FREE ON SYMBOLS
Symbol means something used for or regarded as representing something else. Harry Shaw defines symbol as "as word, phrase, or other expression having a complex of associated meanings". He further says "a symbol is viewed as having values different from those of whatever is being symbolized". This means, while defining his idea of symbol, Shaw stresses the representational aspect, and secondly on the complexity of the meaning associated with the thing in question and lastly, on the difference in values attached to the subject-matter and the object proposed to be symbolized.

For M.H. Abrams, "a symbol in the broadest sense of the term is anything which signifies something else". "In this sense," he observes, "all words are symbols". Elaborating further on this point, he comments: "As commonly used in discussing literature, however, symbol is only applied to a word or set of words that signifies an object or event which itself signifies something else, that is, the words refer to something which suggests a range of preference beyond itself".

Both these definitions reveal that basically the term symbol is used to give a kind of representation to a thing or an object proposed to be symbolized through the medium of words or set of words.
FRYE'S CONCEPTION OF SYMBOLISM

Like many of Frye's literary terms, symbol for Frye has a broad range of reference. In the context of his critical theory outlined in the second essay of *Anatomy* titled 'Ethical Criticism' symbol is the first of the three basic categories used by Frye to differentiate the five phases from one another, the other two being *mythos* and *dianoia*.

By symbol, Frye means "any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention". Thus, "a word, a phrase, or an image used with some kind of special reference are all symbols when they are distinguishable elements in critical analysis". This means, any form of communication bearing a special kind of reference or significance would constitute a symbol provided it has a distinct element to serve the needs of critical analysis. Frye then concludes that criticism as a whole, in terms of this definition, would begin with and would largely consist of the systematizing of literary symbolism.

This broad definition of symbol permits Frye to associate the appropriate kind of symbolism with each of the five phases of literature identified by him in the explanation of his theory, and thereby to define the given phase at the highest level of generality. By *phases* Frye means contexts within which literature has been or can be interpreted; they are primarily meant to describe critical procedures rather than conventional literary types, which is to say that the phases represent perspectives from which to analyze meaning.
The five phases identified by Frye are: **Literal**, descriptive, formal, mythical, and analogic. Diagramatically, Frye's theory of symbols and the five phases discussed above could be represented as under:

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SYMBOLS

FIVE PHASES

LITERAL   DESCRIPTIVE   FORMAL   MYTHICAL   ANALOGICAL

SYMBOL AS    AS    AS    AS    AS
MOTIF   SIGN   IMAGE   ARCHETYPE   MONAD
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Frye believes that these five phases of symbolism have historical parallels with the five modes discussed in the earlier essay, namely myth, romance, high-mimetic, low-mimetic and ironic and correspond to his classification of the five ages of literature. Thus the literal phase having symbol as motif, is peculiar to the 20th century and its symbolist schools of French Parnassians represented by poets like Mallarme, Rimbaud, Valerie and Baudelaire. In the descriptive phase, sign is the dominant symbol and is used by 19th century realism and naturalism; in the formal phase image, which is the prevalent usage of neo-classical art is the dominant symbol; in the mythical phase archetype which is peculiar to the primitive and popular writings of the bygone ages becomes the dominant symbol and lastly, anagogic phase monad which corresponds to the ages of scripture and apocalyptic revelation in literary history becomes the dominant symbol. And, this in turn also explains why modern ironic literature abounds in conventionalized literalism; descriptive symbolism furnishes the language of low-mimetic modes; formal symbolism that of high-mimetic Renaissance and neo-classical poetry; archetype and anagogic are the symbolic matrices of romance and myth respectively.

Frye's attempt to systematize literary symbolism leads him on to a search for a theory of literary meaning, the obvious place for which, he believes, is the literature itself. He thus begins his argument by advancing a new concept, i.e. the notion of polysemous meaning of a work of art. This means, a work of art is believed to possess not one but a multiple set of meanings.
In Frye’s view, on account of the simultaneous development of several different schools of modern criticism, each school makes a distinctive choice of symbols in its analysis and hence, the student is often faced with the task of making one of the two choices: that is i) he must either admit the principle of polysemous meaning in an art-work or ii) choose one of the different schools and then try to prove that all others are less legitimate. In his view the first choice, i.e the principle of polysemous meaning is the way to scholarship while the second is the way to pedantry, i.e it gives a wide choice of goals such as myth criticism, historical criticism, contentious learning, and so on. In other words, the principle of polysemous meaning admits of a pluralistic position in that it allows a work of art to be interpreted in a number of ways, while the way of pedantry considers the possibility that there is a finite number of valid critical methods and that they can all be contained in a single theory.

