

Archetypal Representations in The Main Characters of *A Real Pain* Film Script

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ABSTRACT

The study discusses the film script *A Real Pain* (2024) by using Carl Jung's archetypal theory and Christopher Vogler's Hero's Journey to analyze the archetypes and character arcs of the main characters. The aim of the research is to reveal how the two protagonists, David and Benji, are represented through archetypal patterns and how their development unfolds across the story. This study applies a qualitative descriptive method with textual analysis focusing on dialogue, monologue, and character actions. The findings show that both characters embody four archetypes: Persona, Shadow, Anima, and Self. David and Benji are mostly associated with the Self archetype. David reflecting his pursuit of balance and reflection, while Benji revealing his instability and unresolved grief. The Hero's Journey analysis indicates that David's arc follows a more structured transformation, whereas Benji's journey is fragmented but still conveys emotional depth. The research concludes that archetypes strongly shape the characters' psychological portrayals and that the Hero's Journey framework highlights both complete and incomplete transformations in contemporary cinema.

INTRODUCTION

Archetypes in literature represent recurring characters, symbols, and themes that reflect the universal nature of human experience (Sadiq, 2023). These elements serve as the foundation of storytelling, allowing readers and audiences to connect with narratives across cultures and eras. In literary criticism, the term archetype denotes the repeated presence of narrative structures, character models, and thematic images that appear not only in literature but also in myths, dreams, and rituals (Ike, 2024). Such universality enables stories to transcend cultural boundaries and evoke shared emotions among audiences.

In film analysis, Jungian archetypes function as manifestations of the collective unconscious, represented through symbolic characters and recurring patterns (Bostan, 2022). These archetypes enrich cinematic narratives by revealing the psychological depth of characters and offering viewers an emotional point of identification. Through their representation, films gain moral and emotional complexity, making audiences relate to universal human struggles such as fear, desire, and transformation.

Archetypes not only define a character's identity but also influence their character arc, which reflects how the character evolves throughout the story. As Shandraconis (2013) notes, archetypes provide the foundational traits and motivations that drive transformation, while the arc depicts how these traits evolve through conflict and discovery. The combination of archetypes and arcs allows the audience to witness the internal journey of the character, developing empathy and understanding of their growth and choices.

According to Carl Jung (1968), archetypes form the deep structures of the human psyche. The Persona is the social mask an individual wears to interact with the world, often concealing their true identity. The Shadow represents the darker aspects of the self, impulses, desires, and emotions that are often repressed. The Anima and Animus embody the feminine and masculine aspects of the soul, which balance emotion and logic within the personality. The Self symbolizes the union of the conscious and unconscious mind, representing the ultimate goal of self-realization

and wholeness. These four archetypes, Persona, Shadow, Anima/Animus, and Self are central to understanding how characters in literature and film reflect universal psychological patterns.

Complementing Jung's psychological perspective, Christopher Vogler's *Hero's Journey* (1992) provides a narrative framework that maps the emotional and moral transformation of a protagonist. Vogler identifies twelve stages that guide the hero's evolution:

1. Ordinary World, which establishes the hero's routine and flaws;
2. Call to Adventure, where a new challenge emerges;
3. Refusal of the Call, where fear or doubt causes hesitation;
4. Meeting the Mentor, when guidance or tools are offered;
5. Crossing the Threshold, marking entry into the unknown;
6. Tests, Allies, and Enemies, where trials test the hero's strength and beliefs;
7. Approach to the Inmost Cave, where self-doubt and reflection intensify;
8. The Ordeal, the moment of crisis or confrontation;
9. Reward, the achievement of insight or victory;
10. The Road Back, the decision to return with new understanding;
11. The Resurrection, where transformation is tested; and
12. Return with the Elixir, symbolizing renewal and integration.

These stages illustrate how external events mirror inner change, revealing how storytelling operates as a metaphor for personal and psychological growth (Lanniello, 2023). Using this framework in story analysis confirms the grasp of character intricacy, giving a systematic approach to delve thematic richness, storyline coherency, and the impact of personal struggles as well as external conflicts.

There are several studies that employ Jungian archetypes in film analysis. The Use of Archetypes in the Drama of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo by Ngwoke (2020) examines recurring archetypal patterns in African drama. Calling for a Hero: The Displacement of the Nezha Archetypal Image from Chinese Animated Film *Nezha Naohai* (1979) to *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) by Whyke and Mugica (2021) traces the reinterpretation of traditional hero archetypes in Chinese animation. Similarly, *The World's Hero: God and Archetypes in the Myth of the Superman* by Soriano (2021) analyzes the divine and heroic archetypes within Western popular culture. These studies highlight the ongoing relevance of archetypal analysis in understanding how mythic figures adapt to new cultural and cinematic contexts.

Research on archetypes in film has been widely conducted, emphasizing the role of universal character types in shaping narrative structures and audience reception. However, most previous analyses have primarily focused on identifying the archetypal figures themselves, rather than exploring how these archetypes develop alongside the characters' emotional and psychological transformations. The present study addresses this gap by examining the representation and evolution of archetypes in Jesse Eisenberg's *A Real Pain* (2024), focusing on how the film's characters reflect archetypal dynamics through their personal growth and narrative progression.

