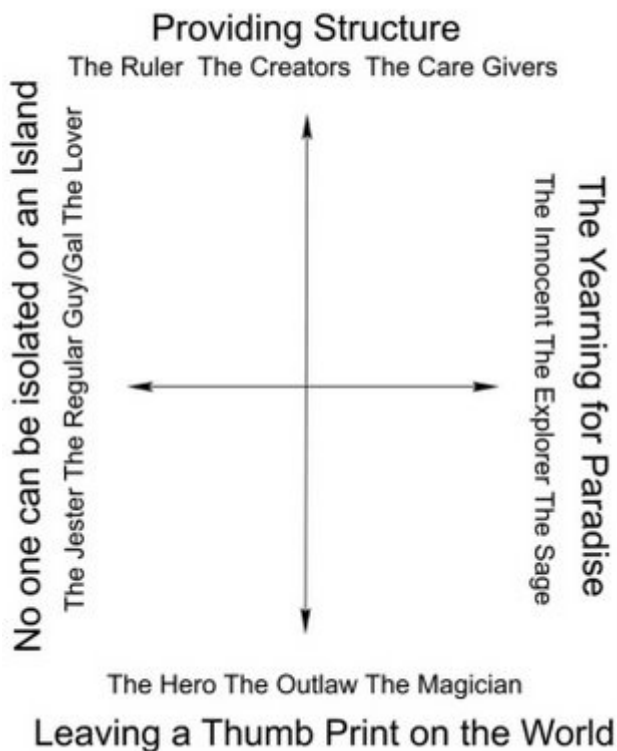
Drivers

Each of the archetypes is associated with one of the drivers giving a general impression of what they want to do.

The key drivers that Jung identified were stability, mastery, belonging and independence. Modern discussions sometimes refer to stability as "providing structure", mastery as "thumb print on the world", belonging as "no one can be an island" and independence as "the yearning for paradise".

Mastery drives us to be innovators, to create knowledge, to be unique and to have an impact on the world. Stability drives us to provide structure to our lives and to blend in. Stability and mastery oppose each other.

Belonging drives us to want to be part of a family and a larger society. It makes us gregarious and crowd-seeking, part of a collective conscience. Independence opposes belonging. It drives us to be seen as an individual, to dress as an individual and to be free thinkers.

The inner conflict between the different drivers creates tension within an individual. These tensions can be used when creating characters to make them dynamic living entities. It can also creates tension and conflict between characters whose drivers are opposed.

Providing Structure
The Ruler The Creators The Care Givers

No one can be isolated or an Island

The Jester The Regular Guy/Gal The Lover

The Yearning for Paradise

The Innocent The Explorer The Sage

The Hero The Outlaw The Magician
Leaving a Thumb Print on the World

Shadows

In Campbell's approach the Shadow is one of the archetypes a character encounters on their journey. When using this technique, however, every archetype has a shadow form. An archetype's shadow is a version of the archetype taken to its extreme. Sometimes they are without a moral compass to guide their actions, some are mentally ill, some just don't know when to stop, some don't know how to say no or they work for the enemy and believe in their cause. A character may be lured by the shadow or struggle with their conscience as they veer towards becoming the shadow and some are redeemed after becoming the shadow.

Providing Structure

The Ruler Archetype

"Power isn't everything. It's the only thing"

These characters seek control, prosperity and positions of leadership. They want to be in charge of their situation. At their best they are benevolent rulers seeking to do the best for their subjects or providing leadership for others during times of adversity.

Their dark side can be found in tyrannical behaviour, seeking to control every aspect of a world or their

situation with no regard for anyone else. At their worst they become evil dictators and world-controlling maniacs. They become cruel control freaks ignoring the needs of their subjects and minions.

Sigourney Weaver's character in the film Alien is a ruler who seeks to lead the rest of the crew to safety. The Sheriff of Nottingham, the Bond film villains who seek to rule the world, and the godfather figure in gangster films are rulers who have slipped to the dark side. The ultimate villains in a lot of fantasy stories are rulers. Many of Shakespeare's most memorable characters are rulers including Hamlet, Macbeth, Richard III, Henry IV and Henry V. In myth, Mab queen of the fairies, Guinevere and Ulysses are examples of this archetype.

The Creator Archetype

"If it can be imagined, it can be created"

These characters have artistic vision and focus on creativity and the imagination. They seek to innovate and craft something new. Their ultimate aim is perfection. They are actors, life givers artists.

If their dark side emerges they become the embodiment of an overly dramatic, soap opera in which they star. When they go too far a minor incident can become an emergency and a compliment can be taken as a serious insult. They may become completely self-obsessed, completely obsessed with their creation or obsessed with a rival who is more successful than they are.