The polysemous meaning Frye refers to has another dimension too. Frye observes that the meaning of a literary work forms part of a larger whole. This means, in Frye’s view the meaning or dianoia is only one of the three elements of an art-work of which it is composed, the other two being the mythos or narrative and ethos or character. All the three elements taken together form the main constituents which define a work of art and help us have a better understanding of the different phases of literature. Thus he says, "it is better to think, therefore not simply of a sequence of meanings but a sequence of contexts or
relationship in which the whole of literary art can be placed, each context having its characteristics mythos and ethos as its dianoia or meaning. I call these contexts or relationship 'phases.' Clearly, in Frye’s view one can achieve a better understanding of a literary work not only in relation to the sequence of meaning that it is capable to convey but with reference to the sequence of contexts and relationships constituted by the mythos, ethos, and dianoia. In other words, not only in terms of its meaning alone but by taking recourse to other two contextual elements like the narrative and the character in an art-work.

Since the five phases of symbolism identified by Frye constitute the main plank of his theory of symbols, it would be worthwhile discussing here in some detail the different notions of symbolism in each of the five phases.

**Literal** is the first of the five phases identified by Frye in course of the exposition of his theory of symbols. Frye observes that traditionally the phase 'literal' or 'literal meaning' refers to a kind of descriptive meaning that is free from ambiguity. And this sense of the term comes down from medieval times, probably due to the theological origin of critical categories. For example, in theology, he says, the literal meaning of scripture is usually the historical meaning, its accuracy as a record of facts or truths. He however cautions saying, "But this conception of meaning as simple descriptive meaning will not do at all for literary criticism" for "an
historical event cannot be literally anything but an historical event”; so also, “a prose narrative describing it cannot be literally anything but a prose narrative”. This means, what is true in scriptures or history may not necessarily hold good in literary criticism. In literary analysis, the concepts ‘literal phase’ and ‘literal meaning’ are used in a different context. Frye explains the idea of literal phase as the one which has motif as its basic symbol, i.e Frye also clarifies that “verbal elements understood inwardly or centripetally, as parts of a verbal structure, are, as symbols, simply and literally, as parts of a verbal structure. We may... call such elements motifs”. This means, in Frye’s scheme of literal phase the prevalence of motif as a symbol determines two things: a) that the phase is literal and b) that the direction of meaning is necessarily inward or centripetal. Frye then concludes the argument on this point saying, “Literal meaning may best be described... as hypothetical, and a hypothetical or assumed relation to the external world is part of what is usually meant by the word ‘imaginative’ In other words, Frye makes two points here: one, that the literal meaning is hypothetical in nature and two, that the hypothetical nature of literal meaning has its base in the faculty of imagination. This way Frye strikes a kind of relationship between the literal meaning of a work of art and the imaginative faculty in man which produces it and then sums up his whole idea of literal meaning by making the former depend upon the latter. The descriptive is the second category of literal phase in Frye’s scheme of the classification of symbols.
Frye believes that when the final direction of meaning is outward, it gives rise to descriptive or assertive writing. In this type of phase, the verbal structure is intended to represent things external to it and it is valued in terms of the accuracy with which it does represent them. This means, the criteria which decide whether a particular writing is descriptive or not depends upon the direction of the direction writing and on how accurately it represents the things in question, which is to say that in case of descriptive type of writing this direction is necessarily external. These two modes of understanding, i.e. the literal and the descriptive, Frye concludes, are equally important in that both of them take place simultaneously in all reading and help us give a more perfect understanding of a given work of literary art.

Frye then turns to the third category, i.e. the formal phase. The formal phase, as the very title suggests revolves round the idea of form in a work of art. Frye’s idea of form is explicitly expressed in these words: "The word form has normally two complementary terms, matter and content, and it perhaps makes some distinction whether we think of form as a shaping principle or as a containing one. As shaping principle, it may be thought of as narrative. As containing principle it may be thought of as meaning, holding the poem together in a simultaneous structure". This means, in Frye’s view, matter gives the shape and the content decides the structure and both together contribute towards the formal aspect of an art-work. Secondly,
whether a literary work is a prose piece or a poem can only be known by its shaping principle to which Frye calls narrative. So also the content decides the structure of a work of art and its relationship to other similar works. In other words, in Frye's conception form can be interpreted in two senses. In the first sense, it relates to the aspect of structural unity of any artwork, and in the second sense, it relates to the expressive aspect of a given work. Frye illustrates this notion further saying that "the poem is not natural in form, but it relates itself naturally to nature". Clearly, Frye attempts here to project a more unified conception of narrative and meaning on the lines of idealists school of thought.

