APPLIED CRITICISM
OF FINE
CHAPTER VIII

APPLIED CRITICISM OF FRYE

This chapter discusses Frye's application of the theory of myth criticism and of the general principles enunciated in the Anatomy of Criticism to actual literary works. Of course, a comprehensive study of the application of his theory would be an exercise beyond the limits of this study. It is therefore proposed to restrict our discussion to Frye's criticism of three major English poets, namely Milton, Shakespeare and Eliot.

I

FRYE ON MILTON

At the outset, the reasons for selecting Frye's discussion of Milton for understanding Frye's application of myth criticism to his works are: i) Milton is undoubtedly one of the poets whom Frye has studied extensively, and ii) secondly he has written at length on him. This can be seen in Frye's early references to Milton's concept of the fallen state of man in Fearful Symmetry (1947), in his archetypal criticism of Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes in Spiritus Mundi (1976) and in his full-length book, The Return of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics (1965) where Frye examines the mythos and dianoia of Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. Secondly, the essay,
"Literature as Contest: Milton's Lycidas" in *Fable's of Identity* (1963) is equally significant for our present purpose. Besides, it is not difficult to discern frequent references to Milton's works in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism, The Critical Path* and other critical works.

Frye's study of Milton concentrates mainly on three aspects, namely i) the pattern of imagery in Milton corresponding to Frye's notion of *dianoia*, ii) the narrative rhythm in Milton corresponding to Frye's idea of *mythos* and iii) the different genres in Milton's complete works.

II

**Imagery**

The pattern of imagery corresponding to Frye's motion of *dianoia* is discernible in Milton's vision of the fallen world that since the fall of Adam and Eve, the world is caught in the remorseless grip of Satan and his hordes. Here, Frye sees the possibility of redemption only after regaining the vision of Adam and Eve before the Fall.

Referring to *L'Allegro* and *II Penseroso*, Frye maintains that they are mythopoeic in nature. In them the imagery of the *Bible* is reflected in "the animation of nature from the singing hills of Isaiah to the dragons of the deep praising God in the *Psalms"*. The four cyclical seasons of the year form the *mythos* of *L'Allegro* and *II Penseroso*. It is through the cyclical structure, Frye comments, "Milton thinks of himself as young in
L'Allegro and the growing old and contemplative in *I Pensirosi* as spending his lively day in the sunshine and his pensive ones at night”.

On the same line, Frye draws our attention in the essay “Literature as Context: Milton's *Lycidas*” in *Fables of Identity*. This essay is based on the following four principles: i) convention (meaning reshaping of poetic material); ii) genre (involving choice of appropriate form); iii) archetypes (pattern of meaning), and iv) the autonomy of literature.

**Convention (reshaping of poetic material)**

Frye declares that the convention in the *Lycidas* is that of pastoral elegy. It takes its material not only from the English elegies but also from Greek, Latin and Italian traditions. Frye draws a comparison between *Lycidas* and other forms of literature when he argues that *Lycidas* is not merely a literary form used for expressing his sorrow at the death of Edward King, but a "conventional or recurring form of the same family as Shelley's *Adonis*... the Daphnis of Theocritus and Virgil and Milton's own *Damon*". And so far as the generic aspect of the poem is concerned, Frye does not mention here that the tragic form of lyric is based on the tragic associative rhythm as discussed by him in the *Anatomy of Criticism*.

**Archetype (pattern of meaning):**

Elaborating his view of the imagery of *Lycidas*, Frye observes that it is entirely archetypal in nature. *Lycidas* for him, is an archetype of a poet, a young man, and a priest. He
sees the myth of Adonis as the one on which this poem is based and so he is led to use the archetypal imagery used by other poets. Milton has thus used the myth as a structural principle in his poetry.

**On autonomy of literary form**

Examining the *Lycidas* from the angle of the autonomy of literary forms, Frye concludes that the poem has taken only one historical incident, i.e. the drowning of Edward King. So far as the rest of the material is concerned, i.e. the structure, the imagery and the form are all provided entirely by the context of literature. Yet another full-length study of Milton by Frye is *The Return of Eden*. As Denham puts it, it is "a typical example of his work and one that specifically applies many of the principles set forth in *Anatomy of Criticism*." In this book, the structural principles such as the *dianoia*, *mythos*, genre and mode of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* are set forth. In both these epics, one can discern both the patterns of meaning and narrative pattern. The central theme which Frye has identified in Milton's epics is the return of Eden, representing the state of freedom to which man aspires. The central myth in these epics is loss and recovery of Eden. Frye has considered the theme and structure of the book in two ways: temporally (in the narrative movement in time) and spatially (in the static structure of imagery).

**On genre**

With regard to genre, Frye believes that Milton's ideal of an epic was "a poem that derived its structure from the epic
tradition of Homer and Virgil and still had the quality of a universal knowledge which belonged to the encyclopaedic poem and included the extra dimension of reality that was afforded by Christianity.

Continuing his discussion of genre, he says that *Paradise Lost* follows the Biblical pattern from Creation to the last Judgement of the encyclopaedic epic as specified in the *Anatomy*. As regards the form of the poem Frye adds that it follows the conventions of prose forms like Platonic dialogue, the debate on the ideal commonwealth and the educational treatise. The speech of Raphael and Adam is under this influence. He further adds that Milton's drawing upon the epic convention dating from Homer and Virgil is evidenced in the division of *Paradise Lost* into twelve books.

