Archetypal criticism is a form of analysis based on the identification and study of recurring symbolic and mythic patterns.

Although most commonly associated with the analysis of literature, art, and popular culture, archetypal criticism was originally employed in the discipline of anthropology by Sir James George Frazer in a compilation entitled *The Golden Bough*. First published in 1890, Frazer's seminal work comprised 12 volumes of extensive research into the myths, beliefs, and practices of various cultures and peoples. Nearly two decades later, C. G. Jung would pioneer analytical psychology, based on the hypothesis that inherited psychical images influenced human consciousness on a personal and collective scale. His work brought archetypal analysis into the realm of psychoanalysis, a field developed by Sigmund Freud during the turn of the century. For many years thereafter, Jung's work would continue to gain acclaim, and even today remains active in modified form. Archetypal criticism moved into the sphere of literary analysis following Maud Bodkin's groundbreaking *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934).

Northrop Frye would later ensure that archetypal criticism remained in the forefront of literary analysis with his *Anatomy of Criticism*, published in 1957. Moving away from psychology and Jung, Frye was primarily concerned with the recurrence of universally familiar characters, landscapes, and narrative structures within genre and text. A figure of singular importance to the continued proliferation of archetypal analysis and comparative mythology was Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and *The Masks of God*. Campbell's work earned popular acclaim and was instrumental in opening archetypal discourse to larger audiences inside and outside academia.

Archetypal analysis relies on several primary hypotheses, the most fundamental of which is that the entire range of human culture, history, and consciousness shares an inherited body of universal myths, beliefs, and symbols. Jung took this theory a step further by positing the existence of a collective unconscious, a domain of symbols and archetypes that can be accessed only indirectly by means of the personal unconscious and that can exert a sublime and potentially dangerous influence on social groups. While differences in archetypes and symbols are acknowledged between peoples of disparate geographic regions, states of development, and systems of practice, it is understood that certain characteristics remain fairly consistent and recognizable. Modified by increasingly sophisticated contexts and adapted to continuous developments in culture, archetypes are found in their purest and most familiar form within folklore, magical practice, and the spiritual dimensions of religion. Thus archetypal analysis can be said to begin with the study of myth and folklore, and it is for this reason that any survey of this critical lens necessarily starts from an anthropological perspective. Following the evolution of a particular archetype or archetypal theme within a changing literary or social context can yield significant insights into the changing values and ideologies of a given community.

**JAMES FRAZER AND THE GOLDEN BOUGH**

Written more than 100 years ago, Frazer's work has since been superseded by radical changes in the field of anthropology. Still, his masterpiece not only represents a landmark in the study of religion and culture, it lays the foundation for a method that permits the critic to find similarities amid a labyrinth of differences.
Frazer's work explores the human need to construct a socially binding mythos. The sheer ubiquity of certain archetypal patterns in mythic structures suggests psychic parallels between otherwise disparate languages and cultures. Evolving from a sequence of experiences that imprinted themselves in the collective psyche of a prehistoric humankind, archetypes blossomed into the complexity of an unending narrative. And although obscured by the translations of telling and retelling, the original power of the imprint ensures the preservation of the archetypes that represent it.

At the heart of humankind's social evolution are the unspoken laws of the physical world, and The Golden Bough appropriately begins with a study of humankind's exploration and interpretation of its relationship to the forces of nature. Central to this relationship is the paradoxical belief that humanity is both threatened by a universe rife with powers beyond its understanding, and able, by virtue of intellect and imagination, to command these powers. Frazer makes references to sorcerers and magicmen who believed themselves able to master the winds, guarantee a good harvest, and even usher the sun on its path across the heavens. Driven by a need to bring order to chaos, such figures developed rituals to maintain the natural balance so crucial to survival. Frazer often notes that individuals projected into the mystery of natural phenomena a vast array of dangers and wonders: within every tree dwelt a spirit; maladies were the product of malevolent sorcery; the stars themselves guided destiny while phantoms thronged the night.

Beset by so many perils on every side, early communities drew strength and comfort from their collective, and united themselves behind a figure or group of figures on whose shoulders rested the responsibility of protecting the community against their unseen enemies: “The belief that kings possess magical or supernatural powers by virtue of which they can fertilize the earth and confer other benefits on their subjects would seem to have been [widely] shared” (Frazer 1959: 15). However, the divine person of the god-man or king was as much a source of danger as the evils his power purported to hold at bay; he was “contagious”: a fire that could destroy what it touches. The god-king, as the embodiment of spiritual power and authority, represents the dichotomy between good and evil in human form, even as the earliest gods themselves were imagined in the likeness of men and women.

