

Paladiary Day 18: Stereotypes vs. Archetypes

Oh wow I'm writing one day of this diary per several weeks

As I've been writing these essays, a question arose for me: what is the relationship between an archetype and a stereotype? After all, I found myself often using phrases such as "a stereotypical knight" or "a stereotypical paladin". And the idea of an archetype is based around a broader trope or common traits. Do stereotypes beget archetypes? Are they a subset?

I think a stereotype is, whether negative or positive, about narrowing to traits. One could look toward cultural, racial, gender stereotypes for examples. But even outside of axes of power/privilege: what comes to mind for a stereotypical teacher, a stereotypical philosopher, a stereotypical mother? Well, usually, it comes down to assigning clear signs or small, detailed traits (they wear glasses, they're old, they're feminine). And what traits are stereotypical for what group will differ wildly across historical context.

What about an archetype? Well, I think there, the question is not narrowing but broadening. An archetype, to me, is the broader umbrella, an abstraction. An Arthurian knight, a modern-day street medic, and an anime magical girl don't have a lot in common, but one can distill something from their trend/overlap.

I talked about this with my partner last night, and he ended up comparing it to the water cycle. People tell stories. These stories, over time, coalesce into broader themes and archetypes (clouds) which then can condense into discrete, individual examples (rain). People's reactions and responses then in turn change the archetype (evaporation, new cloud).

Take, for example, the archetype of the hero. People told stories across history (e.g. Heracles, Gilgamesh, Maui). These stories were different from one another. Nevertheless, people began to grasp a broader concept of "Hero" that acted as an umbrella to all these concepts. Over time, this concept changed and grew more complicated, branching off into subtypes (superhero, mythical hero, antihero) and what were considered heroic traits (strength vs. guile) changed across cultures and contexts. What is currently a "stereotypical hero" is very specific to this time, place, and media milieu. The broader archetype remains.

Another way to look at it is cladistic. I see it as similar to the "family resemblance" that defines a category such as games, languages etc. It's impossible to come up with a clear-cut definition of "language" that includes and excludes everything it should, but people have a good internal sense of a language by experience. So, for example, a "stereotypical dog" might be a Labrador or a golden retriever or a German shepherd. But an "archetypal dog" would point to the broader sense of "dogness" that encompassed all breeds, and would therefore probably be more rooted in high-abstraction concepts like loyalty and domesticism than fur color or ear shape.

So a stereotypical paladin is probably an armored holy knight, heavily influenced by the impact of D&D. But the Archetype of Paladin is a family portrait that I am fitting into.