Thus, after specifying the genre of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* he places them in the category of encyclopaedic forms in the high mimetic mode. Frye then turns to the episodes in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* and draws out the symmetry in these epics in dialectical and cyclical orders.

What is remarkable is that the events described in both these epics take place around the presence of God. God is invariably a personified image in Milton's scheme. Frye exploits this mythical image of God and wants us to "visualize the presence of God in a clock where the figure of 12 is". The figure 6, which is dialectically opposed to the figure 12, represents the position of Fall of human order. Around these two
figures, he distributes the events of *Paradise Lost* as follows:

1. First epiphany of Christ: generation of Son from father.
2. Second epiphany of Christ: triumph over three-day Creation.
3. Establishment of the natural order in the Creation.
4. Establishment of the human order: creation of Adam and Eve.
5. Epiphany of Satan, generating sin and death.
6. Fall of human order.
7. Fall of natural order.
8. Re-establishment of the natural order at the end of the Flood.
9. Re-establishment of the human order with the giving of the law.

It is to be noted that his elaborate exercise as regards the interpretation of *Paradise Lost* is not in conformity with Milton's own scheme. Rather, it is based on Frye's own intentions of identifying these cyclic phases in *Paradise Lost* on the basis of generic form.

Thus, in Frye's diagram, the dialectical movement represents the pattern of imagery and the cyclical movement the narrative of the poem. And with the cyclical pattern of the movement or events, Frye combines the hierarchical Renaissance-paradigm of four levels of existence: divine, angelic, human and demonic. Referring to Milton, Frye says that Milton conceives God as the only source of real action, "the act of creation and recreation
Commenting on the angelic level of existence he says that angels derive their power from God; they lack free will and cannot act on their own. On the other hand, the human act, he believes, is negative in that it is either a surrender of the power to act or refusal to act at all. The demonic act is a parody of the divine act, destructive rather than creative. Thus, God, in the end, turns out to be the only source of action, and he alone can be called heroic in action. And this is one of the reasons why Frye defines *Paradise Lost* as a thematic encyclopaedic form rather than a form of fiction in the tradition of the high mimetic mode. And it is this concept of heroism which, Frye believes, has made the *Paradise Lost* "an anti-romantic and anti-heroic poem".

From the concept of heroism in *Paradise Lost* Frye moves on to the concept of freedom or free intelligence. According to Frye, Milton's conception of free-intelligence lies in detaching oneself from individual ego and the world. This view, it is felt is close to the conception of Nirvana in Hindu philosophy which believes that in order to attain salvation one has to renounce all kinds of worldly possessions and attachments. Milton's perceptions are also similar to this in that in order to reach at the ideal state one should "unite oneself to the totality of freedom and intelligence which is God in man". This in turn, he believes, leads us to participate in our Creator's view of the world which he has made and has found good. Milton also wants his readers to believe that this was the view which related Adam
and Eve to Eden before their fall. This is also implicit, at least partly, in the para "every act of return of Eden, a world in the human form of a garden where we may wander as we please but cannot lose our way".

**Cosmology of Milton.**

Frye then takes up the discussion of the structural myth of *Paradise Lost*. Frye's claim is that since the cosmology of Milton is a part of the myth, its study is essential, particularly for understanding the theme of the Fall.

He summarizes Milton's cosmology as follows:

1. The order of grace or heaven (the place of God's presence)
2. The "Proper" human order (symbolized by Eden and the Golden Age).
3. The Physical order.
4. The order of sin, death, corruption.

Frye is in total agreement with the cosmological order of Milton. The only difference, he observes, in Milton's hierarchical and cosmological order is that Man's place in the latter is not restricted only to the third human order. Man is initially born into the physical order. It is left to him either to rise or fall. In other words, he can either rise above this order into his "proper" human order, or sink into the world of sin and corruption. Commenting on the relationship between man and God, Frye points out that the Creator God "moves downward to his creatures, in a power symbolized by music and poetry which is
called in the Bible the Word, releasing energy by music by
creating form". The tendency in the creature is to move upward
towards its creator, obeying the voice of God within himself.
Elaborating the discussion further, he says that the demonic
parody of the upward human movement is represented by the
"gunpowder" plot, and the downward one of the Creator represented
by the devil's descent into hell. The view advanced by Frye in
the Anatomy, that even Galileo's function in Book I is demonic
derives from his basic assumption that Milton's cosmology runs
all through the poem. And that is a view of fallen man pulling
humanity away from its centre ... from Eden within.

In this cosmology of four levels of existence Frye
identifies a three-level hierarchy of human soul in Paradise
Lost. It consists of reason "which is in control of the soul";
will, the agent for carrying out the decrees of reason, and
thirdly, the 'appetite'. In an unfallen state, reason controls
the soul, the will enjoys the state of freedom because it is one
with reason, and the appetite is subordinate to both. This order
is reversed in the fallen state. This means, the appetite takes
the topmost place, becomes a passion and ultimately results in a
pull towards death.

Corresponding to these three levels identified by Frye in
Milton's intellectual framework, Frye has discovered yet two more
additional levels consisting of revelation and fantasy. He
situates revelation above reason and fantasy below the appetite,
and adds that revelation and reason cross each other at a point
when discursive understanding begins to be intuitive: the point of the emblematic vision or parable, which is the normal unit in the teaching of Jesus. The story of the fall of Satan is a parable to Adam, giving him the kind of knowledge he needs in the only form appropriate to a free man.

