Character Archetypes in Disney/Pixar Animated Films

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What is a Character Archetype?

- Type of character in a narrative whom audiences recognize across many narratives or as part of a storytelling tradition or convention.
- There is a wide range of stock characters, covering people of various ages, social classes and demeanors.
- Distinguished by their simplification and flatness.
- As a result, they tend to be easy targets for parody and to be criticized as clichés.
- The presence of a particular array of stock characters is a key component of many genres, and they often help to identify a genre or subgenre.
- For example, a story with the stock characters of a knight-errant and a witch is probably a fairy tale or fantasy.

The Hero

- The Hero is the axis on which a story revolves.
- They're usually thrown into extraordinary circumstances beyond their control through which they need to fight for a singular objective.
- Along the way the hero's strength will be tested in several ways—maybe physically, mentally, spiritually, and/or morally.
- These trials will reveal exceptional strengths that set them apart from other characters in the story.
- These might be things like supernatural powers or a momentous birthright, or it might be something simple that comes from their humanity—a remarkable sense of compassion, an iron determination and sense of self, great courage in the face of terrifying acts.
- They might be natural leaders or have a heightened survival instinct.
- Heroes are not flawless (pro tip: they'd be quite boring if they were), but the strength they exhibit in times of hardship is what will make your reader believe in them and follow them right up until the end.
- One of the oldest universal story patterns in literature is called "The Hero's Journey."
- Also called the "Monomyth," the hero's journey follows the protagonist through an adventurous cycle of navigating an irrevocably changed world, passing through an initiation or coming-of-age, achieving a goal, and returning home to rebuild from a new beginning.
- Although your hero is the central axis of your story, they don't carry it alone (even if sometimes they think they do).
- Along the way the hero will meet many of the character archetypes listed below—some as obstacles, and some as friends.
- Examples of heroes in literature are Wonder Woman, Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, and Sir Gawain from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The Shadow

- The Shadow is a dark reflection of the hero.
- They might show us weaknesses in the hero that they fight to keep hidden, or what the hero could become if they allowed those weaknesses to consume them.
- In many ways, we all have this "shadow personality" but in literature the shadow will either be a person mirroring the hero's darkest traits and their darkest potential, or a very distinctive facet of the hero.
- For example, if they change their personality completely while under the influence of drugs, manipulation, or some external force.
- Very often you'll see these characters take on two separate names for their opposing polarities, such as Angel and Angelus on the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.
- Other examples of shadow archetypes are Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* and Mr. Hyde in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

The Sidekick

- Sidekicks have been popularized by the comic book medium, but the idea has existed for much longer.
- The sidekick's main role is to offer the hero a way to stay grounded despite all the obstacles they're facing.
- This might be through comic relief or through cautionary advice (or both).
- The sidekick lacks whatever fundamental value has put the hero on their path—perhaps they're not as brave, or not as strong, or not the "chosen one"—and they don't carry the weight of the world in the same way.
- What they *can* do is offer a light in the darkness when your hero begins to lose some integral piece of themselves.
- Your sidekick keeps the hero from getting too close to the edge. nd Ron Weasley from Harry Potter.
- Very often sidekicks in literature serve as a foil character to the protagonist.
- This means that they work in juxtaposition to the hero to draw attention to certain aspects of their personality.
- A great example of this is Batman and Robin, where everything about Robin's brightly colored costume, his chattiness, and his positive energy contrast the darkness of Batman's character.
- Other examples of sidekicks include Friday from *Robinson Crusoe* and Ron Weasley from Harry Potter.

The Villain

- The villain archetype is the big baddie of your story—the challenge to which all roads lead.
- This character has an objective that is in direct conflict with the hero's objective, and for them to reach their goal, they need to make sure that the main character is unable to reach *theirs*.
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- This might be through killing them, humiliating them, discrediting them, or otherwise forcing them into submission.
- The villain always has a reason for doing the terrible things that they do, even if that reason is twisted beyond what we might understand in our own perceptions and values.
- The best villains in literature are ones who truly believe that they're doing the right thing but have allowed their vision of the "right thing" to become clouded with ambition, fear, or pain.
- Some iconic villains in literature are Valentine from *The Mortal Instruments*, Professor Moriarty from the "Sherlock Holmes" stories, and Shere Khan from *The Jungle Book*.

