

Exploring Themes in Literature

Universal Themes in the Oral Tradition

Written literature grew out of the **oral tradition**, the passing of stories, poems, and sayings by word of mouth. Around campfires and at other gatherings, people told tales about love, ambition, and friendship. Expressing their human concerns in stories, they explored **universal themes**, insights into life that are true for many different times and cultures. The following are examples of common universal themes:

- the importance of heroism
- the strength of loyalty
- the power of love
- the dangers of greed

Storytellers explored such themes by means of **archetypes**, the situations, characters, images, and symbols that appear in the tales of various cultures. Here are some important archetypes:

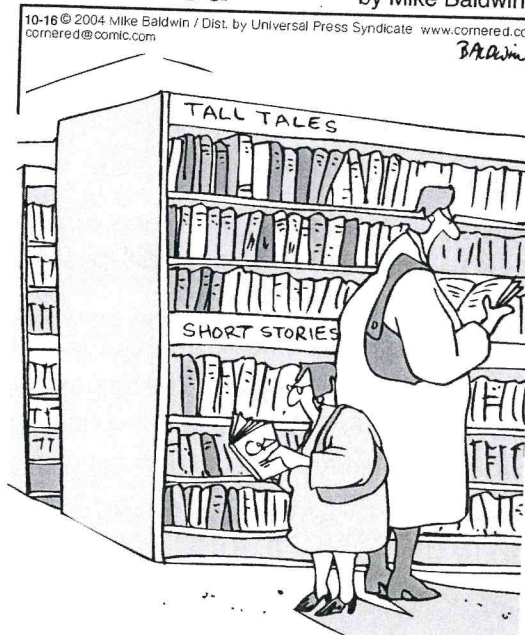
- the **hero's quest**, in which a brave or clever person undergoes tests or trials while searching for something of great value
- the struggle between the **protagonist**, the main character, and the **antagonist**, a person or force that opposes the protagonist
- the **monster**, a nonhuman or semi-human creature that menaces human society and must be destroyed by the hero
- the **trickster**, a clever character who can fool others but often gets into trouble through curiosity
- the **circle** as a symbol of loyalty, completion, or protection

The **historical context** is the social and cultural background of a particular tale. This context influences the presentation of archetypes. Yet, even with cultural variations, one can recognize archetypes across time and culture.

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Forms That Express Universal Themes

Anonymous storytellers developed various forms to express universal themes and archetypes. At first, these forms lived only in the memory, and a tale might vary with every telling. Later in history, stories were written down and individual authors emerged.

- **Myths** explain the actions of gods and the humans who interact with them. Myths also explain the causes of natural phenomena.
- **Folk tales** focus on human or animal heroes and, unlike myths, are not primarily concerned with gods or creation.
- **Legends** are folk tales that recount the adventures of a human hero and are based on a historical truth. A legend told in an exaggerated way is a **tall tale**.
- **Epics** are long narrative poems that describe the exploits of larger-than-life heroes. The hero usually engages in a dangerous journey or quest that is important to the history of a group or culture.

All of these narrative forms express the **values**, ideals, and behaviors cherished by a society. **Shared values** are held in common by people across cultures. In contrast, **culturally distinct values** are specific to a group. In a literary work, **cultural details** are the beliefs, traditions, and customs that reflect a particular society. Modern literature, though written by individuals rather than fashioned by a group, can also express universal themes.

Check Your Understanding

Decide which lettered term or phrase best matches the numbered phrase.

- | | | |
|---|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. example of a universal theme | a. the monster | b. the power of love |
| 2. brave person on a quest | a. epic hero | b. antagonist |
| 3. important archetype | a. trickster | b. culture |
| 4. passing on of tales by word of mouth | a. narrative form | b. oral tradition |
| 5. legend told in an exaggerated way | a. tall tale | b. myth |