The emblematic vision of Milton, according to Frye, is similar to the anagogic vision, discussed in the Anatomy in which the poet becomes a critic of the doctrine of imagination. For Frye, Milton falls in the category of fifth-phase symbolic poets who are poets and critics in one person. He also sees some similarity between Milton's mythopoeic vision and that of romantic poets. He proposes to turn the inside out in Paradise Lost in order to see "God sitting within human soul at the centre and Satan on a remote periphery plotting against our freedom". Perhaps this is what Blake meant when he said that "Milton was a true poet and of devil's (i.e. revolutionary) party without knowing it".

Opposite to the emblematic revelation, Frye situates the fantasy (day-dreaming). The fantasy takes up the role of illuminating appetite from below, as in the case of Eve's dream. This continues up to the Fall. After the Fall, this hierarchical order is reversed. The appetite is illuminated by fantasy from above and becomes greed, lust, fraud and force at the demonic level. Frye makes use of this reversed model to explain Milton's concept of sin and death, with fantasy at the top and revelation at the bottom.
Referring to the narrative pattern of *Paradise Lost*, Frye uses the terms 'dramatic', 'conceptual' and 'tragic' to describe the *dianoia* and *mythos* of the poem. It is not clear why Frye has departed from his conventional usages of the terms 'fictional' and 'thematic' to define the *dianoia* and *mythos* of this epic. Probably, Frye assumes that the Fall of Adam and Eve contains all the potentials and ingredients of the tragic conflict and tragic resignation. Or to make this more clear, Adam's desire to live with Eve, and at the same time not to leave heaven is dramatic. On the other hand, his inherent flaw, inability to act in spite of his foreknowledge of the consequences of the Fall is obviously tragic. Lastly, for Frye, Adam's will to live with Eve is wrong both conceptually and theologically, but it is right 'dramatically' because it appeals to human sympathy. Frye's argument here sounds far from convincing and rather inconsistent with his own postulates in the *Anatomy* so far as his notions of different genres such as tragedy and comedy are concerned.

Structurally, Frye sees both the epics *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* as two separate parts of one action. The myth in these epics bears the *mythos* of the loss of Eden, followed by a quest for its recovery. This quest is fulfilled only through the heroic action. But the heroic action conceived by Frye is not the same as in any other dramatic pattern. It is purely conceptual in that it lies not on the theatrical stage shows but in the consciousness of the presence of God 'within'. Besides, the movement of the hero's journey portrayed by Frye is rather cyclical and circular. This means, the journey begins and ends.
"not precisely at the same point, but at the point renewed and transformed by the heroic action itself".

Notwithstanding these problems, it is clear that in Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained Frye has quite thoroughly applied the theory of myth criticism set forth in the Anatomy of Criticism. Further, a critical review of the application of his theory would also reveal that he has focussed more on the pattern of imagery, myth and cosmology of Milton. Comparatively, he has paid very little attention to the generic and narrative forms in these epics. Thus, in understanding Frye, one feels tempted to agree with Robert Denham’s view that "it is not easy to distinguish the biographical and historical from the archetypal approaches in The Return of Eden...". Yet in another essay "Agon and Logos" in Spiritus Mundi, Frye postulates his notions on the patterns of comedy and tragedy in Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes. Frye’s view in these epics is that Milton has quite successfully established the conquest of Christian forms upon the Classical forms. Frye compares the mythos of Samson Agonistes with that of Paradise Regained and concludes that both these epics belong to the form of divine comedy. This also means that Frye sees nothing tragic in Milton’s world. As a corollary to this, one feels inclined to conclude that, for Frye, tragedy is merely an accomplishment or imposition flowing from the will of the Creator.

Frye’s choice of Milton’s epics for applying his theories of myth criticism is not difficult to guess. In Milton’s works,
Frye sees a vast reservoir of myths which makes his task of hunting for them quite easier. Secondly, in Milton's works he finds the basic tenets of Christianity and Christian myths more extensively explored, particularly in the mythic stories of Adam and Eve, their fall, and the proverbial garden. All this, undoubtedly tunes well with Frye's own religious sensibility and his leanings towards the Christian religion in particular. Thirdly, for obvious reasons, Frye does not appear to favour any of the modern poets. His studies are quite selective and this also justifies his preference for mythopoeic poets like Milton, Shakespeare and Eliot.

Lastly, Frye's purpose in undertaking such an elaborate exercise is to sustain and reinforce his own belief that all literature is basically mythic in nature - an assumption he clearly established in the Polemical Introduction of the Anatomy and from where he proceeds on to maintain it consistently throughout his poetics.

Thus, Frye's efforts in establishing the mythic structure of Milton's works is quite commendable since it is a new approach besides being a lasting contribution to Milton criticism. Undoubtedly myth criticism stands enriched by Frye's contribution.

FRYE ON SHAKESPEARE

Frye holds an important place among the modern critics of Shakespeare's comedy and romance. Of course, earlier studies such as those made by H.B. Charlton, D. Dover Wilson, J.R. Brown and the works of Knight, Tilliyyard, Mack and Righter, to name only a
few, have significantly affected the direction of that thought, but the impact created by Frye's approach to the comedies has been such that even a critic like Wayne A. Rebhorn feels tempted to remark that Frye is "the starting point for modern criticism of Shakespearean comedy and romance".