The mortality of the gods is indivisible from their immortality, and arising out of this tension are the myriad divinities of death and rebirth - of which Jesus Christ is but one example. Early in human history, certain “more thoughtful” individuals realized that their “magical rites” were not responsible for seasonal alterations. “They now pictured to themselves the growth and decay of vegetation, the birth and death of living creatures, as effects of the waxing and waning strength of divine beings, of gods and goddesses, who were born and died, who married and begot children, on the pattern of human life” (Frazer 1959: 52). C. G. Jung would later acknowledge that archetypes reflected cyclical patterns in consciousness that mirrored larger cycles in the natural world - cycles from which he believed modern humanity to have been alienated by an insistence on science and technology at the expense of a deeper and more intense relationship with a mythic and largely unconscious origin. Humanity has ever been preoccupied with altering the parameters of life: with chasing immortality, with commanding those forces that would endanger human life, with seeing in the patterns of the natural and supernatural some semblance of the human condition. So in the Hindu Upanishads we find references to food both spiritual and material, sustenance of the body as well as the immortal atman; and in Christianity the sacrament of the Eucharist, the partaking of purity and redemption as sustenance.

“But,” Frazer writes of humankind, “though he knew it not, these glorious and awful beings [i.e., the gods] were merely … the reflections of his own diminutive personality exaggerated into gigantic proportions by distance and by the mists and clouds of ignorance upon which they were based” (Frazer 1959: 59). The rituals Frazer describes were likely designed to express emotional reactions to the traumatic impact of life on early humanity. They both recall the initial trauma and confront it. This confrontation is a redemption and an assimilation, a cathartic push toward self-realization that is the goal of tragedy and analytical psychology, storytelling and meditation.

Archetypal criticism is directly concerned with this confrontation, which typically marked a transgression of the boundary between the sacred and the profane. Frazer's expansive description of magical acts and rites is an ambitious testament to a universal language of ritual acts designed to communicate with a psychical realm known in some fashion to every culture around the world.
First published in 1934, Maud Bodkin's work bridged the spheres of literary criticism and analytical psychology. *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* moved the language of archetypal analysis away from the purely anthropological and psychological while retaining the most important feature of Frazer's and Jung's work: an emphasis on the enduring ability of archetypes to engender an emotional and potentially transformative response in an individual or group. Whether this response is the product of archaic beliefs and ritual practices, or the dynamics of a collective unconscious exerting a subtle yet penetrative influence on a personal and social level, the emotional resonance of archetypal patterns represents a meeting point among the diverse views of archetypal critics. Bodkin argues that archetypal patterns evolve through literature, especially in poetry. Their recurrence encourages a type of recalled emotional response, Bodkin maintains: “Through such recall one feels the kind of life one shares with plants and animals and the earth itself, present as a factor in the imaginative experience, together with the life shared with the poet as master of words and thought” (1934: 22).

Experiencing the emotional impact of an archetypal pattern is an encounter of significant psychological magnitude, especially when the archetype in question remains unconscious. However, when brought into the light of the conscious and rational mind, the archetypes become symbols, capable of entering into dialogue with the psyche and providing insight into the deeper meaning behind their presence. In this sense, the archetypes are encounters with one's ancestors, as the patterns they embody are ancient. Understanding the past, tracing backwards in time an archetypal narrative shared by a collective of individuals, awakens the self to an ongoing process of mythologization. "In poetry," Bodkin writes, "we may identify themes having a particular form or pattern which persists amid variation from age to age, and which corresponds to a pattern or configuration of emotional tendencies in the minds of those who are stirred by the theme" (1934: 18). This idea of correspondence is crucial; for Frazer, it may be identified as the magical principle of "like produces like," wherein a ritualized symbolic action promotes an external response tangible to the community. For Jung, this correspondence was interpreted as a synchronicity between internal and subjective dynamics and the seemingly objective world, a phenomenon that demonstrated the reality of an exchange between the psyche and a larger system of meaning. This exchange is conducted in symbols, and these symbols are in turn couched in language. The presence of an archetypal pattern can be revealed according to the language employed to represent it, and this is a point Bodkin explores in her study. Words and thought, she suggested, need not damage the archetypal resonance they naturally carry; rather, when in the hands of a skilled poet, they preserve and project this resonance through language by virtue of an emotional and psychical sympathy.

Through the analysis of dreams, automatic writing, and a variety of other techniques, Jung sought to reveal the workings of archetypal forces hidden among spontaneous actions and unpremeditated creation, to make conscious what was unconscious, the better to subject it to the rational will of the subject. In this way, the unconscious assumed a role analogous to the mischievous spirit bound to the sorcerer by virtue of his art. According to many legends, such spirits were commanded by the sorcerers to provide them with information concerning the past, present, and future - all accessible to an entity unfettered by time. The poet similarly facilitates a communion between an audience and this "collective heritage." As Bodkin notes, “if we would contemplate the archetypal patterns that we have in common with men of past generations, we do well to study them in the experience communicated by great poetry that has continued to stir emotional response from age to age” (1934: 22). She identifies these patterns as those of rebirth, heaven and hell, the feminine, and the hero - archetypal images and characters that operate by evoking a particular sympathy in the reader. Jung maintained that these forces could, when discerned, be adapted to support the creative and progressive endeavors of the individual.

