Frye on Genres
CHAPTER VI

FRYE ON GENRES

The term genre means a 'kind' a 'type' or a form of literature such as poetry, novel, epic et cetera. Harry Shaw defines genre as "a category or class of artistic endeavour having a particular form, technique, or content."

The term genre is used somewhat loosely and generally and it may further be subdivided into major and minor categories such as lyric (incorporating elegy, ode, song, sonnet); narrative verse, tragedy, comedy, history, short story, autobiography, and so on.

The concept 'genre' however is of recent origin. Even as late as in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, no proper attempt was made to discriminate between the diverse criteria involved in differentiations such as, subject-matter, structure, language, tone or audience. The study of any work is impossible without choosing the traits we are to discuss, or the angle from which the work is to be approached. It was impossible for early critics to make any useful comparisons between particular works by referring to their constitution.

Till the end of the eighteenth century genres or forms of literature were regarded as relatively fixed entities, i.e. they were supposed to be written according to certain rules. In other words, classical genre theory was regulative and
prescriptive in nature and was based upon certain fixed assumptions about psychology, and social differentiation. It is possible to find examples of theory of genres in Milton's *Lycidas*, *Samson Agonistes* and in *Paradise Lost*. Later on, with the emergence of New Criticism on the scene, a new impact was felt. The rigid way of classification of works of art was gradually given up and a beginning of modernism was made in literature. In the present century, a systematic attempt was made by Russian formalists such as Roman Jackobson, and critics like W.K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brook paid much attention to this aspect of literature by their continuing and persistent efforts to link literary kinds to linguistic structures.

However, it is still difficult to pinpoint precisely the principles of differentiation of different forms of genres. Perhaps, the most significant modern contribution to genre theory is that of Northrop Frye who presents quite a comprehensive typology of genres in the *Anatomy*.

II

Frye's Theory of Genres

Frye presents his theory of genres in the last chapter titled 'Rhetorical Criticism' of *Anatomy*, basing the generic distinction in literature upon what he calls "the radical of presentation," i.e. the conditions set up between the poet and the audience.

Frye makes a distinction between four kinds of genres by
employing the author-audience relationship. In epics or an epic, he finds that the author addresses his audience directly, in drama he addresses the internal characters and in lyric the poet addresses himself, in other words in lyric the author himself represents the audience. So far as the fourth genre is concerned, Frye found that there was no corresponding term in Greek poetics for a genre which addresses its readers through a printed book. Frye has therefore used the term 'fiction' for it. After this, he has advanced a postulate that epic, drama and lyric, though available in print are meant for oral presentation. This means that fiction is not available for oral presentation.

A diagrammatic representation of Frye's theory of genres would look as under:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR - AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPOS</td>
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<tr>
<td>AUTHOR ADDRESSES</td>
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<tr>
<td>AUDIENCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>RHYTHM OF CONTINUITY</td>
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<tr>
<td>(PROSE)</td>
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<tr>
<td>AUTHOR</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADDRESSES</td>
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<tr>
<td>RHYTHM OF</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASSOCIATION</td>
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The epic is the first category of genre Frye refers to in the exposition of his theory of genres. By *epos* Frye means "the literary genre in which the radical of presentation is the author or minstrel as oral reciter with a listening audience in front of him". In other words, Frye uses the term *epos* or epic to define the works in which the author addresses his audience orally. He further observes that in *epos* "the author confronts his audience directly, and the hypothetical characters of his story are concealed. The author is still theoretically there when he is being represented by a rhapsode or minstrel, for the latter speaks as the poet, not as a character in the poem. In written literature both the author and his characters are concealed from the reader". This means, epic involves direct confrontation between the author and the audience; evidently, the internal characters are concealed or relegated to background. The presence of author in the epic is in the form of a poet or a minstrel addressing the audience rather than a participating character. In other words, so far as the role of the author is concerned, the epic stands far in contrast to drama where the author is totally concealed from the audience.

