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THE CHILD WHO KEEPS DRAWING THE WOLF

What Recurring Images May Be Trying to Become

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

When a child returns to the same image, repetition may not mean they are stuck. It may be the way the relationship changes.

A child draws a wolf.

The next morning, they draw it again.

By Friday, the wolf has teeth, a cave, a family, a path through the woods and a particular way of arriving whenever the child feels the story has gone flat.

The adult begins to wonder what it means.

Fair enough. Repetition catches the eye. When a child returns to one image with that much energy, it is hard not to suspect that something is happening.

But the quickest question is not always the best one.

Perhaps the wolf does not need us to name it. Perhaps it needs time to become whatever the child is still making with it.

When a child keeps drawing the same image, rebuilding the same cave, repeating the same chase or returning to the same frightening figure, the repetition may not be a failure to move on. It may be the movement itself.

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The image is being worked, tested, enlarged, resisted, befriended and changed.

The child is not necessarily stuck.

They may be in conversation.

THE WOLF RETURNS

Adults tend to become suspicious of repetition.

We worry that the child is fixated, anxious, lacking ideas or unable to let something go. Sometimes those concerns are justified. A repeated image can sit alongside distress, disruption or experiences that need careful safeguarding attention.

But repetition is also one of childhood's ordinary ways of knowing.

Children ask for the same story. They repeat the same joke. They climb the same bank, pour the same water, build the same enclosure and begin the same game with tiny differences that are obvious to them and almost invisible to us.

The repetition is rarely identical from the inside.

The wolf may be larger today. Yesterday it chased. Today it waits. Tomorrow it may have a cub, lose a tooth, speak, become trapped or allow the child to ride on its back.

The outer image stays recognisable while the relationship around it changes.

That is why the adult who says, "You have already drawn a wolf - why not draw something else?" may accidentally interrupt the very process they are trying to encourage.

The child is drawing something else.

They are drawing the next wolf.

The image may repeat because the relationship is still changing.

REPETITION IS NOT EMPTY

To an adult looking for novelty, recurring play can appear narrow.

To the child, it may be deepening.

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A familiar image gives the child somewhere to return. Because the basic shape is already known, small changes become possible. The child can alter the distance, the ending, the size of the danger, the strength of the shelter or the role they themselves are allowed to take.

The wolf becomes a stable doorway into an unstable question.

The same thing happens when children return to storms, fires, lost babies, prisons, monsters, disappearing parents, falling, rescue, death, giants, thieves or houses with locked rooms.

We should not pretend these images are meaningless. Nor should we behave as though the adult already knows their meaning.

The image may gather many experiences at once: yesterday's story, a real fear, the pleasure of danger, a new bodily sensation, a family tension, the thrill of being chased, the desire to become strong, or simply the beauty of wolves.

Children do not always separate these strands neatly because symbolic play does not need to work like a report.

It can hold several truths without choosing only one.

That is part of its power.

THE IMAGE AS A LIVING PARTNER

A recurring image is not simply a message posted by the unconscious for the adult to collect and translate.

It can behave more like a character entering an unfinished relationship.

The child meets it. Runs from it. Commands it. Draws it smaller. Makes it enormous. Gives it a home. Becomes it. Kills it. Revives it. Feeds it. Locks it outside. Invites it to dinner.

Each movement changes the position of the child in relation to the image.

This matters because fear is often partly a question of position.

To be chased is not the same as choosing to run. Hearing a roar is not the same as making one. Being trapped in a cave is not the same as building the cave and deciding who may enter.

The image gains edges. The child gains choices.

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Nothing here requires the adult to announce what the wolf represents. The useful question is more concrete:

What can the child do with the wolf now that they could not do before?

Can they slow it down?

Can they approach it?

Can they become it without losing themselves?

Can they stop the game?

Can they change the ending?

Can they give the wolf somewhere else to live?

NOT A CODE TO CRACK

The symbolic life of children attracts adult certainty like jam attracts wasps.

