

## Pearsonian archetypal analysis of Rin in R.F. Kuang's The Poppy War novel

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### Abstract

Archetypes reflect the deep psychological complexity of a person's life journey. The phenomena can be exemplified by Rin, the main character in R.F. Kuang's novel *The Poppy War*. While previous research has explored the themes of gender and history, her psychological evolution through archetype transformation remains unexamined. This research addresses this gap by analysing Rin's character through Carol Pearson's twelve archetypes, revealing how trauma and ambition shape her reactions to certain situations. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study examines Rin's dialogue, actions, and thoughts. Findings identified five dominant archetypes in Rin's development which illustrate her psychological development from vulnerability to destructive empowerment. Those archetypes are The Orphan, The Warrior, The Seeker, The Destroyer, and The Magician. This study contributes to literary scholarship by demonstrating how archetype theory explains character psychology, offering a deeper understanding of narrative-driven identity formation in fiction.

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## INTRODUCTION

Fiction has persisted throughout history and across cultures, serving as an important source of inspiration for human creativity and achievement. Fiction is an archive of human psychic structures and instincts that connect on a common notion from year to year through its narrative, making it clear that a similar pattern of thoughts and behaviour is shared among people (Carroll, 2018). According to Jung (1969), this collection of thoughts and behaviour inherited from generation to generation is what is later called archetypes.

Archetypes play a significant role in depicting a character's characteristics in fiction. One needs to define a character's characteristics for someone to understand and relate to the character. Gottschall (2012) explains that humans are creatures naturally wired to respond to stories, as stories help us understand the world and ourselves through organized narrative structures. These

archetypes not only influence fictional characters but also illustrate the larger psychological journey that individuals face in real life. As Petric (2023) said, the complexity of archetypes in characters can give humans the idea that a person's psychological state can change on their journey, either to be good or evil based on the norms.

In real life, the complexity of archetypes is evident in every human being. Consider the example from Maximilien Robespierre, a central figure in the French Revolution. He reflects the complexity of archetypes through his transformation from an idealistic revolutionary to a figure who falls into oppressive power (Jones & Macdonald, 2017). Robespierre was originally a hero who championed social justice and the core values of the French Revolution, namely liberty, fraternity and equality. However, he gradually revealed his dark side as he became repressive and

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cruel to his enemies. His ambition to keep the revolution pure leads him to use terror, ultimately blurring the line between himself and the tyrant he initially opposed (Bouloiseau, 2025). Robespierre demonstrates how these archetypes can coexist within an individual, highlighting the complex nature of a character who changes between intense idealism and the debilitating trap of power.

A similar phenomenon of the twisted hero is also present in the novel *The Poppy War* by R.F. Kuang (2018). Set in 20th-century China, the story revolves around Rin, a dark-skinned war orphan who escapes a forced marriage and seeks to gain power by attending the prestigious Sineward Academy. Despite facing discrimination and prejudice due to her background, Rin eventually caught the eye of Jiang, a Lore instructor who introduced her to shamanism and spiritual powers. Through a ritual, Rin becomes the vessel of Phoenix and eventually inherits its destructive nature. Although useful as a destructive 'tool of war' on a massive scale, Rin gradually lost her humanity due to the fire of emotions burning within her. The Phoenix's power as the god of death and rebirth manifested Rin's anger and trauma as self-fuel to create the rebirth of justice she craved, resulting in moral decay and erasing her sense of justice into a brutal sense of revenge without consideration, to the point that she justifies genocide to the whole country.

The pattern of zero to hero to destroyer is crucial to analyze through archetypal analysis because it provides a deep understanding of a character, considering that similar patterns of behavior are observed in several public figures. Rin's character, who develops from a rising hero to an anti-hero, explores the psychological processes taking place within her while providing a deeper examination of trauma, its response, and the results on the self and community.

In her book, Pearson (1991) categorized archetypes that often appear in hero stories into a system of 12 hero archetypes. Pearson constructed this system to map the human psychological journey in facing life's challenges and changes. She explains that individuals can recognize their life journey through the lens of these archetypes, which reflect different aspects of the evolving and transformative self. *The Innocent*, *The Orphan*, *The Warrior*, and *The Caregiver* are the first four archetypes that set the hero on a journey. On the journey, *The Seeker*, *The Destroyer*, *The Lover*, and *The Creator* will be the archetypes that appear next. The journey then ends with the last four archetypes that facilitate the hero's transformation to return to his kingdom, namely *The Ruler*, *The Magician*, *The Sage*, and *The Fool*.

