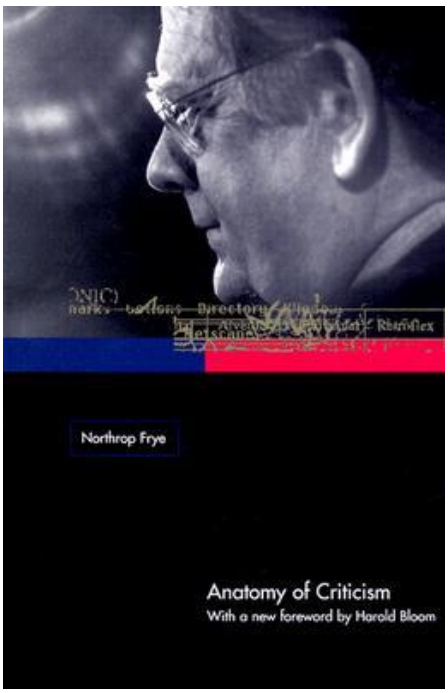

Anatomy of Criticism

Northrop Frye

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Anatomy of Criticism Northrop Frye

Striking out at the conception of criticism as restricted to mere opinion or ritual gesture, Northrop Frye wrote this magisterial work proceeding on the assumption that criticism is a structure of thought and knowledge in its own right. Employing examples of world literature from ancient times to the present, he provides a conceptual framework for the examination of literature. In four brilliant essays on historical, ethical, archetypical, and rhetorical criticism, he applies "scientific" method in an effort to change the character of criticism from the casual to the causal, from the random and intuitive to the systematic.

Harold Bloom contributes a fascinating and highly personal preface that examines Frye's mode of criticism and thought (as opposed to Frye's criticism itself) as being indispensable in the modern literary world.

Anatomy of Criticism Details

Date	:	Published October 15th 2000 by Princeton University Press (first published 1957)
ISBN	:	9780691069999
Author	:	Northrop Frye
Format	:	Paperback 400 pages
Genre	:	Criticism, Literary Criticism, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Philosophy, Literature

From Reader Review Anatomy of Criticism for online ebook

Simon says

OK, it's certainly silly to give this book such a low rating, but honestly, I found it bad. The Polemical Introduction was intriguing but left one wanting to know exactly what he thought the science of criticism would be like. The first essay, on modes, was a taxonomy by principles (the status of the hero relative to 'us') that didn't seem all that intuitive to me. And at the end, there seemed little beyond taxonomy. What this had to do with the goal of explaining the literary phenomena, which I thought, from the Introduction, was the goal, I don't know. Then, the second essay, began to deal with issues related to the philosophy of language: meaning, reference, etc. I found his treatment of these topics maddeningly jejune, confused and insensitive to distinctions. It made me so frustrated that I gave up reading at that point.

I wish someone would explain why I'm wrong, and what I'm missing.

Feliks says

This is pretty dense material. You have to read each paragraph fairly slowly to make sure you grasp his point, or the next one to follow makes no sense. Reversing one's tracks and going-back-over a page is sometimes necessary. This treatise will leave you feeling pummeled and exhausted.

It doesn't start off well. The most difficult and also the most appetizing of targets (in his first two essays, 'Theory of Modes' and 'Theory of Symbols') are the shortest and the murkiest. In essay 1 & 2, 'familiar' references (such as mention of Shakespeare or Homer) are sorely in need--but they can hardly appear often enough as Frye hauls-you-on-his-back through a slough of sticky, mucky, literary quagmires. It feels like drowning in verbiage.

When he sets out on this journey, he's simply far too stingy with his examples. And (in terms of sheer style and readability) there's simply no humor, ease, refreshment, or pausing-for-breath. No stopping-by-the-wayside...much less a cozy-grate-by-the-fire on a winter's night. It's an 'airless' discussion. "Uncomfortable reading", even for me (and I read English literary-criticism quite a lot).

Worse, Frye seems to me to shirk from his main promise, which is to afford us all a new clarity. But there's only faint immanence to be found among anything he is stating; which I find a little irksome. Reading text this subtle and nuanced--anytime you look up from the page, yearning for a mile-marker or highway number...you should quickly be able to find one. In Frye, there's none. No roadmap, no outline, no structure, no taxonomy, no hierarchy, no scaffold, no anatomy.

Sure--in one essay--you might get a couple subheadings like, 'Symbol as Mediator' or 'Symbol as Reception' but this is not very helpful. These lurch up unexpectedly out of nowhere; and as soon as you come to one of these junctures, you simply plunge right over it back into a bottomless well of words.

At the start of each of these essays, Frye seems to follow this pattern: he will begin by taking up a historic or traditional definition or concept--hold it up to the light, turn it this-way-and-that. Then, he'll state how he might defend or attack it, based on some angle which he considers the stronger or weaker strategy for doing so.

But then, he goes on to rattle off example after example of 'obstacles' or 'exceptions' or 'fissures' in the methodology. At the end of the essay, all you have is a list of why things *won't* work; and you discover Frye has really traveled nowhere. You are not given a 'framework' (a term touted much on the cover's blurbs) for ever approaching the topic in future, on your own.