Frye's concerted views on Shakespearean comedies are found in *A Natural Perspective* (1963). The book consists of a compilation of four different lectures delivered at Columbia in 1963, and is subtitled *The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*. Frye's attempt here is two-fold: i) to rehabilitate the comedies as texts for critical attention, and ii) to show how these comedies as well as other works of Shakespeare lead inevitably to the consummation of final romances.

II.

Frye's approach to the comedies of Shakespeare is largely based on his general theory of literature. He perceives all works of imaginative writing as conventional structures, or, to put it in other words, structures of convention. That means, they have no meaning apart from convention. Convention for Frye represents what is left over from myth when people stop believing the myth, just as myth in turn is what is left over from magic when people stop performing magical acts such as to induce say, fertility or stave off disasters and the like. Frye thus apprehends the progress of literature in terms of movement from magic to myth and from myth to convention, and discerns the role of the artist to refine and manipulate this convention to suit his desired
purpose. In a way, and obliquely though, this also throws some light on Frye's notion of what constitutes a work of art.

In the context of this theoretical premise, Frye places the works of Shakespeare and says that Shakespeare's plays are invariably conventional.

One may agree with Frye here, for it is not difficult to notice that Shakespeare's plays, aside from their rhetoric, are invariably full of oracular voices, changed or disguised identities, people risen from graves, interpolated masks and revels, and so on.

To support his argument further, Frye takes recourse to the theme of Shakespeare's comedies and remarks that they are versions of regenerative myth, each having three phases, namely,

a) an opening, in which society is characterized as tyrannous and irrational;

b) a middle, in which social chaos prevails (for example, mixed or confused identities, frustrated courtships, imprisonments, exiles, etc); and,

c) an ending, in which a stylized revel (say a multiple wedding) signals the birth of a new society.

Given the nature of Shakespeare's plays and repeated occurrences of such incidences in them no one would deny the fact that Shakespeare's plays are conventional in the sense that they have a kind of tripartite structure, i.e. an opening, a middle and an ending. However, Frye's observations on the structure of Shakespeare's plays or comedies appear to be rather inflexible
and have the effect of reducing Shakespeare to simply a fabricator, an entertainer. Secondly, Fry seems to say that his plays have no meaning and thirdly, that the poet had no aim in writing them beyond the creation of conventional structures.

Though one may agree with Frye on the tripartite structural pattern of Shakespeare's works, he seems to underplay the basic aspects of Shakespeare's incomparable intellectual prowess.

Frye disregards the fact that Shakespeare is the poet who could reach the deepest recesses of human mind and heart and is acknowledged to have worked with the whole span and depth of emotional values. Arguing further on the same lines Frye remarks:

The assumptions of a dramatist or the expectations of his audience may readily be translated into opinions or propositions or statements. If we do this to Shakespeare's assumptions, they turn into the most dismal commonplace. Hence the feeling expressed (by many critics) that, great poet as Shakespeare was, his philosophy of life, his opinions, standards, and values were bewilderingly shallow. The obvious answer is of course, that Shakespeare had no opinions, no values, no philosophy, no principles of anything except dramatic structure".

Here also Frye seems to take a rather extreme view. It is a commonplace knowledge that Shakespeare was not a mindless poet, dead to everything but the conventions of his art.

It is not clear why Frye takes a rather uncommon and sectarian view of Shakespeare's works. In fact, such remarks could perhaps befit the mouth of Bernard Shaw, whose penchant for mocking and defiling those who cut above him is a well known fact.
At one point, Frye even resorts to the remark that Shakespeare wrote purely for money, and that when he had made his pile he quit and returned to the country. It is difficult to agree with Frye on this point too. It is a well known fact Shakespeare was a highly successful playwright and that he could as well retire many years earlier and return to the country with his later romances still unwritten.

III

It is customary to identify Frye as an archetypal or anthropological critic. Following the Cambridge anthropologists namely Harrison, Cornford, and Murray, Frye too sees comedy and, in fact, all literature as a displacement from ritual and myth, which he characterizes primarily in terms of their plot configurations or structures. In ritual and myth, Frye argues, the individual strives to influence the natural world, while in literature that magical link gets broken. Nevertheless, Frye says,

The bumps and hollows of the story being told follow the contours of the myth beneath, and as literature develops greater variety and independence of expression, these mythical shapes become the conventions that establish the general framework of narratives. Hence literary convention enables the poet to recapture something of the pure and primitive identity of myth.

Frye thus makes it amply clear that because of the mythic
origin of literary conventions one can account for their persistence; and secondly, this also explains why some of the works have a strong effect even on sophisticated audience and makes possible the universal acceptance and accessibility of more conventional and popular works.

Elaborating further on this point, and defending the serious value of comedy because of its particular closeness to myth, Frye speaks out against the modern prejudices about the serious value of comedy in these words:

We live in an ironic age, and we tend to think in Freudian terms of 'wish-fulfillment' as confined to dreams, a helpless and shadowy counterpart of a "reality principle." In watching tragedy we are impressed by the reality of the illusion... In watching romantic comedy we are impressed by the illusion of reality... In the action of Shakespearean comedy, however, the kind of force associated with "wish fulfillment" is not helpless or purely a matter of dreams. It is, in the first place, a power as deeply rooted in nature and the reality as its opponent; in the second place, it is power that we see, as the comedy proceeds taking over and informing the predictable world.

