

# ARCHETYPAL THEMES IN THE MODERN STORY

Edited by Jack Matthews



# ARCHETYPAL THEMES IN THE MODERN STORY

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# INTRODUCTION

THESE ARE EXCITING TIMES FOR BOTH WRITERS AND READERS. THE modern short story has not only opened up new vistas of experience (in step with the proliferation of theories and ideas in the sciences) but it has been emancipated from censorship and the tyranny of *genre*. Today it seems that as long as a story possesses some kind of tension or conflict almost anything goes; and this expansion of the form is virtually worldwide. In France, Robbe-Grillet writes stories in which nothing overt *happens*, and in Argentina Borges writes stories in the form of philosophical essays. Stories are written in present tense, in different voices signaled by changes in typography, even in the form of questionnaires. And not only are writers experimenting vigorously with new modes of telling stories but they are assured of readers, or at least of publication, if they do it well enough.

But in spite of the great emphasis on experimentation in contemporary literature, and the accompanying value placed on "originality," we must remember an important counter truth. The writer who strives for originality is likely to end up with nothing more than novelty, and a story that does not rise above mere novelty will be superseded immediately by the next novelty.

In the narrowest sense, Homer was not original, nor were Sophocles and Shakespeare, for they all took up old tales and motifs and revitalized them with their genius. They were, in an important sense, *retellers* rather than tellers of tales. If the poet is "the maker," as the word *poiētēs* meant in classical Greek, he is not himself the maker of stories but the conveyer of stories; what he makes are cunning and meaningful variations. Stories from myth and folklore, told long ago by Homer, Aesop, Plutarch, and a thousand anonymous storytellers, are still very much alive today, appearing in the pages of *The New Yorker* and *The Malahat Review*, in the books of John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Joyce Carol Oates.

To acknowledge that he is as much a "passer on" of stories as a creator of them should not cause the serious writer to despair. Nor should recognition of that fact disappoint the reader. It is gratifying to understand to what extent, and in what ways, the stories we experience are celebrations of old meanings, perpetuated and revitalized from generation to generation according to the unique customs, preoccupations, and materials of the day.

The "old meanings" I am speaking of are the archetypal themes of this book's title. The term *archetype* may evoke ideas of the racial unconscious and the theories of C. J. Jung, but I do not mean to tie this book to a particular doctrine or psychological school. The premise of this book is simply that certain story patterns clearly have within them the power to symbolize vital concerns from culture to culture and from era to era, and, further, that the contemplation of modern fiction in terms of these enduring themes yields special values and insights.

How many archetypes are there? How many should one settle on? This is a little bit like asking how many pieces there are in a pie, or how many colors in the spectrum: it depends on how you divide them. Professor George Polti classified all story patterns into "thirty-six dramatic situations" (these he viewed as archetypes). At the other end of the scale, someone else once said that all stories are variations on the Cinderella theme.

In this book I have sought to avoid the reductionist error of making all modern stories seem to fit the procrustean bed of a few selected archetypes. I settled on the five themes that organize this collection—The Contest, The Scapegoat, Metamorphosis, The Trickster, Taboo—because these are among the oldest of the themes that are still vital in today's literature. In addition, they contrast strongly with one another so that their basic configurations are vividly apparent. And by limiting them to five I could include a sufficient number of stories to show something of the variety and range possible within each theme. But I am aware that in selecting such archetypes an editor must be somewhat impressionistic, even intuitive, and must have the honesty and humility to admit it.

Not all ancient themes are archetypal in the sense that they are vitally present in the stories of today. The theme of the Hero Slaying the Dragon, for example, which Jung found so important in the literature of the past, has all but disappeared—even if one tries to see the Dragon metaphorically reborn as Guilt or The Establishment. One of the reasons we do not celebrate the Hero-Slaying-the-Dragon theme as we once did is that we no longer have a culturally vivid sense of the Hero. Figures comparable to Aeneas, Beowulf, and Roland are virtually nonexistent in modern stories. The old-fashioned Hero was the champion of his "Establishment"—his fatherland, his family, and the institutions that supported him and gave him meaning as a hero. By contrast, today's fictional protagonist is frequently pictured in revolt against the institutions around him; the practice of identifying with the sacred ideals of one's family and one's culture—what the Romans termed *pietas*—no longer qualifies as heroic and has accordingly lost the power to evoke celebration in stories. Of course, it may turn out that this ancient, seemingly defunct theme is not dead after all; given the right sort of social chemistry, it may once again prove vital.

