

NORTHROP FRYE "THE ARCHETYPES OF LITERATURE" (1951)

In this essay, Frye outlines a theory of the arts in general and literature in particular which would be developed more fully in his celebrated *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). While his inspiration is undoubtedly Jungian (see, for example, his use of concepts such as 'archetype'), his approach is also significantly different in that where Jung's is still predominately author-oriented (what Abrams would term the 'expressive' approach), Frye's is arguably 'objective' (i.e. oriented towards the text itself, formalist). As such, Frye contends, in a vein similar to the New Critics, that literary criticism must be put on a systematic and scientific basis. He dismisses as "pseudo-criticism" (503) all criticism with "centrifugal" (503) tendencies, that is, which diverts our attention away from the literary work itself. He counts in this regard

- literary criticism that masquerades as "[c]asual value-judgments" (503), ones that are not "based on literary experience . . . but are . . . derived from religious or political prejudice" (503) (he is evidently thinking here of what the New Critic Ransom calls the 'moralistic' approach to literary criticism practised by the Humanists and the Marxists alike);
- literary criticism that focuses on the "impact of literature on the reader" (503); and
- literary criticism that focuses on the author as the source of the literary work. He dismisses in this regard all "[s]entimental judgments" (503) that are "based either on non-existent categories or antitheses ('Shakespeare studied life, Milton books') or on a visceral reaction to the writer's personality" (503)

Evidently, Frye shares much in these three respects with the New Critics and their opposition to moralistic, affective and intentional approaches to criticism. In place of moralistic, reader-oriented, and author-oriented critical approaches, Frye advocates a "rhetorical or structural analysis of a work of art" (503), an approach that is "centripetal" (503) in thrust, rather than 'centrifugal.'

Another key influence on Frye in this regard is the philosophy and the literary theory of Aristotle. Aristotle argues that to understand any natural or humanly-made phenomenon, it is necessary to ascertain the four conditions (causes) necessary to its existence: the *material cause* (the material it is made of or the social environment in which it is produced), the *efficient cause* (the divine or human agent responsible for its existence), the *formal cause* (what it is meant to be, what shape it is meant to have), and the *final cause* (to what end it exists, its ultimate purpose). The "material cause of the work of art" (506), for Frye consists in the "social conditions and cultural demands which produced it" (506). The quest to understand the material cause of literary works leads the critic outside of his own discipline (i.e. the study of literature) and into the province of biography, socio-political history and literary history. Frye is uneasy with any historical approach to literature because such an approach tends to be centrifugal, that is, it leads the critic away from the literary work itself. The quest to understand the "efficient cause" (505) of the literary work leads critics to focus on the relationship between the writer and his / her work. Frye cites in this regard what he terms the "fallacy of premature teleology" (504). This is the view that the "critic should not look for more in the poem than the poet may safely be assumed to have been conscious of putting there" (504). Gesturing towards the views of Freud, Frye asserts that a "kind of literary psychology connecting the poet with the poem" (505) is unavoidable for revealing the "failures in his expression, the things in him which are still attached to his work" (505) as well as his "private mythology, his own . . . peculiar formation of symbols, of much of which he is unconscious" (505). However, Frye is of the view that criticism should not degenerate into mere biography. Frye is uneasy with a biographical approach to criticism precisely because of the fact that "so many poets use so many of the same images" (506). Gesturing towards the views of Jung, Frye's point is that the literary work does not derive its significance solely from the personal life of the poet. The sea, for example, is what he terms an "archetypal symbol" (506), the significance of which resonates in the work of more than one poet. Indeed, he points out, any "profound masterpiece seems to draw us to a point at which we can see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance" (507) in a single work. In short, no literary work is explicable with reference solely to the author's personal life.

Frye's view is, in fact, that the "unity of the work of art . . . has not been produced solely by the unconditioned will of the artist" (505). This is because the artist is only the human medium through which the finished artistic product assumes a particular shape or "form" (505).

Frye's real interest, like Aristotle, is in the "formal cause" (505) of the individual literary work, that

is, the particular literary forms available to and unthinkingly utilised by a writer intent upon representing a particular subject-matter. For Frye the question of determining the formal cause of the poem is, hence, a “problem deeply involved with the question of genres” (505) or ‘kinds’ of literature. Frye dismisses in this respect two “fallacious” (505) conceptions of genre: a) the “Pseudo-Platonic” (506) (the view that genres exist “prior to and independently of creation” [506]), and b) the “pseudo-biological” (506) (which conceives genres as so many “evolving species” [506]). A Platonic view of genre necessarily involves a deductive approach to the study of genre whereby one postulates the traits peculiar to a particular form and then searches for actual examples which prove its existence. Frye adopts, by contrast, an inductive approach (one undoubtedly inspired by Aristotle): he examines a whole range of literature in order to ascertain those features of particular works by which they may be sorted into various categories. To comprehend a particular genre involves ascertaining its four causes, the most important of which is, for the reasons outlined above, the formal cause.