Like Jung and Frazer, Bodkin linked symbols and archetypes in poetry to the earliest human experiences; thus, for her, Shakespeare's tragedies conveyed an “emotional meaning that belonged to ancient rituals undertaken for the renewal of the life of the tribe” (Bodkin 1934: 35). But Bodkin here joins the two by suggesting that it is literature - and poetry in particular - that promotes healthy development in the symbolic life of an individual or community and that unites the ancient and modern, solidifying the bond between past and present so necessary to the continued relevance of archetypal symbols. It is through the inheritance of
poetry and literature that we are able to ignite vestiges of arcaic experience in our own consciousness; and it is through literature that we are able to adapt the emotional experience of these encounters to the social needs of our communities in the present. We are able to remember our cultural selves through stories that have been told in varied form throughout history, stories that find expression in the rituals and dreams of our lives. And just as dreams and ritual visions were considered prophetic and oracular in nature, so is literature a medium of prophecy and promise, a means of ensuring the immortality of our most ancient stories. Moreover, it is possible that, as Bodkin points out, the rhythms of nature and human life are so well mirrored in poetry, because the rhythms of poetic language are, for Bodkin at least, coincident with those of memory and experience.

For Bodkin, the symbolic character of a hero's journey is decided by the nature of his psychic "inversion," an ability to plunge into "untried resources of character" (1934: 26). Bodkin is speaking of the heroic quest, an archetypal progression central to traditional archetypal criticism; but she is also pointing to something deeper in her description. The process of "plunging into the depths" of the mind is directly analogous to the individuation process described by Jung, directly analogous to ancient rituals of initiation and transformation, and is in the *Aeneid* poetically expressed through a context unique to a particular culture and time yet transcending both.

Like the magic of contagion described by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, the poetic experience spreads throughout a sensitive audience, moving the individual members of that collective to personal introspection - a plunge into the depths of the past conducted in the solitude of individual recollection and in the communion of a social gathering. For Bodkin, this form of "conquest over the dark powers" is made through a gift, "a deeply probing participating vision" (1934: 28), that functions as a socially binding tool: a means by which mythic patterns are repeated from age to age and a means by which that pattern is used to generate and sustain the belief system of a community. Mythology, transmitted through the vision of poetry, is so culturally pervasive that it can be used to support the justification of a war; it can be used to project an ideal toward which each individual might strive; and it can reify a collective belief in certain values in order to ensure the survival of the whole.

Bodkin's hypothesis concerns not only the individual reader but a general audience as well; in this way she addresses the communal experience of myth initially explored by Frazer. Myth is brought into the sphere of collective and material life by the poet and novelist, Bodkin suggests, both objectified through analysis and yet revealed as an abiding source of emotional significance. In this, she brings a Romantic sensibility that sees the poet as a hypersensitive observer together with a Jungian conception of how symbols function in communities. The poet transforms experience for the community and, at the same time, reveals "a certain tension and ideal reconciliation of opposite forces in present in actual life" (Bodkin 1934: 17). Her emphasis on psychoanalysis and archetypes, together with a highly affective poetics, make Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* a compelling application of Jungian ideas and the model of a form of theoretically driven literary criticism that reached a decisive threshold with the publication, a generation late, of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957).

**NORTHROP FRYE AND THE NEW SCIENCE OF ARCHETYPES**

Northrop Frye's innovation was to create distinct archetypes for literary narrative and to construct a form of literary history that was grounded on the traversal of archetypes through the development of a form. Though he does not cite a Jungian influence, his theory of archetypes, and the models he developed to exemplify archetypal forms, resembles the Jungian one of a universe dominated by *anima* and *animus*, the archetypes of soul and personality. Frye is far more the formalist then Jung, and rarely strayed into the mystical. In one sense, then, Frye sought to formalize archetypal criticism, without robbing it of its inherent believe in universal forms. Because he managed this so successfully, Frye's influence on literary studies was widespread, well into the 1960s, when poststructuralism arose precisely against formalist criticism.