This is why I'm not thrilled with what he's done here. I mean come on--if you're going to give people a book of 'celebrated essays' which are supposed to enhance our understanding, supposed to enlighten us...then deliver your points clearly, make them as transparent as the dawn and as sharp-edged as crystal. Tell us why you're choosing to 'sift-for-gold' using one pan of water rather than the one next to it; tell us why you're choosing one creek vs the neighboring one right alongside. What's the rationale behind your approach?

Frye simply hands us long, chunky blocks of his thought..moving from one subject to the next --with no reason for his choices, ever explained. Instead of traversing from one 'tier' to the next, he rambles and ranges on at great, garrulous, length--talking about scads of stuff--- but never truly exposing any deep or hidden structure to it all. He never explains any new method via which to re-consider the 'history of written English'. He provides plenty of 're-definitions' but no new method of analysis. There's nothing which one can pick up from this book and walk away with. We're simply listening to a man 'talk himself out'.

These were my impressions for the first half of the publication. To be fair, things got somewhat better after that point. The second two essays in the book ('Theory of Myths', & 'Theory of Genres') are given more length and more lucidity. But, they're also the easier subject matter and the least in need of explication. Many other critics have handled them.

The strength of Frye's acumen does come through best in essay #3. I have to acknowledge this. It's a formidable performance. He hits his stride talking about myth; its the best section overall. I've rarely seen the milestones of western lit arrayed so neatly. Really (in just this one area) Frye surveys myth-based narrative better than even Joseph Campbell. Myth lovers, speed thee to essay #3.

Bottom line: I suppose I respect what he's done...I respect his obvious erudition..I just didn't enjoy the endproduct very much. Won't find very much 'utility' in it...but it is going to stay on my shelf for a while. There's too many factoids spilling out from between these two covers to just toss it. Anytime I need a quick 'handle' on Shakespeare, Voltaire, Swift, Jonson, Marlowe, or Moliere--this is where I'll come.

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sologdin says

A superior display of erudition.

Sets out its task in terms reminiscent of Kant's assertion that "philosophy stands in need of a science" in the Critique of Pure Reason: "If criticism exists, it must be an examination of literature in terms of a conceptual framework derivable from an inductive survey of the literary field. The word 'inductive' suggests some sort of scientific procedure. What if criticism is a science as well as an art?" (7). Both Kant and Frye strike me as latter day Miltons, who, within their respective fields, desire to assert Eternal Providence, And justify the ways of God to men.

Frye is of course much more humble about it than Milton (but who isn't?), and, in addressing his miltonic-kantian task, offers this volume as a mere attempt to annotate T.S. Eliot's ideas (18) (which ideas I regard as thoroughly reactionary and dullard). Frye is more lively than that, though, even as he sets out neo-aristotelian

schematics, neo-spenglerian distinctions, neo-arnoldian pseudo-sociology. As with Toynbee or Delbruck, Frye's panoramic reading makes plausible associations across time and space, dispelling problems about which I'd been thinking for years in a sentence. That's not to say that he possesses the answer (it's literary theory, after all)--but that he has an answer.

Much like "42," though, sometimes answers arrive without any question requiring their presence. This volume arrives during the height of the New Criticism, and marks out several departures therefrom, including some arriere garde dangers. But it is nevertheless a study of formalism.

We see both departure and danger in one representative passage: "The verbal action of *Figaro* is comic and that of *Don Giovanni* tragic; but in both cases the audience is exalted by the music above the reach of tragedy and comedy, and, though as profoundly moved as ever, is not emotionally involved with the discovery of plot or characters" (289). This bit departs from New Criticism by delving into the "affective fallacy," but it's not reception theory proper, as it reduces audience response to the formal categories of the text, rather than carrying out a materialist's inductive survey of actual reception. The latter is laborious, surely--whereas formalist heretic Frye is content to read the form of the operas and decide what an audience should do with it.

Thickest citation block in the index is Shakespeare, naturally, followed by other predictables: Milton, Chaucer, Joyce. His commentary on individual texts is usually very impressive, such as classifying Shakespearean plays and whatnot. An example: the text lays out a tidy scheme for prose fiction--the novel is extroverted and personal; the romance, introverted and personal; the confession, introverted and intellectual; the menippean satire, extroverted and intellectual (308). Texts can partake of any of these prose fiction genres simultaneously--and therefore the genius of Joyce's *Ulysses* (and I agree) is that it registers on all four in a unified manner (313-14). Slick, surely.

But the slickest bit is self-referential. Noting that "menippean satire" is unwieldy and misleading as a designation, Frye adopts the term *anatomy*, eponymous of Burton (311). The anatomy as genre is marked out "by piling up an enormous mass of erudition" and "in overwhelming pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon" (id.). Its object is "mental attitudes" such as "pedants, bigots, cranks, perverts, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men" (309). There's much more to be said in platonist definition, but wittgensteinian examples sometimes work better: Lucian, Erasmus, Rabelais, Swift, Apuleius, Petronius, Voltaire, Burton, Joyce are practitioners; best known works of the genre: *Moby Dick*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Don Quixote*, *Brave New World*. Even Boethius is considered in this connection. (I'd add that the subtitle of Kraken should get us to think of Mieville seriously in terms of menippean satire.)

