

# An Introduction to Literary Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts and the world around them. Some lenses will be more appropriate for particular works than others at times and it is your job to discern when to use a particular lens. The following theories are just that, *theories*. Approach them as you would a scientist, without any emotional attachment to any particular one. You do not have to believe or agree with a theory to understand and correctly apply it. Your goal is to understand the literary theories below.

## Archetypal Criticism

### ✓ Archetypal Criticism Explained

- The Archetypal or *collective* unconscious is a theoretical proof of memories that everyone shares - a shared knowledge.
- In literature - archetype signifies narrative designs, character types, or images which are said to be identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as myths, dreams, and even ritualized modes of social behavior.

### ✓ Four Seasonal Categories for Archetypal Criticism

#### ➤ Spring: Comedy

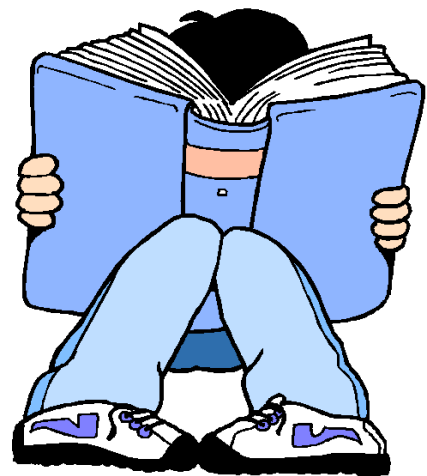
1. Existent society remains
2. Criticism of society without change
3. Existent society is replaced by happy society
4. Happy society resists change
5. Reflective and idyllic view
6. Society ceases to exist beyond
7. Contemplation

#### ➤ Summer: Romance

1. Complete innocence
2. Youthful innocence of inexperience
3. Completion of an ideal
4. Happy society resists change
5. Reflective and idyllic view
6. Society ceases to exist beyond contemplation

#### ➤ Autumn: Tragedy

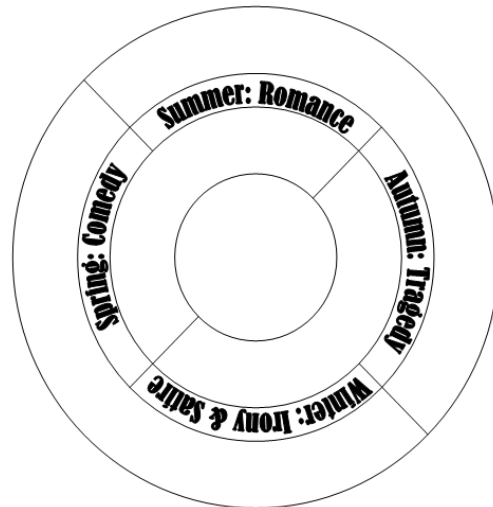
1. Complete innocence
2. Youthful innocence of inexperience
3. Completion of an ideal
4. Individual's faults



5. Natural law
6. World of shock and horror

➤ **Winter: Satire and Irony**

1. Existent society remains
2. Criticism of society without change
3. Existent society is replaced by happy society
4. Individual's faults
5. Natural law
6. World of shock and horror



✓ **Spring Overview - Comedy**

➤ Comedy focuses on the social group, often setting up an arbitrary law or humorous society and setting out to reform it. This change, however, is rarely a moral judgment of the wicked, but usually a social judgment of the absurd instead. The hero's society, which prevails in the end, is really a reversal of social standards which recalls a golden age in the past, an age that usually disappeared before the beginning of the play.

➤ Plot

1. The basic plot follows the movement from one type of society to another:
2. Existent Society: existing society precludes hero from something he wants
3. Confrontation: hero confronts representatives of society
4. Reformation or Replacement of Society: the hero's society replaces the previous society
5. More specifically a typical comedy begins with a young man who wants a young woman, but there is opposition, usually from the young woman's father. In the end a plot twist allows the hero to succeed.
6. The story often begins with an absurd or irrational law that must be broken. The law is sometimes a result of a rash promise or statement of an obsessed tyrant. In fact a powerful, but irrational character who can force much of society into his or her obsession is usually present. The change in societies is usually inoffensive as the members of the original society are generally reconciled with or converted into members of the new society. An irreconcilable character may suffer a scapegoat ritual or suffer expulsion.
7. The society at the beginning of the comedy and at the end tend to follow a predictable pattern:

