

Top 12 Character Archetypes

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<http://greatstorybook.com/top-12-character-archetypes/>

This entry is part 1 of 6 in the series [Characters with Character](#)

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You might think that an archetypal character is one that feels fake or contrived. At the very least, flat. But that isn't necessarily the case. Character archetypes are really those that speak to us, that reach us on a deep, cultural level.

If you know what you're doing and you craft your archetypal character intentionally, you can create a story that moves people. You can create archetypal characters that are unique and that matter to us.

If you understand character archetypes, you'll more *effectively* drive your story plot through the decisions that great characters make.

Artwork by Wee Siang Toh.

Using archetypes in story is a long-lived tradition. Just as there's no reason to stop writing stories with a Happy Ending, there's no reason to stop writing stories with certain character archetypes. It has meaning to us.

- Stories don't have just *any* kind of dialogue. They have the [best possible dialogue](#) we can muster, to convey characterization and action.
- Stories don't have *any* plot. They have [the best possible plot](#) to convey a character arc and concept.

- Stories don't have *any* characters. They have [the *best possible characters*](#) to drive the story forward and engage readers.

That's why it's so important to really understand the 12 character archetypes and how to write them - so that what they do and say *matters* to us.

What You'll Get Here:

- Definition of an archetype and an archetypal character
- Difference between stock character and an archetypal character
- Detailed run-down of the 12 archetypes
- 3 initial character-building decisions you make

What is an Archetype?

When we think of archetypes, we think Big. These are the most common but also the most important ways that we tend to encapsulate the idea of what we value in life most.

For example, archetypal events are things like birth, breaking away, a wedding, or a funeral. Archetypal figures are the virgin, the mother, the child, the father, the old wise woman, the devil, etc. Archetypal motifs would be things like the flood, the creation, or the apocalypse.

Archetypal thinking isn't just a common thing; it's deeply permeated into every culture around the world. It's ancient, but it's also vital and current because every story we care most about involves these archetypes.

Where do archetypes come from?

When what makes up story becomes so much a part of who we are and how we think that it permeates both our conscious and subconscious mind, then we're talking about archetypes.

The traditional 12 archetypes come *not from writing*, but from psychology and philosophy. Carl Gustav Jung clearly defined the concepts behind these 12 archetypes as a way to better understand who we are. It's Jung who expressed that the cultural psyche permeates stories and the characters in them.

Archetypes were first discussed c. 300 BC, in Ancient Greece. It was a topic amongst the great philosophers of the time. But at the time, it was argued that plot was more important than character. That has changed completely, and we now understand (largely through psychology) that character is more important than plot.

Why? Because the protagonist drives plot – plot does not drive the protagonist.

What Are Archetypal Characters?

So if **archetypal figures** are the mother, the child, etc. – then what exactly is an archetypal *character*? Essentially, you need to think broader. Instead of the figure, you need to think about the role that a character plays within the story context.

- Instead of The Child (an archetypal figure), you have the Innocent, or the Rebel, or the Orphan.
- Instead of The Wise Woman (an archetypal figure), you have the Caregiver, the Creator, or the Sage.

Are all archetypal figures and characters doomed to be flat and static? No, they're not.

A Static Character is one that does not change, ever. They have no character arc whatsoever. Does this make the character poorly written? Not necessarily. *Not all characters should be important*, and if they are tertiary to the plot, they really don't need an arc.

A Flat Character is one who is simply one-dimensional, not fully developed into a character that feels real. If a character is flat, does that mean it's poorly written? Not necessarily. You might not want a character that feels real.

For example, if you write a slapstick comedy, it's rare indeed that you'll want the character who tumbles down the stairs to have real feelings. In fact, it's funnier if they don't really have feelings. It's even funnier still if we dislike the character *and* they're flat and static.

Round and Dynamic

When you want readers to be concerned, to genuinely care about what happens to a character, that's when you must develop a character that feels real – one that has a character arc, that is both Round (the opposite of Flat) and Dynamic (the opposite of Static).

Round Characters have depth, they have multiple dimensions and aspects of them that are contrary - just like real people.

Dynamic Characters aren't necessarily ones that move a lot. Dynamic in this case means that their character changes in an important way. When a character learns something important and it changes the way they think, then that is a Dynamic Character.

After you pick an archetype, decide if it will be flat or round. Then decide if it will be static or dynamic.

About Stock Character

That's the primary difference between a Stock Character and a Character Archetype. Stock Characters are always Flat and Static. ALWAYS. Their behavior is predictable and so is their outcome.