Thus, in his observations on comedy, Frye makes an important point. He sees a dialectical relationship between comedy and tragedy; in comedy, he sees the 'illusion of reality' whereas in tragedy he observes the reverse, i.e. the 'reality of the
illusion'. Frye observes that comedy represents a sort of power which is deeply rooted in nature with the reality as its opposite. This means, he does not treat comedy in a light-hearted manner but accords it the same kind of seriousness and gravity that tragedy has traditionally been enjoying. Secondly, just as in tragedy the audience has a foreknowledge of the tragic end, so also, he feels, in comedy one can easily predict the end which in the normal course results in a happy ending.

Clearly, Frye accords equal billing for both the genres; in the words of Rebhorn "comedy has as much dignity as the perennially favoured tragedy".

Frye's writings have attracted the attention of a good number of critics. By and large, most of the critics tend to agree with his basic notion concerning the theory of structures of conventions. Among those who support Frye include C.L. Barber, Leo Salingar, Philip Edward, Thomas McFarland, and so on, whereas critics like Ralph Berry, E.M. Tillyard almost reject Frye's approach to the study of Shakespearean comedies.

Like Frye, Barber's analysis of the Shakespearean comedies implies a tripartite comic structure:

Characters leave or are forced out of their normal social world; they enter on festive world of games, play, and comic confusion, where they can release the energy normally used to maintain social inhibitions and through that release achieve clarification, a heightened awareness of man's link to nature; finally, since the license of misrule is by definition temporary, they return to the everyday world which is beneficially rendered as a result of the experience they have been through.

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Evidently, this is close to Frye's tripartite structure of comedy observed earlier in the opening paras of this section. However, there are certain minor points distinguishing the two: whereas Frye concentrates on his analysis of comedy through structure, Barber gives prominence to such aspects as festivity, tone or mood. Secondly, from the point of view of definition too, Frye focuses on the opposition between hero and villain or such blocking figure, while Barber's definition centers on the clown and buffoons and goes even to the extent of regarding festivity and comedy as synonymous. Nevertheless, despite these minor limitations, Frye's theory still remains more appealing and comprehensive of the two.

Yet another critic who shares with Frye as well as Barber the conviction that comedy is related to seasonal festivities celebrating the renewal of life is Leo Salingar referred to above.

Salingar makes a significant point when he observes: "the festive end of a comedy really derives from all the characters and not just the clowns". He further claims that these endings are not mere wish-fulfillment but reflections of a less sentimental belief: "if men can fashion their own happiness, they cannot make their happiness unaided but depend for that on society, and on something beyond human society as well, on Nature, or Fortune or Providence".

One feels like agreeing with Salingar here who looks at festivity from a slightly broader angle, i.e. not just from the
baser behaviour of clowns or jesters but by including all the other characters who equally contribute towards it, not to speak of factors beyond human society such as Nature, Fortune or Providence.

Another book which relies extensively on Frye for its treatment of Shakespearean comedies is Philip Edward's *Shakespeare and the Confines of Art* (1965). Unlike Barber and Salingar, who concentrate mainly on festivity, Edward begins by claiming that art creates order and thereby offers its audience consolation for the incompleteness and chaos of existence. Shakespeare, he claims, was conscious of this function of art which he was determined to fulfill.

Edward's opinion, though at variance with Barber and Salingar is very much within the framework of Frye's general notions of art, who regards the entire Nature as a big artifice and every aspect of it as well as everything confined in it as a manifestation of the same.

Thomas McFarland, in his *Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy* elaborates a theory quite close to that of Frye though his approach is slightly different from Frye. McFarland begins by setting comedy in opposition to tragedy. Both genres, he believes, deal with man's fear of death, the ultimate form of isolation; but whereas tragedy does so by elevating the hero beyond society, comedy turns to marriage, generally immersing the individual in society. McFarland also observes that comedy adopts the perspective of the social group and aims at humbling
the pretentious ones and ridiculing the out-laws or the deviant types.

Thus, though McFarland treats comedy and tragedy almost as dialectically opposed, by implication this also means that he accords both the genres equal billing - an assertion which Frye too has been consistently making in his theory of structure of conventions. Frye further claims that one genre cannot be seen as inferior to, or subsuming the other. This means, he wants to give equal, if not higher status, to comedy as compared to tragedy.

Probably, Frye’s thinking that tragedy enjoys a comparatively higher status than comedy rests on the belief that the former genre is most extensively discussed and dealt with in practically most of the literatures of the world, and hence, he feels obliged to rescue the comedy and place it on the level of tragedy. But McFarland does not think so. For McFarland both the genres deal with man’s fear of death, the ultimate form of isolation. He regards comedy and tragedy as two different approaches to life and to the domain of art. Thus, Frye’s attempts of comparing the two genres does not match with McFarland’s notions of generic distinction.