To understand the formal cause of a particular genre, Frye advocates in place of historical and biographical approaches what he terms a “literary anthropology” (506). This kind of criticism is one “concerned with the way that literature is informed by pre-literary categories such as ritual, myth and folktale” (507). The “relation between these categories and literature” (507), he argues, “is by no means purely one of descent” (507). That is, we should not think solely in temporal terms that more sophisticated forms of literature are the complicated derivations or descendants of more primitive and simple pre-literary forms (myth, folktale, etc.). Rather, literature is best understood as “not only complicating itself in time, but as spread out in conceptual space from some unseen centre” (507). Accordingly, Frye asserts that the study of literature must proceed on the basis of the “assumption of total coherence” (504), that is, the acceptance of the existence of a “coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which . . . will see the phenomena as parts of a whole” (504).

Frye’s point of view in this regard is very different from the New Critics. For him, the literary work cannot be studied in isolation of other works. He is of the view, rather, that all pre-literary and literary works form a cohesive and systemic whole in relation to which the individual work must be studied precisely because of what it shares with other works. In a nutshell, Frye’s argument is that there are certain recurrent narrative patterns (what Frye calls *mythoi*) which both pre-literary and literary forms share. The fundamental meaning of all fictions for Frye consists in what are sometimes called ‘pre-generic plot-structures’ as a result of which we understand *why* a particular story has ‘turned out’ as it has when we have identified the archetypal myth, or pre-generic plot structure, of which the story is an exemplification. Another important difference between Frye’s archetypal criticism and the tools and methodologies advocated by the New Critics is related to this point. Where the latter focus on lyric poems (poetry that describes subjective states of consciousness), Frye’s methodology seems to lend itself to forms of literature that involve the telling of some sort of story: prose or poetic narratives and drama. Accordingly, where the New Critics limit themselves primarily to the examination of what they describe as the ‘local texture’ (that is, the diction, imagery, etc.), Frye is of the view that one must examine both characterisation and plot-structure (indeed, these two are consubstantial) in addition to local texture in an effort to arrive at an understanding of the archetypal form inherent in the text in question.

The goal of literary criticism is, for Frye to discern the “archetypal form (508) (sometimes Frye refers simply to the ‘archetype’) which the author merely “recreated” (508) in his / her individual work. The best way of detecting the *archetypal* form of a particular literary work is to proceed, according to Frye, inductively. He proposes that one start with the “intricate verbal texture” (507) and patterns of imagery to be found in the text to hand, before moving on from there to the “network of psychological relationships” (507) between characters and the sequence of actions in which they are involved (the plot). This is where an Aristotelian approach to analysing plot-structure is extremely useful. One starts with emotions inspired in the audience (sadness or joy or a mixture of the two) in an effort to understand whether one is dealing with tragedy or comedy or a mixture of the two (tragicomedy) and works backward from there to an understanding of exactly how the sequence of events which constitute the plot are ordered and ultimately to the nature of the genre in question. One asks oneself such questions in this regard as: is there a narrator or persona? Are characters present in the work? Are we dealing, hence, with lyric, epic or dramatic poetry? Etc. We must, in other words, follow the sequence of events dictated by the particular form of narrative in question in an effort to detect the pattern or structure inherent

therein: "We hear or listen to a narrative, but when we grasp a writer's total pattern we 'see' what he means" (508), Frye writes. It is but a short step from an understanding of the narrative structure of the work to hand to an appreciation of the archetypal form which informs the work in question.

However, the "meaning" (508) of a literary work must be viewed as a function of what he describes as the "integrity" (508) of the writer's "completed form" (508). That is, one cannot ignore local texture (the pattern of imagery in the work) in favour of plot nor plot in favour of local texture. (Frye criticises in this respect what he calls the "representational fallacy" [508], to wit, the view of narrative as a "sequential representation of events in an outside 'life,' and of meaning as a reflection of some external 'idea'" [508]. Frye argues that we must see narrative as the "linear movement" [508] or artificially ordered sequence of actions performed by characters. Similarly, an image "is not merely the verbal replica of an eternal object, but any unit of a verbal structure seen as part of a total pattern or rhythm" [508]. In other words, one should not seek to understand a literary work as if it were a reflection of real life.)

