Propp’s Character Archetypes

Vladamir Propp was a Soviet scholar who analysed the basic plot components of Russian folk tales to identify their simplest narrative elements. He also concluded that all the characters could be resolved into 8 broad character types in the 100 tales he analysed:

1. **The Villain** — struggles against the hero; usually an older, ugly, sly and manipulative male.
2. **The Dispatcher** — sends the hero off on his quest.
3. **The (magical) helper** — helps the hero in their quest, usually less good-looking or clever, but essential to their success.
4. **The Donor** (often also a helper) — prepares the hero or gives the hero some magical or essential object in order to aid them on their quest.
5. **The Princess (or prize)** — the hero deserves her throughout the story but is unable to marry her because of an unfair evil, usually because of the villain. The hero’s journey is often ended when he marries the princess, thereby thwarting and beating the villain. The princess tends to be beautiful and good natured, but ultimately weak and passive, a pawn or prize to be won.
6. **The Oracle** — an older wise figure, usually male, who provides essential wisdom, information or clues to aid the hero on his quest.
7. **The Hero** or victim/seeker hero — young, brave and strong, traditionally almost always male; quick to accept his task and commence his quest; reacts to the donor, wins and weds the princess.
8. **False Hero** — takes credit for the hero’s actions or tries to marry the princess.

_Femme Fatale_ characters are not one of Propp’s character archetypes, but are very common ‘evil’ female characters, especially in James Bond etc. They tend to be very beautiful and sexy, but dark and seductive, using their sexual power to distract and lure the hero, seduce him and often try to kill him!

These roles could sometimes be distributed among various characters, as the hero kills the villain dragon, and the dragon’s sisters take on the villainous role of chasing him. Conversely, one character could engage in acts as more than one role, as a father could send his son on the quest and give him a sword, acting as both dispatcher and donor.