On the other hand, there are many themes that are virtually unique to the modern writer. Among these are the Romantic or Glamorized Misfit (the nearest thing to a current version of the Hero); the Bifurcation of Self (in

which a conflict is internalized and enacted within the psyche of a character); and its obverse theme, the Opposable Self (in which a character projects upon another his own obsessions and reacts against him accordingly). There is the theme of the Initiation into Irony, showing a character emerging from a state of innocence into an awareness of the multiple meanings of things he once thought simple. And there are stories without number that celebrate the One Against the Many or the Triumph of the Underdog—two themes that, though closely related, have subtly different emphases. All these themes have proved valuable to modern writers in structuring fictional experiences, and, in fact, the alert reader will find all of them represented to some degree in stories in this book.

But whether or not any of these themes could properly be termed archetypal (and in my judgment all are too modern), they are not the *dominant* themes in the stories present here. And this brings us to the question of how the stories in this book “ought” to be approached.

To arrange thirty stories under five thematic headings, as I have done, is to apply “labels”; and, as the English philosopher Dean William Inge said, “Every label is a libel.” It is important to keep this bit of wisdom in mind, for glib labeling of any sort is the enemy of good reading. On the other hand, labels are essential to our ability to think abstractly—so obviously essential that Dean Inge was forced to use words, or verbal labels, to communicate the idea that every label conceals qualities that limit and oppose the particular truth it conveys. Here is a paradox like the one embedded in the familiar Chinese proverb, “One picture is worth a thousand words”—it takes words to say this.

Perhaps it is most useful to think of the five archetypal themes of this book as lenses, each of which is capable of revealing inner consistencies and focusing particular meanings within a story. One lens will prove irrelevant to a specific tale and focus nothing; another will reveal interestingly different meanings among the stories upon which it is turned. What is to be avoided at all costs is the reductionist error that is most obviously signaled by the words “nothing but”—as in the statement, “Hawthorne’s story ‘My Kinsman, Major Molineux’ is nothing but the Scapegoat tale in early American dress.” Such formulas lie. Nothing is “nothing but.” In working with archetypal themes, the essential thing is to recognize not only how a story embodies a particular theme but how, and in what ways, the story *resists* the theme.

Moreover, archetypes—along with the human values they express—are so subtly entangled with one another that they can appear in all sorts of combinations: a contest might involve two trickster figures, one of whom might play the role of scapegoat. If there were such a story, it would incorporate three of the five archetypal themes I have decided upon. However, the themes in a story are seldom equally dominant, and it is precisely in seeking to discern and account for differences in emphasis among them that a reader may discover essential meanings that might otherwise remain obscure. The reader who begins by asking, “Whose story is this?” and follows out all of the

implications of that question is well on the way to placing the themes in meaningful relationships to one another and arriving at the most powerful interpretation of the story.

As he proceeds, the reader will find that he is participating with the writer in forming an experience—collecting information about the characters and their plight, receiving cues concerning how the events of the story are to be viewed, how one is to feel about them. Are certain things hinted at as forthcoming in the narrative? Are there events, or characters, that are referred to more often than the practical demands of the narrative would seem to justify? If so, what is the significance of such references: do they point toward deeper meanings that are perhaps concealed from the reader or from the characters or from both? How are the events in a particular scene—and in the story as a whole—related to the title? The title itself is a kind of “label”; but, as we have said, a label is often most useful in calling attention to the ways in which the thing labeled resists the description applied to it.

