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From ‘Sophisticated’ to ‘Primitive’: Re-locating Mollie Hunter’s *The Kelpie’s Pearls* and *The Mermaid Summer* within Northrop Frye’s Archetypal Apparatus

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to re-interpret and re-locate the famed Children’s Fiction author Mollie Hunter’s *The Kelpie’s Pearls* (1964) and *The Mermaid Summer* (1988) within the framework of Northrop Frye’s Theory of Archetypes. Hunter’s fantasies for young children are based on magic and folklore. The term ‘archetype’ refers to “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (Frye 365). Broadly speaking, archetypes are primordial patterns, which have been coming down to us from antiquity. This shows that literature is essentially cyclical and follows a recurrence of patterns. This paper would therefore highlight the ‘primordial freshness’ and continuity in literature. An attempt will also be made to apply Frye’s theory in the aforementioned works of Mollie Hunter to generate fresh insights and bring out the underlying systems binding such diverse literary works.

Keywords: Archetype, recurrent narrative patterns, primordial freshness, myth.

Northrop Frye’s Archetypal Theory: A Kaleidoscopic Vision

This paper endeavours to study the theory of archetypes with reference to Northrop Frye (1912-1991) and attempts an applicational case study with reference to Mollie Hunter’s *The Kelpie’s Pearls* (1964) and *The Mermaid Summer* (1988). Frye in his essay collection *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) defines an archetype as “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (365). Broadly speaking, archetypes are primordial patterns, which have been coming down to us from antiquity. These patterns have a universal dimension since they occur repeatedly in a number of literary works throughout the world.

For instance, an important symbol like the sea does not remain limited to the poetry of the romantic poets like Shelley, Keats, or Coleridge but it expands over a wide variety of poets

like Edgar Allan Poe, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden etc. Now, if we were to go back further, we would find this symbol even in the works of the medieval poets like Caedmon and Cynewulf. Similarly, if we delve into the origin of drama in England, we find that it emerged from Christianity just as drama in Greece emerged from the Greek religion so many centuries before. This semblance in the pattern of development proves that "...there may be archetypes of genres as well ..." (Frye 506).

There may be a number of different types of archetypes like archetypal themes such as crime and punishment, good versus evil, conflict between the individual and the society and so on. Archetypal characters like the hero/heroine, the scapegoat, the trickster, and the witch. Archetypal narrative patterns such as the quest of a hero, the journey, the fall, death, rebirth etc. Archetypal colours like green, red, blue, and black. The above analysis proves that an archetype is the unifying thread that brings together the entire gamut of World Literature and is the missing central coordinating principle which Frye feels is the key "...that will put into perspective various partial or fragmentary critical approaches" (500).

From 'Literary History' to 'Literary Anthropology': A Quest for Archetypes

In order to find these archetypes, we need to move from literary history i.e. 'the history of ideas' towards literary anthropology i.e. a 'study of man'. History which is essentially a chronological sequencing of past events does not serve the purpose since historians treat a work of art as a document and analyse it on the basis of the depiction of history in that particular work. Therefore, we need literary history, which is 'the history of ideas'. Literary history can then be understood as being closely tied with literature as well as dealing with generic categories such as the Gothic, Baroque, and Romantic etc. This in turn gives an insight as to how literature existed in primitive times.

Anthropology on the other hand "...is the empirical and scientific study of man in his totality" (Doshi and Jain 30). The term 'anthropology' has its origins in ancient Greek. The root words are 'Anthropos', which means 'man'; and 'Logos', which means 'science'. The approach of anthropology to the study of man is holistic since it studies man, his society, and culture as a dynamic interacting whole. Further, it delves into intricacies such as religion, myths and folklore which history does not touch. Thereby providing a much more detailed and comprehensive evaluation of man. Now, since archetypes are primitive patterns rooted in pre-literary categories (rituals, myths and folktales) therefore to study these archetypes Frye relies greatly on the methods and insights of anthropology.

Further, when we notice that these archetypes are cultural patterns which have a propensity of reappearing in the greatest of classics we realise that their relationship with literature “...is by no means one of pure descent (...) in fact there seems to be a general tendency on the part of great classics to revert to them” (Frye 507). Therefore, Frye is of the opinion that a search for archetypes in literature is “...a kind of literary anthropology...” (506). As a literary anthropologist, Frye relates the narrative patterns to the creation of rituals, imagery to the moments of epiphany and rhythm to the natural cycle. This shows that literature is cyclical in nature and follows a recurrence of patterns. The natural cycle too follows a similar course wherein we observe a synchronization between the human and the natural energies, which ultimately leads to the formation of a ritual.