With reference to this text's own title, we can only conclude that it signifies as assertive, persuasive rhetoric regarding a non-literary purpose, as laid out in the statement of authorial purpose, *supra*. Frye then notes that allegedly "non-literary prose" might be read in a literary way by criticism (326 ff.). This means that Frye's non-fictional anatomy should be read also as an anatomy in the tradition of Lucian and Sterne. It's a big satirical *fuck you!* to the literary theory establishment as well as a love letter to same.

Recommended.

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peiman-mir5 rezakhani says

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Sunny says

I have to admit thAt I found this book really tough to read and understand. Northrop references so many books in this to make his point based around art and literature mainly that it's hard to keep up at times. I have probably ready only 25 % of the books he is referring to. So found it hard to relate to some of the things he is talking about. The book does make some excellent points around poetry and civilisation and language and culture which I found immensely interesting but on the whole I had to skim read large parts of the book as it was way too intellectuall for me. Topics covered are: modes, symbols, myths, comedy, romance, tragedy and. Irony and satire, plays and genres.

Dan says

Although Frye's traditional approach to the criticism of literary texts seems dated now, particularly from the perspective of recent literary theory (feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, post-structuralism, etc.), this text is an impressive attempt at systematizing Western literature according to genres, myths, symbols and modes.

Luci_digio says

Da Introduzione polemica:
"Un pubblico che cerchi di fare a meno della critica, e sostenga di sapere che cosa desideri ed ami, fa violenza alle arti e perde la sua memoria culturale" p. 11
"C'è un altro motivo che giustifica l'esistenza della critica: questa può parlare, mentre tutte le arti sono mute. Nella pittura, nella scrittura e nella musica è abbastanza facile vedere che l'arte emerge, ma non può dire nulla. E per quanto ciò sembri voler dire che il poeta è muto o privo di parola, esiste un senso più alto per cui le poesie sono silezione come statue: la poesia uso disinteressato della parola" p. 11

Gorkem says

Frye, 20.yüzy?l?n en önemli edebiyat ele?tirmenlerden biri ?üphesiz.Özellikle mit ele?tirisi, kahraman?n yolculu?ununa bak???- arketipler ele?tirisi teorileri edebiyat ele?tirisine ciddi yön kazand?rm?? ve ayn? zamanda edebiyat ele?tirisinin sadece akademik veya belirli bir grup taraf?ndan yap?lmas?na kar?? duru?u, bu alan?n geni? bir toplulu?a yay?lmas?n? sa?lam??t?r.

Frye ele?tiriye edebiyat?n ne oldu?unu tart??arak modül ilerlemeler içinde ba?l?yor. Bir edebiyat eserini okunur ve sanat eseri de?erli k?lan ba?l?klar tarihsel ve antropolojik olu?um içinde ?iirsel metinlerle birlikte inceliyor. Bundan sonra kendi olu?turdu?u Edebiyat Modlar? Teorisini 4 makale/deneme içinde inceliyor:

a. ?lk Deneme: Kipler Teorisi:
b.?kinci Deneme: Sembol Teorisi
c. Arketipik Ele?tiri: Mit Teorisi
d.Retorik Ele?tirisi: Tür Teorisi

Her deneme ba??ms?z olarak okunabilece?i gibi s?ras?yla okunabilecek ak?c?l?kta.

Kitap benim aç?mda çok zihin aç?c? oldu. Okudu?um metinlerde hep kafam? kurcalayan sorular?n cevab?n? buldu?umu belirtmeliyim. Fakat, ?iir analizine bazen a??r? denecek fazla yönelmesi, söz geçen metinlerin çevirisi olmad???ndan ya da olanlar? okumad???mdan yazar?n belirtmi? oldu?u ba?lamlar? kavramam konusunda hava kalma hissini do?al olarak yaratt?. Her ?eye ra?men son 2 deneme, gerçekten edebi okumalar?n incelenmesi konusunda çok güzel bir ba?lang?ç seviyesi olu?turdu benim ad?ma.

?lgi duyanlara iyi okumalar dilerim.

Alex says

This book (1957) is an insane Blakean view onto Western literary totality, a set of theories as stacking dolls, a proto-structuralist polemic against dispersed schools of criticism and against 'literary taste' for 'archetypal criticism,' for the ideology of the 'eternal return.' There's some sniping against critics who thought "criticism couldn't become a science," but Frye wasn't going to take "criticism couldn't become a science"... for an answer. There's also some rushing to create a space for criticism in the disciplinary ladder. All in all, a very pretty mandala.

1) historical criticism: theory of mode
a) myth b) romance c) high mimetic d) low mimetic e) ironic

A historical sequence, a circle of ethoses: how a protagonist is depicted against his peers/background (fiction/mythos) or how a poet presents his prophecy to the people (thematic/dianoaia). From divine to risible.

