*Save this in your folder as you will refer to this frequently throughout the year.*

Universal Symbols, Archetypes, and Themes in Western Literature

Literature is not all that difficult to understand once you know a few key symbols and archetypes. That is right! Authors use some very specific symbols, and they *frequently* have the same meaning, even in different literary genres and movements! Once you know what to look for, the questions authors are posing about humanity or the problems they are exposing are much easier to recognize. The following is a list of universal symbols, popular Western symbols, archetypes, and themes. Keep this sheet with you at all times when reading! It is your aid to taking notes and participating in class discussions.

Seasons/Times of Day

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Season | Symbol | Time of Day |
| Spring | Birth/Beginning | Morning |
| Summer | Youth | Afternoon |
| Fall | Impending Death | Evening |
| Winter | Death | Night |

Table 1

Colors

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Color | Symbol |
| Black | Concealment or lack of knowledge |
| Red | Passion (love, hate, or any emotion; may also be passion for a person, place, or thing) |
| White | Innocence or purity, including (but not exclusively virginity; may be one or the other) |
| Yellow | Minority and or corruption |

Table 2

*Note: Select authors may use green and blue also, but they are not universal. Example…Mary Wilkins Freeman may use green to indicate a transcendental nature, but Fitzgerald will use it to indicate social class.*

Additional symbols that may be used throughout the year BUT are not universal or can be used differently by authors:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Object | Symbol | Object | Symbol |
| Fog/Smoke | Obscurity/disillusionment |  |  |
| Silver | Inconsistency/fickleness | Sun | Passion, love |
| Stars | Faith, eternity, unattainable | Sea/tides/sand | Passing of time, cycles |
| Wine | New life, strength(sacrament) | Eyes | Windows to the soul |
| Walls | Barriers between people; mental and physical | Hands | Strength, instinct, true emotion or thought |

Table 3

Hair

In Western literature a woman’s hair is ALWAYS an indication of her *sexuality*. If her hair is thick and long, her sexuality is obvious and she is desirable. If her hair is thinning and limp, the reverse is true. If a woman hides her hair, she is making an effort to…? The different colors also represent different archetypes.

*over*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Hair Color | Symbol |
| Blonde | Goddess – men desire her, but she is untouchable for some reason. |
| Brunette | *Temptress –* She has brown or black hair who men desire, and they may have a chance to sexually obtain her; however, once they do, they have a serious fall from grace that could lead to their death or negative fate. She is usually interesting, intelligent, fun, and can be loyal but dangerous. |
| Red | *Good Girl* – *This is thanks to Mark Twain and only true after Huck Finn*. The Good Girl is innocent and in trouble. She needs the Bad Boy to value her innocence and protect her. He does this…often protecting her from himself. |

Table 4

Other Universal Symbols

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Object | Symbol | Object | Symbol |
| Birds | Freedom (herons symbolize Christ, chickens because they can’t fly) | Windows | Opportunity, freedom (or lack of freedom) |
| Rivers, paths, etc. | A journey  (train tracks, sidewalks, highways) | Light, fire, candles | Knowledge, truth |
| Darkness | Concealment of knowledge or truth | Water | Rebirth, baptism, life |
| Cave | Plato’s cave or yonic symbol (of the womb) | Eating and drinking, sex, kiss | Communion |
| Snakes | Temptation, evil, ignorance, disconnect |  |  |