One person says the wolf means anger. Another says it means the father. Another says it means freedom, trauma, instinct, danger or the child's "shadow".

Any of those associations might become relevant in a particular child's own story. None of them belongs to every wolf.

A symbol is not a clinical barcode.

The adult who decodes too quickly stops watching what the child is actually doing. The image is pinned down before it has finished moving.

Worse, the child can begin to play inside the adult's theory rather than their own unfolding experience.

Questions such as "Is the wolf angry like Daddy?" or "Does the cave make you feel safe?" may sound gentle, but they place an answer inside the question.

Better language remains close to what is happening:

"That wolf has come back."

"Today it is standing outside the cave."

"You made yourself much bigger than it."

"You stopped the game when it came too close."

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These observations do not claim nothing is happening. They honour what is happening without stealing it.

Describe the movement. Do not imprison the image inside an explanation.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN THE CHILD CAN ACT?

The most interesting part of recurring symbolic play is often not the image itself, but the changes in agency around it.

A child may begin as the one who is chased. Later they become the wolf. Then they become the person who protects the smaller animals. Eventually the wolf may become a companion, a pet, a wounded creature or simply one character among many.

The story has not been solved. Its field of possibility has widened.

We might notice that the child can begin and end the play rather than being carried by it; that the frightening character becomes more detailed and less enormous; or that helpers, boundaries, tools and places of return appear.

The child may begin moving between roles rather than remaining trapped in one. The image may become humorous, ordinary or capable of relationship. The child may leave the theme and return later without distress.

These are not scores on an assessment sheet. They are signs that the play has become more flexible.

Flexibility matters because symbolic life becomes frightening when there is only one position available.

The child runs. The monster follows. The ending never changes.

Agency begins when another move becomes imaginable.

THE ADULT WHO WANTS AN ANSWER

Recurring images can wake something in adults too.

We may feel anxious, fascinated, protective or strangely urgent. We want to know whether the child is all right. We want to find the hidden cause. We want to make the wolf friendly before home time.

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Sometimes that urgency belongs to the child's distress.

Sometimes it belongs to ours.

The unknown is uncomfortable. A repeated monster feels easier to manage once it has been named as "anxiety" or "processing change". The label gives the adult a handrail.

But the child may need us to remain beside the mystery for longer than we would naturally choose.

That does not mean becoming vague or mystical about genuine concerns. If the child is distressed, losing sleep, making a disclosure, showing a marked change in behaviour or repeatedly introducing material that raises safeguarding questions, adults must respond properly.

It means we do not confuse careful action with symbolic certainty.

We can safeguard without pretending to know what every image means.

We can comfort without making the image disappear.

We can offer materials without directing the story.

We can notice our own desire for closure and choose not to place it on the child.

THE ARCHETYPE APPROACH: FOLLOW THE MOVEMENT

The Archetype Approach does not assign a recurring image to a fixed archetype.

A wolf is not automatically Rebel, Energy, Explorer or anything else. What matters is the movement taking place around it.

The six axes of balance offer reflective questions rather than interpretations.

Movement and stillness: Is the child always running, or can the chase pause?

Care and playful disruption: Is the creature only destructive, or can it protect, nurture, tease or be cared for?

Truth and harmony: Can the child name fear, anger or dislike without the whole relationship collapsing?

Imagination and order: Can the story gain sequence, boundaries, rules or a chosen ending?

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Intensity and intellect: Can strong feeling be held alongside words, thought and observation?

Exploration and construction: Can the child wander into danger and also build somewhere secure to return?

These questions guide provision. They do not tell us what the wolf secretly is.

A child repeatedly drawing a pursuing animal might be offered movement with clear stopping points, materials for building shelters, figures that allow role changes, or a shared story space where the child controls the next event.

The balancing response is not prescribed from the symbol. It grows from the pattern the child is actually living.

WAKING INVITATIONS

A recurring image can be welcomed into waking provision without becoming a lesson about the child.

THE WOLF AND THE CAVE

The child keeps drawing a wolf outside a dark cave.