<i>Existent Society</i>		<i>Reformed Society</i>
Obstructing or blocking characters	-->	Hero and heroines
Age, parents	-->	Youth, children
Monetary wealth	-->	Monetary poverty
Habit, ritual, bondage, arbitrary law, old characters	-->	Youth with pragmatic freedom
Illusion (fixed or definable)	-->	Reality (not illusion, changeable)

8. The illusion in the existent society may be caused by disguise, obsession, hypocrisy, or unknown parentage.

➤ Characters

1. Eiron

- a. Hero and heroine: self-deprecators, often neutral and uninformed
- b. Tricky slave: hatches schemes to bring hero's victory; examples include the scheming valet, amateur detective, female confidante, and vice who simply loves mischief but is benevolent; this character often produces the happy ending, is commonly spiritual in nature, and regularly receives reward from resolution; sometimes he is an older man, or father, who leaves (to see what his son will do) and reappears at the end, and sometimes advises or orders the vice

2. Alazon

- a. Impostors: typical blocking character, might be a heavy father; character usually rages and threatens, or is marked by obsessions and gullibility; the character is absurd rather than dangerous or pathetic because of obsession; females are rare in this role
- b. Blocking characters are representatives of, and sometimes responsible for, existent society; therefore, they must be confronted and ultimately assimilated into the new society. Comedies are full of unlikely conversions, miraculous transformations, and providential assistance to allow for the necessary ending.

3. Bomolochoi

- a. Buffoons: serve to increase the mood of the festivity rather than advance plot; typical examples include fools, clowns, pages, singers, parasites, cooks, hosts, and the chorus in Aristophanes' plays

4. Agroikos

- a. Rustic: a gull or straight man who is a solemn or inarticulate character who allows the humor to bounce off him; generally a light-hearted, simple man who speaks for a pastoral ideal such as a country squire in an urban setting; they do not refuse festivity but mark the extent of its range; in satiric or ironic comedy, role of rustic may be played by a straight talker, who represents audience's sympathetic ideals in an absurd society, similar to a chorus in a tragedy, but if the tone becomes bitter they may be a malcontent or railer
- b. Churl: a miserly, snobbish, priggish character who refuses festivity and tries to stop the fun; commonly played by old men

5. The *eiron* and *alazon* form the basis of comic action; the *bomolochoi* and *agroikos* polarize the comic mood.

➤ Traits

1. The focus of comedy is often on defeated characters rather than heroes but is presented in a pleasing way because in the end, comedy integrates the family and adjusts it to the society as a whole. The necessity of the happy ending means that comedy often requires the victory of an arbitrary plot over consistency of character. Because the happiness of the ending is a foregone conclusion, it must arise through a clever manipulation to be effective.

➤ Phases of Comedy

1. Existent society remains: The absurd society triumphs or remains undefeated or sometimes, in more ironic cases, dissolves without anything to take its place
2. Criticism of society without change: The hero escapes a humorous society without transforming it
3. Existent society is replaced by happy society: The hero's society replaces that of the humorous society
4. Happy society resists change: The society at the beginning of the story remains at the end, but a metamorphosis occurs by a central character or the members of the society moving into a green world where a comic resolution and a rebirth are achieved before the return to the normal world
5. Reflective and idyllic view: Movement occurs from a lower world of confusion to an upper world of order, where a distance between human experience exists
6. Society ceases to exist beyond contemplation: the collapse and disintegration of comic society occurs, and the story exists in an isolated place or on a different plane

✓ **Summer Overview - Romance**

➤ Tales from this mythos are marked by extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, and a search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space. These stories typically have virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines who represent ideals and villains that threaten their ascendancy.

➤ Plot

1. The common plot is a basic quest sequence:
  - a. Struggle: perilous journey and minor adventures
  - b. Ritual death: crucial struggle, usually a battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die
  - c. Recognition: the exaltation of the hero
2. Often the hero will disappear after the ritual death and will reappear for the final stage.
3. More specifically the tale begins with a land that is ruled by a helpless old king being laid to waste by a dragon. Young people are offered up until the king's daughter is to be sacrificed; then the hero arrives, kills the dragon, marries the king's daughter, and ascends to throne.