Mozart in the film Amadeus is a creator who risks slipping to the dark side while his chief adversary, Antonio Salieri, is the obsessive shadow to the great composer. In myths we find Shen-nung (Chinese mythology), Ptah (Egyptian god) and Galatea (Greek myth). Daedalus, the mythical architect, sculpture and inventor, built the tortuous labyrinth. Then he constructed wings to fly to safety when he was imprisoned in his own creation. Colonel Nicholson (Alec Guinness) in The Bridge on the River Kwai is a creator driven to obsession by his creation, who slips to his dark side and eventually destroys his own creation.

The Care Giver Archetype

"Love your neighbour as yourself."

Care Givers are unselfish, ethical providers of protection who do things for others. They are compassionate saints and helpers. They are healers of

the body, mind, spirit or society's ills. They are peacemakers. Natural, holistic solutions are a common approach for them.

However, if they slip to the dark side, they become living Martyrs to their cause. They will employ guilt trapping to control others in order to achieve their goal. They may make sacrifices for the greater good without a thought for the suffering they inflict to achieve their goal.

Dr "Bones" McCoy in Star Trek is a classic care giver. Ben Kingsley's portrayal of Gandhi and Denzel Washington's Malcolm X are care givers. Jeremy Irons and Robert De Niro both play care givers in The Mission. Louise Fletcher is a shadow form of the archetype in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.

No one can be isolated or an Island

The Jester Archetype

"If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution."

Jesters joyfully live for the moment. They don't want to have a good time. They want to have a great time. They want to be funny. They love making people laugh and making them cry. They often wear a mask that covers their own real emotions. The messages they communicate through a clown's humour are deeply serious. A jester is often critical of the hypocrisy in an individual or in society. They often stand just outside a situation or a society looking in.

A Jester who turns to their dark side becomes self-indulgent and irresponsible. When this happens they can go too far and end up going completely over the top. They will play mean-spirited pranks and tasteless practical jokes. They may use their gifts to distract others in order to get their own way.

Mythological characters who fall into this archetype include Loki (Norse god),
Sir Dagonet (King Arthur's fool) and the Coyote (in Native American lore)
Fictional examples include Don Quixote and the Joker (DC Comics).

The Regular Guy/Gal Archetype

"All men and women are equal."

Regular Guys and Gals have a strong need to belong. They are realistic, practical and empathetic. They

are good at making connections and networking. They'll be OK just as they are and don't need to change. They're one of the boys or girls.

When they go bad they become part of a lynch mob or just one of the gang going along without thinking. They will justify their actions, no matter how evil they are, by blaming others and by claiming to have only been following orders.

Some political analysts think Bill Clinton's team focused on this aspect of his character to market him to the American public. Bruce Willis has played a variety of regular guys throughout his acting career.

The Lover Archetype

"I only have eyes for you."

Lovers are evangelical in their promotion and focus on relationships, sensuality and pleasure. They hold truthfulness and commitment dear. Harmonious relationships and emotional involvement are important to them. They seek intimacy, deep love and passion. Sensuous beauty appeals to their aesthetic side. Ultimately they want to find love and give love.

Their dark side is obsession, envy, jealousy and Puritanism. They are the preying mantises, the femme fatale preying on others.

Aphrodite (Greek Goddess) and Freya (Norse goddess) are both Lover archetypes. Delilah (Biblical temptress), the Sirens (Greek Legend) and Cleopatra (Egyptian Queen) are all shadow characters of the archetype. Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell both play lovers in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. Not all Lovers are women - Michael Caine's Alfie is a Lover. They often come in pairs like Romeo and Juliet. Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart's characters in Casablanca cannot easily be separated in our consciousness no matter how tragic their parting. Some portrayals of Guinevere cast her as a Lover and not a Ruler.

Leaving a Thumb Print on the World

The Hero Archetype

"Where there's a will there's a way."

The hero's core desire is to act courageously. With heroes it's all about winning and overcoming a challenge. They remain courageous no matter what the difficulties. They seek to master the world in a

way that improves it. Duty and loyalty are key values for them. They are moral, ambitious, and highly respected. They often die young.

On the path to their dark side arrogance, ruthlessness and an obsessive desire to win, no matter what the cost, wait in ambush. They risk slipping from being the archetypal hero to being a simple bully. Their need for a challenge and an enemy may lead to them creating one if there isn't one. They can suffer from serious ethical problems because of this need to win, especially if they throw their morals away.