The *Anatomy of Criticism* addressed what Frye believed was a deficiency in the discipline of criticism: the lack of a central hypothesis that could organize and unify the materials of the literary critic. "Criticism," he writes, "seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole" (Frye 1957: 16). This whole,
he goes on to say, is impossibly large, composed of innumerable parts that if considered as purely separate entities will mire the analyst in endless and fruitless efforts. It is only upon discerning patterns within the whole that analysis becomes meaningful as a social science capable of making assertions. These patterns are recurring and representative of a common origin, a source-point of image, character, and form that anchors the diversity of literature and poetics to a specific order: “We begin to wonder if we cannot see literature, not only as complicating itself in time, but as spread out in conceptual space from some kind of center that criticism could locate” (1957: 17).

The idea of this center is distinctly modernist in flavor, and preserves a vital tenet of archetypal criticism since Frazer: when abstracted from context, archetypes and archetypal patterns reveal a universal quality underlying the infinitely varied expressions of humanity. Literature, for Frye as for Bodkin, best exposes the underlying correspondence between imagination, human experience, and archaic memory. This correspondence is of an ancient and mythic nature, best expressed in stories and fairytales. Indeed, Jung’s work is supported by many references to folk tales and legends, and Frye follows suit by acknowledging a universality of patterns extant among the varied forms and genres of literature. “The criticism which can deal with such matters,” Frye maintains, “will have to be based on that aspect of symbolism which relates poems to one another, and it will choose, as its main field of operation, the symbols that link poems together” (1957: 96). This is the warrant of archetypal criticism as Frye understands it. An archetype is “a communicable unit … a typical or recurring image … a symbol that connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience” (99). Unlike signs, Frye argues, the archetypes are “associative clusters” of a complex and variable nature, rooted in cultural representation and convention; consequently, they are “most easily studied in highly conventionalized literature” (104). Frye believes that archetypes are more readily visible, and lend themselves more readily to interpretation, in popular literature. Popular genres, highly conventional in structure and theme, not only reach large audiences, they also convey archetypal images in simpler, more explicit ways than in classical or “high” literary forms. In any case, archetypes serve to unify the literary experience, to bring the reader, through a given text, into dialogue with the wealth of experiences that literature communicates. Frye focuses on several modes, including the symbolic, mythic, and rhetorical, and identifies patterns in literature that convey meanings based on genre and form, structure and language.

One of Frye’s most important contributions to archetypal criticism is his claim that myth functions as a narrative and that archetypes function as units of meaning within that narrative. And in a claim that looks forward to radical affective or “libidinal” approaches to texts, genres, and discourse that will arise at the “poststructuralist turn” (from the mid-1960s), Frye suggests that in narrative “myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire” (1957: 136). At one end of the mythic scale is pure mythic narrative, wherein the archetypes are active in their purest state - as gods and heroes, devils and sorcerers. Frye explores several narratives of this kind: the apocalyptic, or heavenly, the demonic, and the analogical. At the other end of the scale, as myth approaches and becomes subordinate to the constraints of realism, the archetypes become increasingly displaced by metaphor. Characters or landscapes in realist representations often take on archetypal significance based not on mythic personages or forces but rather on moral and ethical concepts. Thus, the archetypal Hero maybe submerged within a narrative of contemporary events and themes in which the mythic substratum emerges only indirectly. In Frye’s system, the principal modalities - romance, tragedy, irony, and comedy-characterize the general narrative thrust of archetypes and it is theoretically possible to find one embedded within another. Frye suggests that these modalities “are all episodes in a total quest-myth,” and suggests further that, for example, “comedy can contain a potential tragedy within itself” (1957: 215).

CONCLUSION

While structuralist and postructuralist methodologies by and large have surpassed archetypal criticism as dominant modes in the academy, the latter has by no means been discarded as a valid method of criticism. On the contrary, it has adapted to changes in scholarship and methodology, and the fundamental concepts that define the language of archetypal analysis continue to circulate in a variety of mediums. The work of post-Jungian critics like Leslie Fiedler, Richard Slotkin, and Andrew Samuels remain relevant, while new challenges arise to provoke growth and revision. Such an approach offers an alternative to Jung’s distrust of
language. By combining Frye's approach to archetypes as structural components of narrative patterns and Jung's approach to archetypes as numinous psychic entities, one can appreciate the malleability of archetypal analysis, its multiplicity of interpretation, and also the extent to which a text can be seen as a reflection of larger patterns in a given culture. Today, symbols circulate more freely than ever before across cultural and national boundaries in ways unimaginable to either Frazer or Jung. In an era of globalization, archetypal criticism offers an interpretive model that can discern larger patterns amid a chaos of disassociated fragments. The prevalence of symbolic imagery in postmodern literature, across genres, invites an analytical method designed to interpret the relationship of symbols and archetypes to one another and to the larger communities in which they are produced and consumed.

SEE ALSO: Archetype; Campbell, Joseph; Jung, C. G.; Freud, Sigmund; Frye, Northrop: Psychoanalysis (to 1966)

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


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