

Frye N. *Anatomy of criticism: four essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957. 354 p.

The *Anatomy of Criticism* treats literature as a total structure whose units are recurring formal elements such as conventions, genres, symbols, rhetorical patterns, plot and character types, and so on. These recurring units, or *archetypes*, interlock to form a total order of words. [The *A&HC*® (since 1975) and *SSC*® (since 1966) indicate that this book has been cited in over 1,045 publications.]

Critical Theory: Structure, Archetypes, and the Order of Words

Northrop Frye
Massey College
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario M5S 2E1
Canada

December 8, 1988

The *Anatomy of Criticism* emerged from my earlier study of William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947); indeed, some of its material was actually part of that book, whose manuscript was once double the size of the final volume. I mention this because it was Blake's work that taught me the central insight of the *Anatomy*, which has become the organizing principle of my criticism as a whole: that literature is not just an aggregate of texts but a total structure articulating a total vision of reality. The units of that structure are the recurring formal elements of literature: its conventions, genres, symbols, rhetorical patterns, plot and character types, and so on. I called these recurrent units *archetypes*, and the schematic design of the *Anatomy* reflects how these archetypes interlock to form a total order of words.

Blake himself was influenced by the rudimentary beginnings of what was to become comparative mythology and folklore, and the *Anatomy* attempts to apply to the whole of literature the same kind of analysis of types, motifs, and so on, that has been commonly applied to folktales and myths. Leaving aside questions of origin, belief, and social function that would interest an anthropologist or psychologist, myth and folktale can be studied as the most primitive forms of literature, "primitive" in this context meaning, not crude, but reduced to essentials, so that the basic structural principles are clearly on display. Later literature adapts these structural principles to new circumstances: whether directly, as in popular romance; through accommodation and dis-

guise, as in realism (a process I call *displacement*); or through parody and subversion, as in satire and ironic writing. As Western culture derived its archetypal framework most directly from the encyclopedic mythological and metaphorical patterns of the Bible, the path that led me from Blake to the theory of literature in the *Anatomy* has brought me recently to a study of the Bible, of which I am completing the second volume.

For a theoretical book bristling with terminology, the *Anatomy* has acquired an unexpectedly wide audience: I continue to get letters from people who have found some of its insights applicable in contexts as various as theology, film study, and city planning. Most gratifying has been the interest in utilizing its structural approach in educational theory and practice.¹ In literary theory itself, the *Anatomy* seems most often regarded as a book of its time, a transitional successor to the New Criticism and precursor to later movements such as structuralism; in its "Polemical introduction" and "Tentative conclusion," the book in fact takes a rather similar view of itself. (For reviews and articles about *Anatomy* there is R.D. Denham's recent bibliography.)² Nevertheless, it is possible that its perspective is due for a return to fashion someday, for I suspect that some of its "datedness" is due to four still-prevailing misconceptions. (1) The amount of space devoted in the text to myth and romance, and the absence of detailed examination of particular works or passages, implies the subordination neither of realism and irony to myth and romance nor of particulars to general patterns; such emphases are merely inevitable in a book with its kind of focus upon universal formal principles. (2) The archetypes do not turn literature into a quasi-Platonic or Symbolist world of essences divorced from reality^{3,4}—though they do call into question the naive subject-object view of reality tacitly assumed by much criticism even in these post-structuralist times. (3) What the *Anatomy* says about value judgments is that they follow from structural knowledge and not vice versa, and therefore are not a part of criticism as such—not that they are necessarily invalid or that we can or should avoid making them. (4) There has been a recent tendency to deny the universality of any structural patterns in the name of "interpretation," to maintain that all forms and categories are merely projections of ideology. Conditioned, yes; determined, no: such a view seems to me itself ideologically conditioned and at any rate impossible to preserve from the consequences of its own determinism.

1. Frye N, Baker S, Perkins G & Perkins B, eds. *The practical imagination: stories, poems, plays*. New York: Harper, 1987. 1,445 p.

2. Denham R D. Northrop Frye: an annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1987. 449 p.

3. Davie D. *Articulate energy: an inquiry into the syntax of English poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958. (Cited 40 times since 1966.)

4. Leontovich F. *After the new criticism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980. 384 p. (Cited 195 times.)