The Lover

- In a story, the lover archetype really just wants everyone to get along.
- They're usually a "good" character, in the sense of having a functioning moral compass, but they lack the courage, sense of injustice, and capacity for self-sacrifice that the hero has.
- Though guided by the needs of their heart, lovers tend to take the path of least resistance that brings the least amount of harm to themselves and those they care for.
- Many traditionally artistic characters will fall into this category.
- In some ways, the lover reflects the trickster archetype, which we'll look at further below.
- Both try to stay out of trouble and have a limited scope of what's worth fighting for.
- Examples of great lover archetypes in stories are Dustfinger in *Inkheart* and Pippin from *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Mentor

- One of the most essential figures in the hero's journey, the mentor is older (sometimes), wiser (always), and has knowledge and experiences beyond that of the hero.
- They may also have supernatural powers, or a particularly specialized skill set. The mentor serves to give the protagonist a little nudge (or a violent shove) forward onto their path, bringing out the potential of what that hero will become.
- The mentor is also a great tool for exposition and immersing your reader into your story.
- As the mentor teaches the hero ….
    - about their world,
    - the threats they'll be facing,
    - the steps they can take to overcome those threats,
    - and how to develop the skills necessary to do so,
- … your readers will learn everything they need to know about your story world right alongside them.
- The most recognizable mentor figure in modern literature is the wizard Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings*.
- Other examples include Haymitch Abernath from *The Hunger Games* and Merlin from the tales of King Arthur.

The Mother

- Made famous by the godmothers of classic fairy tales, the mother archetype represents a supportive, nurturing presence in the hero's life.
- They won't always be a literal mother (although they can be); they don't even necessarily need to be female.
- The mother character is strong and wise, but they differ from the mentor figure in that they don't give the hero the tools they need to move forward on their journey; rather, they give the hero a safe place to come home to, a place to heal.
- Depending on where the hero is on their journey, there may be more than one character filling this role. Aunt May from "Spider-man" and Nokomis from *The Song of Hiawatha* are examples of mother archetypes.

The Everyman

- The everyman character is a projection of the reader.
- They're an utterly normal person thrown into remarkable circumstances, and they adapt to the situation in much the same way that any one of us would.
- They usually say what they're thinking and call things out that don't make sense, and their normality might make them an outsider in a world where very un-normal things are happening.
- This archetype functions to bring some perspective to the story and make the plot more relatable to us as readers.
- The everyman might be an unwilling hero, or they might be a sidekick or other supporting character that acts as a link between the main character and the reader.
- Dr. John Watson from the "Sherlock Holmes" stories is an everyman—faced with a genius best friend and some equally genius villains, he brings a comforting averageness to their world.
- Other examples of the everyman archetype are Arthur Dent from *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* and Simon Lewis from *The Mortal Instruments*.

The Damsel

- The iconic damsel-in-distress is one of the most recognizable literary tropes, but this character can take many forms of any age and any gender.
- Sometimes called the "innocent," they represent naivety, inexperience, and trust.
- The damsel is like the everyman in that they see everything with new eyes; but unlike the everyman, the damsel never gives up the idea that there's good in the world.
- They cling to their innocence even when the events around them threaten to strip it away.
- Unfortunately, this determined positivity can lead them into some difficult situations, often requiring the services of a hero to rescue them.
- In a story, this archetype reminds us that there is always hope and wonder to be found in the world.
- Examples of classic damsels in literature are Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Tiny Tim from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

The Trickster

- Tricksters are perhaps our most enduring character archetype, even more so than heroes.
- Before storytellers were repeating tales of Beowulf and King Arthur, they were gathering around the fire listening to stories about Coyote, Raven, and the spider god Anansi.
- Tricksters are neither good nor evil but use cunning and cleverness to further their own ends. They might help the hero, or they might hinder them, depending on which best suits their own agenda at the time.
- The trickster has given rise to one of our most popular modern archetypes, the antihero.
- Antiheroes are usually tricksters who, rather begrudgingly, have become invested in something more than just their own survival. They then need to reassess their goals which launch them onto a new path to becoming a hero.
- Examples of famous tricksters in literature include Puck from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Weasley twins from the Harry Potter series, and Loki from Norse mythology.