Several papers have studied *The Poppy War* novel before. From the feminist and gender study point of view, papers conducted by Suryaningrum (2022), Adzifah (2023), Virnanda (2024), and Jannah et al. (2024) discuss the socio-political oppression and struggle of women experienced by Rin who defies traditional gender expectations. From the perspective of historical studies, Healey (2021) explores hybridity and is concerned with the intersections of different cultures within a post-colonial framework. Research was also conducted by Khoirunnisa et al. (2023) to explore the social representation of societal values in *The Poppy War* novel.

On the other hand, the novel *The Poppy War* has never been discussed through Pearson's 12 archetypes of hero theory. Some papers that apply this theory to fiction include the work of Rahmawati et al. (2024) and Daffa & Amelia (2024), who discussed the hero archetype that appears in the main character of *The Study in Scarlet* and Mario Bros Movie. Furthermore, there is a paper conducted by Tusprianto (2021) that applies Pearson's theory to identify the shift of hero archetype from comic and movie adaption of Hercules.

There is still a significant gap in previous studies that primarily focus on the women's oppression experienced by the main character. This academic gap is crucial because defining the hero archetype in this novel is not just about understanding character, but also as an approach to understanding universal patterns of behaviour. Understanding character archetypes can help people to see patterns of behaviour, defence mechanisms, and how individuals deal with major changes in their lives. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the hero archetype in the novel *The Poppy War* by R.F. Kuang through the lens of Pearson's 12 archetypes.

In addition, this analysis theoretically aims to define the psychological development of characters influenced by trauma and the ambition for revenge. This research can help readers and literature reviewers understand how characters experience self-formation and self-liberation through various challenges and crises. Pedagogically, this research can be used as teaching material that helps students or readers understand Pearson's framework of 12 archetypes in literary applications.

## METHODS

This study uses the descriptive qualitative method to produce descriptive results of Rin's archetype of hero that she experiences throughout the novel. According to Creswell & Creswell

(2023), the qualitative approach is a method of research that relies on non-numerical data such as texts and images. The qualitative method has characteristics that are identical to the role of the researcher as a key instrument that carefully identifies, collects, examines, and interprets data from multiple sources, as mentioned that "Theory is located somewhere in the data and researcher try to synthesize data to develop a framework of underlying structure of experiences or process which are prevalent in raw data." (Awasthy, 2019, p. 150).

In this study, documentation of the object is conducted to collect data, which is subsequently categorized according to the research aims. The primary data for this research are extracted from the novel R. F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* in the form of words, phrases, and sentences that pertain to the psychological challenges faced by the main character. Alongside the primary data, secondary data are also gathered from journal articles, books, and other reliable sources. Following this, the data will be analyzed using Carol Pearson's theory of 12 archetypes of the hero. Next, the collected data was categorized into 12 archetypes of a hero, according to the main character's responses in dealing with specific situations in the form of words, deeds, and thoughts on her journey, which is divided into three parts, which are the preparation, the journey, and the return to the kingdom (Pearson, 1991).

In the preparation stage, four archetypes usually appear as the starting point of a hero's journey. The Innocent is the part of our subconscious that believes in everything to stay safe. Meanwhile, The Orphan is an archetype born out of distrust towards someone as a response to feeling abandoned, betrayed, or victimized, so The Orphan must fight hard to gain a sense of security. The Warrior has a goal to win and make a difference through struggle, claiming power in the world, identifying aspects of personal or collective lives that are unsatisfactory, and then seeking to change them by force or persuasion. The Caregiver is the nurturer who helps others, even if it means making sacrifice and encouraging nurturing relationships between and among individuals and constituencies. (Pearson, 1991).

Four archetypes develop as the need to fulfill the quest to *slay the dragon* in the second stage, which is the actual journey. To ensure a better life,

The Seeker pursues truth on a higher or deeper level, gaining a greater comprehension and understanding of life along the way. The Destroyer then symbolizes the darkness that precedes rebirth and the necessary process of destruction that must occur before transformation can take place. On the other hand, the Lover symbolizes the profound connections that promote peace and understanding in our lives both with ourselves and with others whether platonic or romantic. In this final section, the Creator archetype aids in reawakening the inner essence of our actual selves and helps us reach our full potential to create or build the desired world. (Pearson, 1991).