In order to explicate this, we will delve into an ancient harvesting practice adopted by the Egyptians. During the sowing season, these people would bury the effigy of the corn-god Osiris along with the corn seeds and this burial followed a lamentation over his death. When the crop sprouted and yielded a good harvest the Egyptians would celebrate it as the corn-god’s re-birth. Soon this practice became a repetitive phenomenon, and assumed the form of a ritual. Over the centuries, humans attached various narratives to these rituals resulting in the formation of myths.

Myths therefore are narrative patterns, passed down from one generation to the other thereby becoming a part of human culture. Frye stresses, that “the myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle” (509). The central myth of all literature is the quest myth constructed around a hero whose actions are in cognisance with the different phases of the organic, solar, and seasonal cycles respectively.

Diagrammatic Representation of Seasonal, Solar and Organic Cycles: Frye’s Approach:

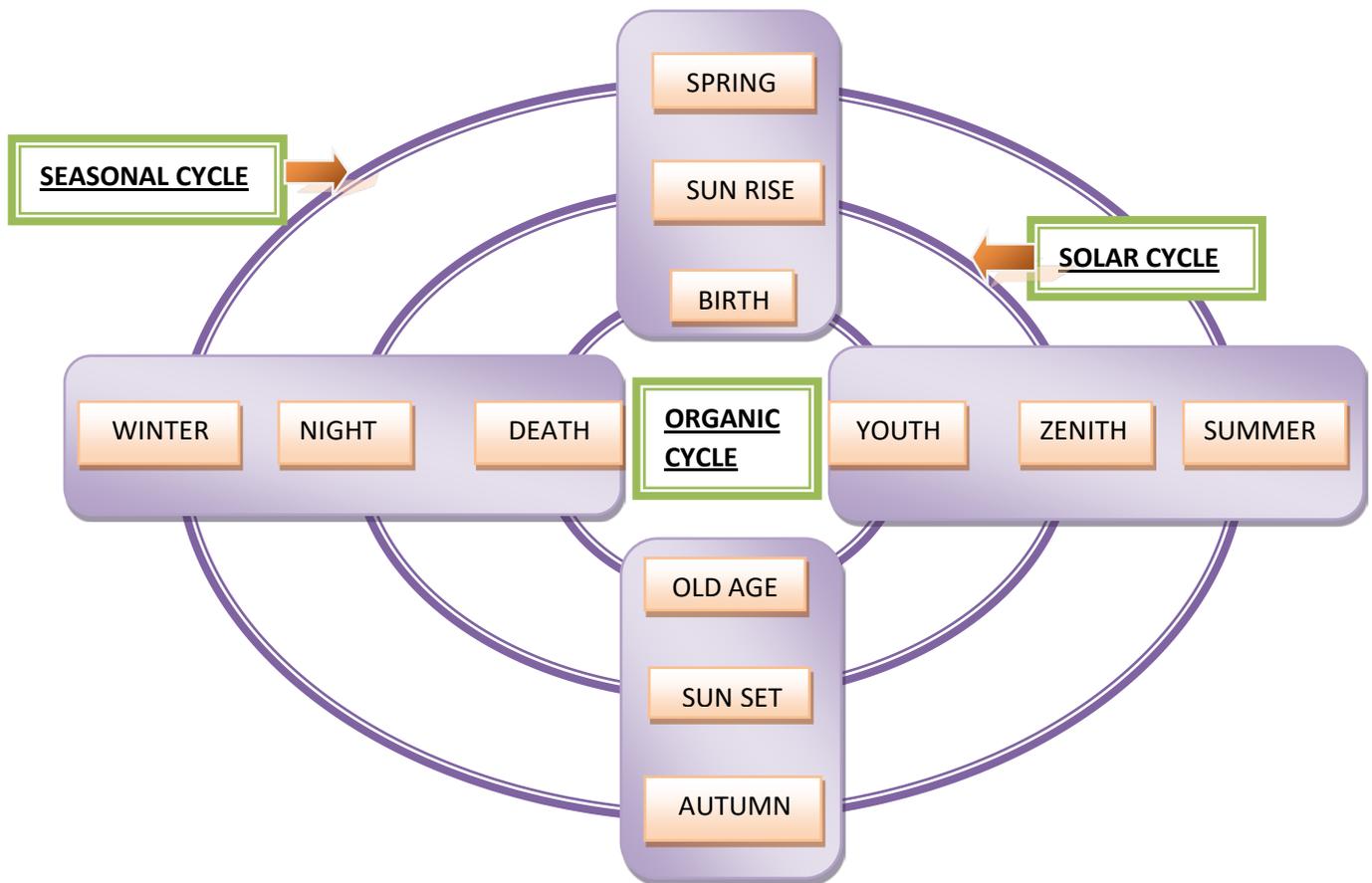


Fig.1

Further, in order to trace these recurrent patterns Frye adopts an Inductive Approach a “...movement towards the archetype in a process of backing up” (507). In order to explain this backing up movement Frye draws on the example of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603). He traces the legend of Hamlet from a pre-Shakespearean play to Saxo and from Saxo finally to nature-myths. Hence, this Inductive Approach facilitates the understanding of the relationship between the pre-literary categories i.e., symbols, images, rituals, etc. and the sophisticated categories.

Applicational Case Study of Frye’s Archetypal Theory

This section of the paper deals with the application of the Inductive Approach as observed in various works. Frye takes us back to the primitive times to find the unifying thread that, ties the entire gamut of world literature. When we read various literary works, we find glimpses of antiquity as well as primitive culture in them. Hunter’s fantasies have close affiliations with folklore, which according to the Archetypal Approach constitute the pre-literary categories. Further, to understand these fictional works in their entirety Hunter says,

“...one must reach back toward that far past which is common to all mankind and in which, therefore, the taproot of all folklore lies deeply buried” (124).

Her fantasies often highlight the Otherworld as a “...familiar place where great attraction coexists with great danger (...)” (Greenway 45). Therefore, her works seem to depict a dichotomy where sometimes these supernatural beings represent the dark forces while on other occasions they have positive connotations.