2) ethical criticism: theory of symbol
a) literal [motif] b) descriptive [sign] c) formal [image]]d) mythical [archetype] e) anagogic [monad]

How to read the "symbol" in medieval times, or like a historical critic, or like a new critic, or like a Jungian/Frazerian, or a William Blake. (All of the above).

3) archetypal criticism: theory of myth
a) comedy b) romance c) tragedy d) irony

Myth has already written all the categories of the Apocalyptic (that's everything perfect) and Demonic (that's really bad). There's the same four set of characters adapted for each (the alazon, eiron, bomolochon, and agroikos [loudmouth, straight man, class clown, and tightass]), adapted for each season; and there's a sequence of six flavors of each season, which follow the modes as outlined in the first essay.

4) rhetorical criticism: theory of genre
a) drama [...] b) epic [metric recursion] c) fiction [continuity] d) lyric [association]

A genre derives its strength from its rhythm, though rhythms mix all the time, and there's no ideal types that exist in the Real World, hombre. You could run every genre through the five modes or the four myths, if you'd like. (This is what Frye does).

In conclusion, Aristotle already did it.

Justin Evans says

Well, this is pretty dense in a way that books usually aren't these days. Not dense in a Frenchified theory way, and not dense in a flowery language kind of way. Just conceptually dense. Which is fine, but not all of the concepts are useful. Density aside, the first two essays - on historical criticism and 'symbols,' (which for Frye doesn't really mean, well, symbol) - are pretty good, if overly schematic. The third essay is horrific. Really, you just need a diagram for it, but we get over 100 pages instead. The fourth essay, on genres, is occasionally interesting but also too schematic and way too long. I'd stick to the introduction and first two essays, and skim the rest.

One thing that's odd is that people say this seems 'dated' thanks to Marxist or feminist or postcolonial theory, or deconstruction. Not really, though. Frye's aware of all those trends already in 1957 (not counting postco, I guess); and his work isn't dated by deconstruction. It's just the opposite side, handily summarised in Harold Bloom's (awful) foreword: for Bloom and his ilk, literature is all about indeterminacy, and more or less a brawl among self-loathing geniuses. For Frye, literature is a "cooperative enterprise," part of the attempt to make life better for ourselves. Not dated, then, but one side of an ongoing argument. Frankly, I hope Frye's side wins. Then there'll be no need to re-read this book.

Bob R Bogle says

It took a long time, but I finally finished reading Northrop Frye's 1957 classic, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, from cover to cover. It is, as Frye expressed in the opening paragraph, a work of "pure critical theory," practically and appropriately biblical and epic in style and structure. Because anyone reading this review is likely to already have a good notion of the content of the Anatomy or, in the case of students for whom it is assigned reading, who soon enough shall, I will not belabor that matter here; instead, I'll spend a few moments and words to try to locate the work in its proper celestial locus almost 60 years since its first publication.

The jargon-heavy Anatomy is a thick slab of critical theory marbled with little fat or garnish on the side. Frye approaches literature and its criticism as a physical universe unto itself, having some connection to the world we inhabit, but these connections are of little interest to him, or less. This all has to do with words and how they hook together, what kinds of patterns emerge from their concatenations, and what their attendant etymology is, and mythic allusions, as well as how cultures work and rework the old myths, always pressing their own stamp upon the myths and words, so the stories change even while they carry their most ancient meanings, or significations. Still, it is how we talk about stories or poems, or how we relate to them in the unfolding of time, that is of more concern to Frye, for criticism becomes for him something of a persisting cloud of dust raised upon the old roads of literature that is inseparable from the original item. Frye penetrates to pattern where others perceive only a hodgepodge of old fairytales and random psychological archetypes. He assembles these patterns laboriously into a structure which is become his theory, and it is for the student to decide whether to accept or reject Frye, or to take bits and pieces of his conclusions and adapt them to current use.

I am struck that the Anatomy appeared shortly before the heyday of the literary renaissance of the 1960s, and it's easy to see why this book provided a timely roadmap for many who were to launch their own explorations of that other-dimensional spacetime of limitless literary possibility toward the end of that turbulent decade. But it is now 2015 as I write these words and the world has changed again, so that now the Anatomy almost feels like both a triumphant summation of centuries of literature and its scholarly criticism as well as a final fanfare before the darkness which was to come. For we every day sink deeper into a new Dark Age in which all that Frye clearly cherished and believed in is rejected by our modern society ? one bridles at calling it a culture ? as impractical, non-utilitarian and dangerously liberal. We live in a time in which free-thought is summarily rejected, in which we are to aspire to become useful tools of the state, to collect our pittance and go home and plug in to the bread-and-circus world series and pennant races and celebrity shenanigans de jour and cheer on the outrageous tantrums of our political party of choice. Reading literature for literature's sake has become a sign of perversity, a symptom that one is improperly integrated into the social machine. Despite Frye's careful arguments, he now seems impossibly old-fashioned, a relic of the past, a brief harbinger of a world-to-come that failed to thrive and to survive.