The **mythical** is the fourth phase in the five-fold classification of the theory of symbols. This phase uses symbol as its archetype. Frye defines the concept of archetype in the mythical phase as "a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience". Thus, the definition of the term archetype in the mythical phase reveals that Frye lays more emphasis on the unification and integration of our literary experience, and secondly, on the archetype as a communicable symbol in literary works. It is to be noted that the concept of archetype used in the mythical phase differs slightly from the one given by Frye in his theory of archetypal criticism. In his theory of archetypal criticism, Frye defines the term archetype as "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be
recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole. In this definition, Frye's main emphasis is on the recurring nature of the symbol, which, in turn, makes it a point of attention in one's literary experience. Thus, unlike his definition of archetype in the theory of archetypal criticism where the notion of archetype centres round its frequent recurrences in literary works Frye's view of archetype in the mythical phase is more specific in that he regards it as the communicable unit which helps unify and integrate our literary experience. The latter view of symbol as archetype appears to be more in tune with his general theory of literature which will be discussed in a separate chapter.

Another endeavour of Frye in the direction of exposition of the mythical phase is the important observation he makes on art as a form of imitation of nature: "The archetypal critic", he says, "studies the poem as part of poetry, and poetry as part of the total human imitation of nature that we call civilization. Civilization is not merely an imitation of nature, but the process of making total human out of nature, and it is impelled by the force that we have... called desire". This means, in Frye's view, poetry as a form of art, is a manifestation of human imitation of nature and this process is motivated by human desire, which, acting as the impelling force behind all kinds of progress, makes way for what we call civilization. In other words, desire is the driving force behind civilization. Human desire, in Frye's scheme, thus, is not a simple response to needs
but a kind of energy that leads human society to develop its own form. Arguing further on this point Frye observes, "Desire in this sense is the social aspect of what we meet on the literal level as emotions, an impulse towards expression which would have remained amorphous if the poem had not liberated it by providing the form of its expression. The form of desire...is liberated and made apparent by civilization. The efficient cause of civilization is work, and poetry in its social aspect has the function of expressing, as a verbal hypothesis, a vision of the goal of work and the forms of desire". This means, Frye links desire and expression as the two complementary aspects of an artwork, like a poem, in which the poet provides the form to his poem. In other words, the desire is the impelling or motivating force which makes the poet give vent to his expression, and that this desire, when thus liberated contributes to what Frye calls civilization. To put this in simpler terms, civilization for Frye is a manifestation of human desire giving vent to man's natural impulses. Frye's idea of a work of art is based on this idea of civilization.

Having re-defined the concept of archetype and its role in the mythical phase of symbolism, Frye turns to other important concepts like myth, ritual, and dream and then shows their inter-connections in the mythical phase.

Referring to myth, he says "the union of ritual and dream in a form of verbal communication is myth". This means, the myth accounts for and makes communicable the ritual and dream.
The idea of myth in the mythical phase thus only slightly differs from the one given by Frye in his glossary of literary terms where he defines myth in terms of narratives in which some characters are superhuman beings who do things that 'happen' only in stories... and so on. Frye too admits the different senses in which the concept of myth has been used, for "This is a sense of the term myth slightly different from that used in the previous essay". But defends himself once again saying "...the ambiguity is not mine but the dictionary's".