The Guardian

- The guardian archetype is someone who stands at a threshold, holding the hero back from continuing their journey.
- Guardians are usually quite single-minded and fixated on their goal of keeping two worlds, people, or experiences separated.
- Sometimes this might be someone guarding a literal doorway, such as the Sphinx of Egyptian mythology; other times it might be a new stage of life, such as an admissions officer who stands between a student and their dream school.
- Guardians challenge the hero to reassess their situation and look at things in a new way.
- If the hero continues using the same strengths, tools, or techniques as they always have, they won't make it past the threshold.
- They'll need to try something different, probably something less comfortable, and exercise a new skill in order to continue towards their goal.
- By the time they make their way across the obstacle, they will have grown as a result of stretching the limits of who they can be.
- Examples of guardians in literature are the Wall guards from Neil Gaiman's *Stardust*, the gatekeeper to the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*, and the three-headed dog Fluffy from the Harry Potter series.

The Herald

- The herald is a character that foretells a great change, usually near the beginning of the story.
- After they've made their appearance, nothing will be the same for the hero again.
- An example of a herald can be found in the classic fairy tale *Cinderella*, where a messenger shows up to announce that the king is seeking a match for his son, launching the plot into action.
- Although the herald's job is to set the events of the plot in motion, they may also hang around to fill another role in the story later on.
- In *The Hobbit*, for instance, Gandalf begins as the herald by marking Bilbo's door, and then shifts into a mentor figure once the story is on its feet.
- Other examples of heralds in literature are Effie Trinket in *The Hunger Games* and the three witches in *Macbeth*.

The Scapegoat

- In literature, the scapegoat archetype is someone who takes the blame for another's misdeeds. This often works a bit like a reverse guardian—their defeat clears the way for the villain to move forward towards their goal.
- Using a scapegoat allows your characters to unite against a common perceived enemy, thereby (temporarily) dispersing whatever tensions had been brewing.
- This is a useful literary device for turning the plot in a new direction.
- Scapegoats in literature include Snowball from *Animal Farm* and Wilmer from *The Maltese Falcon*.

The Outlaw

- The outlaw's key strengths are their independence and the sense of self that keeps them from bending to societal constraints.
- This doesn't always make them a lot of friends, but the ones they have are loyal and share the same ideas about what matters in life.
- The outlaw is often romanticized and well-liked, but other characters may grow to resent them through their envy of the outlaw's lifestyle and freedom from expectations.
- The outlaw is a major archetype in both *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and the original *Spiderman* comics, where the outlaw's antagonists—the Sheriff of Nottingham and the newspaper man J. Jonah Jameson—express their hidden envy of a life that they could never have.
- Sometimes this animosity will put the outlaw onto a new path, turning them into a hero as their self-contained existence begins crumbling down.
- Other outlaws in literature are Roux from *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris, and Maurice Leblanc's character Arsène Lupin from the series of the same name.

The Rebel

- Also called the revolutionary, the rebel archetype epitomizes “chaotic good”; they have a cause and they’re not afraid to burn a few bridges, or cities, in its name.
- The rebel sees something deeply wrong in their society and takes it upon themselves to change it, because nobody else is going to.
- The rebel archetype is deeply protective of the ones they love but tend to alienate all but the most devoted due to their inflammatory ideas.
- The rebel is a natural leader, and their passion for their cause makes people want to follow them.
- This passion is boundless and transcends minor annoyances like common sense, which means that this archetype can be a hero, a villain, or an antihero that falls somewhere in the middle.
- Examples of rebels in literature include Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*, Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Lyra Belacqua from *His Dark Materials*.

The Ruler

- The ruler is a natural leader in a position of power, such as a monarchy, a government office, or the head of a powerful company.
- Unlike the leadership skills displayed by the rebel, the ruler archetype thrives on order, stability, and tradition.
- They thrive in the status quo.
- They can be a force for good or for ill, but they will usually be put at odds with the hero for one simple reason: the ruler likes the way things are and doesn’t want them to change.
- While every one of us has the capacity to lead in times of conflict, not everyone handles being in a position of authority very well.
- Power corrupts, and even good people can find their values tested if they’re given too much power too quickly.
- This is why many ruler archetypes find themselves embroiled in conflict with those around them.
- Some ruler archetypes in literature are King Uther from the Arthurian legends and Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Appendix 1: Disney Animated Films