In the last stage, the last four archetypes signify the hero's return to his kingdom after completing the main quest, making him bring a new part of himself. The Ruler is an archetype that deals with the desire to control things, with the primary goal of The Ruler being to form a whole and integrated self and world. Furthermore, The Magician is an archetype that acts in the soul as an agent of rebirth and renewal to facilitate change and growth in life. Meanwhile, The Sage's ultimate goal is to understand the self and the world and to achieve wisdom. Lastly, The Fool represents an archetype that emphasizes living life for its own sake, without regard for the future, and with little to no regard for tradition, morality, or the opinions of others (Pearson, 1991).

Finally, the categorized data are presented in written form, including quotations to illustrate and prove a phenomenon of the topic and object under study. The use of quotations in qualitative research serves multiple purposes, including illustrating findings and demonstrating the analysis process (Eldh et al., 2020).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Preparation

#### *The Orphan*

As the war-orphan, it's safe to say that Rin's childhood wasn't the smoothest. She lived with adoptive parents who forced her to sell opium. Rin also experienced violence after violence while living with Fang. This situation shows that Rin was not born with the archetype of The Innocent, but The Orphan.

*"No, the Fangs would be happy. They'd get to*

*import opium in bulk without bleeding money for bribes. But Rin kept her mouth clamped shut—further argument would only bring pain. It was clear that the Fangs would have her married if they had to drag her to the bridal bed themselves.”* (Kuang, 2018, p. 4).

The situation shows Rin's powerlessness as an orphan to fight her foster family, who planned to marry her off in exchange for a market monopoly. She decides to keep her mouth shut even though she knows she is a victim because she has no power. This quotation indicates that Rin has been emotionally neglected and not valued as an individual with autonomy or agency. The Orphan archetype relates to the experience of abandonment, both physical and emotional, which corresponds to Rin's situation.

*“She walked everywhere with a book. She studied as she ate. When she tired, she conjured up images for herself, telling herself the story of the worst possible future. You walk up the aisle in a dress that doesn't fit you. You're trembling. He's waiting at the other end. He looks at you like you're a juicy, fattened pig, a marbled slab of meat for his purchase. He spreads saliva over his dry lips. He doesn't look away from you throughout the entire banquet. When it's over, he carries you to his bedroom. He pushes you onto the sheets.”* (Kuang, 2018, p. 15).

The Orphan archetype that originates from the response to abandonment, loss, and betrayal will always look for ways to feel safe. The quote above is an example where Rin feels an overwhelming sense of insecurity because she is haunted by the shadow of a forced marriage. Therefore, she studied hard to pass the Keju test and enter the Sinegard academy even without formal education so that she could escape the marriage.

*“So many gods. Which was the god of test scores? Which was the god of unmarried shopgirls who wished to stay that way?*

*She decided to simply pray to all of them.*

*“If you exist, if you're up there, help me. Give me a way out of this shithole. Or if you can't do that, give the import inspector a heart attack.”* (Kuang, 2018, p. 19).

The Orphan has a quest to seek security and defy her helplessness. Rin does not show a feeling of safety in the first place like The Innocent archetype, but rather she seeks security and keeps moving forward. She, who had never been religious before, eventually felt desperate and prayed to a deity to help her. Although Rin felt isolated and neglected in many ways, her struggle

to escape the future imposed on her, as well as her desire to break out of her helplessness reflected her quest for security and to continue her journey in the world.

### **The Warrior**

After entering Sinegard Academy, Rin was still haunted by a sense of helplessness. Especially when she realized that Sinegard was a prestigious academy filled with children of influential people who had received formal education from an early age, unlike her; this spurred Rin to prove herself that she, too, deserved to be in Sinegard. This self-proving nature represents The Warrior archetype that emerges in Rin.

*“Auntie Fang's lip curled. “Sinegard will eat you alive.”*

*“I'll take my chances,” Rin said.* (Kuang, 2018, p. 22)

The Warrior has a quest to *slay the dragon* which means she must defeat her enemies and fears. Despite knowing that Sinegard would not sympathize with her just because she was a poor orphan, she still went there in the hope that the military academy would make her life better and give her a chance to change her destiny.

*“Rin hadn't been completely forthcoming with Irjah. He was right—she would find a way.*

*Starting with the fact that she hadn't given up on martial arts.*

*Jun had banned her from her class, but he hadn't banned her from the library. The stacks at Sinegard contained a wealth of martial arts instruction tomes, the largest collection in all the Empire. Rin had within reach the secrets of most inherited arts, excepting those tightly guarded techniques like the House of Yin's.”* (Kuang, 2018, p. 83).

When Jun, the Combat teacher at Sinegard, banned her from the class because she did not meet Sinegard's student standards, Rin was determined to prove that she belonged at the academy. This quote depicts Rin making her studies a battlefield, where every task, every interaction, and every opportunity is a "battle" she must win. The Warrior archetype is often about proving oneself through struggle and hard work. Rin does not just study to pass; she sees every class as an opportunity to compete with people who seem more fortunate than she, such as Nezha and Venka.