A Real Pain is a 2024 comedy-drama written and directed by Jesse Eisenberg, starring Eisenberg and Kieran Culkin as cousins David and Benji. The film follows their journey through a Jewish heritage tour in Poland, using humor and tension to explore grief, family bonds, and identity. As the story unfolds, the cousins' emotional contrasts, David's restraint and Benji's restlessness reveal two opposing ways of coping with pain and memory. These differences make *A Real Pain* a rich text for exploring how Jungian archetypes and Vogler's narrative structure interact to illuminate the psychological depth and human fragility expressed in contemporary cinema.

The researcher conducted a study on the film *A Real Pain*, where this film traced its emotional depth, characters' relations, and the author's narrative skills to the film. The psychological characters' dimensions of the characters and their problems gave an abundance of examples for a research work. Through the present investigation, the aim was to find the representation archetypes and the arc of the character by following the journey of David and Benji as the main characters, hence, reflecting the psychological and emotional side of their road. The

latter was the supposed intention of this approach, which was to demonstrate that archetypes are still very current in the films of the present days and that they even serve as characters in the story, hence, the film's triumphant deeply exploring of the human emotions and characters.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive research design, specifically employed textual analysis and archetypal criticism. Textual analysis is a qualitative technique for dealing with cultural texts. Such an analysis makes it possible to identify the representations, roots of assumptions, and the meanings of the cultural texts involved (Jurgens et al, 2024). This method allows a thorough investigation of the text, revealing hidden meanings, societal factors, and the author's purpose.

The research utilized Carl Gustav Jung's archetype theory (1968) to identify the archetypal figures of the main characters, sampling six typical ones: Persona, Shadow, Anima and Animus, and Self. Besides that, Vogler's Hero Journey theory (1992), which depicts the phases The Ordinary World, The Call to Adventure, Refusal to Call, Meeting the Mentor, Crossing the Threshold, Tests, Allies, Enemies, Approach to the Inmost Cave, The Ordeal, Reward, The Road Back, The Resurrection and Return with the Elixir, was a suitable method for comparing the transformation of the archetypal main characters arcs in *A Real Pain* film to the initial main characters roles.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the analysis of *A Real Pain* (2024) based on Carl Jung's theory of archetypes and Christopher Vogler's concept of the Hero's Journey. The analysis focuses on how archetypal representations are manifested in the main characters, David and Benji and how these archetypal elements develop throughout their character arcs as the story unfolds.

3.1 Archetypal Representation of the Main Characters

Through textual analysis of 127 scenes and 868 lines of dialogue, a total of 107 excerpts were identified as expressing archetypal characteristics. Both characters display four central Jungian archetypes; Persona, Shadow, Anima, and Self, each illustrating different psychological tendencies and emotional states. The frequencies and percentages of these archetypes are shown below.

Table 1: The Percentage of Archetypal Representation in the Main Characters of *A Real Pain*

No.	Types of Archetype	David Frequency	David (%)	Benji Frequency	Benji (%)
1.	Persona	12	20.3	8	16.6
2.	Shadow	10	17	14	29.2
3.	Anima	11	18.6	9	18.8
4.	Self	26	44.1	17	35.4
Total		59	100%	48	100%

The percentages show that David is more strongly associated with the Self (44.1%), reflecting his tendency toward reflection and balance, while Benji is dominated by the Self (35.4%), highlighting his struggles with instability and unresolved pain. Both share the Anima, but David suppresses his vulnerability whereas Benji voices it openly. These differences illustrate how their contrasting archetypal emphases shape their psychological depth and development in the story.

To illustrate how these archetypes are represented, Table 2 provides selected textual data and interpretations.

Table 2: Archetypal Representation in the Main Characters of *A Real Pain*

No.	Archetypes	Characters	The Data Example	Interpretation
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1.	Persona	David	“I’m not. That’s the thing! I have shit going on! I do. But I take a pill for my fuckin OCD, I jog, I meditate and I go to work and come home at the end of the day. I move forward. Because I know my pain is unexceptional so I don’t feel the need to burden everybody with it!” (p.70)	David masks pain with responsibility, while Benji Uses humor as mask.
		Benji	Benji perks up when he sees everyone, his erratic charisma suddenly alighting. “Dave literally woke me up two minutes ago. Ha.” (p.42)	
2.	Shadow	David	“...I’m just so fucking exhausted by him sometimes. I love him and I hate him and I want to kill him and I want to be him and I feel so lame around him...” (to Diane) (p.70-71)	David’s shows suppressed envy and anger, while Benji’s acts impulsive rebellion and aggression.
		Benji	David shares looks with Eloge and James — they’re all pissed that Benji’s allowed to change the mood whenever it suits him. (p.64)	
3.	Anima	David	David calms down. He speaks quietly and with emotion: “I don’t understand why you would ever do anything so fucking stupid to yourself... (chokes back tears) If I had your mind... Benji, if I had your mind...” (p.89)	Both show deep need for emotional connection, but David hides it while Benji voices it.
		Benji	“Why don’t you care about me anymore? I never hear from you anymore. Yeah, but you only came here with me because I tried to kill Myself”. (p.88)	
4.	Self	David	David exits a cafe with a tray of food. Feeling unsocial, he takes a seat alone. (p.27)	Both move toward individuation: David through reflection, Benji through openness.

