

NORTHROP FRYE

“THE ARCHETYPES OF LITERATURE”: QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

1. According to Kaplan and Anderson, “As a literary anthropologist,” what does Frye do? (475)

“As a literary anthropologist, he relates narrative to the creation of rituals, imagery to moments of instantaneous insights, rhythm to natural cycles, and so forth” (475).

2. What is the “central myth of all literature,” according to Frye? (475)

“The central myth of all literature [Frye] identifies as the **quest-myth**, seen in four distinct phases that correspond to four aspects of cyclical recurrence” (475).

3. What is a “frequently voiced criticism of the archetypal approach” to literature? (476)

“A frequently voiced criticism of the archetypal approach is that it ultimately tends to wash out the specifics of individual works in favor of the universals charted in the larger patterns” ((476)

4. Frye contends that “every poet has his private **mythology**, his own spectroscopic band or peculiar formation of **symbols**, of much of which he is quite **unconscious**” (479).

5. The “search for **archetypes** is a kind of literary **anthropology**, concerned with the way that literature is informed by pre-literary categories such as ritual, **myth** and **folktale**” (480).

6. Summarize the four “daily/seasonal/human life” myths listed by Frye, being sure to list what happens to the quest-hero in each phase and the genres of literature each produces (483).

(1) “The **dawn, spring** and birth phase. Myths of the **birth of the hero** [King Arthur’s birth and training], of revival and **resurrection**, of **creation** and . . . of the defeat of the powers of darkness, winter and death” (483). “The archetype of **romance** and of most dithyrambic [hymns to god] and rhapsodic [exciting parts of an epic] poetry” (483).

(2) “The zenith [**noon**], **summer**, and marriage or triumph phase.” “Myths of apotheosis [human becomes god], of the sacred **marriage** [Arthur’s marriage with Guinevere], and of entering Paradise. . . . The archetype of **comedy**, pastoral and idyll [natural/picturesque poems]” (483).

(3) “The **sunset, autumn** and death phase. Myths of fall, of the dying god, of **violent death** and **sacrifice** and of the isolation of the hero [defeat and death of Arthur’s round table]. . . . The archetype of **tragedy** and elegy” (483).

(4) “The **darkness, winter** and dissolution phase. . . . “[M]yths of floods and the **return of chaos**, of the **defeat of the hero**, and Götterdämmerung [total collapse of society] myths. . . . The archetype of **satire**” (483).

7. What are the five contrasts between comedy and tragedy in Frye’s myth criticism? (485-86)

(1) “In the comic vision the **human** world is a community, or a hero who represents the wish-fulfillment of the reader” (486).

“In the tragic vision the human world is a **tyranny or anarchy**, or an individual or isolated man . . . the deserted or betrayed hero.

“Marriage or some equivalent consummation belongs to the comic vision; the **harlot, witch** and other varieties of Jung’s ‘terrible mother’ belong to the tragic one” (486).

(2) In the comic vision the **animal** world is a **community** of domesticated animals . . . or a lamb, or one of the gentler birds, usually a dove” (486).

“In the tragic vision the animal world is seen in terms of **beasts** and birds of prey” (486).

(3) “In the comic vision the **vegetable** world is a **garden**, grove or park, or a tree of life, or a rose or lotus [as in] Shakespeare’s forest comedies” (486).

“In the tragic vision it is a sinister **forest** [as in] the opening of the **Inferno** or a heath or wilderness, or a tree of death.

(4) “In the comic vision the **mineral** world is a **city**, or one building or temple, or one stone, normally a glowing precious stone” (486).

“In the tragic vision the mineral world is seen in terms of **deserts**, rocks and ruins” (486).

(5) “In the comic vision the **unformed** world is a **river**, traditionally fourfold” (486).

“In the tragic vision this world usually becomes the **sea**, as the narrative myth of dissolution is so often a flood myth” (486).

8. How does Yeats’s poem “Sailing to Byzantium” reflect “the comic vision” from a myth criticism perspective? (486)

The poem has “the city, the tree, the bird, the community of sages, the geometrical gyre and the detachment from the cyclic world” (486).