



Article : Literary Theory Myth as the Archetype,(A critical review)

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Abstract

The paper begins with Northrop Frye's argument that we teach or learn criticism, not literature. It reviews Frye's model of archetypal criticism which seeks to interpret a text in the context of a myth and an archetype. It concludes that while the model widens the scope of literary criticism the singularity of meaning implied in it indicates its limitation.

1.0 Introduction

Contrary to the popular notion of learning literature as an aesthetic, an individual experience leading to its understanding Northrop Frye, a Canadian critic, says that the exercise, in effect, is an act of criticism¹. Frye, then goes on to explain his theory of Archetypal Criticism, In this paper I propose to point out some the implications of this theory. I shall first put the theory in perspective, discuss some of its aspects and point out its implications.

1.1.1 Nous and dianoia

Frye refers to Plato's distinction between two levels of understanding viz. the level of *nous* and the level of *dianoia*, knowledge of things². Knowledge about things preserves the split between subject and object, 'I' learn "that": what I learn is an objective body of facts set over against me and essentially unrelated to me. Knowledge of thing on the other hand implies some kind of identification of essential unity of subject and object. What is learned and the mind of the learner becomes interdependent, indivisible parts of one thing.

Three principles are involved in this conception. First, learning about things is the necessary and indispensable prelude to the knowledge of things: confrontation is the only possible beginning of identity. Second, knowledge of things cannot be taught. It can only be accepted as act of faith. He who knows on the upper level knows that he knows as a fact of his experience but he cannot

impart this knowledge directly. This is the basis of the traditional contrast between knowledge and wisdom.

We can explain the distinction between the *nous* and *dianoia* with the help of a day to day learning situation. In learning a skill like driving a car, a conscious mind comes into contact with an alien and emotionally disturbing object. When the skill is learned, the object ceases to be objective and becomes an extension of the personality, and the learning process has moved from conscious to sub consciousness yet it is far less dogmatic (self-conscious). An untrained driver tends to be overconfident, for a trained one, with a hidden skill that he cannot directly impart others driving comes effortlessly.

Literature presents the same distinction. There is the *dianoia* of literature, or criticism, which constitutes the whole of what can be directly taught and learned about literature. *Nous* (knowledge of literature) cannot be taught so it is impossible to teach or learn literature. **What one teaches or learns is criticism.** We do not regard this area of direct teaching and learning as an end but as a means to another end. A person who is wholly absorbed by knowledge about things is called a pedant. Beyond this is the experience of literature itself.

1.1.2 Criticism Through Ages

Frye moves on to tracing the evolution of criticism through ages. The humanists had a great faith in Greek and Latin classics. They insisted their teaching as a model. The classics were great but the conception of literature involved in them was aristocratic and had involved the limitation of aristocracy built into it. It saw literature as hierarchy of comparative greatness, the summit of which provides the standards for the critics. The Philologist in nineteenth century, more or less continued the tradition of judging the new work in the context of some great classic. This led to injustice to the new work under review. The new criticism began by challenging the tendency to accept knowledge about literature as a substitute for literary experience. They set the object of literary experience directly in front of student and insisted that the student grapple with it and not try to find its meaning or his understanding outside the text. However, new criticism also developed its own techniques of talking about a work and provided another critical counterpart of the work to read. Though this appears inevitable Frye suggests that in order to be genuine, criticism ought to overcome the obsession with keeping the student and the text at a distance by indulging in what he calls, '*critical dandyism*' which involves the judgments based on vague critical canons like casual relationship or personal likes or dislike. A large part of criticism

is concerned with commentary, and a major work of literature has vast amount of commentary attached to it. To a certain extent this might be useful but this approach keeps the criticism at the peripheral level. To be useful, both academically and socially, criticism must move towards understanding a text at deeper levels.

1.2.1 The Model

Frye says that, present literary criticism lacks a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in Biology, will see the phenomenon it deals with as a part of a whole, criticism as a science is totally intelligible but literature as a subject of science is an inexhaustible source of new discoveries. So criticism should acquire something of the methodology, discipline and coherence of sciences. This can be achieved by assuming a total coherence in criticism based on a hypothesis about literature itself. After pointing out the present limitation of criticism Frye outlines his model of criticism in 'The Archetypes of Literature' and 'Anatomy of Criticism'.

1.2.2 Archetypes in Literature

The term Archetype signifies the narrative design, character types, and images which are found in variety of work of literature which the critics have used to interpret the word of literature (Frazer; Bodkin; Knight; Wheelright). C.G.Jung calls archetypes 'Primordial Images' the physical residue. In order to archive the coherence of science criticism should use the recurrence with various degrees and displacement of certain archetypes in literature of all period and cultures.

Every poet has private mythology, his own spectroscopic band or peculiar formation of symbols, of much of which he is quite unconscious. But when a number of poets use the same images or symbols, the problem cannot be biographical. It concerns with literature. Criticism is a systematic study of literature because there is a quality in literature which enables it to be so. An Archetype should not only be unifying category of criticism but itself a part of total form. Literature should be read in its totality-from primitive to the sophisticated. The search for archetype is a kind of literary anthropology concerned with the way that literature is informed by pre- literary categories such as ritual myth and folktale. Frye reviews the grave digger's scene from 'Hamlet' to point out its archetype as the hero's protestation of love, the fatal fight with lacerates the leap into grave and then the return from it. In chasing the source of Hamlet legend from pre Shakespeare play to Saxo and from Saxo to nature myth, the critic is not

running away from Shakespeare, he is drawing closer to the archetypal form which Shakespeare recreated.