Hunter in *The Mermaid Summer* (1988) deals with the popular character type of the mermaid. However, in this particular work she has taken a darker view of this supernatural being and has thus based it on the famous Celtic creature of the Merrow. The Merrow was “...a kind of sea-fairy, an Otherworld creature who swam in shallow coastal waters drawing humans into the brine and to their deaths.... Their sweet singing lulled people to sleep and whenever water lapped over them they drowned....” (Monaghan 325) These creatures were devastatingly beautiful which made men extremely vulnerable to their charm. Therefore, sailors were asked to avoid these creatures whenever they undertook a voyage.

From the very outset, Hunter’s novel describes the mermaid as being an extremely dangerous and terrible creature, which is feared in the villages surrounding the northern lands. The fisher folk living in these areas believed that this creature could raise storms and wreck ships. To build on this sinister image the writer introduces the character of Eric Anderson who refuses to acknowledge the very existence of this creature.

Eric while fishing near The Drongs one day comes face to face with the creature. In order to teach Eric a lesson for his brazenness the mermaid casts a fog all over the sea and manipulates the movement of the tides pulling the boat towards these jagged rocks. However, Eric and his crew desperately try to “...set course in a direction away from The Drongs” but the mermaid begins to sing thereby rendering them entranced (Hunter 5). Hunter vividly describes the plight of Eric and his crew as:

The heads of the oarsmen turned towards the sound of her singing. The sweetness of it fascinated them. Their hearts filled with pity at the sadness in it. The thrilling notes of her music filled their souls with yearning. It was a spell that drew them towards her, and even though each one of them knew this was so, there was nothing any of them could do to resist the power of that spell. (5)

This leads to the boat smashing against the rocks and all of them being caught in “...the whirlpool of water among The Drongs” (7). Fortunately, all the fishing gear from the boat falls near them saving them in the process. Eric then relies on the ancient technique of identifying the ‘mother wave’ in order to find land. He succeeds in his efforts and he and his crew finally

reach the village safe and sound. However, after this incident the anglers in the village become wary of Eric forcing him to seek work on a ship sailing abroad.

