What Is an Archetype?

An archetype is an emotion, character type, or event that is notably recurrent across the human experience. In the arts, an archetype creates an immediate sense of familiarity, allowing an audience member to relate to an event or character without having to necessarily ponder *why* they relate. Thanks to our instincts and life experiences, we’re able to recognize archetypes without any need for explanation.

What’s the Difference Between Archetypes, Stereotypes, Stock Characters, and Clichés?

Although there is overlap among archetypes, stereotypes, stock characters, and clichés, the words are not synonyms. As a rule, common archetypes and stock characters provide guidelines for characterization, while stereotypes and clichés are negative labels, used to describe bad writing or shallow thinking.

* A **stereotype** is an oversimplified notion or characterization. Some stereotypes are negative (“the dumb jock”), others are positive (“the innocent child”), but all are considered overly simplistic and undesirable in literature.
* A **cliché** is an idea, event, or detail that’s used so repeatedly in literature or film that used that it becomes predictable and even boring. An example of a cliché might include the TV firefighter haunted by the memory of the one damsel in distress that he couldn’t save. An archetype, by contrast, does not imply predictability or intellectual laziness. Most of the time, it suggests that a character or situation will speak to a universal truth. Archetypes will by definition be familiar, but they aren’t so predictable that we already know what will happen in their story.
* A **stock character** is somewhere between an archetype and a stereotype: a character who intentionally fits a narrow, predictable description. Well-selected stock characters (e.g., a wise old man or a puffed-up military officer) can serve as an effective foil for a main character, particularly in comedy, but they aren’t compelling as protagonists. Stock characters originate classic European tradition of *commedia dell’arte*, in which actors would wear masks and perform over-the-top versions of stock characters.

12 Archetypal Characters to Use in Your Writing

Some archetypal characters are well known—the hero, for instance—while others, such as the sage, are discussed less frequently outside of literary circles. While some archetypes lend themselves most readily to protagonists or villains, it’s worth noting that any of these archetypes can apply to good, bad, major, or minor characters.

Here are the 12 common character archetypes, as well as examples of archetype in famous works of literature and film.

**1.** **The Lover**

The romantic lead who’s guided by the heart.

* **Strengths**: humanism, passion, conviction
* **Weaknesses**: naivete, irrationality
* **Lover Archetype Examples**: Romeo and Juliet (*Romeo and Juliet*), Noah Calhoun (*The Notebook*), Scarlett O’Hara (*Gone With the Wind*), Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*)

**2.** **The Hero**

The protagonist who rises to meet a challenge and saves the day.

* **Strengths**: courage, perseverance, honor
* **Weaknesses**: overconfidence, hubris
* **Hero Archetype Examples**: Achilles (*The Iliad*), Luke Skywalker (*Star Wars*), Wonder Woman (*Wonder Woman*), Harry Potter (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*)

**3.** **The Magician**

A powerful figure who has harnessed the ways of the universe to achieve key goals.

* **Strengths**: omniscience, omnipotence, discipline
* **Weaknesses**: corruptibility, arrogance
* **Magician Archetype Examples**: Prospero (*The Tempest*), Gandalf (*The Lord of the Rings*), Morpheus (*The Matrix*), Darth Vader (*Star Wars*)

**4.** **The Outlaw**

The rebel who won’t abide by society’s demands.

* **Strengths**: independent thinking, virtue, owes no favors
* **Weaknesses**: self-involved, potentially criminal
* **Outlaw Archetype Examples**: Han Solo (*Star Wars*), Dean Moriarty (*On the Road*), Humbert Humbert (*Lolita*), Batman (*The Dark Knight*)

**5.** **The Explorer**

A character naturally driven to push the boundaries of the status quo and explore the unknown.

* **Strengths**: curious, driven, motivated by self-improvement
* **Weaknesses**: restless, unreliable, never satisfied
* **Explorer Archetype Examples**: Odysseus (*The Odyssey*), Sal Paradise (*On the Road*), Huckleberry Finn (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock Holmes*)

**6.** **The Sage**

A wise figure with knowledge for those who inquire. The mother figure or mentor is often based on this archetype.

* **Strengths**: wisdom, experience, insight
* **Weaknesses**: cautious, hesitant to actually join the action
* **Famous sages**: Athena (*The Odyssey*), Obi-Wan Kenobi (*Star Wars*), Hannibal Lecter (*The Silence of the Lambs*), The Oracle (*The Matrix*)

**7.** **The Innocent**

A morally pure character, often a child, whose only intentions are good.

* **Strengths**: morality, kindness, sincerity
* **Weaknesses**: vulnerable, naive, rarely skilled
* **Innocent Archetype Examples**: Tiny Tim (*A Christmas Carol*), Lennie Small (*Of Mice and Men*), Cio-Cio-san (*Madame Butterfly*), Buddy the Elf (*Elf*)

**8.** **The Creator**

A motivated visionary who creates art or structures during the narrative.

* **Strengths**: creativity, willpower, conviction
* **Weaknesses**: self-involvement, single-mindedness, lack of practical skills
* **Creator Archetype Examples**: Zeus (*The Iliad*), Dr. Emmett Brown (*Back to the Future*), Dr. Moreau (*The Island of Dr. Moreau*), Dr. Victor Frankenstein (*Frankenstein*)

**9.** **The Ruler**

A character with legal or emotional power over others.

* **Strengths**: omnipotence, status, resources
* **Weaknesses**: aloofness, disliked by others, out of touch
* **Ruler Archetype Examples**: Creon (*Oedipus Rex*), King Lear (*King Lear*), Aunt Sally (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*)

**10.** **The Caregiver**

A character who continually supports others and makes sacrifices on their behalf.

* **Strengths**: honorable, selfless, loyal
* **Weaknesses**: lacking personal ambition or leadership
* **Caregiver Archetype Examples**: Dolly Oblonsky (*Anna Karenina*), Calpurnia (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), Samwell Tarly (The *Game of Thrones* series), Mary Poppins (*Mary Poppins*)

**11.** **The Everyman**

A relatable character who feels recognizable from daily life.

* **Strengths**: grounded, salt-of-the-earth, relatable
* **Weaknesses**: lacking special powers, often unprepared for what’s to come
* **Everyman Archetype Examples**: Bilbo Baggins (*The Hobbit*), Leopold Bloom (*Ulysses*), Leslie Knope (*Parks & Recreation*), Winston Smith (*1984*)

**12.** **The Jester**

A funny character or trickster who provides comic relief, but may also speak important truths.

* **Strengths**: funny, disarming, insightful
* **Weaknesses**: can be obnoxious and superficial
* **Jester Archetype Examples**: Sir John Falstaff (*Henry V*), King Lear’s Fool (*King Lear*), Frank and Estelle Costanza (*Seinfeld*), R2D2 and C-3PO (*Star Wars*)

These 12 archetypes, each with highly identifiable traits, populate our books, poetry, films, and theatrical productions.

Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_mdG6azrMA>

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/archetype-in-literature-definition-examples-quiz.html>