

The Beginning of Archetypes: The End of Chaos

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When one thinks of literature, it is not unusual for a book to come to mind. However, literature should not be confined merely to the sense of books or to a lesser sense of words. It includes both visual and verbal elements. Literature is open to interpretation on many levels that can be visualized or translated by the mind into words. However, is it possible to classify all of literature into specific types based on content? In other words, can something of infinite proportions be finitely encapsulated into simplistic categories?

Consider the natural sciences that set out to map the unknown, and more specifically the classification methodology that we use to categorize the flora and the fauna in biology. Each level of the classification groups similar traits together like phyla, order, on down to the exact species. It is a very organized system to which newly discovered animals and plants can easily be added. However, literature cannot be divided so nicely. Some works are not only text; many occur in an array of formats. Are we able to devise a literary classification system that can work? Northrop Frye's essay, "The Archetypes of Literature," offers one possibility. He uses a system of four categories where any piece of literature can fit regardless of its origin, language, or presentation.

The first archetype deals with "the dawn, spring, and birth phase" (Frye 1452). This type has connotations of creation, birth, and an end to a chaotic period. The second archetype is characterized by "the zenith, summer, and marriage, or triumph phase" (Frye 1453). It deals with that of periods of paradise and marriage. The third archetype deals with "The sunset, autumn, and death phase" (Frye 1453). This phase is distinguished as the fall, or perhaps the end of paradise, often tragic times for the hero of a story. Frye's final archetype is that of "the darkness, winter, and dissolution phase," a period of darkness and destruction (Frye 1453). Horrible natural disasters are given in this phase, and the hero of the story is usually beaten. These are the four categories into which all literature supposedly should fit, and I shall test this theory with an analysis of excerpts from the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, and the Kane myths of creation in *Hawaiian Mythology* by Martha Beckwith. Frye's classification should easily account for these myths. However, another problem is whether or not the classification system applies to nonfiction, such as the essay. One could also test his system on his essay as a kind of control, to see if it fits into the archetypes as well.

The myths of Hawaiian creation and that of creation in Ovid's account come from two very distinct cultures, yet there are some similarities despite this cultural and time gap. The first similarity is the idea of polytheism. The Hawaiian creation myths involve three gods, who are Kane, Ku, Lono. Ovid alludes to multiple gods when he says, "whatever god it was, who out of chaos brought order to the universe" (Ovid 32-33). In both mythologies, many gods are involved with aspects of human life. The other similarity is the vision of life before the creation. In the first Fornander version of the Hawaiian myths, we see that Kane exists in a state of darkness, and that there is no light created until the next era. The Kepelino version depicts Kane, Ku, Lono living in a state of darkness. The Kamakau version states, "Kane, assisted by Ku and Lono and opposed by Kanaloa, makes the heaven and the earth. All is chaotic" (Beckwith 45). Polytheism and darkness, chaos prior to the order of creation, are common themes shared by these cultures to explain what is unknown to them.

Another similarity between the two literary myths is their close relationship concerning the beginning of man. In multiple versions, Hawaiian creation myths describe man formed from earth, just as Ovid states, "So Man was born, it may be, in God's image, or Earth, perhaps, so newly separated from the old fire of Heaven, still retained some seed of the celestial force which fashioned gods out of living clay and running water" (Ovid 74-78). He refers to the "seed," which in the context implies that the process of creating gods and man is similar, and therefore, man is also created by clay and water.

Another important similarity is based on the location of the gods in relation to man. It is clear that both put the gods in the heavens or on a mountain, as long as they are above all else. In both versions of the Fornander creation myths of Hawaii, the gods' home is in the three heavens that they create: "the uppermost for Kane, the next below for Ku, and the lowest for Lono" (Beckwith 43). In Ovid's depiction, he says "their home [heaven] forever, and the gods lived there" (Ovid 69-70). This statement is important because it shows an authoritative hierarchy that puts the gods above all else; it shows that each of the cultures had a belief in a divine beginning and rule.

