FREE ON MODES
Since the early days of human civilization it was noticed by man that nature behaved in a certain cyclical pattern and this in turn, had a significant impact on his everyday life. However, the idea of the cyclical movement of nature was rather complex and mystical for him as the ordinary notions of perceptions available to him did not help him grasp the exact nature of natural phenomena.

To facilitate the understanding of the natural phenomena, he felt it necessary to have some new means of communication with nature. Furthermore, by breaking the continuum of nature into a kind of discontinuum, i.e. by dividing the entire cyclic nature into different parts or seasons, he hoped to achieve a better understanding of nature. Accordingly, he divided the phenomena of cyclical structure of nature into different seasons and tried to establish a kind of relationship between man and nature by attributing human emotions to nature's seasons.

This achievement of the early man with regard to the cyclical movement of nature helped modern thinkers understand man-nature relationship in a better light. Frye's understanding of literature is a part of his larger understanding of man-nature relationship. In his eagerness to explain literary works and different art-forms on the basis of this notion of man-nature
relationship, Frye developed a theory of literary criticism in his *Anatomy* of which 'Historical Criticism' and 'Theory of Modes' are two significant parts. Frye's first essay in the *Anatomy* addresses itself to the problem of 'historical criticism' and to his 'theory of modes'.

In the *Anatomy*, Frye defines mode as "a conventional power of action assumed about the chief characters in fictional literature, or the corresponding attitude assumed by the poet toward his audience in thematic literature. Such modes tend to succeed one another in a historical sequence".

Frye's definition of modes refers to two kinds of modes: a) Fictional and b) Thematic. While elaborating the idea of the fictional category, he attributes power of action to the heroes, which is the defining characteristic of the fictional mode. Thus, a hero can establish his bravery by the acts of heroism only on the strength of his power of action. It is noteworthy that Frye does not refer to the power of action assumed by the hero as a positive value only. On the contrary, he also refers the power of action exhibited by the most villainous character. In other words, so far as the power of action goes, both the hero and the villain stand on the same footing.

In the case of thematic literature, Frye's focus is on the poet's attitude towards the audience. He believes that the possible response of the audience to the poet's works is determinative of the poet's own attitude towards his work of art. By implication, this also means that in Frye's notion of thematic
literature, he expects the poet to anticipate the reaction of the audience and this in turn influences his attitude and consequently shapes his literary work. Whether the audience reaction really shapes the poet's work is essentially the moot question which will be clear to us at a later point. Referring to the modal classification of literary works evolved by Frye, Marshall Grossman observes:

Frye's theory of modes uses the power of action of the hero as the criterion of modal classification. Particular kinds of mythoi require particular kinds of heroes. Conversely, the hero defines a special plot structure by bringing into play a defined range of possible actions. The classification of modes is, for Frye, historical criticism because the power of action of the hero is assumed to be a surrogate for the power of imagination of the writers and readers who create and recreate written heroes.

At the basis of Frye's theory of modes we can identify four fundamental categories:

i) Fictional, ii) Tragic Fictional, iii) Comic Fictional, and iv) Thematic.

By fictional Frye means the one which relates to literature in which there are internal characters, apart from the author and his audience. Depending upon the prevalence of tragic or comic characters in the works, he classifies the works as comic fictional or tragic fictional. Frye's thematic modes relate to "works of literature in which no characters are involved except the author and his audience, as in most lyrics and essays or to works of literature in which internal characters are subordinated to an argument maintained by the author, as in allegories and
parables”. This also means that thematic modes are opposed to fictional modes.

Frye makes a further sub-division of each of these categories into some smaller units. A tabular representation of Frye’s entire scheme of modes would help us have a clearer idea of his theory of modes.
Fictional modes

It seems that Frye’s idea of fictional modes is inspired by Aristotelian notion of literary fictions given in the second paragraph of *Poetics*. Aristotle maintains that in some fictions, the characters are better than we are, in others worse, in still others, on the same level. This means, the differences in works of fiction are caused by the different elevations of characters in them. Likewise, Frye also argues that “in literary fictions the plot consists of somebody doing something. The somebody, if an individual, is the hero, and the something he does or fails to do is what he can do, or could have done, on the level of postulates made about him by the author and the consequent expectations of the audience”. This implies that Frye’s idea of literary fictions is based upon the hero’s power of action and his relative capacities which, “may be greater than ours less, or roughly the same”. Accordingly, Frye postulates a five-fold classification of literary fictions into myth, romance, high-mimetic, low-mimetic and ironic.

If superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a myth in the common sense of a story about a god. Such stories have an important place in literature, but are as a rule found outside the normal literary categories.

Frye’s notion of the mythic mode of life here corresponds to that of the hero of myths, i.e. the divine beings having larger than life statures and gods. This means, they are closer to the type of heroes usually referred to in the traditional myths.
Such heroes had their own importance in pre-medieval, classical and epic type of literature, and are unconventional in the sense that they fall outside the normal literary categories.

If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established.

Frye identifies the hero of the romance as a human being whose actions are marvellous, full of courage and endurance and having qualities which impart him a degree of superiority compared to other men and his environment. The movement of the hero of romance is from that of myth to that of legend, folk-tale and the like.

If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. This is the hero of the high mimetic mode, of most epic tragedy, and is primarily the kind of hero that Aristotle had in mind.

The power of action of the hero of high-mimetic mode in Frye's opinion is superior to us but not to his natural environment. Frye places this hero ahead of us by attributing qualities such as authority, passions, and powers of expression.
However, his powers are limited by constraints such as social censure and the order of nature. Evidently, Greek heroes of the Sophoclean type would belong to this category of mode.

If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us; we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience. This is the hero of the low mimetic mode, of most comedy and of realistic fiction.

These postulates make it clear that the hero of low-mimetic mode is neither superior to other men nor to his environment, which means his status is comparable to ours. Clearly, heroes of most comedies and of realistic fiction are placed in this category of mode.

If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a sense of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the ironic mode. This is still true when the reader feels that he is or might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of a greater freedom.

The hero of ironic mode thus has neither power nor intelligence comparable to ours and in the hierarchy of the placement of the heroes in terms of their power of actions he belongs to the last category. Since frustration and absurdity become a part of his lot, we tend to look down upon him with pity and sympathy.

In his 'Theory of Modes' Frye thus uses the power of action of the hero as the criterion of modal classification. His list of five types of heroes is arranged in a descending order.
means, at the top of the scale we find the hero as a divine being who can do what he pleases; his freedom is unqualified. Then comes the hero who moves in and out of natural order; in his world "the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended". As we move fully into history witnessing the diminishment of heroic power, down through high-mimetic and low-mimetic modes, we notice the fully imprisoned anti-hero of the ironic mode who, as unfree, seems less than human.

Frye's idea of five kinds of heroes will be clear if we refer back to his notions of mythoi in which he has ascribed certain kinds of heroes to certain mythoi. It is noteworthy that in Frye's scheme of modal classification of literary works the hero too defines the specified plot structure of a given work of art by bringing into play a defined range of possible action.

**Tragic fictional modes**

We will now consider the second category of modes described by Frye as tragic fictional modes in his 'Theory of Modes'. Frye argues that the theme of the tragic fiction is the pathos, which is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, or with the conflict of inner and outer life.

The type of character involved in the tragic fictional mode is named by the Greek word alazon, which means an imposter, or someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is. For Frye, the most popular types of alazon in this category are
In tragic fictional modes, Frye identifies altogether five sub-categories:

i) Dionysiac  
ii) Elegiac  
iii) Tragic  
iv) Pathetic and  
v) Ironic.

The first such type is the Dionysiac and by Dionysiac Frye means "tragic stories when they apply to divine beings". Frye illustrates this idea by referring to the stories of dying gods "like Christ dying on the Cross and marking with the words "Why has thou forsaken me?". Unlike the mythic hero of the fictional category, the dionysiac mode concerns itself with the stories not of any mythical heroes having a well defined power of action but of divine beings and dying gods. Frye's reference to dying gods like Christ and his dying words implies that the chief characteristics of this mode is the sense of exclusion, isolation and so on. In a way, the dionysiac mode can be said to correspond to the mythic mode of the fictional category discussed earlier.

The elegiac is the second type of the tragic fictional mode. By elegiac, Frye means tragic stories involving hero's death or his isolation from society. "The hero's death or isolation" he says, "thus has the effect of a spirit passing out of nature, and evokes a mood best described by elegiac". In the elegiac mode he thus places a kind of diffused, resigned, melancholy sense of
the passing of time, or the old order changing and yielding place to a new one.