The drama is the second category of genre among the four literary genres Frye refers to. His own idea of drama is explicit in these words:

In drama, the hypothetical or internal characters of the story confront the audience directly, hence the drama is marked by the concealment of the author from his audience. In every spectacular drama, such as we get in many movies, the author is of relatively little importance. Drama, like music, is an
ensemble performance for an audience, and music and drama are most likely to flourish in a society with a strong consciousness of itself as a society, like Elizabethan England. When a society becomes individualized and competitive, like Victorian England, music and drama suffer accordingly and the written word almost monopolizes literature.

Thus, in explaining his views on dramatic art, Frye makes four points. Drama, according to him, involves i) direct confrontation of the internal characters with the audience, ii) the author is relegated to a background position and his role is of little importance; iii) drama can flourish in a homogeneous kind of society having a strong consciousness of its own social norms and values; and iv) the society (by which Frye means the audience) should not turn 'individualized' or 'competitive'; consequently, the dramatic art tends to be taken over by the written word.

Frye's views on the dramatic form of art are quite convincing. He however seems to be taking a rather idealized or compartmentalized view of the society, both homogeneous and fragmented. In fact, it is difficult to draw a rigid line between 'a society with a strong consciousness of itself as a society' and contrast it with a society which has become 'individualized' and 'competitive'.

The lyric is the third type of genre in Frye's scheme of generic classification of literary works. Traditionally, lyric is regarded as the genre in which the poet, like the ironic writer, turns his back on his audience. In Frye's view, lyric is "a literary genre characterized by the assumed concealment of the
audience from the poet and by the predominance of an 
associational rhythm distinguishable both from recurrent metre 
and from semantic or prose rhythm". Frye's definition thus not 
only covers the traditional notion of lyric but goes a step 
further to stress the rhythmical aspect of poetry distinguishing 
it from the two rhythms namely the recurrent and prose rhythm. 
Frye offers quite a comprehensive explanation of this genre in 
the following words:

The concealment of the poet's audience from 
the poet, is presented in the lyric. There 
is, as usual, no word for the audience of the 
lyric: What is wanted is something analogous 
to "chorus" which does not suggest 
simultaneous presence or dramatic context. 
The lyric is... pre-eminently the utterance 
that is overheard. The lyric poet normally 
pretends to be talking to himself or to 
someone else: a spirit of nature, a Muse,... a 
personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified 
abstraction, or a natural object. The lyric 
is... the poet presenting the image in 
relation to himself: it is to epic, 
rhetorically, as prayer is to sermon. The 
radical of presentation in the lyric is the 
hypothetical form of what in religion is 
called the "I-Thou" relationship. The poet... 
turns his back on his listeners, though he may 
speak for them, and though they may repeat 
some of his words after him".

This means, in lyric the audience's presence is rather in a 
concealed form. The poet talks either to himself or to someone 
else who could be either a spirit, a god, or some other kind of 
abstraction. The poet becomes immune to the reaction of the 
listeners, if any, even if they attempt to repeat some of poet's 
own utterances after him. Secondly, Frye compares the lyric to 
the 'chorus' in Greek tragedies. In the tradition of ancient 
Greeks, chorus played an important part in the drama. It
depicted, among other things the *denouement* in the course of the dramatic events to follow in a choral sequence, though the choral participants themselves would not have any active dramatic role. Likewise, Frye believes that lyrical utterances of the poet are analogous to the chorus in Greek tragedies.

III

**THEORY OF RHYTHM**

Rhythm is a concept derived mainly from the musical arts. It means uniform recurrence or repetition of beat or accent. In literature however, it is "the measured flow of words in verse or prose". Rhythm in verse is most often established by a combination of accent and syllables. In prose, rhythm is marked by variety of movements. In other words, rhythm is contributed by balanced sentences, variety in sentence structure and length, and so on.

Based upon the four-fold generic classification of literary works made by Frye on the basis of author-audience relationships, he identifies four different kinds of rhythms, associating each one of them with a literary genre. Thus, the recurrent rhythm is associated with *epos*; rhythm of continuity with prose; rhythm of decorum with drama, and rhythm of association with lyric.