➤ Characters

1. In romance the reader's values are bound up with hero who unequivocally represents what is supposed to be right and virtuous. If the tale rises to the

level of myth, the hero will show signs of divinity and the enemy will have demonic qualities.

<b>Hero from upper world</b>	→ Battle in our world ←	<b>Enemy from lower world</b>
Spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, youth		Winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, old age

## 2. Eiron

- a. hero: an unequivocally right and virtuous character
- b. old wise man: often a magician who effects action
- c. Sybilline: often the lady for whose sake or at whose bidding the quest is performed

## 3. Alazon

- a. enemy: in religious tales this character may take the form of a horrible monster that represents different ideas of Satan; in a secular story, the enemy may be guarding a hoard of gold, which may represent power and wisdom

## 4. Bomolochoi

- a. spirits of nature (shy nymph, elusive half-wild creatures, wild man): elude moral antithesis because they are partly of the moral neutrality of the world or partly of the world of mystery that is never seen; these characters intensify and focus the romantic mood

5. Many characters that are on the virtuous side in romance have a counterpart: the hero's helper is balanced by the traitor; the heroine, by siren or beautiful witch; and the dragon, by helpful animals. Not all of these characters or even complete pairs of characters need to appear in every tale.

### ➤ Traits

1. Dialectic structure resists subtlety and complexity: characters are either for or against the quest: those who assist are gallant or pure; those who obstruct are villainous or cowardly.
2. Jung (dream terms): quest-romance is search of libido or desire of self-fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality; antagonists are sinister figures, giants, ogres, witches and magicians of parental origin
3. Frazer (ritual terms): quest-romance signifies fertility (food and drink, bread and wine, body and blood, union of male and female) over wasteland

### ➤ Phases of Romance

1. Complete innocence: These stories often relate to the birth of the hero, an event which is commonly associated with a flood or water imagery; it is common to have a hero locked in a chest, symbolizing that fertility and youth is the real wealth
2. Youthful innocence of inexperience: This phase usually presents a pastoral world, a generally pleasant wooded landscape with glades, shaded valleys, and murmuring brooks; the story tends to center on a youthful hero, still overshadowed by parents and surrounded by youthful companions

3. Completion of an ideal: This is the typical quest where the hero sets out on an adventure to destroy the monster and evil and return goodness and fertility to the land

4. Happy society resists change: The hero's society, which is innocent, is assaulted by an enemy, which is experience, but it withstands and survives the assault; this is often seen in a moral allegory or morality play; it may be a society or the individual that needs to be defended

5. Reflective or idyllic view: Here experience and adventure is contemplated, a similar world as that in the second phase is present, but with a knowledge of experience that did not previously exist

6. Society ceases to exist beyond contemplation: These are tales often told in quotation marks by one individual to a small group; there is a coziness to this type of tale as it is free from confrontation and has a relaxed and entertaining tone

#### ✓ Autumn Overview - Tragedy

➤ In tragedy the focus is on individuals: the tragedy is in the hero's isolation, not the villain's betrayal, in fact the villain is often part of the hero. The story begins with a hero who has comparatively free will and moves him or her into a world of causation. This world of causation is dependent on a belief in natural law or fate, although it does not necessarily attempt to answer questions about why these events happen so much as shows the effects of them.

##### ➤ Plot

1. The basic revenge tragedy is at the heart of most tragedies although they can be considerably more complex:

- a. Initial act: this act provokes revenge and commonly comes from or is transmitted through another world stretching the conception of nature and law beyond the visible world; it is not uncommon for this act to occur before the start of the story
- b. Counterbalancing movement: an attempt is made to set the set things right
- c. Resolution: in balancing out the first act, destruction is often spread beyond the individual hero

2. At some point in the tragedy the audience must be able to see two possible futures for the tragic hero: the one he could have had in which his path is more or less happy and peaceful and the inevitable one. The hero cannot see both.