The tragic is the third type of mode identified by Frye in the five-fold scheme of the tragic fictional modes. For Frye, the tragic mode represents "the fiction of the fall of a leader" and his isolation from the society. He further states that "tragedy belongs chiefly to the two indigenous developments of tragic drama in fifth-century Athens and seventeenth-century Europe from Shakespeare to Racine". Frye's idea of tragic is thus not restricted to the Greek view alone but extends over the notion of tragedy evolved during Shakespeare's times. Like the tragic hero of the medieval times, Frye's hero too "has to be of a properly heroic size, but his fall is involved both with a sense of his relation to society and with a sense of the supremacy of natural law, both of which are ironic in reference", i.e. in keeping with the heroic stature of the tragic fictional hero Frye wants to project the heroic predicament in terms of the contest between the supremacy of the natural law and the helplessness of the hero.

On the point of death of the tragic hero, Frye compares the tragic mode with the elegiac saying that "in elegiac romance the mortality is primarily a natural fact, the sign of his humanity, in high mimetic tragedy, it is also a social and moral fact". This means he sees the death of his tragic hero as not only a natural phenomenon but one having a kind of social and moral sanction behind it. The difference in the two types of death.
referred to here is rather inconsequential for under the ordinary notions of perceptions, every natural death is also a social and moral fact.

The pathetic is the fourth kind of tragic fictional mode discussed by Frye. Referring to this mode, Frye says that "the root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by a social consensus." Thus, in the pathetic mode we meet a hero who is isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is on our own level of experience and his personality, broken by personal and social conflicts, compels him to keep himself isolated from the society around him.

Frye observes that the type of characters involved in the pathetic mode is known by the Greek word alazon, which means imposter, i.e. someone who pretends to be or tries to be something more than he is. He further adds that the most popular type of alazon is the miles gloriosus and the learned crank or obsessed philosopher. Clearly, themes around domestic tragedies would belong to this category of mode.

The ironic is the last category of the mode in the five-fold classification of the tragic fictional modes. Frye makes his
idea of the tragic irony clear in these words: "The conception of irony meets us in Aristotle's Ethics, where the eiron is the man who deprecates himself, as opposed to alazon... Tragic irony, turns to be simply the study of tragic isolation. Its hero does not necessarily have any tragic hamartia, or pathetic obsession. He is only somebody who gets isolated from his society," and concludes the argument saying "the central principle of tragic irony is that whatever exceptional happens to the hero should be causally out of line with his character." Frye's view of tragic irony is largely derived from Aristotelian conception of eiron, i.e. the man who belittles himself and is concerned with problems like the isolation of the hero from his society, and so on. Tragic irony differs from the tragic fictional modes in that we observe in it the absence of tragic hamartia; it differs from the pathetic mode as the pathetic obsession is absent in it. The absence of these two tendencies, the tragic hamartia, and the pathetic obsession imparts the hero of the ironic mode a character of a pharmakos, i.e. a kind of scapegoat who is victimised for no fault of his own. Illustrating the idea of ironic further, Frye says that irony manifests itself in two ways: a) the incongruous and b) the inevitable. In the incongruous category he places the archetype of Christ in whom Frye sees the guilt of humanity transferred. He sees Christ as a kind of reservoir which absorbs the sins of humanity. In his view, the archetype of the inevitable ironic is Adam, a being destined to the sentence of death and expulsion from Eden. Probably, Frye's purpose in taking such a polar view of the ironic mode is
to avoid, as far as possible, the exclusion of any kind of literary work falling in the peripheral range of the ironic mode.

**Comic Fictional Modes**

This is the third category of literary mode identified by Frye. In Frye’s scheme of modal classification of literature, the theme of comic is the integration of society, which, he says, usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it. In keeping with his historical-chronological sequence of identification of literary modes, Frye propounds five sub-types of comic-fictional modes: a) Apollonian, b) Idyllic, c) High-mimetic, d) Low-mimetic and e) Ironic.

The **Apollonian** mode thus is the first such mode and it concerns with the story of how a hero is accepted by the society of gods. Frye illustrates this idea by referring to two types of literature, the Classical and the Christian.

In Classical literature, he says, the theme of the acceptance forms part of the stories of Hercules, Mercury and other deities. This means the theme concerns itself with how the stories of these gods and deities were accepted by the society of the time. In Christian literature, he observes, it is the theme of salvation and of assumption, i.e., the typical Christian theme around the story of Christ's death, resurrection, and so on. Thus, the Apollonian mode serves the purpose of analysing the comic literature that deal with comic stories of mythical gods, deities and Christ-like figures. The two-fold classification of classical literature helps in incorporating different mythical
themes.

