



Northrop Frye as a Synoptic Critic

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Abstract

The paper establishes Northrop Frye as a synoptic critic who brings varied symbols under one umbrella. Many scholars in the past have laid much emphasis on his mythical or archetypal aspect of criticism, overlooking the other facets of his theory. In order to establish his criticism as all encompassing, the paper elaborates his theory of symbols as asserted in his pivotal work, 'Anatomy of Criticism'. The paper further analyses his perspective on Ethical Criticism that rests on his convergence of all the phases of symbols- sign, motif, image, archetype and monad.

Keywords: Ethical Criticism, synoptic, myth, anagogy, monad

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Introduction

It is in and through symbols that man 'consciously lives, works and has his being.' (1986:30). It is very true that without symbolism there can neither be literature nor language. The concept of symbol is very vast. Wheelwright's definition that symbols are more in intention than they are in existence suggests that they have vast and variety of meanings. Since the term is always expanding, C. S. Pierce's

statement that it would be an injury to add a new meaning to the word symbol is quite wrong. Interestingly Swiatecka calls it a chameleon, an analogy that justifies diverse interpretations given to the term through ages. (1980:10)

Though notion of the literary symbol is popularly associated with the French symbolist movement, the term goes back to Plato. Art as an imitation of nature stems from Plato's *Republic* where it is shown to be a reflection or shadow of reality. Plato holds the universe to be an imitation of the perpetual ideas and therefore, a work of art becomes an imitation of an imitation, which according to him is a misleading copy of the real world. Though Aristotle follows Plato in defining poetry as mimesis, he does not consider it to be mere copying. Kant also has much influence on the modern literary theory of the symbol. In *The Critique of Judgment* (section 59), Kant classifies all illustrations into the schematical and the symbolical. However, like Plato and Aristotle, he does not link the symbol with language: "... to what extent that form is linguistic is not broached," says Adams. (1926:30) another fore-runner of theory of symbol is Blake. Though the words 'myth', 'symbol' or 'symbolism' do not appear in Blake's extant writings, yet Blake has long been regarded as a symbolist and myth maker. Blake illustrates in the *Marriage* that human consciousness is the circumference of experience or reality rather than its center. He argues that the literary artist while creating the work first moves to the circumference to accumulate all the experience and then shifts to the centre from the imaginative circumference to externalize the objects.

The ideas of the literary artists discussed above paved the way for the concept of literary symbolic with the French symbolist movement. Symbolism radiated originally from France in 1886 with Baudlaire followed by Mallarme, Verlaine and Neo-Symbolists like Valery. Coleridge's view, that nature is the book, the Bible the word and reality was developed further with subtlety by Baudlaire and Mallarme. Hazard Adams has also put that the symbolist movement is the 'culmination in synthesis of previous romantic thought about the symbol'. (1926: 119) Baudlaire's comparison of nature to a dictionary also echoes Plato's thought. He further compares the painter with the obedience to imagination with those without imagination. While the former seeks in his dictionary for the elements which suit his conception, the latter merely copies the dictionary. Baudlaire accuses the latter of failure to feel and to think. The idea that the artist creates a composition from the dictionary of nature gives great authority to the artist to give a new shape and order to his work. However, for Baudlaire, the ultimate text is not verbal but it is a non-verbal mystical source. On the other hand, Mallarme sees creation as a linguistic act. Unlike Baudlaire's dictionary, Mallarme's reference to book represents all the possibilities of language arranged in print. From the above discussion it becomes clear that for the writers from Plato onwards till Baudlaire, symbols are not in language. It is only in the Modern Thought that symbols have

joined thought to language and have become sophisticated with respect to linguistics.

Frye's Theory of Symbols

The above account on symbolism forms the right background to the discussion on Frye's concept of symbol which is treated by various critics as an effort to synthesize the elements of different theories. In Frye's theory 'subject, object, man, poet, work, world, and literature-all merge into the One that receives all.' (1969:229) He conceives the whole of literature as a self-enclosed system of symbols and myths 'existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life or reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships.'(1957:38) He suggests that direct and simple language is very forceful and therefore, not the right medium to convey the feelings. The writers tend to use poetic and symbolic language instead-which is soothing and reassuring. It is the imaginative and symbolic language or the combination of emotion and intellect, which conveys the feeling in the most profound manner.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye suggests that symbol is a unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention. In view of this definition the unit should include words, phrases, letters a writer spells his words with, figures of speech including images, metaphors, similes, sign, motif, image archetype and monad. Thus Frye's theory of symbols should include different schools of modern criticism each making a distinctive choice of symbols in its analysis. Frye views that whenever we read anything, we find our attention moving in two directions at once. One is outward or centrifugal and the other is inward or centripetal. In the first case, the reader moves from the individual words to the literal meaning. While in the other, he tries to reach the deeper aspect of the meaning through the larger verbal pattern that the words make. While the former aspect of symbol is called sign, the latter is called motif. Frye asserts that both kinds of symbols are present in every kind of writing as neither aspect can be eliminated. The classification of the verbal structure would depend on whether the final direction of meaning is outward or inward. The third kind of symbol is image which combines both literal and descriptive aspects of the symbol. The two kinds of symbols that move in the opposite directions as asserted in the first two phases, come together to form the symbol 'image' in the third phase which is formal. The argument that the form signifies both narrative as well as the literal meaning establishes the viewpoint of Frye.