*“You should surrender.”*

*“You're joking,” Rin responded. “I'm going to win this thing.”* (Kuang, 2018, p. 121).

When her friend suggested giving up, Rin firmly responded and stated that she would win. This

quote shows Rin's unyielding attitude to slay the final boss Nezha on her quest to prove herself as the depiction of The Warrior archetype within her.

### The Journey

#### The Seeker

Rin won the battle, which also made her pass the ascension exam. In her second year at Sinegard, Rin took the Lore subject. Together with her master, she discovers ancient theories, history, and most importantly spiritual and magical powers that give life a new meaning. Rin's situation on this journey is an expression of The Seeker archetype, which is "the urge to seek the grail, to climb the mountain in search of visions, to seek wisdom, to cross new frontiers, to achieve the formerly unachievable in all areas of life seems endemic in the human race. The Seeker responds to the call of Spirit-to ascend." (Pearson, 1991, p. 112)

*"Rin thought it was somewhat unreasonable to ask her to puzzle out what philosophers and theologians had been trying to answer for millennia, but she returned to the library.*

*And came back with more questions still. "But how does the existence or nonexistence of the gods affect me? Why does it matter how the universe came to be?"*" (Kuang, 2018, p. 155).

The Seeker aims to be open to the truth of the world. The quote above reflects Rin's expression of The Seeker, as she seeks to uncover what exactly the twelve gods in the Nikara Empire do to her, reflecting her desire to understand the world and her place within it.

*"Fine," Rin said, refusing to rise to the bait of having her own words thrown in her face. "But why not?" She had thought the Nikara religious skepticism was reasonable, but not when people like Jiang could do the things they did. "Why aren't there more believers?"*" (Kuang, 2018, p. 160).

*"But I don't understand," she said. "Why have the shamans disappeared? Wouldn't the Red Emperor be all the more powerful for having shamans in his army?"*" (Kuang, 2018, p. 161)

In these two quotes, Rin demonstrates The Seeker's nature of wanting to understand the world around her. In the first quote, she wonders why Nikara society is skeptical of religion when there are people like Jiang who can do extraordinary things. This quotation shows her quest to find the truth behind the disbelief. In the second quote, Rin questions why shamans are disappearing and why they are not considered an important force in power. This quotation reveals her desire to gain a

deeper understanding of the world, history, and the forces that shape life, aligning with the task of the Seeker archetype.

#### The Destroyer

The war led Rin to become a shaman and resonate with The Phoenix, Speer's ancient God. As the god of fire, death, and rebirth, The Phoenix's destructive power required sacrifice. Rin could not control the Phoenix's power within her, much less stop it. The Phoenix's fire would only stop if she felt she had taken something worthwhile. Rin became a destroyer, and in the end, she rationalized her brutal actions under the pretext of necessary pain before win.

*"I can give you the power you seek.*

*She struggled wildly to breathe, but the general's grip only tightened around her neck.*

*I can give you the strength to topple empires. To burn your enemies until their bones are nothing but ash. All this I will give you and more. You know the trade. You know the terms.*

*"Anything," Rin whispered. "Anything at all."*" (Kuang, 2018, p. 208).

The Destroyer archetype involves the need to abandon or destroy something in order to achieve a typically greater goal. In the excerpt, the Phoenix offers her power to destroy Rin's enemies to the ground, then immediately asks for payment. Rin was willing to give whatever The Phoenix asked because she had a strong will to live. Rin is fully aware that this deal may cost her soul or humanity, but she accepts it, which is key to The Destroyer archetype's tendency to give up the old in exchange for power or transformation

*"I don't want to be saved!" Rin shrieked. "I want power! I want Altan's power! I want to be the most powerful shaman there ever was, so that there is no one I can't save!"*" (Kuang, 2018, p. 329).

In this quote, Rin immediately refused to be saved from her madness, opting instead for self-empowerment. She wants Altan's power which has great destructive capabilities to save others. Rin exemplifies the absolute archetype of The Destroyer, justifying violence as necessary for the greater good.

*"War's already here. A traitor sits on the throne of the Empire," she said stubbornly. "I will see her burn."*" (Kuang, 2018, p. 431).

*Chaghan looked sideways at her. His expression was grim. "You are going to paint the world in Altan's blood, aren't you?"*

*"I'm going to find and kill everyone*

*responsible,” said Rin. “You cannot stop me.”* (Kuang, 2018, p. 440).