While it is possible for Character Archetypes to be Static (especially a supporting character), they should never be Flat. There must be a sense of depth to the character, otherwise we tend to think of it as a Stock

Character. And really, that might be just fine - in certain stories. Just be certain that it's a Stock Character that you want.

If you do it intentionally, fine. It's when a writer accidentally writes a flat, static character that we feel - well, like we should have read something else. Just know what you're writing and why - because it will absolutely affect how we feel about that character - and ultimately, their story.

What are the 12 archetype characters?

You start with an archetype and then add *layers of characterization* (that includes: physical description, action, inner thoughts, reactions and speech) and [dialogue that pushes action](#) forward.

So let's bang-out the 12 types of character archetypes.

Caregiver

The Caregiver can be a motherly character that isn't necessarily the mother. This is the supporter and sometimes the martyr, the soul who takes care of everyone else first - but first and foremost, the protagonist.

Can the Caregiver be the protagonist? Yes, but only if she (or he) is also one of the other archetypes. You need to double-up here, because otherwise the Innocent (the baby) becomes the protagonist. Ask any mother, and she will agree that the child is more important. This is part of how we think and feel about these archetypes. You cannot write that away, but you can expand on it - by adding another archetypal layer.

The one exception: If you double-up the Caregiver with Lover, then the character has to be a supporting one, not the protagonist. (More on that below.)

Creator

The Creator is an artist, or a god. This is the creative character, driven by the need to create what will endure the passage of time. Creators feel that if you can imagine it, you can do it. Nothing is impossible for the Creator Archetype.

Explorer

This is the pure individualist, the one who always seeks the next horizon. "Don't fence me in!" Freedom and adventure are around every next corner for this person.

Hero

The Hero is honorable, brave and tenacious. They never give up, regardless of the odds.

Innocent

This is the dreamer, the romantic, the naïve and hopeful character. The Innocent will always strive to do the right thing, no matter what. These characters are loyal.

Jester

Joy, fun – silliness! This is what the Jester is all about, but the Jester can also be a sad character or even an evil one. This is a trickster who always gets away with everything. The fool can be the wisest or the sadest character.

Lover

Passion and commitment are most important here. This is a supportive character, always. It has to be, because the role of the Lover is to be a partner, an enthusiast, to support the one or ones they love most.

Even if you double-up the Lover archetype with another archetype, it will still remain a supporting character (unlike the Caretaker, which can become a protagonist if you double-up with another archetype).

Magician

The Magician can be good and wise, but can also be manipulative or even evil. The magician is a visionary type of person who sees what could be and is certain they can make it happen.

Orphan

The motherless child is one who can go on adventures without worrying about a curfew. This is why so many children's stories have orphans in the lead roles. Without a loving mother, the Orphan must go on their own to discover who they are and what they should be doing. Most Orphan characters get guidance from a Sage.

Rebel

Rules are made to be broken and authority should always be questioned. This is what the Rebel lives by and what drives this kind of character. The Rebel would rather die than lose their freedom and would never compromise their position on something important to them.

Ruler

This can be a Caesar type of character - or any ruler - or any person in a position of power. In a modern story, this can also be a politician (think **House of Cards**) or a powerful businessperson. Power is the primary concern for this kind of character.

Sage

This is the wise old man or the wise old woman, the mentor to our hero who becomes much more than a favorite teacher. This is Yoda to Luke.

When types are crossed

It is absolutely possible for a character in your story to carry more than one archetype. In fact, that could represent the character arc. For example, the rebel can become the hero or even the sage - or any other archetype.

It is also possible for a character to be two archetypes at once. For example, a Fairy Godmother type of character could be written as a Magician, a Caregiver or Sage. Likewise, she could be a combination of these.

Knowing that you're making that decision and that you're making it intentionally will help you more easily make decisions about what they should do. *But first you need to be sure to tackle the big three questions about your archetypal character.*

3 big character decisions you must make

1. So pick your archetype or archetype combo or archetype arc.
2. Decide if the character should be Round or Flat.
3. Then decide if the character should be Static or Dynamic.

What's Next? Then you can start to decide more specific details and add **characterization**. I'll be writing about how to do that next. (You can go there NOW: [Whose Characterizations Really Grab Us and Why.](#))

Tell me: what is your favorite character archetype? What archetype is for you the one that matters most, or that really reaches you, deep down? Write below, let me know – or, as ever, send me an email.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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Be sure to check out the other posts:

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