Of all the rhythms referred to above, the rhythm of recurrence, he believes, is central to every work of art, and further points out that metre, quantity, and stress are the
organizing principles of rhythm in epos. Frye elaborates this concept further by taking a survey of the whole English poetry, and observes: "When in poetry we have a predominantly stress accent and a variable number of syllables between two stresses, we have a musical in poetry, that is poetry which resembles in its structure the music contemporary with it". In other words, he introduces the idea of 'musical' in poetry by referring to some technical components of a poem such as the stress, accent and so on, and differentiates this 'musical' aspect from the other attributes of the poem, especially its 'sentimental' aspect. To its 'sentimental' aspect, Frye adduces attributes such as soft and soothing syllabus, smooth musical flow and a semblance of harmony. For a practical illustration of these ideas, Frye makes a comparison between Tennyson's poetry and that of Browning's, saying that the latter is a musical poet in the technical sense and the former is the sentimental type. It is to be noted, however, that Frye's observations here appear to be somewhat general and his classification is rather too rigid in nature, for it is not difficult to find elements of music as well as sentimentality in the poetry of both Tennyson and Browning as well; and secondly, neither of them wrote their poetry keeping in their minds any such aspects.

The rhythm of continuity has its genre in prose. Frye explains this rhythm saying "In every poem we can hear at least two distinct rhythms. One is the recurring rhythm, which we have shown to be a complex of accent, metre, and sound-pattern. The other is the semantic rhythm of sense or what is usually felt to
be prose rhythm." Elaborating the same idea further he observes, "We have verse epos when the recurrent rhythm is the primary or organizing one, and prose when the semantic rhythm is primary". This means, he identifies two kinds of rhythms in every poem, the recurring and the semantic. The former is the outcome of verse epos and the latter, of the prose epos. He then concludes that literary prose results from the use within literature of the form used for discursive or assertive writing, whereas treatises in verse are invariably classified as literary.

The rhythm of decorum is the third type of rhythm identified by Frye in course of his exposition of the theory of genre. This type of rhythm has drama as its genre. By decorum, Frye means the suiting of style to an internal character or subject, or to put it simply, appropriateness of style to content and character. In Frye's view, decorum is in general the poet's ethical voice, the modification of his own voice to the voice of character or to the vocal tone demanded by subject or mood. And "as style is at its purest in discursive prose so decorum is obviously at its purest in drama, where the poet does not appear in person". In other words, the rhythm of decorum constitutes the crucial characteristic of drama. The dramatist has to maintain the decorum of style, that is, he is not free to use his distinctive voice within the text of the play. His voice has to be rendered through the dialogues of his characters, which means that he has to adapt his style to the demand of the characters and the general tone of the play.
The rhythm of association is the fourth category of rhythm Frye refers to in the concluding part of the essay on ‘Rhetorical Criticism’ in the Anatomy. The rhythm of association has lyric as its genre. The lyric, according to Frye, "is the genre in which the poet, like the ironic writer, turns his back on his audience. It is also the genre which most clearly shows the hypothetical core of literature, narrative and meaning in their literal aspects as word-order and word-pattern." This means, in lyric there is no author-audience relationship and the author addresses himself. The lyrical writing has to conform to a certain musical word-order and also to a fixed word-pattern. It emerges from the coincidence of the sound pattern. Because its creative process is an associative of rhetorical process, its rhythm is necessarily 'associative'. The discussion of generic rhythms in the Anatomy is followed by the complex analysis of generic forms within each genre. It is to be noted that Frye does not neatly classify all the species of particular genres, but roughly counts the species of that genre, better known by their traditional names in critical analysis. We propose to discuss here one such genre i.e. drama.
The first quadrant is occupied by the species of forms known as myth-plays. Myth-plays take on the mood of the myth it represents. According to Frye, the characteristic mood and the resolution of the myth-play are pensive, and pensiveness in this context implies a sort of continuing imaginative subjection to the story. Frye also maintains that the myth plays emphasize dramatically the symbol of spiritual and corporeal communion. He quotes scriptural plays associated with Corpus Christi and children's plays as the examples from this category.