Key examples include Captain Kirk, Robin Hood, King Arthur, Indiana Jones, Superman, most of the Knights of the Round Table, Samson, Achilles and Nike. Many sports personalities' public personae fall into this category. The list of villains who are the epitome of the shadow form of the hero is as long as the list of heroes. Francisco Scaramanga is the shadow form to Bond's heroic spy in The Man with the Golden Gun. If the ultimate bad guy in an action film isn't a hero gone bad their right hand inflictor of violence and mayhem probably is.

The Outlaw Archetype

"Rules are meant to be broken."

Outlaws seek revenge and revolution. They want to bring about the destruction of what is working. Their tactics are disruption, shock and outrage. They break the rules and buck the system.

At their worst they go completely over the top. Their dark side sees them slip into villainous and evil behaviour. They become criminal outlaws cut off from society. The road to their dark side may see them rebel because of peer pressure or for the sake of fashion rather than because there is a real need.

Zorro, James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause, Marlon Brando in The Wild One, Kirk Douglas in Spartacus, Meryl Streep in Silkwood. Harley Davidson is the ultimate brand endorsement for the modern outlaw archetype. Most fictional bandits, criminals and assassins are outlaws. Barbossa (Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl) and John Malkovich's assassin in In the Line of Fire are both outlaws.

The Magician Archetype

"It can happen."

Magicians seek knowledge so that they can make dreams come true. They are mediators and visionaries seeking win-win outcomes where no one loses out.

The shadow sides of this archetype are found in the misuse of the power and knowledge. Seduction and trickery, by magic and wizardry, are used to play on the desires of many people to transform their lives. Modern day magicians include spin-doctors and scientists.

Examples of the magician include Captain Picard, Merlin, Dr Who, Rumpelstiltskin, Katharine Hepburn in The African Queen and Jeff Goldblum's portrayal of the shadow Magician in The Fly. Xavier and Magneto are magician and shadow magician in the X-Men. John Malkovich and Glenn Close in Dangerous Liaisons are both Shadows seeking to manipulate each other for supremacy.

The Yearning for Paradise

The Innocent Archetype

"Free to be you and me."

The Innocent wants to be happy and to do things right. They have faith and opportunism. Other key traits include cleanliness, purity and trust. The innocent are uncontroversial. They may seek to retain or renew faith. They are often children or childlike. They often lead idyllic lives.

Their dark side is that they can be boring and may turn out not to be an innocent at heart as they appear. An innocent with a dark secret or less than innocent intent can be an evil being. They may be in denial or deny the obvious truth of a situation. The may repress themselves or others so they can try to remain innocent.

Examples include Dorothy (The Wizard of Oz), Alice (Lewis Carroll) Oliver Twist (Charles Dickens) and most Shelleyan heroines. Some versions of Maid Marian and Guinevere are innocents. Many fairy tale character's are innocents including Snow White and Cinderella. Drew Barrymore in E.T., Tom Hanks in Big and Jon Voight's Midnight Cowboy are all classic film performances. They show that an adult can be just as effective, if not more so than a child in the role. Cupid, Harpa-Khruti (Egyptian god) and Harpocrates (Greek god) are all mythical versions of the archetype.

The Explorer Archetype

"Don't fence me in."

Explorers seek freedom and fulfilment. They seek to boldly go, aimlessly wandering with the autonomy to be true to their soul. They are iconoclasts who maintain their independence. They are frontier spirits at the cutting edge. These pioneers are called to discover and explore new lands, whether that territory is external or internal.

Should they go too far ahead and not take people with them, seek too much change they will have stepped over the line into their dark side. This leads to alienation and becoming trapped by their own individuality.

The USS Enterprise, The TARDIS, The Flying Dutchman, the Ancient Mariner, Odysseus, Phineas Fogg and the Wagon Train are all examples of the Explorer.

The Sage Archetype

"The truth will set you free."

Sages seek the discovery of truth, knowledge and wisdom. They prize research and intelligence. Their aim is to understand the world. They also guiding others acting as mentors and teacher.

When they go wrong they may slip into inaction, forever debating the best solution in an ivory tower and never acting. At worst they become completely divorced from reality.

The shadow aspect of the Sage is visible in some modern televangelists and gurus of various traditions, who are more interested in financial gain and controlling their followers than in imparting genuine spiritual insight.
Janeway (Star Trek: Voyager), Obi Wan Kenobi (Star Wars), Yoda (Star Wars), Takashi Shimura in The Seven Samurai, Yul Brynner in The Magnificent Seven all serve this role. Sidney Poitier in To Sir with Love and Michael Caine in Educating Rita both provide complex portrayals of this archetype in a modern setting. Fagin (Oliver Twist) is a twisted shadow of the sage archetype. Darth Vader is a sage who lost his way but in the end finds redemption at the moment of his death.