A fact that clearly emerges from the foregoing discussion is that these critics, by and large, depend upon Frye’s postulates for the interpretation of Shakespearean comedies. But critics like Ralph Berry and E.M. Tillyard, as we have observed earlier, think otherwise and almost reject Frye in toto.
In his *Shakespearean Comedy* and Northrop Frye, Berry directs his attack on Frye's tripartite schema for the structure of comedy. He accepts Frye's middle phase of confusion and release but rejects the two phases in Frye's analysis, viz. the initial phase dominated by an anticomic society and by the tyrannical persons or laws, and the final phase with its discovery of personal and social identity. For instance, referring to *Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Berry claims that the law at the start of the play is neither harsh nor unreasonable because Theseus accepts it and most of Shakespeare's audience would have approved of parents having some control over their children's marriage. Yet, Theseus himself later in the play sets aside the very law he seems to support at the start. So also, in plays like *Love's Labour Lost*, Berry observes, the hero and heroine are opposed by tyrannical fathers, rulers, or laws, but often it leads to a foolish resolution in the end. Berry thus establishes his two points and concludes that Shakespeare's comedies are merely presentations of problems in realistically conceived human relationships and that their endings do not solve problems. In other words, Berry rejects the idea of constructing a generic model for the plays and emphasizes realistically conceived situations for determining the structure, and sees the endings merely in terms of balance of contending forces.

It is difficult to agree with Berry's argument in toto here. Berry takes a somewhat one-sided and extreme view of Shakespeare's comedies. It is a commonplace knowledge that Shakespeare treats almost all the absurd and comic characters in
his plays with compassion and tolerance. Berry also does not seem to appreciate the fact that comedy allows the audience a detached, wide, tolerant view of stage full of characters and that Shakespeare deliberately uses artistic devices such as multiple plots and shifting of interests.

Like Berry, E.M. W. Tillyard also does not approve of a folkloristic approach to the interpretation of Shakespearean comedies. In his *Shakespeare's Early Comedies* (1965), Tillyard declares that a festivity must have some sort of practical result if it is to be significant, and since Shakespeare's plays do not have such results, they cannot be festive. He also claims that festivities were merely periodic amusements which had become a minor element in English life by the time Shakespeare started writing his early comedies.

Frye's contribution to the study of Shakespearean comedies has been quite significant, firstly, because he tried, quite successfully, to accord an equal weightage for both comedy and tragedy. Literary critics, by and large, concentrate more on tragedy and comedy is not given the same status as that of tragedy. Frye has almost rehabilitated comedy, firstly by placing it on a par with tragedy, and secondly, by refusing to make any significant differentiation between the two genres, i.e. the comedy and the tragedy while perceiving or postulating that all works of imaginative writing are 'structures of convention'. This way, Frye has quite successfully rehabilitated the status of comedy which hitherto had been a theoretically neglected genre.
FRYE ON ELIOT

After concluding our discussion of 'Frye on Shakespeare' in the preceding section, it is proposed to take up Frye's study of Eliot's writing. This study is organized in two sub-sections: the first one deals with the application of Frye's theories to Eliot's critical works in general; the second one concerns with some of Eliot's individual works, with particular reference to The Waste Land, Ash Wednesday, Four Quartets, Murder in the Cathedral, The Family Reunion, The Cocktail Party, The Confidential Clerk and The Elder Statesman.

I

Frye's book titled T.S. Eliot (1963) assumes a special significance for us, firstly, because in the third and fourth essays entitled "Unreal City" and "From Fire By Fire" of this book, Frye discusses the patterns of imagery and symbols in the major poetical works of Eliot, and secondly, he addresses himself to the problem of generic classification of Eliot's works.

Frye starts the third essay by analysing the dianoia formed by the pattern of imagery of Eliot's works. It is remarkable that he does not use his favourite technical terms like 'image', 'motif', 'sign', 'archetype' and 'monad' while discussing any of Eliot's works. Instead, like a formalistic critic, he devotes himself to the study of imagery in Eliot's works.

Eliot's imagery, Frye believes, is a consequence of the cyclical and dialectical movement of the narrative pattern of Eliot's poetry. He observes that Eliot's poetry displays four
main phases of the natural cycles as identified by him in the Anatomy, Frye states:

The December setting of Murder in the Cathedral, the cold March of The Family Reunion, the mid-winter spring of Little Gidding are deeply wrought into the texture of the imagery.

In his comments on The Waste Land, Frye says that the cyclical and dialectical movement is also seen in this poem. The opening lines of The Waste Land start with April, and going through the season of summer and rains, complete the cycle with winter in the end. Similarly, he identifies a dialectical opposition in spring and winter; youth and old age; dawn and darkness, rains and sea. In his opinion, so far as the imagery in Eliot's works is concerned cyclical and dialectical movements constitute an important aspect dominating Eliot's poetry.

Another set of imagery that Frye finds throughout the works of Eliot in general is that of "secret garden". The images associated with the "secret garden" are childhood, spring, flowers, rains, a young girl and innocence.

Yet another aspect of archetypal imagery is noticed in Frye's observation that the meeting of Dante with the young girl Matilda in Eden after renewing his innocence reflects the archetype of all such images in Eliot.

Frye's book on Eliot stresses the use of imagery revolving around "two figures the youth or girl killed or betrayed or deserted in fullness of life, and the weary old or middle-aged man who dreams of life in an after-dinner sleep".

To the first group, he associates characters such as the
Burbank in "Burbank with a Baedeker", while Tiresias in The Waste Land, the bewildered Magi, and the speaker in "Lines from an Old Man" belong to the second group. Frye thus classifies imagery in Eliot's works in two broad categories:

a) the vision of innocence, and
b) the vision of experience.