For Frye, the narrative and imagery patterns detectable in this way in literary works can be traced first to myths and thence to those human rituals, in the form of harvest songs, sacrifices and folk customs, etc., handed down from time immemorial. These rituals are themselves responses to or attempts to render intelligible natural cycles such as the solar cycle of the day, the seasonal cycle of the year and the organic cycle of human life. That is, such rituals represent an effort on the part of humans to 'humanise' natural phenomena, in other words, to make some sense out of events in the physical world over which humans in fact have little control and which are in and of themselves perhaps inherently unintelligible. As such, rituals are "deliberate expression of a will to synchronize human and natural energies" (509). These rituals are themselves at some point formalised into 'myths' which are, consequently, essentially narratives constructed around a central human protagonist the pattern of whose actions reflect or correspond to the natural cycles.

Hence, we may tabulate the relationship between natural cycles, rituals, myth, and literary genre in the following fashion:

daily / seasonal / human cycle	myth (based upon an archetypal pattern of human experience)	literary genre
dawn / <i>spring</i> / birth	the birth, revival, resurrection of the hero	romance
zenith / <i>summer</i> / marriage or triumph	the triumph, marriage or apotheosis of the hero	comedy; pastoral; idyll
sunset / <i>autumn</i> / impending death	the fall, sacrifice, isolation or death of the hero	tragedy; elegy
night / <i>winter</i> / dissolution	the unheroic nature of the hero	satire

Frye points out that all literary genres are initially "derived from" (511) and thus variations on the "quest-myth" (511). All myths are basically concerned, that is, with some kind of quest to accomplish some sort of goal. Each genre gestures towards a particular kind of human quest, that is, one involving the protagonist in a specific pattern of actions. In other words, the hero may triumph (comedy), fail or be killed (tragedy), be reborn (romance) and/or be the object of criticism rather than adulation (satire). Each pattern of actions and thus each genre are traceable and thus correspond to a particular cycle, especially of the seasons: comedy--summer / midday; tragedy – autumn / dusk; satire – winter / night; and romance --spring / morning. Literary history, he contends, may be divided into particular stages in which any one of the genres/archetypal forms listed above predominate.

Moreover, Frye goes so far as to argue that all art caters to a single impulse. The "final cause" (512) or ultimate purpose of literature is the "resolution of the antithesis" (512) between day and night, light and darkness, summer and winter, life and death, etc. which informs all myth. All art functions to

effect the “mingling of the sun and the hero, the realizing of a world in which the inner desire and the outward circumstance coincide” (512). The “central myth of art must be the vision of an omnipotent personal community beyond an indifferent nature” (512), man triumphant over a nature subservient to his will, Frye contends.

In summary, for Frye, literature is not mimetic. Literary writers reflect not reality but, rather, regurgitate in complex ways in their individual works those simple pre-literary mythical narratives that are central to the cultural heritage of humanity. The human actions depicted therein are ultimately grounded in those personifications which humans have come to attach to natural events and phenomena in an effort to humanise an inherently intransigent and unintelligible natural world. It must be noted, however, that it is not for the most part a question of the writer consciously deciding to write a particular narrative corresponding to a specific genre. The choice of narrative form originates in the collective unconscious of mankind: when one wants to treat a particular aspect of human existence, particular forms suggest themselves automatically. For example, tragic human experiences necessitate the utilisation by the writer of the appropriate genre, in this case, tragedy. Frye seems to say that one’s range of choices in this regard as a writer is not delimited by the range of narrative forms at the disposal of a given culture: the process which Frye describes is one that is universal to all humankind. Although the specifics and the particularities may differ from culture to culture, any given story is ultimately reducible to its archetypal core which is, from Frye’s viewpoint, the true significance or meaning of the work in question. All humans everywhere, from his point of view, have had to contend with the same natural facts which they have attempted to render intelligible and to overcome in remarkably similar ways. In short, Frye’s argument is that the different forms taken by literary works pre-exist the intentional or unintentional choices made by their writers. In other words, writers (for the most part unthinkingly) utilise certain pre-existent literary forms (or genres) that are universally appropriate to and thus indispensable in the treatment of the subject-matter (that is, the particular aspect of human experience) which they want to deal with. Frye proposes that the totality of literary works therefore constitutes a ‘self-contained literary universe’ which has been created over centuries by the workings of the human imagination. The ultimate goal (final cause) in so doing, Frye suggests, is to ‘humanise’ the alien and indifferent world of nature, to render it, in appearances at least, malleable to human will. That is, literature plays an essential role in refashioning the material universe into an alternative universe that is humanly intelligible and viable, one adapted to essential human needs and concerns.