The idyllic mode is the second category of mode belonging to Frye's modal classification of comic-fictional literature. As its name suggests, the idyllic mode deals with the romantic comedy. Its chief vehicle, is the pastoral. Because of the social interest of comedy, the idyllic is concerned with the "theme of escape from society to the extent of idealizing a simplified life in the countryside or on frontiers". It associates closely with animal and vegetable nature such as sheep and pleasant pastures, cattle and ranches and so on. This kind of myth and imagery is usually found in the Bible, particularly in the theme of salvation. The idyllic corresponds to the elegiac in the tragic-fictional category of modes.

The high-mimetic is the third category of mode in Frye's scheme of the comic-fictional sub-division of modes. It deals with the traditional Greek comedy of Aristophanes type. In this category, usually a central figure constructs his own society confronting all the opposition, "driving off one after another all the people who come to prevent or exploit him, and eventually achieving a heroic triumph, complete with mistresses, in which he is sometimes assigned the honour of a reborn god". This means, the hero of the high-mimetic is a kind of self-opinionated man who knows exactly what he wants and knows how to achieve it too. Hence, he does not admit of any impediments in the pursuit of his goals. No wonder therefore that sometimes he is assigned the honour of a reborn god.
The low-mimetic comedy as a mode concerns with the domestic type of comedy. The action of the comedy, Frye holds, "moves towards the incorporation of the hero into the society that he naturally fits. The hero himself is seldom a very interesting person; in conformity with low-mimetic decorum, he is ordinary in his virtues, but socially attractive". This means, the hero of low-mimetic comedy does not belong to a high or elite class. He is just an ordinary person belonging to a middle class culture. Frye maintains that Renaissance literature of the periods of the dominant middle class culture belongs to this category of mode.

The ironic is the last mode identified by Frye in the hierarchy of the comic fictional modes. In this mode, Frye includes all forms of melodrama, detective stories, the modern literature of advertising, of propaganda, parodies, the comedy of manners in all ages of modern European languages as also the contemporary rising literary art of science, fiction, thriller, murder stories and so on. This means, everything that is excluded in the first four types of comic fictional modes constitutes the ironic mode.

Thus, the five-fold subdivision of comic fictional modes, namely Apollonian, idyllic, high-mimetic, low-mimetic and ironic represents the themes of 'acceptance of gods' and gradually moves down to the 'pastoral' type. Then from the 'adventuruous' to the man in 'ordinary in virtues,' until finally the hero settles down to the modern detective type in the ironic mode.
The comic fictional mode, with its theme of the integration of society by incorporating a central character into it helps, to classify comic fictional writing according to the order and contextual framework developed by Frye. It thus help us appreciate a literary work of art better.

**Thematic modes**

In the exposition of the modal theory of literature, Frye expounds yet another category, i.e. the thematic modes. Frye maintains that thematic modes relate to "works of literature in which no characters are involved except the author and his audience as in most lyrics and essays or in works of literature in which internal characters are subordinated to an argument maintained by the author, as in allegories and parables". This means, Frye distinguishes two kinds of works in thematic literature. In the first category, he places literary works like lyrics and essays having no internal characters apart from the author and audience, and in the second category, he includes literary works like allegories and parables with internal characters having a limited role of keeping themselves subordinated to the author's argument. Thematic modes are thus distinguishable from the fictional ones which relate to literature having internal characters in addition to the author and the audience.

In his further exposition of the theory of thematic modes, Frye postulates two thematic tendencies: a) individual and b) social.

The modes dependent on individual thematic tendency give
rise to four kinds of literature, namely, lyric, essay, satire and occasional pieces. On the other hand, the mode dependent on social tendency gives rise to three kinds of literature, i.e. epic, didactic poetry and prose. In addition to identifying these two tendencies, Frye also postulates another category of modes, i.e. encyclopaediac and episodic.

In the encyclopaediac mode, he says, the poet may devote himself to being a spokesman of his society, which means that the poet gives vent to his poetic knowledge through his expressive power which is otherwise latent in him. Such an attitude, he says, produces poetry which is educational in the broadest sense. Epic, didactic poetry, prose, encyclopaediac compilation of myth, folklore and legend belong to this kind of mode.

In the episodic mode, he maintains, the poet may emphasize the separation of his personality and the distinctiveness of his vision, and his tone is that of protest, resentment or revolt. This attitude, Frye maintains, produces most lyrics, essays, satire, epigrams and occasional pieces generally.