To return, finally, to our five archetypal themes: they are among the most ancient, and yet at least five of the six authors represented in each of the following sections are actively writing, and experimenting, today. The originality we seek in these modern stories is no different from what readers (or listeners) in all ages have valued. It consists in what the storytellers have *made* of the themes that are available to them in their heritage, and it comes only with the writers’ achievement of honesty and depth. As the word suggests, originality is the origin of something: it generates, it moves, it affects. The best way to approach a story, then, is with an open responsiveness, a sense of adventure in launching forth upon the particular journey the story represents. If the reader is responsive and the story a good one, there will be no question that the journey has been worthwhile.

# THE CONTEST

IN SPITE OF RECENT EXPERIMENTATION, ALL STORIES MUST HAVE CONFLICT of some kind, or we don't refer to them as stories at all—we call them tone poems, or essays, or mood pieces, or something else. In one important sense, conflict is the story; it forms the vortex of interest in the story, and it is often the force that propels the narrative movement.

Since it is an essential feature of stories, conflict cannot reasonably be considered a theme. In one of its forms, however—the Contest motif—it constitutes a primordial situation, a truly archetypal theme. While a single character may experience “inner conflict,” it would be strange indeed to speak of his “inner contest.” In the Contest, there are two characters of comparable power who more or less knowingly enter some sort of arena in a struggle with each other. Often this struggle is highly symbolic, insofar as the characters themselves seem vested with larger meaning.

David and Goliath, Hector and Achilles, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, Eliza and W. O. Gant (in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*), Fast Eddie and Minnesota Fats (in Walter Tevis' *The Hustler*) are all participants in contests, are all Contest figures. Sometimes the contest is overt and physical; at other times it is concealed and confused, as in the marriage of Eliza and W. O. Gant—a marriage that is itself an arena of strife between two life styles.

Much more than a conflict between life styles is at stake in Herman Melville's strange and fascinating story, “Bartleby the Scrivener.” The lawyer and Bartleby come together in the arena of an office of law—a place that exists in service of dialectic, of rational debate for the sake of truth. But Bartleby's challenge is a deeper, more unsettling one: he does not seem to care for reason, or dialectic, or truth. He is a spirit of awesome negation, and the contest is entered upon the instant his employer (the narrator of the story) determines to force Bartleby not simply to go to work but to “see things his way.” In the playing out of the long, strange drama of struggle, Bartleby's insistent preference “not to” makes us feel that he achieves a kind of humble nobility, even though our social and rational sentiments must belong to the kindly but exasperated lawyer who tells the story.

The variations on the Contest theme seem almost endless. Joyce Carol Oates claims that most of her stories have to do with the Contest motif. Her “Love and Death,” like Eudora Welty's hauntingly subtle “Circe,” involves

one of the oldest contests around (and still, at this writing, undecided)—that between man and woman. William Sansom's story, on the other hand, is a colorful and honest journey into the implications of two old men entering the whimsical arena of who-can-out-miser-the-other, and the whimsical triumph of a protagonist who is suddenly deprived of his antagonist.

A few of the many classic short stories that are concerned with the theme of the Contest are "The Pupil" by Henry James, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" by Ernest Hemingway, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" by Stephen Crane, and "The Secret Sharer" by Joseph Conrad.

# Herman Melville

## Bartleby the Scrivener

I AM A RATHER ELDERLY MAN. THE NATURE OF MY AVOCATIONS, FOR THE last thirty years, has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom, as yet, nothing, that I know of, has ever been written—I mean, the law-copyists, or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and, if I pleased could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners, for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener, the strangest I ever saw, or heard of. While, of other law-copyists, I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report, which will appear in the sequel.

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my *employés*, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented. Imprimis: I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never address a jury, or in any way draw down public applause; but, in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds. All who know me, consider me an eminently *safe* man. The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat; for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion.

Some time prior to the period at which this little history begins, my avocations had been largely increased. The good old office, now extinct in the State of New York, of a Master in Chancery, had been conferred upon me. It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative. I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages; but I must be permitted to be rash here and declare, that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a—premature act; inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years. But this is by the way.