##### ➤ Characters

1. Tragic heroes reside at the top of the wheel of fortune, somewhere between heaven and earth, between a paradisaal freedom and a world of bondage. They are inevitable conductors of power: instruments as well as victims of destruction.

2. Eiron

- a. Withdrawing figure: decrees action
- b. Soothsayer or prophet (counterpart to tricky slave): foresees the inevitable or at least more than the hero does

- c. Villain of Elizabethan drama (counterpart to vice): self-starting principle of malevolence, projection of author's will

### 3. Alazon

- a. Hero (an impostor in the sense of being self-deceived by or dizzy with hybris): often begins as a semi-divine character, tragedy separates his divine pretence from his human actuality
- b. Suppliant: often female, who presents picture of helplessness and destitution, which incites pathos; pity and terror are invoked by separation from the group
- c. Messenger: focuses mood, usually announces catastrophe in Greek tragedy
- d. *The suppliant and messenger are structural counterparts to the bomolochoi, or buffoons in comedy, although they do not possess the comic traits often associated with buffoonery.*
- e. Plain dealer (counterpart to the *Agroikos* or rustic in comedy): friend of the hero or other outspoken critic of tragic action; represent social norm from which the hero is gradually isolated; sometimes called a chorus character because serves the same role as the chorus in Greek tragedy

#### ➤ Traits

1. Time works to bring the inevitable causality and the catastrophic conclusion to the tragic process. This conclusion makes love and the social structure irreconcilable and contending forces; tragedy is concerned with breaking up the family and opposing it to the rest of society.
2. Two reductive and useful but insufficient theories of tragedy:
  - a. Tragedy exhibits omnipotence of external fate. This is insufficient because fate often becomes external only after the tragic process begins; the hero begins with free will.
  - b. An act that is primarily a violation of moral law, whether human or divine, sets the tragic process in motion. This is insufficient because there are innocent sufferers in tragedy.
3. Tragedy lies somewhere between these two ideas. It is helpful to consider this caveat: if the hero could not stand the story would be ironic, but if he hero could not fall it would be romantic. The tragic hero must seem to be able to stand, but does not.

#### ➤ Phases of Tragedy

1. Complete innocence: The hero who is dignified because of her innocence and courage is toppled; the hero is often a female in this phase
2. Youthful innocence of inexperience: The heroes and heroines are often young people first encountering the realities of adulthood; frequently a central character will survive so that the action closes with an adjustment to mature experience
3. Completion of an ideal: The success or completion of hero's achievement is essential despite his tragic end, and a sense of serenity or peace often

exists after his death because of his final accomplishment; these tragedies are commonly a sequel to a previous tragic event

4. Individual's faults: The hero moves from innocence to experience with his fall occurring as a result of *hybris* and *hamartia*

5. Natural law: Natural law becomes prominent in these stories, overshadowing the hero and allowing the audience to look down on the action; this phase includes any of the existential and fatalistic tragedies that deal more with metaphysical and theological questions rather than social or moral ones

6. World of shock and horror: These stories possess a strong element of demonic ritual in public punishments and depict a hero in such deep agony or humiliation that they cannot achieve a heroic pose; cannibalism, mutilation, and torture are frequently present in this phase

#### ✓ Winter Overview - Satire/Irony

➤ Irony and satire parody romance by applying romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content, which fits them in unexpected ways. It presents an image where reality rather than ideology is dominant.

➤ Satire is militant irony, where moral norms are relatively clear, and standards are assumed against which the grotesque and absurd are measured. Sheer invective or name-calling is satire with little irony. Because satire must carefully select content to criticize it is at least implicitly moral. Irony with little satire occurs when the reader is unsure of author's attitude or what their own should be.

#### ➤ Plot

1. This mythos is driven more by content than structure, so it is difficult to offer a typical example of plot.

2. One Example - A Goliath is encountered by a tiny David with his sudden and vicious stones: he is a giant prodded by a cool and observant but almost invisible enemy into a blind, stampeding fury and then polished off at leisure.