The vision of innocence

Frye believes that Eliot's imagery of innocence is similar to the analogical imagery discussed in the Anatomy. In this imagery, Frye sees a dialectical pull, one towards the works of paradisal imagery and the other towards the infernal imagery. Since in Frye's scheme notions of innocence and experience are dialectically opposed, every image which belongs to the vision of innocence also belongs dialectically to the vision of experience.

The image chiefly associated with innocent characters is that of water. We find the symbolism of innocence in the waters of the sea in Eliot's The Waste Land, in the passage where the Thames carries the filth of London in it. Here we also meet the drowned Phoenician sailor Phlebas representing the feelings of suffering and unrelieved bondage in his image. The healing waters of the sea returning in the form of rains correspond to the symbolism of baptism in Christianity. Dialectically opposed to the images of the vision of innocence are the threatening images of the animate world of birds and animals. For example, tiger, for Frye, symbolizes the image of Anti-christ, of wrath in "Gerontion". The raven appearing soon after the vision of love
in *The Family Reunion* symbolizes desertion. In *The Waste Land* the scratching up of corpses by the dog symbolizes consciousness which is opposed to the stupor of lying buried in darkness.

The image of the girl with "her arms full of flowers," deserted by her man, the 'hyacinth girl' in *The Waste Land* and the "rose garden" of Harry in *The Family Reunion* belong to the imagery of innocence.

Referring to Eliot's *Burnt Norton* Frye remarks that the episode of the rose-garden in *Burnt Norton* is the most concentrated of all visions of a lost or transitory state of innocence. One can see here the water of life, the rose and the lotus, the tree of life, the parental guardian figure "dignified, invisible", as it was in the Garden of Eden, before the fading of the vision.

**The vision of experience**

The vision of experience, Frye believes, is often ironic. The elements of irony is an ever present factor in it. Frye quotes "Prufrock" and "Gerontion" as illustrative of the same. This vision attains tragic proportions when the characters feel alienated from their environment and deserted by their creator. The situation is best depicted in the "Hollow Men" who respond passively to the winds, "behaving as the wind behaves".

II

Frye has accorded a complete section in his essay on *The*
Waste Land to indicate a four-fold pattern of imagery prevailing in the poem: static, dynamic, cyclical and dialectical.

"The Waste Land", he says, "is a vision of Europe, mainly of London at the close of First World War, and is the climax of Eliot's infernal vision".

Its setting is civilization in winter, completing the natural cycle. He links winter with past. (In Frye's scheme, 'past' represents the world of paradisal imagery. Here, in the present context, it includes the London Bridge also). Thus, winter, the "brown land" as he often refers to, is set to ruin every moment of the past. This is a world of subterranean existence, a world of shadows, corpses, and buried seeds. No growth is discernible in such a state. Like seeds buried in winter, people too do not wish to grow, and like the three-day rhythm of the resurrection of Christ, we sink into the lower world of the "unreal city" in "Burial of the Dead".

The next two sections of the poem take us to the underworld: Section titled "Death by Water" symbolizes physical death and burial in earth symbolizes spiritual death. The imagery of physical death is followed by imagery of the rebirth of those who can die into new life at the command of thunder and those who are rejected and die like a sterile seed. The concluding section depicts the resurrection of the dead in an image of a streaming crowd, "hooded horses swarming". Frye points out in The Waste Land that the world to be redeemed is under water and under the earth. The Fisher King of Eliot, sitting gloomily at the shore with the "arid plain" behind him, represents the human figure of
Adam who cannot redeem himself. The essay in Frye's book *T.S. Eliot*, titled "From Fire by Fire" deals with the later poems and plays of T.S. Eliot.

These essays, according to Frye, belong to Eliot's "purgatorial" visions. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* (1930) portrays the imageries of desert, garden, and stairway. The images of stairways in *Ash Wednesday* Frye points out, are analogous to winding mountains of Dante's *Purgatorio*. Of all the imagery depicted in Eliot's works, Frye points out, the one which is prevalent throughout the works of Eliot is the imagery of stairway. Eliot has included this imagery even in an ironic context e.g. failure in love. So also are the symbols of garden and desert. Each symbol has been identified by Frye in *Ash Wednesday* itself. Frye's purpose in turning to the same kind of imagery is in tune with his leanings towards Biblical imagery. Five of these symbols, namely Adam, Israel, Israel in exile, the world of vanity and "the burden of the grasshopper" are obviously from the *Bible*. The sixth symbol is from commemoration of temptation (i.e. of Israelites wandering in the desert for forty years) and the seventh symbol is from Dante's *Purgatorio*.

The images of desert in *Ash Wednesday*, Frye says, symbolize an alienated individual in spiritual life. It is the place where the three dreams of waking consciousness, memory and dream proper occur to the narrator. Commenting on the different levels of the narrator's experience Frye states that

a) the first is a world of identity where the individual is one with his community.
b) the second is a world where the experiences are linked by memory and impose a sadness on life,

c) the third represents one's encounter with ordinary experiences, and

d) the fourth depicts one's concentration of consciousness in order to break up the illusion of individual ego.

The poem, in Frye's view, represents the predicament of a middle-aged man, who is fed up with carnal desires and has reached a point to throw away his ego to the dust. He dreams of ascending the stairway and yearns for reaching the garden. But each time his dreams are overtaken by desires and memory. Ultimately, he gives in by succumbing to the dreams of the white lady.