I am a scientist ? and an admirer of science ? by training, a cog in an industrial nightmare by vocation and a writer by choice. I would not be uplifted as an exemplar of the society in which I find myself. Unlike all those who surround me, seemingly, I believe our culture ? not this toxic society ? has now a more pressing need for broad liberal arts education than perhaps ever before. Any society that values monetary profit and ransacking the planet far above tending the needs of its constituent citizens is sick, and a return to the arts, including the literary arts and theories of their criticism, must surely be part of the requisite cure. So I believe that Frye may grow dusty on the shelves for years to come, or for decades to come, or maybe even longer,

but one day Frye will be read again when the wheel has turned sufficiently. Then a more encompassing theory of criticism will be put forth, leaving much of the Anatomy behind, no doubt, but incorporating its mythic essence at least, and there will be a culture which will advance upon his work. Then, once again, the theories of literature and criticism will be reborn, and they will be appropriately valued.

Ellen says

[image error]

Jason says

Northrup Frye argues that literary criticism is a way of thinking, defining it thus: "… by criticism I mean the whole work of scholarship and taste concerned with literature which is a part of what is called variously liberal education, culture, or the study of the humanities. I start from the principle that criticism is not simply a part of this larger activity, but an essential part of it" (3). Literature is not taught, criticism is taught. He places criticism, and the humanities on the same level as mathematics and the sciences. He intends to rescue literary criticism from the sense that it is taste, which is entirely based on what is the current moral climate. To do this, he takes the various strands of criticism and posits a unity between them. He seeks to elucidate a structure or framework for studying literature. In my reading, the word, typology came to mind. He is setting up all the different interpretative and methodical concepts together to form a coherent whole. He suggest that criticism is like science in many ways; in introduction he suggests that like early science, criticism needs to realize that it is conceptual framework to work in (15). He argues further that criticism should not lean on theories outside literature to explain literature, but rather it should look to literature to explain literature. Criticism in his thinking is a problem of interrelationships.

He brings together all the different critical positions and concepts of literature. The first essay is concerned with modes, which refers to the hero's power of action in relation to the audience and the environment. He sees five different modes: myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic and ironic, where the hero's power is reduced from divinity to less than the reader's. Frye appears to see some sort of historical progression through these modes, but he also suggests a cycle, where ironic leads back into myth. After these modes, he examines these modes in tragedy and then in comedy. Finally he examines the thematic mode. Thematic here is a way of saying idea; the thematic mode puts the story after or behind the organizing idea of the literature. This response paper falls into the thematic mode, as its main concern is the idea of book, though part of this is the construction. He notes the ancient Greeks saw six aspects to poetry: mythos (plot), ethos (character and setting), dianoia (idea or poetic thought). The other three (melody, diction and spectacle) he leaves for later. Dianoia is what we are concerned with when we ask what the story's point is. (52). To discuss ethos, he defines internal fictions (hero and his society) and external fictions (the author and his society). He states that all literature has a fictional and thematic aspect. In the comic, the hero tends to integrate with his society (or creates a new society). In the tragic, the hero tends to isolate from society.

The second essay concerns symbols, which are units isolated for attention by the critic. Here the framework come from phases. Phase, in this essay, mean the context in which the narrative and meaning of a work is considered (367). There are five phases: literal, descriptive, formal, archetypal (elsewhere he calls this one central) and finally anagogic. The literal and descriptive are dicussed together; here the symbol is motif and

sign. Frye is critical of the popular use of the term literal: it is used for “unimaginative illiterates” or to suggest something is free from ambiguity (76). Here he means it as the poem itself (77). The literal meaning of a poem is the interrelationship of the poems parts; the whole of the poem. In the formal phase, the symbol is image. The form of a poem remains the same whether read from beginning to end or seen as a whole; thus both pattern and narrative. Next he examines the mythical phase, where symbol is archetype, closely tied to romance. Here I felt most comfortable. Poetry here is a technique of civilization. Finally he discusses the anagogic phase: symbol as monad. Monad means unity or one; thus Frye’s sense that it is the center of an individual’s literary experience. The individual is separated from society. Anagogic means spiritual or elevated.

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John Pistelli says

If I had to choose one book as the foundation for an education in literary criticism and theory, I might choose *Anatomy of Criticism*; I wish I had read it much earlier. Even if one's goal were the deconstruction, to various ends or just for the hell of it, of the concept of literature, this might be the most productive text to deconstruct, because Frye construes his theory as the climax and (to use his typological Biblical language) fulfillment of all prior western literary theory from Aristotle to Eliot.

In his "Polemical Introduction," Frye rejects prevailing ways of defining the critical project. The goal of criticism, he says, should not be canon-making or politicking, but rather a properly elaborated science of the whole body of literature:

> Criticism, rather, is to art what history is to action and philosophy to wisdom: a verbal imitation of a human productive power which in itself does not speak. And just as there is nothing which the philosopher cannot consider philosophically, and nothing which the historian cannot consider historically, so the critic should be able to construct and dwell in a conceptual universe of his own.

This may sound like an arid scientistic or New Critical project, severing literature from life, but, as the end of the book makes clear, it is just the opposite: since criticism addresses itself primarily to rhetoric, and since no concept or emotion can be expressed without rhetoric, criticism in fact addresses itself to everything human. In this, and in his refusal to adjudicate questions of literary quality (which he dismisses as mere "taste," hence social prejudice), Frye's seemingly old-fashioned book leads more or less directly to some variant (a non-Marxist one) of cultural studies and multiculturalism.