#### ➤ Characters

##### 1. Eiron

- a. Hero, if there is one; part of irony and satire is the disappearance of the heroic
- b. A character who takes the attitude of flexible pragmatism and an avoidance of illusion or compulsive behavior, and is thus the most difficult to satirize

##### 2. Alazon

- a. A deceiving or self-deceived character, often the object of ridicule in satire
- b. Often blocking characters that are in charge of society
- c. Represent conventions which are interpreted as humorous, and normally stereotypical in nature

##### 3. Agroikos

- a. Plain, common sense, conventional foil for the various *alazons* of society
- b. Often a rustic with pastoral affinities

#### ➤ Traits

1. Two necessities of satire: wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, and an object of attack.
2. Humor, like attack is founded on convention. All humor demands agreement that certain things, such as a picture of a wife beating her husband in a comic strip, are conventionally funny. To introduce a comic strip in which a husband beats his wife would distress the reader, because it would mean learning a new convention. Note: if this example is not funny, it is perhaps because the convention has changed since Frye first suggested it.

➤ Philosophy vs. Satire

1. Philosophies of life abstract from life, and an abstraction implies the leaving out of inconvenient data. The satirist brings up this inconvenient data, sometimes, in the form of alternative and equally plausible theories.
2. The satirist will attack an individual who is a member of a larger group, thus the satirist is attacking the individual given more power by the group rather than the individual or the group.

➤ Phases/Characteristics of Irony and Satire

➤ Satiric

1. Existent society remains: There is no displacement of the humorous society in this phase, and the absurdity often does not occur to the audience until after the story has ended, when a realization of the futility of the society is realized; it takes for granted a world that is full of anomalies, injustices, follies, and crimes that is permanent and displaceable; it suggests the only way to survive is for one to live with his or her eyes open and his or her mouth shut
2. Criticism of society without change: Sources of values and conventions are ridiculed usually by a successful rogue who challenges the society's generalizations, theories, and dogmas by showing their ineffectiveness in the face of reality; the rogue does not, however, offer a positive solution or create a new society
3. Existent society is replaced by happy society: In irony and satire this is accomplished by attacking and criticizing even basic common sense; there is usually a shift in perspective to show societies in a different light
4. Individual's faults: This phase applies a moral and realistic perspective to tragedy
5. Natural law: The main emphasis is on the natural cycle, examining the steady unbroken wheel of fate or fortune
6. World of shock and horror: Presents human life in terms of largely unrelieved bondage and social tyranny

➤ Ironic

1. Phase One
2. No displacement in the story of myth of the humorous (capricious, natural, whimsical) society
3. One feels very close to the demonic and nightmarish
4. A world full of crime and injustice is 'taken for granted'
5. To stay alive one must observe more and say less
6. The emphasis is on pragmatism

## 7. Phase Two

8. A successful "rogue...makes conventional society look foolish without setting up any positive standard"
9. The emphasis is on surviving everyday life, as opposed to attempting to understand life philosophically
10. Consequently, this phase does not set up a moral imperative
11. Stereotypes and dogmas are shown to be inapplicable when set against real life.

## 12. Phase Three

13. Every common sense is seen as a dogma
14. Constant shifts in perspective permeate this phase, so that the characters are seen from different angles, close ups, long shots, so to speak
15. Even the senses should be distrusted, because often what we think we see isn't what we have really seen

## 16. Fourth Phase

17. The fall of the tragic hero...is so delicately balanced emotionally that we almost exaggerate any one element of it in merely calling attention to it
18. The emphasis is on the everyday aspects of a human being...not their heroism
19. Much of the suffering portrayed is seen as avoidable
20. The hero falls "through hubris and hamartia" and crosses the line of innocence to experience

## 21. Fifth Phase

22. Emphasis is on ineluctable fate or fortune. Everything important has already happened or is set to unavoidably happen.
23. Thus an emphasis on stoicism
24. The practical situation is more important than "the theoretical situation"

## 25. Sixth Phase

26. Complete "unrelieved bondage"
27. The assumption is made that the ruling class takes sadistic pleasure in torturing people indefinitely "which is precisely the assumption one must make about devils in order to accept the orthodox picture of hell"

### ✓ Strategies for Archetypal Criticism

- Take a close look at characters and themes in a text
- Determine if you recognize forms of these characters or theme in any other literary texts
- Determine what meaning is intended by the author based on the identification of these archetypes.