So why use Archetypes?

As a writer there are several advantages to using archetypes when designing characters. Archetypes give characters personalities that readers can easily identify with. They make characters memorable by making them stand out (what marketers would call providing strong differentiation). They also provide obvious areas for minor conflict between player characters at a philosophical level.

Archetypes from the drivers opposed to those a character is pursuing and shadow forms of their own archetype make excellent adversaries for a character. If you want to tempt a character their potential dark side will reveal a weakness that you can attack.

By knowing your character's archetypes you can develop stories that have stronger plots because you have a clearer understanding of their motivation. Also because you know their motivation you will find it easier to their reaction to situation should you find your original story and plot going off-piste.

Not every character needs to fit an archetype. Many lesser characters fall short of being archetypical. Some are pulled towards more than one driver and can never fit an archetype. Some are just bland, unmemorable bit players and some may be there to provide contrast to an archetypical character by casting them into relief through their slip from being archetypical to being an also-ran.

At their simplest level they are useful for the more clear-cut style of writing, often associated with heroic styles. They can also be useful for more complex characterisation especially when the changing drives and internal conflicts come into play. In TV's West Wing an ongoing sub-plot was centred on President Bartlett's struggle between the different archetypes he might be presented as and the difficulty this caused him.

In the end this is just a tool. If it's getting in the way of having fun throw it out.

Five Steps to Use Your Character's Archetype

This simple process may help you use the idea of archetypes when writing a character.

Step 1: Search for your Character's Soul

Think about your character.
Where does your character stand?

What is your character's purpose?
What is the character's background?
What is their personal history?

If you are starting with a blank sheet think about which archetype appeals to you for the character you're going to create.

Step 2: Search for Character Substance

Identify your character's soul's impression in their substance. Look at their history and background.
What are their values?
Does their behaviour fit one of the drivers?
What is their identity?
Is there an archetype that fits their behaviour?
If not, is there one that they might try to become?

See how their archetype has influenced their behaviour. Select hindrances and enhancements for your character, especially psychological and personality ones, that fit with their dark side and their core desire.

Step 3: Competitive Leverage

Is there another character with the same archetype around?

Do them in!

This may seem a little extreme, but over a long period of time, in any given situation, there will only be one character who ultimately fits an archetype. Others will either slip to their dark side, prove not to be as firmly rooted in the archetype, or die trying to be the best they can.

Step 4: Define Archetypal Territory

Don't get caught in several archetypes; focus on one and do it well.

Once a character is settled into a particular driver and archetype staying focused on it is a good way to achieve a memorable character with strong characterisation.

There is a temptation as a writer to cast aside an archetype for a different archetype that will have an easier time in a situation. How a character behaves in adversity shows their true strength, and sticking to an archetype even though there is an easier path is part of that. There is also a temptation over the long term to move to become a different archetype, the hero that becomes a ruler for example. This too will weaken your writing. Tackle their new situation as

their archetype would. A hero can lead by bold example instead of becoming a statesman.

Step 5: Link with other Characters

Make connections with other characters in your world, building on how the archetypes can collaborate to form a whole stronger than the parts, by complementing each other.

In many stories the characters can only be really successful by cooperating to achieve the overall goal drawing on the strengths of their different archetypes along the way.

Jung, Carl Gustav (1875-1961)

Born in 1875 Jung (pronounced young) was trained in medicine in Basel. His early years of practice were at the Burghšlzli Mental Hospital in Zurich. He was influenced by Freud's writings on mental illness and dreams. From 1907 to 1913 they maintained close ties. In 1911 he became the first president of the Internationale Psychoanalytische Gesellschaft (International Psychoanalytic Association). Theoretical disputes with Freud, chiefly concerned with the significance of sexuality led to the end of their relationship when in 1912 their differences became irreconcilable.

Jung went on to originate the concept of introverted and extroverted personalities. In his major work, Psychology of the Unconscious *(1912)*, Jung described how the mind contained both individual experiences and common inherited cultural experiences buried in our "collective unconscious". He suggested that every human has a shared pool of memories, ideas and modes of thought from the life experiences of our ancestors and in effect the entire human race. In effect this acts as an immense store of ancient wisdom. Within the collective unconscious experiences archetypes, symbolic pictures or personifications represent these. They appear in our dreams and in literature, myths and fairy tales. He later went on to apply his theories to historical studies of religion and to dreams.

He also made valuable studies of mental disorder, including schizophrenia. His other works included Modern Man in Search of a Soul (1933), autobiography, Memories, Dreams, Reflections (1961).