But if *Anatomy of Criticism* is known for anything these days, it as a compendium of quasi-Jungian mythical or archetypal theories of literature. Frye argues that the four central types of criticism—the historical, the

ethical, the archetypal, and the generic—examine different aspects of literature that can nevertheless be reconstructed by the theorist as a unity. This unity is ultimately based upon categorial human mythoi that refer to the life-cycles of individuals, societies, and the human race. Just as Shelley claimed that every language is "the chaos of a cyclic poem," so Frye argues that literature in its diversity is made up of primordial images and narratives. For criticism to be a science, Frye believes, it must have an ultimate end in sight, and the ultimate end is literature-in-its-totality's vision of the human archetypes on their progress through the natural rotation:

> The structural principles of literature…are to be derived from archetypal and anagogic criticism, the only kind that assumes a larger context, of literature as a whole. […] Hence the structural principles of literature are as closely related to mythology and comparative religion as those of painting are to geometry. In this essay [on myths] we shall be using the symbolism of the Bible, and to a lesser extent Classical mythology, as a grammar of literary archetypes.

These mythoi, to each of which Frye assigns a season, move in a pattern from birth to death to rebirth and they are narrated in their entirety in The Bible, which Frye construes as a total myth. My brief review, even with selective quotation, cannot really reproduce the psychedelic quality of Frye's pages on these topics, and I would have to read the book again to be able to account precisely for how the mythoi interrelate across modes and genres. As Frye traces how myth and mode interact, how each literary work and genre can be seen as one element in a total process, his book gives the pleasure of a narrative in which a maddening and chaotic mystery suddenly becomes clear:

> The four *mythoi* that we are dealing with, comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony, may now be seen as four aspects of a central unifying myth. *Agon* or conflict is the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a sequence of marvellous adventures. *Pathos* or catastrophe, whether in triumph or in defeat, is the archetypal theme of tragedy. *Sparagmos*, or the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world, is the archetypal theme of irony and satire. *Anagnorisis*, or recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero and bis bride, is the archetypal theme of comedy.

Most people today probably doubt that criticism can be a science in the way that Frye defines it, even though Frye was probably correct to think that literature would not be able to maintain its status in the modern university unless it could defend itself as a disinterested and autonomous contribution to *Wissenschaft*. But creative writers are happy to present themselves either as crazy people or craftspeople, and literary scholars have been cheerfully selling their birthright for every mess of pottage that has come their way, from structural linguistics to critical sociology to techno-utopianism. Having sawn off the branch they were sitting on (to vary my metaphor), literary scholars have little cause to complain, it seems to me, if they find themselves without support (why pay a literary critic to do imprecise sociology?). Even at that, though, Frye's Jung- and Frazer-inspired "science" will strike even sympathetic readers as too New Agey to be a sober and scholarly account of a body of historical evidence, however entertaining certain sensibilities (I mean mine!) happen to find it, and however inspiring it is as an attempt to make good on Wilde's program for criticism: to show "the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms."

Frye does envision an ultimate "ethical" or social mission for literature, as he reveals in *Anatomy*'s extraordinary "Tentative Conclusion." There he defines the study of literature as a humanizing force that provides students with a repertoire of images for the just society that humanity will probably never attain but must always strive for. Readers of Fredric Jameson will recall the ease with which Jameson—playing Hegel to Frye's Kant, as it were—was able to set Frye's static archetypes into motion to appropriate his theory for Marxism. But Frye takes a hard line against Marxism, correctly observing that revolution and politics, by

denying the autonomy that legitimates literature's utopianism and by interfering with the freedom of writers and scholars to pursue their visions, actually curtails human development in the guise of pushing it forward. Frye, to be sure, is something of an optimist, and his ultimate view of our species' progress seems to be something on the order of "Don't push the river—it flows." This will anger conservatives for its somewhat cavalier attitude toward tradition and it will anger radicals for its passivity; in short, Frye has constructed one of the most ingenious defenses of liberalism known to me. (I have posted a long quotation from Frye on this political theme over at my Tumblr to avoid lengthening this review: see here if you're interested.)

Why read this book today if you aren't convinced of its politics or its theoretical presuppositions? Joshua Rothman gives the best reason: Frye's lucid exposition of literary genres and modes expands our vocabulary for talking about novels, poems, plays, films, and other imaginative forms. When Frye protests against labelling any work of prose narrative a "novel," insisting on the contrary that there are in fact four genres of prose narrative—romance, novel, confession, anatomy—you can sense the literary universe get a bit bigger. In that sense, this might be the most affirmative book of literary criticism or theory I have ever read. Frye ultimately implies that knowledge and pleasure should be concomitant in the attention we pay to the arts. The more we understand about a work's tradition, the more we will be able to value it for what it is rather than censuring it for what it is not: as Frye says, we should not judge a romance by the standards of the novel and vice versa.