Now, the question arises whether the exploration of this character i.e., the mermaid has appeared for the very first time in literature. Alternatively, does it have some connection with the works written in the past? Further, we also need to delve into the fact as to what is the source of this particular character. Now, by applying Frye's Inductive Approach, we find a very similar character in H.G. Wells' *The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine* (1902). A mermaid Doris Thalassia Waters comes ashore on a beach "...just east of Sandgate Castle, towards Folkestone..." (Wells 3) immensely taken up by the good looks of Harry Chatteris whom she had seen "In the South Seas – near Tonga" (156). However, her intentions are dubious. Being a mermaid, Doris does not possess a soul and in order to gain immortality she must ensure that a mortal fall in love with her ultimately following her to her abode under water. Further, like these supernatural creatures Doris too is extremely beautiful. Her encounter with the Glendower girls aptly exemplifies this: "They could see that she was swimming very gracefully and that she had a lovely face and very beautiful arms" (12). She uses this beauty to lure Harry Chatteris who with the passage of time becomes completely enamoured of her. Despite being aware of Doris' identity and that getting involved with her equal's death. Harry gives up everything only to plunge to his death while following Doris into the sea.

When we move back further, we find that the fairy tale *The Little Sea Maid* (1837), written by Hans Christian Andersen also deals with this character. However, here the benign side of the sea-maid confronts us. On her fifteenth birthday as per tradition, the sea-maid is allowed to peek at the mortal world and when she rises "...light and clear as a water-bubble, up through the sea" she sees a ship full of men. The music, dancing, the million lighted coloured lanterns, as well as the firing of rockets and canons all take her by surprise. However, the Prince who was "...the handsomest of all men (...) with great black eyes..." beguiles her (Andersen 547).

The sea soon grows tumultuous resulting in the ship's wreckage. When the sea-maid spots the Prince sinking into the sea for a moment, she feels thrilled that he would sink and come down to her. However, in that moment she remembers that mortals unlike mermaids cannot breathe under water and decides to save him. She dives deep under the water rising amongst the waves and finds the prince struggling to remain afloat. Finally, she grabs and props his head over the water and delivers him to safety as soon as she sees the first signs of dry land. Andersen has given an extremely picturesque description of this episode:

Now she saw in front of her the dry land – high blue mountains, on whose summits the white snow gleamed as if swans were lying there. Down on the coast were glorious green forests, and a building The sea formed a little bay there; it was quite calm, but very deep. Straight towards the rock where the fine white sand had been cast up, she swam with the handsome Prince, and laid him upon the sand, taking especial care that his head was raised in the warm sunshine. (548)

Further movement into the past reveals a similar scenario in Homer's epic *The Odyssey* (800 BC). Here too Odysseus and his crew while on one of their adventures at sea encounter the dangerous Sirens. These creatures would charm sailors with their beautiful warbling voices and persuade them to jump off their ships only to drown. The Sirens try to do the same thing when they spot Odysseus' ship. However, being aware of the Sirens' abilities he has his crew stop their ears with wax and has himself tied to the mast. Therefore, Odysseus survives this adventure as well.

This epic has its roots in the Greek mythical legend of Odysseus. Thus, when we look back we realise that the mythical sea creature the mermaid has evolved from the Sirens. However, this archetype spreads across other cultures as well. For instance, in Germany we have several tales surrounding mythical sea creatures known as Meerfrau while in Indian mythology we have the popular legend of the Matsyakanya.

Another dominant strand in Hunter's fantasies is the conflict between good and evil. This theme is depicted in distinctly different ways in these fantasies. In *The Kelpie's Pearls* (1964) since the writer has taken a sympathetic view of the Otherworld, therefore the kelpie represents the forces of good. Other key representatives include Morag and Torquil who have a strong belief in the supernatural. All the others who challenge and threaten the very existence of this supernatural world like Alasdair the Trapper, the woman, the reporter, the scientist, as well as the tourists stand for evil. For instance, Alasdair the Trapper attempts to raid the kelpie's pool repeatedly. He tries to get the pearls by dragging a makeshift fishing rod over the pool, which fails. Next, we see Alasdair making tall claims, "I am six foot three in my socks (...) and I am strong and hardy. Anyway, I am a modern man and I do not believe in kelpies" (3). Despite his disbelief in the kelpie, he jumps into the pool in search of the pearls. However, the kelpie attacks and nearly drowns him. The Trapper makes two more attempts wherein he builds a dam and then blows up the pool with explosives but both his attempts fail ultimately, leading to his imprisonment.