In order to evaluate Frye's perspective on the symbol that he describes in the archetypal phase, it is very necessary to understand his attempt to explain Blake's conception of symbolism. From 1942 onwards, he composed many versions of his book on William Blake. The first book *Fearful Symmetry* appeared 20 years after his interest in Blake was first aroused. Blake believes that there is no divinity in

nature. He views nature to be half dead with no intelligence, kindness or love. (1974:59) He feels that the poet has the ability to transform nature and make it responsive by using his imagination. Blake's classification of symbols is based on three levels of imagination. The lowest is that of the isolated individual contemplating on his memories of perception and developing abstract ideas. The world is single which he calls Ulro where the distinction of subject and object is lost. It is hell and symbols for it are those of sterility, chiefly rocks and sand. Above it is the ordinary world we live in, a double world of subject and object, of organism and environment, which he calls Generation. No living thing is completely adjusted to this world except the plants. Hence Blake usually speaks of it as vegetable. Above it is the imaginative world and Blake divides this into an upper and a lower part. Blake holds the view that it is not the personal existence of the literary artist but his imagination that matters. The artist's intentions, which are even on conscious and super conscious level, are quite unknown to him. Seeing Blake's views it can be adjudged that he was not in favour of psycho-analytical approach and that for him genuine poetry was quite separate from the artist. Frye's concept of symbol too is based on similar lines when he explains the symbols in the last two phases and paves the way for deconstruction. The last two phases of symbolism are concerned with the mythological aspect of literature. In the fourth phase the symbols are archetypes or communicable symbols and in the last phase, the symbols are monads or universal symbols which are found at the centre of the archetypes. Frye asserts that these symbols have a power which is 'potentially unlimited' and whose power to communicate is not 'bound by nature or history.' (1957:118) He argues that in the process of shifting from the descriptive phase to formal, the imitation shifts from a reflection of external nature to formal organization of which the nature is the content. In the archetypal phase also, literary work is 'within the limits of the natural or plausible' (118). However, on moving to the last phase, 'nature becomes not the container, but the thing contained', and the archetypal symbols themselves become the 'forms of nature' and not the 'forms' that man 'constructs'. (119) Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man, Frye argues.

Frye's Stand on Ethical Criticism

Frye integrates the conflicting and contradictory practices in his theory of symbols discussed above. He asserts that as soon as the anagogic approach is added to the other approaches-descriptive, literal, formal and mythical, literature becomes an ethical instrument and the critic passes beyond the dilemma between aesthetic idolatry and ethical freedom. As discussed above, the principle on which the anagogic phase rests is that there is a center of order of words. That such a centre exists is predicated on the assumption that our greatest literary experiences derive from works, which are the most mythopoeic. Frye argues that on reading great

works of art, the reader feels that he has moved into the centre of the order of words and has a feeling of converging significance which means that his emotions, his thoughts and his feelings converge at the centre and this is what the literary experience is all about. Frye holds that the ethical purpose of literature is to educate and liberate the imagination of the reader. The word, ethical with Frye does not imply judicial evaluation or the moral element of literature. The word instead refers to the connection between art and life which makes literature a liberal yet disinterested ethical instrument. Ethical Criticism, Frye says in the Polemical Introduction, refers to 'consciousness of the presence of society' and it deals with art as a 'communication from the past to the present'. (24)

Conclusion

Frye's humanistic and educational thought rests on his convergence of all the phases of symbols. His theory of symbols is a comprehensive theory to which the other critical practices can relate themselves. He himself has pointed out that he has not talked about anything new while explaining the symbols in the five phases. He asserts that the critical techniques as discussed by him are already used in contemporary scholarship. Nor he has attempted to suggest new perspectives on the existing critical theories. His attempt has been to break the barriers between different Schools of Criticism, the barriers that tend to make a critic confine himself to a single method of criticism. Moreover, he does not condemn any school of criticism in his theory but his attack is directed to the lack of perspective or outlook among practitioners of criticism, the lack of comprehensive theory. Rejecting Plato's concept of morality i.e. to teach and propagate morality, Frye's attempt to synthesize various schools into a broad theory of contexts means that his attention is always directed away from the peculiar aims and powers of a given critical method. The label of either new critic or myth critic does not do justice to Frye's work as a whole, and it fails to explain his critical vision fully. He protests against the classification by saying that he does not belong to any one school of criticism. Frye believes that a synoptic view of theory, principles and techniques of literary criticism are both possible and necessary. He says that a unified structure of knowledge about literature exists which criticism should systematically develop. *Anatomy of Criticism* is witness to Frye's claim that such a structure of knowledge is possible.

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