(Though some might understand what I mean if I say I am bit disappointed that Rothman has to use this theory to explicate the middlebrow genre-inflected literary fiction of today, whereas Frye's own essay on genre climaxes in an attempt to explain the avant-garde achievements of Joyce: Frye praises *Ulysses* as a "complete prose epic" that contains all four prose genres in perfect balance, and he claims that *Finnegans Wake* goes further even than that to attain something like scriptural status.)

While some may think that Frye's compendium of jargon and his intense schematism might neutralize literary appreciation by taking the passion out of it, it instead increases appreciation by imparting more and more language with which to express one's knowledge about what one reads. I do believe, however, that it would be a disaster to try to create a great work by trying to conform to Frye's categories: that would probably result in Joseph Campbell, *Star Wars*, and other such simplistic stuff that piles up cliches and calls them myths. Even if we accept Frye's postulate that a critic must be a scientist, we can agree that it is the scientist's business to account for nature, and not nature's business to tailor and circumscribe itself for the benefit of the scientist.

In any case, I doubt this will be my only reading of this learned and mind-expanding book. I would advise every student of literature, professional or amateur, to read it sooner rather than later.

Eric says

Frye writes like a genial, slightly waggish but awesomely learned professor talks. This book should be subtitled, "The Mutations of Storytelling." Easygoing and smoothly narrated next to the nigh-nightmarish Wimsatt & Welleck.

Some:

"The disadvantage of making the queen-figure the hero's mistress, in anything more than a political sense, is that she spoils his fun with the distressed damsels he meets on his journey, who are often enticingly tied

naked to rocks or trees, like Andromeda or Angelica in Aristo."

Jacob Wickham says

Northrup Frye argues that literary criticism is a way of thinking, defining it thus: "… by criticism I mean the whole work of scholarship and taste concerned with literature which is a part of what is called variously liberal education, culture, or the study of the humanities. I start from the principle that criticism is not simply a part of this larger activity, but an essential part of it" (3). Literature is not taught, criticism is taught. He places criticism, and the humanities on the same level as mathematics and the sciences. He intends to rescue literary criticism from the sense that it is taste, which is entirely based on what is the current moral climate. To do this, he takes the various strands of criticism and posits a unity between them. He seeks to elucidate a structure or framework for studying literature. In my reading, the word, typology came to mind. He is setting up all the different interpretative and methodical concepts together to form a coherent whole. He suggest that criticism is like science in many ways; in introduction he suggests that like early science, criticism needs to realize that it is conceptual framework to work in (15). He argues further that criticism should not lean on theories outside literature to explain literature, but rather it should look to literature to explain literature. Criticism in his thinking is a problem of interrelationships.

He brings together all the different critical positions and concepts of literature. The first essay is concerned with modes, which refers to the hero's power of action in relation to the audience and the environment. He sees five different modes: myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic and ironic, where the hero's power is reduced from divinity to less than the reader's. Frye appears to see some sort of historical progression through these modes, but he also suggests a cycle, where ironic leads back into myth. After these modes, he examines these modes in tragedy and then in comedy. Finally he examines the thematic mode. Thematic here is a way of saying idea; the thematic mode puts the story after or behind the organizing idea of the literature. This response paper falls into the thematic mode, as its main concern is the idea of book, though part of this is the construction. He notes the ancient Greeks saw six aspects to poetry: mythos (plot), ethos (character and setting), dianoia (idea or poetic thought). The other three (melody, diction and spectacle) he leaves for later. Dianoia is what we are concerned with when we ask what the story's point is. (52). To discuss ethos, he defines internal fictions (hero and his society) and external fictions (the author and his society). He states that all literature has a fictional and thematic aspect. In the comic, the hero tends to integrate with his society (or creates a new society). In the tragic, the hero tends to isolate from society.

The second essay concerns symbols, which are units isolated for attention by the critic. Here the framework come from phases. Phase, in this essay, mean the context in which the narrative and meaning of a work is considered (367). There are five phases: literal, descriptive, formal, archetypal (elsewhere he calls this one central) and finally anagogic. The literal and descriptive are dicussed together; here the symbol is motif and sign. Frye is critical of the popular use of the term literal: it is used for "unimaginative illiterates" or to suggest something is free from ambiguity (76). Here he means it as the poem itself (77). The literal meaning of a poem is the interrelationship of the poems parts; the whole of the poem. In the formal phase, the symbol is image. The form of a poem remains the same whether read from beginning to end or seen as a whole; thus both pattern and narrative. Next he examines the mythical phase, where symbol is archetype, closely tied to romance. Here I felt most comfortable. Poetry here is a technique of civilization. Finally he discusses the anagogic phase: symbol as monad. Monad means unity or one; thus Frye's sense that it is the center of an individual's literary experience. The individual is separated from society. Anagogic means spiritual or

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Riku Sayuj says

Except for the comically inadequate introduction by Harold Bloom, this book is a window to a whole new way of seeing the literary universe. In scope and depth, it is an epic and no matter how cynically you approach it, Frye is going to awe you with sheer erudition and immaculate schematics. For anyone with a Platonic bent, Frye's work has the potential to become an immediate Bible.