Just like Alasdair, the scientist leading an expedition to locate the monster living in the Loch Ness also fails. He too claims to be a modern man and comes in conflict with Morag

whom he badmouths and calls a humbug. However, it is Morag who ultimately gets a glimpse of the Loch Ness Monster due to her firm faith in the supernatural. Although her life is beset with trouble including being dubbed a witch and thus being shunned by the society, yet she is victorious. Unlike the others, she has the great fortune of being offered sanctuary in the whimsical Otherworld, Tir-nan-Og. Morag accepts and is ridden off to Tir-nan-Og by the kelpie where is rewarded with eternal life.

In *The Mermaid Summer* (1988), on the other hand since the Otherworld is delineated in a negative light therefore the mermaid is a portent of evil while the mortal world represented by Jon and Anna stands for the forces of good. For instance, the mermaid who is a mighty creature possessing supernatural powers is defeated in the end although she constantly attempts to harm the village located closest to The Drongs. Initially, she drives Eric Anderson, the children's grandfather away from the village by attempting to drown him and his crew while they were fishing near The Drongs.

Next, the mermaid begins to blackmail Jon and Anna when they accidentally summon her. Apart from this, she chases away the herring in order to spoil the three-month fishing expedition carried out by the fisher folk annually. However, the two children due to their immense fortitude, quick thinking, as well as with the aid of the gifts sent by Eric are able to fight the mermaid and outwit her. Thereby, vanquishing the evil, ensuring the village's wellbeing, and their grandfather's safe return after his three-year long absence.

When we go back, we find a similar theme in Frank L. Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1899). In this novel Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, the Cowardly Lion, Glinda, and Locasta Tattypoo are representatives of the good while the two Wicked Witches of the East and the West represent evil. When a terrible cyclone carries Dorothy and her dog Toto along with their house to Muchkin Country in the magical Land of Oz, the house accidentally lands on the Wicked Witch of the East thereby killing her. Although by accident, yet Dorothy manages to free the Muchkins from the tyranny of the evil witch.

Similarly, the Wicked Witch of the West schemes and plots against Dorothy but ultimately fails. For instance, when Dorothy reaches the Emerald City the wizard agrees to help her in finding her way back to Kansas but on the condition that they defeat the Wicked Witch of the West, residing in the Winkie Country. On hearing this Dorothy and her three companions the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion all set out to achieve the impossible. As they advance towards the Winkie Country the witch sees them approaching with her "...one eye (...) that was as powerful as a telescope, and could see everywhere" (Baum 124).

She decides to kill them all and initially sends a pack of wolves to “...tear them to pieces” but, the Tin Woodman rises to the occasion and hacks them all to pieces with his axe. The witch still does not back down she sends another set of reinforcements in the form of wild crows to peck their eyes out. They too fail since the Scarecrow rings their necks and kills them. After which she sends a swarm of bees and a group of Winkie soldiers who also fail (124).

Maddened at her failure the witch resorts to using her most prized possession the Golden Cap which was said to be charmed and possessed the ability to “...call three times upon the Winged Monkeys, who would obey any order they were given” (128). Thus, she summons the monkeys and commands them to destroy Dorothy and her companions. While executing the witch’s orders the leader of the Winged Monkeys attempts to attack Dorothy but stops short since he notices “...the mark of the Good Witch’s kiss”. He tells the others, “We dare not harm this little girl, (...) for she is protected by the Power of Good, and that is greater than the Power of Evil” (130). Thus, the monkeys simply carry her and the lion to the witch’s castle. Although the witch is successful in her evil design to make them captive yet Dorothy courageously fights back and ultimately defeats the witch by throwing a bucket of water on her.

