

Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism “Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes”

Presented by
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About Frye's Book

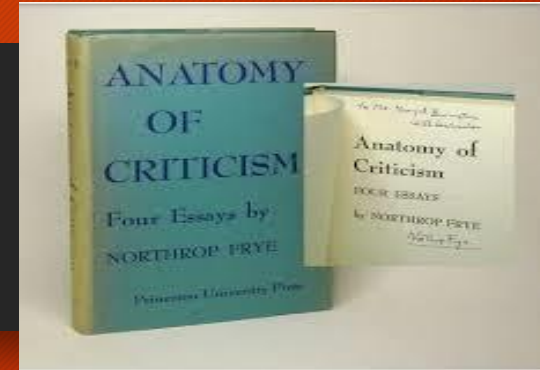
- **Title:** Why “Anatomy” ?
- **Approach:** Argumentative (presenting a thesis) and analytical(assembling data from reliable sources).
- **Structure:** In four brilliant essays on historical, ethical, archetypical, and rhetorical criticism, he applies "scientific" method in an effort to change the character of criticism from the casual to the causal, from the random and intuitive to the systematic.
- **Critical Reception:** Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is the magnum opus of one of the most important and influential literary theorists of the twentieth century. Breaking with the practice of close reading of individual texts, Frye seeks to describe a common basis for understanding the full range of literary forms by examining archetypes, genres, poetic language, and the relations among the text, the reader, and society. Using a dazzling array of examples, he argues that understanding “the structure of literature as a total form” also allows us to see the profoundly liberating effect literature can have.
- Frye was a learned and eloquent spokesman for the view that literature constitutes an autonomous system, an order of works and words to be studied through a systematic and classificatory approach, as articulated in the essays comprising the "anatomy."



Polemical introduction

- It focuses on defining Frye's central term: criticism: "Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb." "Criticism is a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its own right, with some measure of independence from the art it deals with." He dismisses a "parasitic" view of criticism that thinks criticism simply imitates or copies the literature it engages.
- Criticism is not a parasite theory simply because it does not imitate or copy the literature it engages. "It deals with literature in terms of specific conceptual framework...derivable from an inductive survey of the literary field."
- Frye warns against criticism that he calls "deterministic." This kind of criticism says the meaning of literature is completely caused, or determined, by something else, in particular a special field of knowledge.
- "Criticism ... is to art what history is to action and philosophy to wisdom." That means criticism is a *knowledge about* something, rather than the thing itself.
- Criticism is a science that has its own anatomy, it is not "deterministic"

“Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes”



Frye follows Aristotle's *Poetics* in which he classifies genres of literature according to the “object of imitation”, namely man in action: “**Fiction, therefore, may be classified, not morally, but by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same**” 1957, 33)

Literary genres are mainly divided into **thematic** mode and **fictional** mode, each of which refers to certain literary epoch.

Fictional and Thematic Modes

Fictional: plot driven (mythos)
Integration with society



Tragedy
separation



Comedy
cohesion

Myth
Romance
High mimetic
Low mimetic
ironic

Thematic: idea driven (dianoia)



Episodic
((individualism))



Encyclopedic
((Collectivism))

Fictional mode and the Hero's power of Action

- Superior in kind to other men and to the environment of other men , the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a **myth**.
- Superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of a **romance**.
- Superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. This is the hero of **the high mimetic mode**.
- Superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us. This gives us the hero of the **low mimetic mode**, of most **comedy** and of **realistic**.
- Inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, ...frustration or absurdity, the hero belongs to the **ironic** mode.

The Epochs of the Fictional Modes

- Myth: Premedieval
- Romance: Medieval Romance either secular (dealing with chivalry and knight-errantry) or religious devoted to legends of saints.
- High mimetic: Renaissance (genres of tragedy)
- Low mimetic: from Defoe's time to the end of nineteenth century.
- Ironic: modernism

Tragic Fictional Mode (Dionysiac)

- Tragic Myth: stories of dying gods , like Hercules. The effect of such stories is “solemn sympathy” . These stories are associated with Autumn and sunset.
- Tragic Romance : its typical setting is the forest. The effect of such stories is elegiac which is produced while the hero is dying, like *Beowulf* and Tennyson’s *Passing of Arthur*.
- Tragic High mimetic: the hero’s conflict in tragedy produces a cathartic effect. This can be clearly recognized in Shakespeare's tragedies.
- Tragic Low mimetic: the produced effect is pathos which presents its hero as isolated by a weakness like in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess*. The hero in such stories is called alazon.
- Tragic Irony: the hero of such stories is called pharmakos or scapegoat. He is neither innocent nor guilty in a sense that he is a member of guilty society where injustices are inescapable part of existence. This can be recognized in Septimus of *Mrs. Dalloway* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Hester Prynne*

Comic Fictional Modes (Apollonian)

- Comic Myth: The story of how a hero is accepted by a society of gods.
- Comic Romance: Its chief vehicle is the pastoral or idyllic. It is marked by an escape from society to the extent of idealizing simplified life in the countryside.
- Comic high mimetic: Like in Aristophanes's comedies, there is usually a central figure who constructs his own society, driving off one after another all the people who prevent or exploit him, and eventually achieving a heroic triumph. The effect of such stories are sympathy and ridicule. Shakespeare achieves his high mimetic pattern by making the struggle of repressive and the desirable societies a struggle between two levels of existence: one like our world or worse, the second is enchanted and idyllic. (The Tempest)
- Comic low mimetic (domestic comedy): the action of the comedy moves towards the incorporation of the hero into the society that he naturally fits in. Such kind of story is manifested in "Cinderella archetype"
- Ironic comedy is perhaps more difficult, and Frye devotes a good deal more space to this than the other comedic modes. At one extreme, ironic comedy borders on savagery, the inflicting of pain on a helpless victim. Some examples of this include tales of lynch mobs, murder mysteries, or human sacrifice. Yet ironic comedy may also offer biting satire of a society replete with snobbery. It may even depict a protagonist rejected by society (thus failing the typical comic reintegration) yet who appears wiser than the rejecting society. Aristophanes, Ben Jonson, Molière, Henry Fielding, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Graham Greene offer examples of the wide range of ironic comic possibility.

Thematic Mode: Episodic

- Mythic episodic: combines the mythic sense of the divine with the individualistic and thematic sense of the episodic: “the poet’s visionary function is to reveal the god for whom he speaks...in connection with specific occasion.
- The romantic episodic form is about a poet’s movement between worlds or states of consciousness.
- High mimetic episodic literature looks outwards to someone admirable
- low mimetic, thematic exposition tends toward individualism and romanticism. The individual author's own thoughts and ideas are now the center of authority, as instanced by William Wordsworth's *Prelude*.
- an episodic form in an ironic mode is about a fleeting moment in a poet’s life, like in much of the "decadent" poetry of late 19th century French symbolists, like Rimbaud.

Thematic Mode: Encyclopedic

- mythic mode of this form is scripture: the voice of God rather than the voice of the individual prophet.
- In romantic encyclopedic literature, a poet remembers the history of his people or tells a story that seems mythical, except it is about men instead of gods. Here, Frye includes Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
- High mimetic encyclopedic literature is about the leaders of a society.
- low mimetic encyclopedic literature is about everyday people. *Pride and Prejudice* is an example.
- ironic encyclopedic literature is about observing rather than interpreting, and it is often about the writing of literature itself. Here, Frye includes modernist writing such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the novels of Virginia Woolf, often told in a stream of consciousness