

Introduction: What is a Character Archetype?

You may have heard the word "archetype" tossed around before, but it's possible that you haven't quite learned the meaning of this word yet. Simply put, an archetype is something that reoccurs in literature and in art. This something can be a symbol, a theme, a setting, or a character. This article focuses on character archetypes—that is, character types that pop up across all genres of literature, both classic and contemporary. Everyone is familiar with these guys, because everywhere we turn, there they are! Here's a list of some of the most commonly found archetypes in literature.

The Hero

Summary: The hero is always the protagonist (though the protagonist is not always a hero). Traditionally speaking, the hero has been male, though fortunately there are more female heroes appearing in contemporary literature (think [Katniss Everdeen](#) and [Lisbeth Salander](#)). The hero is after some ultimate objective and must encounter and overcome obstacles along the way to achieving this goal. He or she is usually morally good, though that goodness will likely be challenged throughout the story. Heroes' ability to stay true to themselves despite the trials they must face is what makes them heroic. That and the fact that they are often responsible for saving a bunch of people (or hobbits, or wizards, or what have you).

Examples of hero archetypes in literature: If you're a medieval literature buff, you'll be familiar with Sir Gawain of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* fame. If reading Middle English literature isn't your thing, here's a quick breakdown: Sir Gawain, after stepping up to the plate and taking on a challenge that none of the other knights were brave (or dumb) enough to take on, must go on an adventure that is almost certain to end in his death. He faces many challenges along the way—most important, there is a very tempting and very married lady that Sir Gawain must resist. The whole thing is a test of Sir Gawain's integrity and bravery, and—honorable knight that he is—he passes with only a minor indiscretion.

Though not everyone is familiar with Sir Gawain, I think it's fair to assume that most people have heard of [Harry Potter](#). Harry represents the hero archetype almost perfectly. He takes on more responsibility than he should reasonably have to—teens aren't *usually* expected to keep the world safe from evil, after all—and remains brave even when he knows he faces certain death. Like many classic heroes, Harry conquers death, completes his mission, and never waivers from his true self, despite all the hardships he must face. Like many hero archetypes in literature before him, Harry is ethical almost to a fault. His friends accuse him of being a martyr, a role that often goes along with the hero territory.

The Mentor

Summary: The mentor is a common archetype in literature. The mentor is usually old, and this person often has some kind of magical abilities or a much greater breadth of knowledge than others possess. Mentors help heroes along their journeys, usually by teaching them how to help themselves (though mentors sometimes directly intervene in extreme situations). The mentor often ends up dying but is sometimes resurrected or revisited even after death.

Examples of mentor archetypes in literature: One word, folks: [Gandalf](#). This infamous *The Lord of the Rings* wizard is the guy you want to have on your side when you're faced with an unexpected journey. He knows when to help; he knows when to back off. Gandalf's magical powers seem almost inseparable from his knowledge. He's definitely someone you want to have on your side when you're in a tough spot.

The Everyman

Summary: The everyman character archetype often acts as the stand-in for the audience. This character archetype is just a normal person, but for some reason, he or she must face extraordinary circumstances. The everyman can be the protagonist or a supporting figure. Unlike the hero, the everyman does not feel a moral obligation to his or her task; instead, these characters often find themselves in the middle of something they have barely any control over. Unlike the hero, the everyman archetype isn't trying to make a great change or work for the common good: these characters are just trying to get through a difficult situation.

Examples of everyman archetypes in literature: [Dr. John Watson](#) is the epitome of the everyman archetype. Sidekick to the infamous Sherlock Holmes, Watson is perfectly content being Holmes' right-hand man. His plainness contrasts Holmes's eccentricities, and he is assumed to be on the same average level as the reader. Another example of the everyman archetype in literature is Arthur Dent of [The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy](#). He's just a regular guy minding his own business when he's suddenly saved from the destruction of his entire planet. Normal dude, extraordinary circumstances.

The Innocent

Summary: Characters representing the innocent archetype are often women or children. These character archetypes are pure in every way. Though often surrounded by dark circumstances, the innocent archetype somehow has not become jaded by the corruption and evil of others. These character archetypes aren't stupid: they're just so morally good that the badness of others cannot seem to mar them.

Examples of innocent archetypes in literature: There are several examples of characters fitting the innocent archetype in literature both old and new. Lucie from Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* comes to mind, as does [Tiny Tim](#) from Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. A more contemporary example of the innocent character archetype is Prim from Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series. Prim is a beautiful young girl who retains her innocence and love for others, even after seeing her district destroyed and her sister nearly killed by the Capitol. Her faith in people never seems to waiver, despite the fact that, other than her sister Katniss, people have never done much good for Prim.

The Villain

Summary: The villain wants to stop the hero archetype from achieving his or her goal. The villain is often evil, though there is often a reason—however warped that reason may be—why villains are so bad. Villains often want nothing more than to control and have power over everyone and everything around them, probably because most of them are secretly strongly motivated by fear. Villains are often the moral *foil* of the hero: that is, their main vice will parallel the hero's main virtue.

Examples of villain archetypes in literature: There are so many great examples of villain archetypes out there that it's hard to cite only a couple. The [White Witch](#) from C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, [Edmund](#) from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, [Iago](#) from the Bard's *Othello*, [the Joker](#) from the *Batman* series, and of course J.K. Rowling's [Lord Voldemort](#) and J.R.R. Tolkien's [Sauron](#) all come to mind as classic villain archetypes.

The Joker, from DC Comics' *Batman* series, essentially worships chaos. This is in direct contrast to Bruce Wayne himself, who spends his life trying to restore order and safety in Gotham. Lord Voldemort, of *Harry Potter*, craves power because he wishes to overcome all weakness, especially the mortal weakness that scares him the most: death. While Harry faces his certain death with dignity, Voldemort drags himself back from the brink of death, even when he barely exists anymore. These villains have one thing in common: their actions work directly against those of the heroes, but they also create the need for the heroes' actions in the first place.

Conclusion

There are many more character archetypes in literature to learn about. However, knowing the five character archetypes above should help make you more aware of other archetypes as you encounter them in your favorite books. Which types of characters seem to recur over and over again? What do these character types have in common? If these questions are easy to answer, you've likely encountered a character archetype.

Incorporating character archetypes into your own novel? Our manuscript editors provide feedback about characterization, plot progression, and structure in addition to grammar and punctuation. [Get a free quote](#) and place your order today!

Image sources: Heather Wilson Smith/Stocksnap.io