1	*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*	December 21, 1937
2	*Pinocchio*	February 7, 1940
3	*Fantasia*	November 13, 1940
4	*Dumbo*	October 23, 1941
5	*Bambi*	August 13, 1942
6	*Saludos Amigos*	February 6, 1943
7	*The Three Caballeros*	February 3, 1945
8	*Make Mine Music*	April 20, 1946
9	*Fun and Fancy Free*	September 27, 1947
10	*Melody Time*	May 27, 1948
11	*The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad*	October 5, 1949
12	*Cinderella*	March 4, 1950
13	*Alice in Wonderland*	July 26, 1951
14	*Peter Pan*	February 5, 1953
15	*Lady and the Tramp*	June 16, 1955
16	*Sleeping Beauty*	January 29, 1959
17	*One Hundred and One Dalmatians*	January 25, 1961
18	*The Sword in the Stone*	December 25, 1963
19	*The Jungle Book*	October 18, 1967
20	*The Aristocats*	December 24, 1970
21	*Robin Hood*	November 8, 1973
22	*The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*	March 11, 1977
23	*The Rescuers*	June 22, 1977
24	*The Fox and the Hound*	July 10, 1981
25	*The Black Cauldron*	July 24, 1985
26	*The Great Mouse Detective*	July 2, 1986
27	*Oliver & Company*	November 18, 1988
28	*The Little Mermaid*	November 17, 1989
29	*The Rescuers Down Under*	November 16, 1990
30	*Beauty and the Beast*	November 22, 1991
31	*Aladdin*	November 25, 1992
32	*The Lion King*	June 24, 1994
33	*Pocahontas*	June 23, 1995
34	*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*	June 21, 1996
35	*Hercules*	June 27, 1997
36	*Mulan*	June 19, 1998
37	*Tarzan*	June 18, 1999
38	*Fantasia 2000*	December 17, 1999
39	*Dinosaur*	May 19, 2000
40	*The Emperor's New Groove*	December 15, 2000
41	*Atlantis: The Lost Empire*	June 15, 2001
42	*Lilo & Stitch*	June 21, 2002
43	*Treasure Planet*	November 27, 2002
44	*Brother Bear*	November 1, 2003
45	*Home on the Range*	April 2, 2004
46	*Chicken Little*	November 4, 2005
47	*Meet the Robinsons*	March 30, 2007
48	*Bolt*	November 21, 2008
49	*The Princess and the Frog*	December 11, 2009
50	*Tangled*	November 24, 2010
51	*Winnie the Pooh*	July 15, 2011
52	*Wreck-It Ralph*	November 2, 2012
53	*Frozen*	November 27, 2013
54	*Big Hero 6*	November 7, 2014
55	*Zootopia*	March 4, 2016
56	*Moana*	November 23, 2016
57	*Ralph Breaks the Internet*	November 21, 2018
58	*Frozen II*	November 22, 2019
59	*Raya and the Last Dragon*	March 5, 2021
60	*Encanto*	November 24, 2021
61	*Strange World*	November 23, 2022
62	*Wish*	November 22, 2023

Appendix 2: Pixar Animated Films

1	*Toy Story*	November 22, 1995
2	*A Bug's Life*	November 25, 1998
3	*Toy Story 2*	November 24, 1999
4	*Monsters, Inc.*	November 2, 2001
5	*Finding Nemo*	May 30, 2003
6	*The Incredibles*	November 5, 2004
7	*Cars*	June 9, 2006
8	*Ratatouille*	June 29, 2007
9	*WALL-E*	June 27, 2008
10	*Up*	May 29, 2009
11	*Toy Story 3*	June 18, 2010
12	*Cars 2*	June 24, 2011
13	*Brave*	June 22, 2012
14	*Monsters University*	June 21, 2013
15	*Inside Out*	June 19, 2015
16	*The Good Dinosaur*	November 25, 2015
17	*Finding Dory*	June 17, 2016
18	*Cars 3*	June 16, 2017
19	*Coco*	November 22, 2017
20	*Incredibles 2*	June 15, 2018
21	*Toy Story 4*	June 21, 2019
22	*Onward*	March 6, 2020
23	*Soul*	December 25, 2020
24	*Luca*	June 18, 2021
25	*Turning Red*	March 11, 2022
26	*Lightyear*	June 17, 2022
27	*Elemental*	June 16, 2023
28	*Inside Out 2*	June 14, 2024