Rin's ambition to eliminate the traitor who destroyed her squadron and country shows a shift towards a path of destruction and revenge. The two quotes above strongly illustrate The Destroyer archetype which depicts individuals who are ready to take extreme measures to dismantle what they deem unjust or oppressive. The quote above immediately suggests that Rin is not The Creator. She does not reconstruct the world, but instead destroys it by setting it on fire. Nor is she The Lover, since love in Rin comes with rage and revenge to kill in behalf of her love's name. It is contradictive to what Pearson said about The Lover, that “Love also comes as compassion, forgiveness, grace.” (Pearson, 1991, p. 146).

### **The Return**

#### ***The Magician***

After going through the ritual once more and becoming a power vessel of The Phoenix, Rin accepted her destiny as Speer's last shaman and made the destruction of the empire her ultimate goal. This phenomenon aligns with the Magician archetype, which involves a significant transformation and ritual offering, removing the old reality and accepting the desired new reality (Pearson, 1991).

*“And what will you give me in return?” inquired the Phoenix. “The price to alter the fabric of the world is steep.”*

*What did a god, especially the Phoenix, want? What did any god ever want?*

*“I can give you worship,” she promised. “I can give you an unending flow of blood.”* (Kuang, 2018, p. 420).

From the quote above, Rin embodies the archetype of The Magician by connecting with supernatural forces, offering something of value, and transitioning into a reality where she transforms into a destructive force in pursuit of her quest. This quotation also denies the archetype of The Sage. She no longer questioned about why the God who was supposed to protect his country was asking for offerings and immediately offered a destructive solution to offer The Phoenix bloods.

*“My god didn't make me do anything,” she said. “The gods can't make our choices for us. They can only offer their power, and we can wield it. And I did, and this is what I chose.” She swallowed. “I don't regret it.”* (Kuang, 2018, p. 429).

The magical process always starts with some sort of harm (Pearson, 1991). Rin has gone through painful stages in her life, including child abandonment, bullying, discrimination, and even being betrayed by those she serves. All of these experiences are wounds that have shaped her as The Magician. Rin, having gone through those wounds, is now at a point where she not only accepts the power offered by her god, but also controls it to achieve her goals and desires. The decision to use that power reflects Rin's transition from someone who was wounded to someone who mastered that power to shape her destiny, exactly as depicted in the concept of The Magician. Rin's claim that she is responsible for the fate upon her also rejects the Fool's core principle of passive submission to chaos. When The Fool laughs off responsibility, Rin claims it even for the genocide she committed.

After conducting a close reading of the novel *The Poppy War* through Pearson's twelve archetypes of hero lens, Rin, the main character, undergoes five dominant archetypes during the three stages of her hero's journey. In preparation for the journey to seek safety, the archetypes that appear from Rin are The Orphan and The Warrior archetypes. Rin then came to the core of her journey in Sinegard when she resonated with The Phoenix, God of Death and Rebirth. At the core of this journey, the archetypes that emerged were The Seeker and The Destroyer. Then, at the end of her journey, Rin became both a shaman and an instrument of war with immense destructive power, thus confirming the emergence of the Magician archetype within her.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that Rin's psychological transformation in *The Poppy War* (Kuang, 2018) mirrors the dynamic shifts of five dominant archetypes within Pearson's (1991) framework of 12 archetypes of hero. It starts with the Orphan archetype, which is defined by the need for safety after experiencing trauma as a child. Her battle to establish herself at Sinegard Academy serves as an example of how it led her to become The Warrior. Rin's investigation of spiritual abilities then demonstrated her transformation into The Seeker. After resonating with the Phoenix, she

transforms into an agent of destruction, demonstrating that she turns into The Destroyer. The transformation of the archetype continues until it reaches The Magician, who is portrayed by the ability to control supernatural forces in order to change fate. Her transformation from a helpless victim to a destructive hero due to trauma and betrayal exposes the deconstruction of heroism. Her journey shows heroism not as a noble ideal, but as a brutal and corrosive path born out of the trauma she experienced throughout her life, making her morally gray and desiring the total annihilation of what she deems unjust.

Moreover, the results show that Pearson's theory of the 12 archetypes applies to the analysis of the complexity of contemporary literature. Subsequently, the study offers additional perspectives to previous studies, which were previously limited to gender and historical perspectives. The findings also confirm Pearson theory of archetypes that archetypes are not static categories but dynamic processes triggered by psychological crises, especially intense trauma, isolation, and ambition.

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