Archetypes in Literature
What is an archetype?

- Archetype – a recurrent image, symbol, character or even situation that is an instinctual expression of man’s nature and experiences that are universal in nature.
Carl Jung – Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist whose study of the nature of the human mind resulted in two basic concepts that are important in examining and analyzing literature.

1. **collective unconsciousness** – unconscious/subconscious mental record of all common human experiences (examples – love, passion, birth, death, anger, peace, evil, spirituality, etc)

2. **archetypes** – symbols which express our “collective unconscious,” which are our common human experiences
Objects as Archetypal Images
Water

- birth, death, resurrection, purification, redemption, fertility, growth
  - the sea – mother of all life, the unconscious, timelessness
  - rivers – baptism, flowing of time, phases of life cycle
Sun

- Creative energy, father figure, passage of time and life
  - Rising sun – birth, creation, enlightenment, associated with the east
  - Setting sun – death, destruction, associated with the west
circle

- wholeness, unity, oneness
Serpent or worm

- evil, corruption, healing energy and force, (but also, sometimes, sensuality)
garden

- paradise, innocence, unspoiled feminine beauty, fertility
tree

- growth, proliferation, life, immortality
road or train

- journey through life
Desert

- lack of spirituality, death, hopelessness
colors

- red – blood, sacrifice, immorality, passion, sometimes violent
- green – growth, sensation, hope, fertility
- blue – truth, security, religiousness, spiritual purity
- black or darkness – chaos, mystery, unknown, death, unconscious, evil, melancholy
- white – (positive) purity, innocence, light, timelessness (negative) death, terror, supernatural
numbers

- three – holy trinity, spiritual awareness, light
- four – life cycle, four seasons, the four elements (earth, air, fire, water)
- seven – most potent of all symbolic numbers because it signifies the union of 3 and 4, represents perfect order
Characters as archetypal images
hero

- circumstances of his conception and birth are vague or unusual
- little or nothing is known of his childhood
- upon reaching manhood, he returns to his future kingdom
- after a victory of some sort, he reigns uneventfully for a time until he loses favor with gods
- often meets with a mysterious death
- examples - Beowulf, King Arthur
Scapegoat

- the hero with whom the welfare of the people of the nation, kingdom, or tribe is identified and who must die to atone for the people’s sins in order to return the land to fruitfulness

- examples - Jesus Christ
Outcast

- A figure who is banished from a social group for some crime against his fellow man
- He/she is usually destined to become a wanderer
- Examples - Cain, Unferth
devil figure

- offers worldly goods, fame, knowledge to the protagonist in exchange for possession of his soul
- examples - Lucifer, Satan, Hades
Earth mother

- symbolic of fruition and abundance as well as fertility
- example - Mother Nature
Temptress

- characterized by sensuous beauty
- usually involved in downfall of the hero or protagonist
- examples - the Sirens
Unfaithful Wife

- married to a man she sees as dull and unimaginative
- physically attracted to a more virile or desirable man
- example - Guinevere
wise old man

- represents knowledge, wisdom, spirituality of soul, insight
- examples - Ben Kenobi, Yoda, Merlin
Situations as archetypal images
the search for someone or some talisman which, when found and brought back, will restore fertility to a wasted land

the desolate state of that land is mirrored by a leader’s illness and disability

examples - search for the Holy Grail, Ahab’s quest for the albino whale
to save the kingdom, to win the fair lady, or to assume his rightful position, the hero must perform some superhuman deed

- examples - Beowulf must slay Grendel, Arthur pulling the sword from the stone
fall

describes a descent, usually of a hero, from a higher to a lower state of being

usually involves spiritual defilement and/or loss of innocence

also involves an expulsion from some kind of paradise

examples - King Arthur, Adam and Eve
night journey

- descent into earth followed by a return to light
- usually, knowledge has been gained through the experience
What movie today played with these archetypes, almost inverting them for the sake of humor?