1.2.3 Myth as the Archetype

According to Frye myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. In the solar cycle of the day, the Seasonal cycle of the year and the organic cycle of the human life, there is a single pattern of significance out of which myth constructs a central narrative around a figure who is partly the sun, partly vegetative fertility and partly a god or archetypal human being.

The quest myth is the central myth in literature. We see the hero's quest in terms of its fulfillment. This gives us the central pattern of archetypal images. It is the vision of innocence which sees the world in total human intelligibility and corresponds to the vision of the 'Unfallen World' or, 'The Heaven'. This is called the comic vision of the world. It is contrast to the tragic vision of the life which sees the world only in the form of its ordained cycle. In its narrative aspect the quest myth assimilates the oracular and verbal structure. It emerges from rituals, For example, the messiah myth became the narrative structure of the oracles of Judaism, The study of sacred scriptures can help a critic to gain a comprehensive view of his subject. After understanding these structures the critic can move from archetype to genre. For example, he can see that drama (genre) emerges from the ritual side of the myth and the lyric from the fragmental side of the myth. The quest myth can have a meaning aspect. For this purpose we have to study the working of the subconscious or dream. The cycle of waking and dreaming in human life corresponds to the cycle of light and darkness in nature. However this correspondence is an antithesis because it is in the daylight that a man is really in the power of darkness. He is the victim of frustration and weakness. On the contrary it is in the darkness of nature that the libido or the heroic self of a man awakes. That is why Plato called art a 'dream for awakened minds.'

1.2.3 Recurrence as Organizing Principal

Frye classifies art in terms of time and place, for example music is temporal (of time); painting is spatial (of space). The organizing principle for both is recurrence; it is called 'rhythm' when it is temporal and 'pattern' when it is spatial. Temporal art like music have rhythm and spatial art like painting have pattern. Literature has both. The rhythm of literature can be called as narrative (something that is told) and its pattern can be called the meaning (words convey

meaning). Both the narrative and the meaning become the context of the imaginary. The origin of the narrative can be found in ritual. The pattern of imaginary which forms meaning may be found in oracle. The myth is central informing power. It gives archetypical meaning to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. That is why myth is archetype.

Four phases of myth, according to Frye are:

- a) Dawn, Spring, Birth
- b) Zenith, Summer, Marriage and Triumph
- c) Sunset, Autumn, Death
- d) Darkness, Winter and Dissolution

The central activity of criticism according to Frye, which is the understanding of literature, is essentially one of establishing a context for the work of literature being studied. This means relating them to their context in the writer's life, in the writer's time, in the history of literature and in the total structure of literature itself.

1.3 Implications

Frye has correctly pointed out the shortcomings of what he calls pseudo criticism which involves looking at a text on the basis of personal likes and dislikes. He has also pointed out that the new criticism which puts the text at the center results at times in developing centrifugal (going away from the center) tendencies, in a total misreading of text. Frye's point that criticism is like natural science like physics, a science discipline as it is a systematic study based on logical presentation of evidence is valid. However, despite his systematic approach and logical presentation of critic as a literary Anthropologist Frye's model of Archetypal criticism echoes the continuation of humanistic criticism which he severely criticizes. His insistence on placing a text in the prehistorical context is not very much different from critics like Mathew Arnold⁴ who defines criticism as a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and T. S. Eliot who insisted on historical sense on the part of poets as well as critics.

The central concern here is the obsession with '*the*' meaning. By placing the text into historical/per historical context the critic endeavors to find out its meaning which usually is considered as '*the*' meaning. A text is open to multiple

meanings. Considering that a poem like 'Tiger Tiger' by William Blake opens up different avenues of meanings for different readers of different ages it is difficult to read its meaning in the context of just one central myth. As Bradley has pointed out, about best poetry there floats an atmosphere of infinite suggestion⁵. The poet speaks to us of one thing, but in this one thing there seems to lurk the secret of all. He has said what he meant (to say) but his meaning seems to bacon away beyond itself; to expand into something boundless which is only focused in it.

There are two individuals involved in the process of criticism: the author, and the reader/critic. Traditional critics give more importance to the author. With new criticism the reader has acquired greater importance. The critics felt that the reader should be given more importance. His reading and response to a text should be given more priority because a text yields meaning according to the reader's response to it. It is a reader's response that decides its meaning. The reader response critic believes that a work of literature is not an artifact, but an experience. Stanley Fish points out that the place where sense is made or not made is the reader's mind rather than the printed page or the space between the covers of a book.

3.0 Conclusion

Northrop Frye's model of archetypal criticism has given a new dimension to a critic's role. It involves a close study of a text in the context of pre historical myth. While this is an innovative approach to criticism which encourages a scientific analysis of a text, its insistence on a specific meaning in the context of particular myth anticipates an extensive knowledge of Anthropology on the part of the critic. Secondly, since a text is open to multiple meanings the singularity of meaning implied in the approach indicates its limitations.

References

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- 3) _____ "*The Archetypes of Literature*". 20th Century criticism: A Reader, ed. David Lodge. London. Longman, 1972.

- 4) Arnold Mathew. *“The Function of Criticism in the present Times”*. In R. Sethuraman 2004.
- 5) Bradley, AC. *“Poetry for Poetries Sake”*. ibid