It might take a while to get through and it might require you to convert a lot of Frye's work into shorter notes and diagrammatic notations, just to keep up with the density of the text, but at the end of it you will be exposed to an almost cosmic vision of Literature, comparable to that at the end of Paradiso.

It is worth the effort just for the sheer ambition of the work and for the bit of that ambition that will rub off on you, even if you reject everything else contained here.

Only Joyce might be able to teach you about the scope of literature in a more inspiring fashion than this poet-critic.

Wesley Schantz says

https://newschoolnotes.blogspot.com/2...

Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays by Northrup Frye is another one of these books I've had like a Sword of Damocles hanging over me for years, nodding to the lives I haven't lived. Finally coming to read it, I find it's incredibly germane to the project I'm engaged in right now of exploring the poetic potential brought to light in scientific and technological progress--particularly in the rhetoric surrounding this progress as practiced by its champions and popularizers, as well as by its detractors and demonizers.

Frye beautifully sums up the whole field of literary criticism, from Aristotle to the present. For since 1957, when Anatomy came out, the post-structural vogue for obfuscation and the plurality of -isms which have followed in its train seem to be the only new developments, with the exception of a revitalization of philology springing from Tolkien's vast shadow.

With metaphors of music and seasons, the descriptive play of the reader's impressions of all manner of verbal content is brought into a series of illuminating formal patterns, spiraling around axes of innocence and experience, tragedy and comedy, romance and irony, high and low mimesis, pity and fear, community and individuality, shading on the one hand into direct address, on the other into incommunicable epiphany and apocalypse. Here, if we can understand it, is the structure from which the post-structuralists went post-al.

Practically every page, starting with the dedication, sent me to search up references I didn't know, to pause and sigh over connections I had never made, to marvel at intuitions and jokes I could hardly parse. Speaking of the pastoral Lycidas, Frye quips:
In short, we can get a whole liberal education simply by picking up one conventional poem and following its archetypes as they stretch out into the rest of literature. (100)
The erudition and endless reading that went into this synthesis appall me, when I compare them with my own education. And yet the message of the book is ultimately encouraging:
What does improve in the arts is the comprehension of them, and the refining of society which results from it. It is the consumer, not the producer, who benefits by culture, the consumer who becomes humanized and liberally educated. There is no reason why a great poet should be a wise and good man, or even a tolerable human being, but there is every reason why his reader should be improved in his humanity as a result of reading him. (344)
This opens up, of course, the broadest possible meaning of poet as one who produces imaginatively, including scientists, artists, musicians, and, occupying a still more privileged place in Frye's conception, mathematicians. The fascinating analogy between literature and mathematics cuts through the grandiosity of socio-cultural proselytizing the critic seems glad to dispose of here, brings the book to its close, and presumably picks up in his later work The Great Code, which I'm eager to look forward to reading awhile, too.

And now, without further ado, three fun facts about Frye and I:

1. Neither of us hold PhDs (though he ended up receiving many honorary doctorates).

2. Neither of us drive.

3. Our given names, Northrup and Wesley, both start with what sound like cardinal directions.

Christy says

On trying to read Northrop Frye 30 years after European critical theory stormed the gates of the academy, leaving the humanities, which were retrospectively ripe for collapse, in a kind of fall-of-Rome state of confusion and disillusionment, I was actually reminded (again - it comes up often for me these days) of Shelley’s poem:

My name is Ozymandias, king of kings
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!

Nothing beside remains – round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The Classically-descended celestial clockwork world Frye created his magisterial critical system from and for is vanishing before our eyes, like Newton's universe did after Einstein. Like many elaborate attempts to model some aspect of the world in a system, this one's biggest, most ironic flaw is its failure to take the defining reality of time into account. But maybe actually a Copernican metaphor is better here – Frye, like Harold Bloom, and then a bevy of less intelligent and more reactionary late 20th century culture warriors, saw Western literature at the center of something that has been revealed to have no permanent center – human history.

There's no bringing back the past, but Frye's system does offer anybody who has more than a beach reader's interest in Western literature some clever and useful ways to think about the forms it has taken and the techniques that have been applied in it from pre-history to the 20th century modernists, anyway. (Whether Frye's project has any relevance to other literary traditions I can't say.) Thank goodness *Anatomy of Criticism* has a good Wikipedia page. I'd recommend that. You get the gist of the system without every tedious example or obsolete hypothesis. That's enough.

10001010001 says

This is the groundbreaking book that officially introduced Jungian archetype theory into the realm of literary criticism. Jungians should check it out!

I will not do any review-spoilers on this one. As someone who refrained from it for six years due to inadequate education in literature, I'll just give out a (surprisingly) short survival list of literature prerequisites for this book:

1) Whatever literature Jung put you into reading. That should include *the Golden Bough, Iliad, Odyssey, Faust, Bible*, Greek tragedy and Greek comedy, some other readings in mythology, the more the merrier.

2) Milton, Dante, Spencer, some novels, the more the merrier.

3) Shakespeare. A LOT of Shakespeare. In fact, **all of Shakespeare**.

~~4) Now this is textbook repression at work: Aristotle's *Poetics*.~~

Enjoy!