The adult might offer clay, blocks, fabric, torches, animal figures and materials for doors or boundaries. The child may build the cave, decide who lives there, create a second entrance or discover that the wolf is guarding something.

The invitation is construction, not interpretation.

THE CREATURE THAT ALWAYS CHASES

The child repeatedly plays a creature that chases everybody until the game falls apart.

The adult might help the group establish a starting call, a safe base and a stopping signal. The child can still bring the creature fully to life, but the play gains rhythm, consent and an ending.

The invitation is intensity with containment.

THE ANIMAL THAT CANNOT COME INSIDE

The child draws an animal at the edge of the house but never lets it enter.

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The adult might simply notice the threshold and offer miniature doors, fences, bridges, pathways or figures that can meet outside. Perhaps the animal enters. Perhaps it does not.

The invitation is relationship without forcing closeness.

THE ANIMAL THE CHILD BECOMES

The child stops drawing the wolf and begins moving like it.

They may need open space, fabric, masks, mirrors, drums or a place to crawl, prowl and roar. The adult protects other children and the physical boundary while allowing the power of the creature to be embodied.

The invitation is safe possession of intensity.

WHEN TO STEP BACK

Not every repeated image needs extending.

Sometimes adults see a rich symbolic theme and immediately bury it under provision. The child draws one wolf and arrives the next morning to find a wolf tray, wolf books, wolf masks, wolf counting cards and a handwritten sign saying WOLF INVESTIGATION AREA.

Bit much.

The child may have wanted to draw a wolf.

Symbolic hospitality includes restraint.

We step back when the child has moved on. We do not repeatedly ask about the dream or image. We do not display private work without permission. We do not recruit the whole group into one child's inner material. We do not turn a living symbol into a weekly topic because the planning sheet looked empty.

The adult offers a door, not a conveyor belt.

If the child returns, the materials remain available. If they do not, the garden is allowed to grow somewhere else.

OBSERVATION WITHOUT OWNERSHIP

Practitioners may need to record recurring play, especially when it connects with wellbeing, development or safeguarding.

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The record should remain descriptive.

"Over four mornings, the child drew a large grey wolf. In the first two drawings the wolf chased a small figure. On Thursday the child drew a cave and said, 'Now it cannot get me.' On Friday the child chose to be the wolf during outdoor play and stopped when another child used the agreed signal."

That observation is useful. It shows repetition, change, language, agency and social response.

It does not claim that the wolf represents unresolved fear, that the child is integrating their shadow, that the dream proves trauma or that the child is expressing the Rebel archetype.

The image belongs first to the child.

Our records should not quietly confiscate it.

The child owns the image. We are only witnesses to its movement.

A HYPOTHESIS WORTH FOLLOWING

The Night Garden proposes a simple hypothesis.

When children are allowed to return to recurring images through drawing, story, movement, construction and role play - without those images being dismissed, decoded or over-directed - they may develop a more flexible relationship with experiences that previously felt fixed, frightening or unfinished.

The important change may not be that the image disappears.

The wolf may remain.

But perhaps it no longer controls every ending.

This is worth observing carefully.

Does the child gain more positions within the story? Does the image become more detailed, bounded or relational? Do places of safety, helpers, tools or routes of return begin to appear?

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Does embodiment bring relief, delight or greater control? Can the child eventually leave the image behind without being pushed away from it? Can adults support this movement while resisting the urge to explain the child to themselves?

These questions belong in reflective practice and future research.

For now, the wolf offers a modest lesson.

A repeated image is not necessarily going nowhere.

It may be circling the place where something new is trying to become possible.

*Perhaps the child keeps drawing the wolf because this time,
the story might finally move.*

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver Riddett is the founder of the Archetype Approach, a developmental and relational model of childhood built around twelve universal archetypes. Developed through practice at Children of Towan in Porthtowan, Cornwall, the approach helps parents and practitioners look beneath behaviour and respond through balance rather than correction.