Table 5

Table 6 Archetypes \*only American

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Archetype | Description |
| Bad boy\* | Unmarried and usually disenfranchised. Always the underdog and unacceptable to general society, but his moral center is strong and admirable. He is not innocent, but he recognizes and seeks to protect it in others. |
| Bad man\* | The entity the bad boy must overcome. In early literature literally a man but later could be represented by a group, corporation or machine. |
| Good girl\* | Usually red headed and possessing some derivative of the name “Mary Jane,” the good girl is innocent and trusting, which often makes her a mark for the unscrupulous. She is what the bad boy will seek to protect, but she is no shrinking violet. She is be more than willing to participate in her own protection. The bad boy will seek to protect her even against himself if necessary. |
| Mentor\* | Foil to the bad man, the mentor usually teaches the bad boy how to be a good man. Usually the mentor is NOT from the same social class as the bad boy, but is able to speak in a language the bad boy understands. Later, the lost generation authors may turn the mentors into questionable influences. |
| Cold wife | In some way emasculates her husband – intentionally or otherwise – found throughout Western literature, but in the Post-Modern era, they become more sympathetic |
| Antiquated character | A character who belongs to a past time or generation dues to moral values, social norms, or religious beliefs |
| Prophet | A character who can do all or some of the following:   1. bring others truth or knowledge (often associated with light) 2. make others aware of beauty, 3. have some power over life and death, 4. act as confessors, 5. and/or grant absolution. |
| Christ | Does everything a prophet might do, ***and*** sacrifice herself for the good of the group. |
| Epic hero | Needs to precisely or metaphorically fit these criteria. The epic hero:   1. Is an everyman, an ordinary guy living an ordinary life. 2. Suddenly, either by choice or chance, is either pulled out of his ordinary life or chooses to leave his life to launch into a great adventure. 3. Journeys to a dark world where he meets forces or entities he must deal with. 4. Encounters a teacher who gives him instruction in new skills he needs to achieve his goal. 5. Becomes very aware of what his specific goals are. 6. Is challenged to his limit, reaching a culminating experience, what Campbell calls “the supreme ordeal.” 7. Gains his reward and is forever changed by the experience. 8. Gains new powers and sets off with them.   Eventually reconnects with his society and uses these new powers to restore his community in some way. |
| Tragic hero | The tragic hero or his story (always a male in Greek tragedy and much of literature):   1. Must be noble (in Western Literature) / he must be noble in nature (in American Literature) 2. Must be doomed from the start and his decline inevitable 3. Must suffer 4. Must arouse fear and pity 5. Must have free choice to some degree 6. His decline must result from a tragic flaw (this is usually but not always hubris) |
| Frustrated artist/ intellect | A character who, for one reason or another, is unable to practice her need to create or think freely for reasons that usually have to do with social mores and codes, mores and codes she may even put on herself. She frequently comes into conflict with the society around herself, and the repression often leads to madness or destruction. There will be a deterioration of some kind unless she decide to disassociate from society completely which may be the catalyst for a journey. |
| Disaffected teacher | After Twain, usually – but not always – female and usually – but not always – single and hasn’t “kept up with the times.” She usually labors under antiquated notions of education, faith, social norms, and values. She does not listen to youth, only talks at them. She teaches what to believe but not what question. |
| Romantic villain | Always characterized as the cold intellect. He is usually associated with cold colors or season. His heart and morality are cold and dead, but his intellect is unusually keen; as a matter of fact, the protagonist has trouble because the romantic villain is always one step ahead. He is usually seeking revenge or trying to retain power, doing so by first appearing publically benevolent, but his intensions are always malevolent. He will frequently appear to be friends with the people he is against and is eventually destroyed by his desire for revenge. |

The Conflicts (*not* themes)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Man vs Man | Man vs Nature |
| Man vs Self | Man vs Society |
| Man vs Possession | Man vs Fate |

Table 7

Western Literary Tools

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Tool | Description |
| Unreliable narrator | A narrator you cannot trust to provide a neutral perspective for various reasons. A narrator can be too young, too in love, too old, too religious, too crazy, etc. and provide the reader with an unbiased view of the events which unfold in the story. When authors use this narrator, the reader must pay attention to subtext in order to fully grasp the fundamental human question being posed in the story. |
| Mismatched pairs | A pair of characters who must be romantically linked. If they are not romantically linked but fit the following definition, they are most likely literary foils. Mismatched pairs can be opposite of one another in attitude, physicality, financial position, social acceptability, etc. Authors do mismatch differently, but if they do, they will make it very obvious, and it will be for an important thematic reason |
| Literary foils | See above except remove the sexual relationship |
| Echo characters | Characters drawn by an author who represent characters in the piece with which the reader is already familiar. Authors employ this for various reasons but when they do, it should be obvious and will be for a thematic reason. |
| Author as character | With the advent of realism, it became increasingly difficult for authors to have a direct conversation with their reader. Therefore, the reader will often find a character within the story who is either metaphorically or almost exactly a replica of the author. Authors will usually make this obvious, so if you think you are dealing with this character, pay attention to any speeches this character may make. |

