

MYTH CRITICISM: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

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According to the common misconception and misuse of the term, myths are merely primitive fictions, illusions, or opinions based upon false reasoning. Actually, mythology encompasses more than grade school stories about the Greek and Roman deities or clever fables invented for the amusement of children (or the harassment of students in college literature courses). It may be true that myths do not meet our current standards of factual reality, but then neither does any great literature. Instead, they both reflect a more profound reality. **Myth** is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend (Guerin, 2005). Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories—some no doubt fact, and some fantasy—which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life. Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities.

This approach emphasizes “the recurrent universal patterns underlying most literary works.” Combining the insights from anthropology, psychology, history, and comparative religion, mythological criticism “explores the artist’s common humanity by tracing how the individual imagination uses myths and symbols common to different cultures and epochs.” One key concept in **mythological** criticism is the archetype, “a symbol, character, situation, or image that evokes a deep universal response,” which entered literary criticism from Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. According to Jung, all individuals share a “‘collective unconscious,’ a set of primal memories common to the human race, existing below each person’s conscious mind”, often deriving from primordial phenomena such as the sun, moon, fire, night, and blood, archetypes according to Jung “trigger the collective unconscious”. Far from being primitive fictions — about the natural

as parts of a verbal structure). Literature is preeminently an autonomous verbal structure where the sign-values are subordinate to the interconnectedness of motifs. The fourth essay proposes a theory of genres, where Frye outlined the differences between the lyric, epic, dramatic work, etc.

Frye's approach was invigorating, but has not been broadly accepted. His categories seem arbitrary, and many works of art do not fit neatly into any category. For all his learning, Frye's focus was on western literature and its classification. So general a view does not help the practising poet with rewriting, or the critic explaining *how* one piece of literature is better than another, beyond of course understanding the larger picture. Finally, though Frye's own criticism was subtle and illuminating, the approach too easily degenerated into "hunt the symbol" exercises.

But important matters lie behind symbolism. Literature employs words, and the reality behind words has been the central preoccupation of twentieth century philosophy. Linguistic philosophy attempted to explain away the great philosophical dilemmas of existence as the improper use of words. Structuralism described literature as the surface expression of deep anthropological (and often) binary codes. Post-structuralism denied that words could be anything but part of an endless web of yet more words, without final referent or meaning. Postmodernism uses words as flat, media images, without deeper reference.

None of these has been very unconvincing. Words do have great emotional and intellectual power if employed in certain ways, and these ways draw on matters of deep and lasting interest to the human psyche. Mythic criticism (indeed all criticism: Frye makes this point) is subsequent to literature, as history is to action. We cannot clothe with plot and character the skeletal requirements of criticism and expect literature to result. Works of art follow their own devices and grow out of the artist's imagination, only submitting to criticism if they still seem incomplete or unsatisfactory.

But mythic criticism can show the writer where his imagery is coming from, and suggest reasons for its power. Subsequent work — deep thought, reading and endless toying with possibilities — may then turn up further material. Whether that material is useful can only be found by testing it in the poem, a trial and error process of continual adaptation and refinement that may eventually

References:

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<http://www.textetc.com/criticism/myth-criticism.html>

achieve the strengths of the coherence theory of truth: transforming power, internal consistency, simplicity, elegance and fertility.

Although "myth criticism" no longer enjoys its earlier vogue, its legacy is powerful. Frye's work remains deeply influential; critics of Shakespearean comedy or *Paradise Lost* must still come to terms with the arguments of Barber's and MacCaffrey's studies; Girard continues to be a striking presence on the contemporary critical scene; and many individual critical studies concentrating on mythic themes, as well as on the formal or generic consequences of those themes, form an important part of the exegetical tradition. This seems to be particularly true for studies of modernist and American literature. It is likely that the future of literary myth criticism will be determined by the vitality of mythography as a concern in other related or allied fields, as well as by the heuristic power of the questions such criticism can generate. One of the most important of these questions asks about the degree of mythic "self-consciousness" in literary texts. Is literature mythopoeia or mythology? the creation or reflective use of mythic materials? The nineteenth-century philologist and student of myth F. Max Müller proposed a distinction between the "mythic" and the "mythical" that gave early form to precisely this issue. And subsequently many critics have insisted on the very different ways in which myth is conceived and appropriated by Homer and Sophocles; Virgil and Milton; T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, and Gabriel García Márquez. (The peculiarly self-conscious and individual myth systems of poets such as William Blake and W. B. Yeats also point up the critical question sharply.) In turn, other critics have asked how the Western myth tradition has underwritten canon formation and how, for example, black and feminist literatures are to be understood in relation to, and in conscious rebellion against, this tradition. If one accepts that the proposition "myth *is* literature" is itself an aesthetic creation and hence defines further creative possibilities (as does, for example, the Americanist and myth critic Richard Chase), then the question of mythic self-consciousness becomes particularly exigent.

In short, complex critical and theoretical questions about myth and literature continue to be asked. The susceptibility of literature to forms of myth criticism depends upon the persuasiveness of answers to such questions, as well as upon the success of literary theorists in appropriating the empirical and conceptual investigations of myth by other disciplines.

world, some supposed ancestor, or tribal practice — myths are reflections of a profound reality. They dramatically represent our instinctive understandings. Moreover, unlike Freud's concepts, myths are collective and communal, and so bring a sense of wholeness and togetherness to social life. Native peoples, and indeed whole civilizations, have their own mythologies, but there appear to be common images, themes and motives which Jung called "archetypes".

The mythology of the classical world provided themes for some of the world's greatest drama, and similar themes can be traced in Renaissance literature through to modern poetry. Hamlet, for example, is often seen as the reluctant hero who must sacrifice himself to purify a Denmark made diseased by the foul and unnatural murder of its king. Yeats, Pound and Eliot employ the myths of history, rebirth and fulfillment through sacrifice, as do other poets.

Myth criticism continues to draw freely on the psychology of Jung, on social anthropology, on the study of religions, on metaphor and depth psychology, but the archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye has attempted to redefine what criticism is, and what it can be expected to do.

Frye attempted a general theory of literature, which he approached from four perspectives. Rather than justify what were little more than matters of preference (i.e. squabble over the relative merits of authors and their works) scholars should derive principles, structures and laws from the study of literature itself. His first essay in *Anatomy of Criticism* recognized various levels of realism in literature, an articulation he termed a theory of modes. The second essay put forward a theory of symbols, recognizing five levels ranging from the mundane to the anagogic (the last represented in work of a religious or spiritual nature).

The theory of myths that forms the third essay has possibly been Frye's most influential contribution. He starts by identifying the four seasons — spring, summer, autumn and winter — with the four main plots or 'mythoi' of romance, comedy, tragedy, and irony/satire. These are further broken down into phases. The mythos of winter consists of six phases, the last representing human life in terms of unrelieved bondage: prisons, madhouses, lynching mobs and places of execution. The human figures of this phase are the dispossessed, the destitute and mad-ogres, witches, Baudelaire's black giantess and Pope's Dullness. Frye distinguishes between signs (which point outward to things beyond themselves) and motifs (which are understood inwardly