In Frye's view, myth-plays take on three forms: in the first form, he places literary works like legends; in the second, he puts the sacred auto and cites the drama Japanese No as an illustration of this form; and in the third, he places the secular auto and quotes dramas like Tamburlaine as one of the examples in this form. Frye clarifies that by the term auto he means dramas in which the main subject is sacred or sacrosant legend such as miracle plays and so on.

Referring to the term auto Frye says that auto is "a form of drama in which the main subject is sacred or sacrosant legend, such as miracle plays, solemn and professional in form but not strictly tragic." He further clarifies that "when there is no clear-cut distinction between gods and heroes in a society's mythology, or between the ideals of nobility and the priesthood, the auto may present a legend which is secular and sacred at once". And finally, he concludes that "in the auto, drama is at its most objective the audience's part is to accept the story without judgment".
Frye makes three points: firstly, that auto is a kind of drama or legend on a religious subject-matter but without any tragic overtones; secondly, auto can assume both a secular as well as sacred character in given circumstances such as when in a given mythology there is no differentiation between divine and human beings or when feudalism and priesthood share the same ideals, and lastly, unlike the tragedy, where in the last analysis there is invariably a kind of judgment on the part of audience, in the auto, Frye expects the audience to display objectivity, i.e. to accept the story on its own face value.

The second and third quadrants are occupied by tragedy, irony and comedy. It is remarkable that in the normal course, each of the second and third quadrants should have been occupied by the two genres tragedy and comedy respectively. Frye's reasons for including the ironic in these two quadrants are clear from the following passage:

but the association of heroism with downfall is due to the simultaneous presence of irony. The nearer the tragedy is to auto, the more closely associated the hero is with divinity; the nearer to irony, the more human the hero is, and the more catastrophe appears to be a social rather than a cosmological event.

To put this in simpler terms, the presence of irony ensures the downfall of the hero. This also means that so far as the aspect of downfall of the hero is concerned, Frye's notion of tragedy is in tune with the Greek view where the hero in the last analysis invariably falls from the position of prominence and meets his doom. However, Frye's view of tragedy differs from
that of the Aristotelian tradition in that in Greek view the catastrophic fall is a predetermined fact and follows naturally as a matter of course, whereas Frye incorporates concepts like auto and ironic to ensure the downfall. In Frye’s scheme, auto and ironic have an indirect bearing on the nature of tragic drama, i.e. when the tragic drama resembles auto, the hero is associated with divinity; on the other hand, if it resembles irony, the human is the hero.

The last quadrant in the upper half is occupied by masque. In Frye’s glossary of literary terms, masque is a "species of drama in which music and spectacle play an important role, and in which the characters tend to become aspects of human personality rather than independent characters". This means, in masque the characters shed off their representational aspects and resemble actual human beings. Elaborating the idea of masque further, Frye argues that in masque the "plots and characters are fairly stock, as they exist only in relation to the significance of the occasion... The members of the masque are accordingly disguised members of the audience, and there is a final gesture of surrender when the actors unmask, and join the audience in a dance". Thus, in Frye’s scheme, the characters in masque have a limited role; they are made up for the ‘occasion’ and the plots too are accordingly designed to have a restricted role. More often, the participants come from the audience itself and they return to their normal selves when they rejoin the members of the
masque the audience is given superior position to look at the things as spectacular entertainment while in auto, the audience has to be objective and obedient. The sub-genres of masque are farce, morality play, ideal masque and archetypal masque.