Table 8

Popular Western Literary Components

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Idea | Explanation |
| Search for identity | Ever since Homer, characters will many times manifest their search for identity by changing their names or creating alter egos. |
| Hospitality | Ever since Gilgamesh, hospitality is what separates us from the beasts. |
| Epitaphs and eulogies | Ever since the Egyptians our reverence for the dead is not only a mark of our humanity, but also usually what the author is conveying about humanity to his generation and beyond (look for funerals or grave stones). |
| The American dream | Ever since Twain (although he simply put together in *one* novel all which Emerson and Whitman had written), is made up of four components:   1. personal connection 2. owning land or heading west 3. must be about the youth 4. should revolve around the working or middle class. |

Table 9

Consider these a symbolic foundation. Individual authors will incorporate their own symbols and motifs throughout their works; these are simply often present in Western works. You must get used to looking for recurring symbols. *If a Romantic author uses red in a story…it most likely represents passion. To a realist or postmodernist, however…the fire truck may be red, because, well, fire trucks are red.*

Important Literary Movements

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Movement  or Era | Significant traits | Movement or Era |  |
| Romanticism  1798 – 1832 | 1. Imagination and intuition are   favored over reason and facts   1. Intense interest in nature 2. potential of humans is not   limited by nature   1. coincidence and the super-   natural are common features   1. first era of American fiction | Naturalism  1900 – 1930 | 1. A writer must observe people and society objectively and draw conclusions from conservation 2. One's destiny is determined by nature, social conditions, and economic circumstances rather than by free will 3. often pessimistic writers |
| Realism  1865 – 1914 | 1. A reaction against the idealism   of romanticism   1. Authors attempt to create an   honest version of reality   1. Coincided with the country's increase in territory 2. Writers found meaning in the   ordinary Works often contain  dialect and detailed settings | Post  modernism  1965 – ? | 1. Associated with social and political upheaval of the 1960s 2. attempt to integrate art and life 3. A blurring of distinctions between genres 4. Confessionalism, beat writers, Theatre of the Absurd, and popularity of the memoir. |

Table 10

Possible Themes in Literature

Consider the following when deciding on theme of a work:

1. **How does a character change over the course of the novel?**
2. What is the author’s message?
3. What is a universal message that applies to all humanity?

Following are categories with suggested themes. Not all are written with style and grace, but they’re starting points for you.

1. The individual in nature (person v. nature)
   1. Nature is at war with each of us and proves our vulnerability
   2. People are out of place in nature and need technology to survive
   3. People are destroying nature and themselves with uncontrolled technology
2. The individual in society (person v. society)
   1. Society and a person’s inner nature are always at war
   2. Social influences determine a person’s final destiny
   3. Social influences can only complete inclinations formed by nature
   4. A person’s identity is determined by one’s place in society
   5. In spite of pressures to be among people, individuals are still alone and frightened
3. The individual in relation to the gods (person v. fate)
   1. God(s) are benevolent and reward humans for overcoming evil and temptation
   2. God(s) mock the individual and torture him or her for presuming to be great
   3. God(s) are jealous of and constantly thwart human aspirations to power and knowledge
   4. God(s) are indifferent toward humans and let them run their undetermined courses
   5. There are/is no God(s) in whom people can place faith or yearning for meaning in life
4. Human relations (person v. other)
   1. Marriage is a perpetual comedy bound to fail
   2. Marriage is a relationship in which each is supported and allowed to grow
   3. An old man marrying a young woman is destined to be a cuckold.
   4. Parents should not sacrifice everything to make a better life for their children
   5. There are few friends who will make extreme sacrifices
5. Growth and initiation (person v. self)
   1. Youth must go through a special trial or series of trials before maturing
   2. Adulthood is often achieved by an abrupt, random crisis, sometimes at an unusually early age
   3. Aspects of childhood are never lost sometimes hindering growth
   4. A person grows only so far as one must face a crisis of confidence or identity
6. Time (person v. fate)
   1. Enjoy life now, for the present moment, because we all die too soon
   2. By the time one understands life, there is too little time left to live
7. Death (person v. fate)
   1. Death is a part of living, giving life meaning
   2. Death is the ultimate absurd joke on life
   3. There is no death, only a different plane or mode of life without physical decay
   4. Without love, death may appear to be the only alternative to life
8. Alienation (person v. self)
   1. An individual is isolated from fellow humans and foolishly tries to bridge the gaps
   2. Through alienation comes self-knowledge
   3. Modern culture is defective because it doesn’t provide group ties, which in primitive culture made alienation virtually impossible