When Frye turns to Eliot's *Four Quartets*, he uses the two categories of innocence and experience to describe its imagery in terms of a circular diagram:

![Circular Diagram](image-url)
The horizontal diameter of the diagram represents the clock time, 'the Heraclitus Flux'. The vertical diameter shows the presence of God descending into time, 'and crossing it at the incarnation forming the 'still point of the turning world'". The smaller circle encircles the centre and is situated inside the bigger circle, thus representing the world of rose-garden at the top-half; while the bottom-half depicts the world of experience, of the subways. The top-half and the lower-half of the larger circle are visions of plenitude and vacancy respectively.

Experience related to the lowest part of the diagram is that of ascesis or dark night. The movement of The Four Quartets is cyclical beginning and ending at the same point. Frye holds:

The archetype of this cycle is the Bible which begins with the story of man in a garden. Man then falls into a wilderness or waste land, and into a still deeper chaos symbolized by a flood. At the end of time he is restored to his garden, and to the tree and water of life that he lost with it".

The narrow movement of every Quartet is described in terms of the imagery of the rose garden, subway and the dark night. The intricate movement of the concepts of time and eternity dominates the rest of the argument. The rose garden and the yew trees constitute the recurring symbols of Four Quartets. The former symbolizes a world up, the upper region of plenitude, while latter takes us down to the dark night, to the state of ascesis. The turning wheel of time makes the two worlds look identical at the moments when eternity descends upon the
individual visions. As a whole, the theme of Four Quartets, in Frye's opinion, is the theme of divine comedy.

The imagery of Murder in the Cathedral is based upon the dialectical and purgatorial aspects of the comic action depicted in miracle plays. The action begins in 'experience' and does not rise up to the vision of the rose garden. Frye has not shown clearly the pattern of tragic action in this play. It is noticeable that even the basic principles of his own poetics have not been applied to the play.

So far as The Family Reunion is concerned, Frye maintains that it is central to all the tragic plays of Eliot. In all the plays of Eliot one finds invariably a central figure who through a process of spiritual purgation attains a vision of the four worlds discussed earlier. But in the process he is isolated from other people and his audience. The action of the play is tragic followed by a scapegoat ritual in the end... the ritual of rejection, the life of ego for the life of the rose garden. In other words, sacrifice by the individual for removing the guilt of the family.

Another example in this category is The Cocktail Party which has a structure parallel to that of Euripides's Alcestis. In this play, the conflict is represented by Celia, the central figure, who is haunted by a profound sense of original sin. She starts on a mission of spiritual journey and is crucified ultimately in Africa.

In The Confidential Clerk it is possible to discover the
device of anagnorisis in the long lost parents of the hero and heroine. Frye compares the plot of this comedy to that of Menandrine's New Comedy. Throughout the comedy an atmosphere of demure farce prevails, symbolizing somewhat a distorted but self-consistent world. The imagery of the suburban garden and the city discerns the lower world of experience while the upper world is depicted by marriage.

The Elder Statesman is based on the theme of sin and redemption. Lord Claverton, the central figure, is a retired person and has dedicated his life to social causes. Gomez and two of his Oxford chums come to remind him of his previous misdeeds. They are instruments of grace to him, like the Furies of Harry. Ultimately, the persona of the elder statesman breaks up and he confesses his misdeeds to his daughter.

Frye finds mythoi of heroism in two poems on Coriolanus, namely "Triumphant March" and "Difficulties of a Statesman". Coriolanus is a person of great integrity. He is in the state of innocence. But his inability to "operate the social machinery of tact and compromise keeps him imprisoned in that integrity". It results in the isolation of the hero and isolation of his ego. Frye compares the hero of "Triumphant March" with Arjuna of Mahabharata facing a dilemma and in doubts about what he is doing in an archetypal situation.

Frye also makes a brief mention of the dramatic monologues of Prufrock and Gerontion in the context of his critical analysis. These monologues, he says, are studies of self, romanticizing ego. They are in the form of a self-meditative
verse in which a romantic illusion finds itself strangled in a visionary conscience.

Frye's preference for the works of Milton, Shakespeare and Eliot is justified at least on three counts:

Firstly, because their works are too esoteric and complicated enough to enable even a lay critic to offer a wide and differing range of meaning and interpretation.

Secondly, the works of these authors are full of mythical elements which can easily be explored and analysed. In fact, some of Eliot's works discussed above and Milton's epics treated in the preceding section are cases in point. Since in Frye's scheme, myth finally constitutes what he calls the 'matrix of literature,' his preference for Milton, Eliot and Shakespeare is self explanatory in character.

Thirdly, in some aspects, Frye's religious sensibility appears to be quite in tune with that of the authors he has selected for applying and testing the tenets of his critical theories.

To sum up, Frye's work on Eliot "possesses all the virtues of all Frye's writings; it is strong in relating image to concept".

Chapter Notes

2. Ibid. p.277.


5. Ibid. p.161.


7. Ibid. p.28.

8. Ibid. p.30.

9. Ibid. p.31.

10. Ibid. p.32.

11. Ibid. p.63.

12. Ibid. p.78.

13. Ibid. p.119.


19. Ibid. p.123.

21. Ibid. p.556.


24. Ibid. p.53.

25. Ibid. p.61.

26. Ibid. p.64.

27. Ibid. p.77.

28. Ibid. p.79.