These findings demonstrate that both characters mirror opposing yet complementary psychological states. David’s characterization is dominated by restraint and self-discipline; his Persona acts as a defense mechanism that conceals suppressed grief. Over time, his Self emerges through introspection and the recognition of emotional authenticity. Benji, on the other hand, embodies emotional spontaneity and volatility. His Self dominates his psyche, driving him to express anger, humor, and despair interchangeably. However, his Anima occasionally surfaces through moments of compassion and vulnerability, revealing his suppressed longing for connection and stability.

3.2 Character Arc of the Main Characters

The development of these archetypal traits is further understood through the characters' narrative arcs, analyzed using Vogler's twelve-stage Hero's Journey model. This framework highlights how David and Benji evolve psychologically as they confront conflict, grief, and reconciliation. Their arcs are not heroic in the traditional sense but reveal inner transformations shaped by emotion, memory, and personal growth.

Table 3: Character Arc of the Main Characters of *A Real Pain*

No.	Hero's Journey Stage	David	Benji
1.	Ordinary World	Shows Persona of discipline and stability, masking grief with routine.	Displays Persona of charm and humor, hiding instability.
2.	Call to Adventure	Awakens the Self as he reconnects with heritage and suppressed grief.	Shadow is triggered as he is forced to face trauma behind his humor.
3.	Refusal of the Call	Persona resists vulnerability through control, logic, and discipline.	Shadow resists growth through sarcasm, recklessness, and denial.
4.	Meeting the Mentor	Guided by James and history, reinforcing his Self's search for balance.	Finds fragmented mentorship through empathy (Eloge), reflecting Anima.
5.	Crossing the Threshold	Childlike hesitation, showing fragility beneath Persona.	Shadow dominates as he masks pain with impulsive humor.
6.	Tests, Allies, Enemies	Self emerges in quiet responsibility, testing his inner control.	Shadow and Anima clash as he oscillates between anger and emotional need.
7.	Approach to the Inmost Cave	Childlike avoidance of grief, delaying confrontation.	Shadow reveals yearning for authenticity beneath chaos.
8.	The Ordeal	Self is forced toward painful self-awareness, grief surfaces.	Shadow overwhelms him through breakdowns and erratic behavior.
9.	Reward	Gains insight into balance, valuing presence over control (Self).	Finds brief healing through openness, Anima surfaces in vulnerability.
10.	The Road Back	Moves toward individuation, preparing to integrate Self into daily life.	Shadow persists, but moments of gratitude hint at Self.
11.	Resurrection	Accepts vulnerability, Self becomes stronger through empathy and grief.	Shadow collapses, revealing depth of pain; resurrection is fragile.
12.	Return with the Elixir	Brings back wisdom of balance between responsibility and vulnerability (Self).	Gains fleeting elixir of connection, showing glimpses of individuation.

David's journey reflects a steady and structured transformation. His arc begins with repression but gradually opens toward empathy and emotional maturity. The dominance of the Self archetype signifies his process of individuation, integrating his inner and outer worlds. Benji's arc, by contrast, is fragmented and cyclical. His dominant Shadow drives him through impulsivity and self-doubt, yet moments of openness through the Anima allow brief glimpses of balance.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This research explored the archetypal representations of the two main characters in *A Real Pain* (2024) through Carl Jung's archetype theory. The analysis found that both David and Benji embody four key archetypes Persona, Shadow, Anima, and Self which shape their dialogue, behavior, and emotional conflict. David and Benji is strongly associated with the Self. David reflecting introspection and balance, while Benji exposing his instability and unresolved grief. Although they share similar archetypes, David conceals vulnerability beneath control, whereas Benji expresses it openly through impulsive emotion. The contrast between them deepens the film's psychological dimension, portraying two opposing ways of coping with pain. Their development, viewed through Christopher Vogler's Hero's Journey, shows David's structured path toward empathy and acceptance, while Benji's remains fragmented and uncertain. Together, their intertwined arcs demonstrate how archetypal forces and narrative stages express themes of grief, family, and identity, reaffirming the lasting relevance of Jungian archetypes in contemporary cinema.

Based on the results of this research it is advocated:

1. For future researchers, this study has only dealt with two characters of one movie script. Hence, future research could extend the range by comparing various films' archetypal representations or by analyzing supporting characters' contributions to the whole picture of how the archetypes work in narrative structures.
2. For students of Literature and Film Studies, this research might be a guide on how psychoanalysis theories, mainly Jungian archetypes and the Hero's Journey, can be used to illuminate character analysis. Students are invited to follow this method in order to dig into the minds of characters in both classic and modern stories.

For the English Department, the results of this study can help to enrich the teaching materials compensating for the character analysis, psychoanalysis criticism, and film studies.

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