My chambers were up stairs, at No.—Wall Street. At one end, they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom.

This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call "life." But, if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction, my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window-panes. Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern.

At the period just preceding the advent of *Bartleby*, I had two persons as copyists in my employment, and a promising lad as an office-boy. First, Turkey; second, Nippers; third, Ginger Nut. These may seem names, the like of which are not usually found in the Directory. In truth, they were nick-names, mutually conferred upon each other by my three clerks, and were deemed expressive of their respective persons or characters. Turkey was a short, puffy Englishman, of about my own age—that is, somewhere not far from sixty. In the morning, one might say, his face was of a fine florid hue, but after twelve o'clock, meridian—his dinner hour—it blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals; and continued blazing—but, as it were, with a gradual wane—till six o'clock, P.M., or thereabouts; after which, I saw no more of the proprietor of the face, which, gaining its meridian with the sun, seemed to set with it, to rise, culminate, and decline the following day, with the like regularity and undiminished glory. There are many singular coincidences I have known in the course of my life, not the least among which was the fact, that, exactly when Turkey displayed his fullest beams from his red and radiant countenance, just then, too, at that critical moment, began the daily period when I considered his business capacities as seriously disturbed for the remainder of the twenty-four hours. Not that he was absolutely idle, or averse to business then; far from it. The difficulty was, he was apt to be altogether too energetic. There was a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him. He would be incautious in dipping his pen into his ink-stand. All his blots upon my documents were dropped there after twelve



o'clock, meridian. Indeed, not only would he be reckless, and sadly given to making blots in the afternoon, but, some days, he went further, and was rather noisy. At such times, too, his face flamed with augmented blazonry, as if cannel coal had been heaped on anthracite. He made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand-box; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up, and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner, very sad to behold in an elderly man like him. Nevertheless, as he was in many ways a most valuable person to me, and all the time before twelve o'clock, meridian, was the quickest, steadiest creature, too, accomplishing a great deal of work in a style not easily to be matched—for these reasons, I was willing to overlook his eccentricities, though, indeed, occasionally, I remonstrated with him. I did this very gently, however, because, though the civillest, nay, the blandest and most reverential of men in the morning, yet, in the afternoon, he was disposed, upon provocation, to be slightly rash with his tongue—in fact, insolent. Now, valuing his morning services as I did, and resolved not to lose them—yet, at the same time, made uncomfortable by his inflamed ways after twelve o'clock—and being a man of peace, unwilling by my admonitions to call forth unseemly retorts from him, I took upon me, one Saturday noon (he was always worse on Saturdays) to hint to him, very kindly, that, perhaps, now that he was growing old, it might be well to abridge his labors; in short, he need not come to my chambers after twelve o'clock, but, dinner over, had best go home to his lodgings, and rest himself till tea-time. But no; he insisted upon his afternoon devotions. His countenance became intolerably fervid, as he oratorically assured me—gesticulating with a long ruler at the other end of the room—that if his services in the morning were useful, how indispensable, then, in the afternoon?

“With submission, sir,” said Turkey, on this occasion, “I consider myself your right-hand man. In the morning I but marshal and deploy my columns; but in the afternoon I put myself at their head, and gallantly charge the foe, thus”—and he made a violent thrust with the ruler.

“But the blots, Turkey,” intimated I.

“True; but, with submission, sir, behold these hairs! I am getting old. Surely, sir, a blot or two of a warm afternoon is not to be severely urged against gray hairs. Old age—even if it blot the page—is honorable. With submission, sir, we *both* are getting old.”

This appeal to my fellow-feeling was hardly to be resisted. At all events, I saw that go he would not. So, I made up my mind to let him stay, resolving, nevertheless, to see to it that, during the afternoon, he had to do with my less important papers.

Nippers, the second on my list, was a whiskered, sallow, and, upon the whole, rather piratical-looking young man, of about five-and-twenty. I always deemed him the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion. The ambition was evinced by a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copyist, an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents. The indigestion seemed betokened in an