Frye differentiates generic criticism from other forms of art-criticism, more particularly the structural and historical forms. He voices his opinion in these words, "Generic criticism... differs from structural criticism... which is concerned with such matters as myth and ritual. It separates the structural from the historical critic, and enables the former to get clear of the tyranny of historical categories. The structural critic does not need to establish a solid historical tradition all the way from prehistoric fertility rites to the nature myth..., or take sides in the quarrel of Classical scholars over the ritual origin of Greek drama: he is concerned only with the ritual and mythical patterns which are actually in plays, however they got there. The study of genres, which takes all drama as contemporary and deals with categories prior to historical varieties should help to disentangle problems of structure from problems of origin."

This means the task of a structural critic is not to go back to history to establish or support his ideas, theories or patterns. The structuralist critic, in Frye's view, would not participate in the origin of ideas or patterns. He is concerned only with the actual use of the pattern and mythical or ritualistic traditions. In other words, a structuralistic critic...
builds up the established structure of an art-work based upon the established and accepted norms, without concerning himself with the 'why' and 'how' and the origin of pattern or ideas, or the history behind them. Hence, Frye finds it convenient to adduce generic criticism a superficial role of a mediator between the historical and structural forms of criticism and thereby expects it to 'disentangle' or solve the problems of structure from problems of origin of art-work. Frye's argument here seems to be quite sound and we have no difficulty agreeing with him on this point.

Frye's theory of genres has attracted mixed responses from different critics. For instance, commenting upon the achievements and importance of his typology of generic criticism, Wayne A. Rebhorn observes, "Since 1957, when Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism... appeared,... over thirty-five books and articles have poured forth... One reason for this deluge has been the rise of genre criticism in this period; [and] in this mass of material, Northrop Frye's work stands out above the rest". He further concludes that "while it would not be accurate to call him a genre critic, if only because his notion of the 'mythos' of comedy ispregeneric, he nevertheless has provided genre criticism with many useful tools. What is more, he has spearheaded the revaluation of the 'low' subjects of comedy and romance, thus aiding the efforts of students of popular culture". The following passages too are a part of the mixed response invited by Frye's genre criticism: "Mr. Frye has
tried to give the conventional genres new import by seeing them as modes of vision and, even more, by seeing them as vestiges of mythology, concrete archetypes which involved a typical conception of man as actor, a typical setting all interdependent and coherent. This method has done a great deal to deflect criticism from its repetitive demonstration that everything that lives is organic, particularly because it has an elaborate circulatory system of images. It has redirected attention to the larger, more than verbal structure of literature. Further, "Mr. Frye has been most ingenious in creating new categories. He has related the traditional genres to each other as the cycles of seasons might be charted, and each genre admits several levels of style that are uniform from one another. The task of the myth critic is to place a work so that we may see its context fully." Similarly, Mr. Frye has been far more imaginative than any other genre critic we have had, but he has also produced a system of the kind that occupied the scholastic mind to the point of impoverishment. Such a system testifies nobly to the impulse to find unity; but its a "drive toward a 'verbal circumference of human experience' may shrink up our perception of diversity and novelty".

In the face of such criticism, Frye argues,

...our conspectus of genres...... does not pretend to answer every conceivable question, but it attempts to add a few more letters to the critic's hornbook..." Finally, Frye concludes his argument on this point saying, "We may close with a final warning that generic criticism is not an attempt at
classification or pigeon-holing, but at the systematic study of the formal causes of art".

Thus, from the different lines of argument raised in favour of and against Frye's typology of generic criticism, it is clear that Frye's system has been able to contribute positively towards a better understanding, interpretation and appreciation of different literary genres, and secondly, on the systematic study of the formal causes of art-works.

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Chapter Notes


3. Ibid. p. 246.

4. Ibid. p. 249.

5. Ibid. p. 249.

6. Ibid. p. 249.

7. Ibid. p. 249.

8. Ibid. p. 249.


10. Ibid. p. 251.

11. Ibid. p. 263.

12. Ibid. p. 263.
13. Ibid. p. 269.
15. Ibid. p. 271.
16. Ibid. p. 271.
17. Ibid. p. 271.
18. Ibid. p. 365.
19. Ibid. p. 284.
20. Ibid. p. 366.

25. Ibid. p. 593.
26. Ibid. p. 593.