But the distinction between fictional and thematic is not so rigid and it cannot be pushed too far. Frye observes that "every work of literature has both a fictional and a thematic aspect, and the question of which is more important is often simply a matter of opinion or emphasis in interpretation". He supports this argument by saying that "it is easy to say that some literary works are fictional and others thematic in their main emphasis. But clearly there is no such thing as a fictional or a
thematic work of literature, for all four ethical elements, the
hero, the hero's society, the poet and the poet's readers are
always at least partially present. There can hardly be a work of
literature without some kind of relation, implied or expressed
between its creator and its auditors".

Clearly, Frye's theory of thematic modes does not seem to
rest on any solid ground as he himself dilutes his stand adopted
initially. In other words, the division of literary modes in
terms of the different types appears to be more a statement of
tendencies or attitudes rather than a rigid or specific criterion
of distinction. In fact, the concluding para of Frye's statement
referred to above makes it amply clear that his criterion lacks
rigidity of sort.

Thus an overview of the modal classification evolved by Frye
in the first essay of the Anatomy, 'Historical Criticism: Theory
of modes' would reveal that Frye classifies fictions according to
the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours,
less, or roughly the same". The list of five types of heroes is
arranged in a descending order. At the top is the hero as a
divine being, who can do what he pleases: his freedom is
unqualified. Then comes the romance hero who moves in and out of
the natural order; in Frye's words the 'ordinary laws of nature
are slightly suspended'. As we move fully into history witnessing
the diminishments of heroic power down through high mimetic and
low mimetic modes, at the bottom of the list we find the fully
imprisoned anti-hero of the ironic mode who, as an unfree being,
seems less than human: 'If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustrations, or absurdity the hero belongs to the ironic mode'. The elaborate classification of modes into different categories evolved by Frye, with an assist from Aristotle, helps us to understand better the different categories of literary works, namely comedy, tragedy, romance, satire and so on because Frye's 'modal' hero defines the specific plot structure of a given work of art by bringing into play a defined range of possible action.

In Frye's analysis narratives begin with mythic tales and then move to romance, high mimetic, low mimetic and finally ironic forms. The hero in myth is superior to his environment whereas the protagonist in ironic forms is inferior to both, inferior to us as we imagine ourselves, both in power and intelligence. The other modes are arranged between this two extremes according to the hero's powers of action. This suggest a sort of progression from the myth, in which the hero stands somewhat outside the natural order, through the high mimetic mode and the low mimetic mode of comedy, to the ironic mode, in which the hero is inferior in power and intelligence to the reader. This means, when attention is centered on literature as mode, the mimetic nature of its representation is stressed. Secondly, Frye's concept of mode, which characterises the hero's power of action from classical to modern literature, suggests that man's power in the natural world has been decreasing. This means, the
movement from classical to modern literature, from the mythic to the ironic mode implies the declining power of the human over the natural world.

Frye uses the power of action of the hero as the criterion of modal classification of literary works. While classifying literary works into different genres such as tragedy, comedy et cetera, Frye has made a radical shift from the traditional Aristotelian notions. For Aristotle, the presence of hamartia or typical mental-traits or mental make-ups determined the classification of literary works into a tragedy or a comedy. Instead of identifying character-traits of a hero, Frye preferred to concentrate on the actions of hero when he encounters a human or a natural situation. This means, particular kinds of literary narratives require particular kinds of heroes. Or, to put it differently, Frye's hero thus defines a special plot structure by bringing into play a defined range of possible action. Thus, Frye's method of classification of modes contributes to our understanding of modal classification of literature because the power of action of the hero is assumed to be a surrogate for the power of imagination of the writers and readers who, in the words of Marshall Grossman, "create and recreate written heroes".

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Chapter Notes


2. Marshall Grossman, 'The Vicissitudes of the Subject in
4. Ibid. p. 33.
5. Ibid. p. 33.
6. Ibid. p. 33.
7. Ibid. p. 34.
8. Ibid. p. 34.
9. Ibid. p. 34.
10. Ibid. p. 33.
11. Ibid. p. 36.
12. Ibid. p. 36.
13. Ibid. p. 37.
15. Ibid. p. 37.
16. Ibid. p. 38.
17. Ibid. p. 39.
18. Ibid. p. 40.
19. Ibid. p. 41.
20. Ibid. p. 41.
21. Ibid. p. 43.
22. Ibid. p. 44.
23. Ibid. p. 367.
24. Ibid. p. 53.
25. Ibid. p. 53.
26. Ibid. p. 33.