Since both myths deal with creation, it will be easy to categorize them into the first phase of Frye's archetypes, about creation and birth. The second phase, triumph, can also be associated with the stories. For instance, in the second Fornander version of the Kane myth, "they give him [Ke-li'i-ku-honua or man] a delightful garden to live in called Kalana-i-hauola" (Beckwith 43). Then shortly afterward, the three gods make a woman for the man. This story constitutes the sacred marriage in the second of Frye's archetypes. Similarly, Ovid's account of the Golden Age of humanity states that it was "a time that cherished of its own will, justice and right; no law, no punishment, was called for; fearfulness was quite unknown" (Ovid 81-84). This perfect representation of the "state of nature" is similar to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's peaceful vision of the world before organized social societies were formed, and from this situation a paradise develops. Because humankind is naturally good in this stage, according to Rousseau, there is no need for government at this particular moment; it stands to reason that it must to some degree be a paradise.

The third phase, that of death and the exile of the hero, can be accommodated in these stories as well. According to the second Fornander version of the Hawaiian creation myth, "a law is given him but he breaks the law and is then known as Kane-la'a-uli, 'a god who fell because of the law'" (Beckwith 43). Man breaks the law and is later banished from the paradise garden. In the Kepelino version, the woman is tricked into eating the fruit of the sacred tree, and as a result, she becomes a bird that carries the man out of the garden of paradise. Both of these examples from Hawaiian mythology are about the fall of mankind, and the loss of paradise.

Ovid speaks of an "Iron Age," in which man loses all sense of morality: "And War came forth that uses both to fight with; bloody hands...Men lived on plunder" (Ovid 135-137). Evil, trickery, violence, war, and plunder, men's darkest actions, come to light. These developments are significant in the third phase of Frye's archetypes as well.

The last phase of Frye's archetypes can easily be tied into Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The flood that Ovid describes is exactly the state of chaos that Frye would say fits into the last archetype, which reflects both the end and the beginning of the cycle. In the Kamakau legend of creation, prior to the creation of man, "all is chaotic. Nothing exists but the upper regions and the spirit gods" (Beckwith 45). The fact that chaos is occurring during this time means that the creation truly has not yet begun. There is a similarity between the first and last archetypes, which Frye bases on the seasons. The birth phase reflects the chaos of the final phase.

It appears that these works clearly can be categorized not only within one of Frye's archetypes, but in all of them. Despite the cultural gap, the content can be broken down and categorized based on Frye's archetype conclusions. However, I am not truly convinced that Frye's system is adequate enough to cover other types of writing. I would like to know if Frye's ideas can account for his own work. In other words, can Frye's work be classified into an archetype, or will he merely be done in by his own categorization? In trying to tie Frye's archetypes to his own writings directly, I found it impossible to assimilate the text towards any of his four archetypes; however, there is still an important argument that associates his writings with the archetypes. Frye begins to talk about his archetypes by stating, "In the solar cycle of the day, the seasonal cycle of the year, and the organic cycle of human life, there is a single pattern of significance, out of which myth constructs a central narrative" (Frye 1452). It is a declaration as to what composes an archetype of literature. If Frye created the archetypes of literary categorization, then it is also possible to

put Frye into an archetype. The first archetype deals with beginnings and creation, which fits Frye's work almost perfectly. It is not that he is directly describing the creation of the archetypes, but merely that he is to some degree giving birth to a new philosophy of literary criticism. He is starting the foundations of a type of literary criticism that improves upon the analysis of merely the structure or the context of the work. He recreates the process by which we judge our literature, and therefore that fits into the first phase of his own work.

The infinite possibilities that can shape literature can be directly broken down and encompassed within a system of classification. Frye's system does seem to be undeniable proof that infinity can be measured to some degree not only in mathematics, but also in the field of literary criticism. The two works from two entirely different parts of the world show us that a various forms of literature can be fitted into Frye archetypes, but for how long will the archetypal system last? The unfortunate consequence of progress means that eventually the world of literature will outgrow Frye, and a new system will need to be created that can accommodate the literature of tomorrow.

Works Cited

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