This Archetypal Approach, backing up movement reveals that the Renaissance play *Macbeth* (1623), written by Shakespeare also echoes this theme. For instance, the prophecy made by the three witches about Macbeth becoming a king fires his dormant ambition motivating him to turn evil. He and Lady Macbeth hatch a conspiracy to kill Duncan in order to make this prophecy true. They invite Duncan to their palace at Inverness and Macbeth murders him while Lady Macbeth plants the bloody daggers on the two sleeping grooms pinning the murder on them. Following Duncan’s murder, his sons Malcolm and Donaldbain flee to England and Ireland respectively making them possible suspects. Macbeth being next of kin is declared the King of Scotland. However, the good eventually triumphs over the evil as Macduff unites his forces with Malcolm and together, they lay siege to Dunsinane Castle thus defeating Macbeth in the end.

Further, Lady Macbeth also pays for her evil deeds since the guilt of her actions drive her insane. She constantly keeps washing her hands and is seen remarking “Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One, two. Why then ’tis time to do’t. / Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard? /What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? / Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (5.1. 31-35)

When we move back once again, we find a similar scenario in the epic *Le Morte d’Arthur* (1485) written by Sir Thomas Mallory. In Book I Morgan Le Fray, the evil sorceress and sister of Arthur attempts to kill him. She transports Arthur to the dungeon of King Damas

using her dark arts. This King apparently would imprison knights and starve them in the hope of persuading them to fight against his brother in order to attain their freedom. Arthur agrees to fight King Damas’ brother while Morgan conveniently arranges that her lover Accolon fight on her behalf. Further, she gives Accolon Excalibur without which she knows Arthur is powerless. However, Nineve aware of Morgan’s plan comes to Arthur’s aid thus ensuring the triumph of good over evil.

This work has its roots in the Celtic mythical legend of King Arthur. Thus, when we look back we find that this evergreen theme of good vs evil has its roots here. However, this archetype is not limited to this work and spreads across literature. For instance, Indian Epics like, *The Mahabharata* (701-900 BC) and *The Ramayana* (500-301 BC)) reflects this theme beautifully.

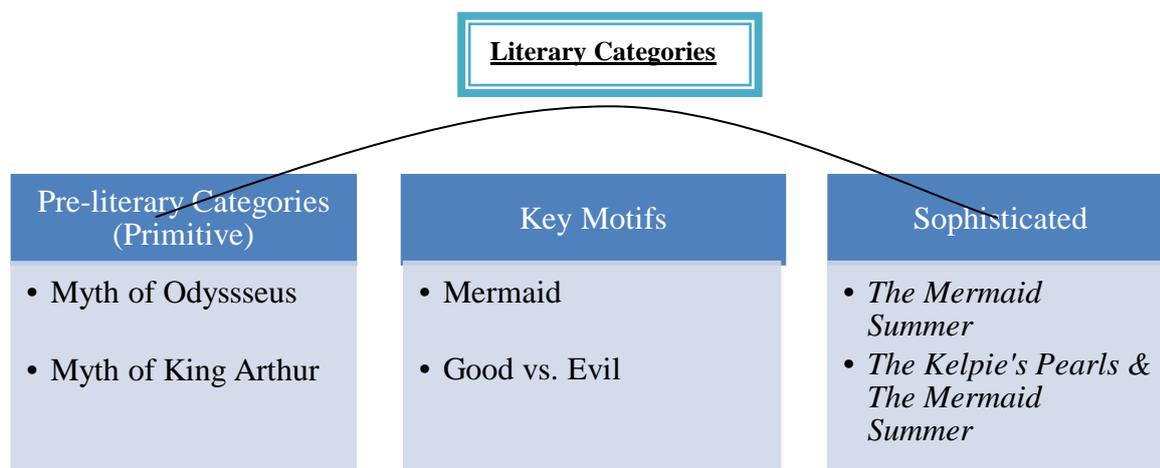


Fig. 2

Conclusion

Mollie Hunter’s novels are an amalgamation of the rich history and folklore of Scotland. Even though most of her readers are not familiar with the culture from and about which she writes yet, the brilliant manner in which she combines “.... exotic details of setting and language with universal themes” (Greenway xviii) make her works stand out. Therefore, the study of Mollie Hunter within the framework of Northrop Frye’s Archetypal Approach reveals that there is ‘primordial freshness’ and continuity in literature. There are certain cultural patterns, which occur repeatedly over a period in literature but they never tend to become obsolete. These archetypal patterns are thus the underlying systems binding such diverse literary works. Further, by the applying the Inductive method appropriated by Frye we are able to demonstrate through these selected works the latent relationship between the pre-literary categories and the literature of the present times.

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