Referring to the other two concepts, the ritual and the dream to define the concept of myth in the mythical phase, Frye says, "Ritual, by itself, cannot account for itself: it is pre-logical, pre-verbal, and in a sense pre-human. Its attachment to the calendar seems to link human life to the biological dependence on the natural cycle which plants, and to some extent animals still have". This means, in Frye's view rituals have no logical base, they are instinct oriented and have roots in the natural cycle just like plants and animals. Given the nature of rituals observed by man and the beliefs he attaches to them, one cannot deny the fact that Frye has a valid point here. In Frye's belief, "Everything in nature that we think of having some analogy with works of art... grows out of synchronization between an organism and the rhythms of its natural environment, especially that of the solar year", i.e. natural cycles are produced out of solar variations, which in turn, give rise to seasons. The seasons, in Frye's view, have an effect on
literature, in other words on different literary art-works. In sum, Frye sees a significant relationship between works of art and the natural environment. Likewise he argues that "dream, by itself is a system of cryptic illusions to the dreamer’s own life, not fully understood by him... but in all dreams there is a mythical element which has a power of independent communication". Evidently Frye wants to underline the role of myths in dream, for myth "not only gives meaning to ritual and narrative, it is the identification of ritual and dream, in which the former is seen to be the latter in movement". Or to put this in Frye’s own technical language, ritual is the archetypal aspect of mythos and dream the archetypal aspect of dianoia.

The mythical phase is particularly important for our discussion because apart from clarifying certain key concepts like archetype, myth, ritual and dream, Frye has explained his views on the nature of a work of art in the concluding part of his essay. For example, in its archetypal phase, "art is a part of civilization we defined as the process of making a human form out of nature. The shape of this human form is revealed by civilization itself as it develops; its major components are the city, the garden, the farm, the sheepfold, and the like, as well as human society itself. An archetypal symbol is usually a natural object with a human meaning, and it forms part of the critical view of art as a civilized product, a vision of the goals of human work".

The anagogic is the last one among the five phases of
symbolism identified by Frye. This phase has monad as its symbol by which Frye means a symbol in its aspect as a centre of one's total literary experience.

In explaining the concept of anagogic in detail, Frye observes that the form of literature most deeply influenced by the anagogic phase is the scripture or apocalyptic revelation. Hence, a clear understanding of the concept of apocalypse becomes imperative at this stage.

Frye observes that "by an apocalypse I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than being animate". In other words, in Frye’s belief, apocalypse stands for complete transformation of both nature and human nature into the same form, and that, apocalyptic reality is the reality in its highest form. It is what the human imagination can conceive at the extreme limits of desire. Frye believes that it is only in the apocalyptic world that nature can be humanized and man liberated— and both are achieved at the same time by, what he calls, the principle of radical metaphors. Frye’s conception of apocalypse is based upon a disjunction between what is perceived by sensory perception and what is apprehended by the reach of imagination or, to use his own terminology, between the 'fallen' and 'unfallen' worlds. The concept of apocalypse has thus a great significance in the anagogic phase.

Frye’s idea of anagogy is also explicit in the following
passage: "When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the container but the thing contained, and the archetypal symbols, the city, the garden, the quest, the marriage, are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature but are themselves the forms of nature. Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way". This means, in the anagogic phase the 'content' of nature transforms itself into form. As a result, the archetypal symbols too cease to be manifestations of human desire; instead, they assume a different kind of representation, i.e. by turning themselves into 'forms' of nature. Probably, by projecting the 'form-content' relationship and the transformation of one into another Frye wants to stress the basic underlying idea of unity in literary works.

In much the same way, he relates poetry as a form of literary art to the place it holds in the anagogic phase. Thus, "The god, whether traditional deity, glorified hero, or apotheosized poet, is the central image that poetry uses in trying to convey the sense of unlimited power in a humanized form... We see the relation to anagogy also in the vast encyclopaedic structure of poetry that seem to be a world in itself, that stands in its culture as an inexhaustible storehouse of imaginative suggestions and seems... to be applicable to, or have analogous connections with every part of the literary universe". This means, at the level of the anagogic phase, poetry transcends itself and attains a kind of metaphysical
reality. This kind of transcendence enables poetry to absorb and reflect not only the apocalyptic and encyclopaedic manifestations of nature and universe but even what human imagination is capable of conceiving at that level at its extreme limits of desire.

Frye then concludes this point saying, "such works are definitive mythos, or complete organization of archetypes".

In the concluding part of his theory, Frye makes an important observation:

But the anagogic perspective is not to be confined only to works that seem to take in everything, for the principle of anagogy is not simply that everything is the subject of poetry, but that anything may be the subject of poem. The sense of the infinitely varied unity of poetry may come, not only explicitly from an apocalyptic epic, but implicitly from any poem. We said that we could get a whole liberal education by picking up one conventional poem Lycidas, for example, and following its archetypes through literature. Thus the center of the literary universe is whatever poem we happen to be reading. One step further, and the poem appears as a microcosm of literature, an individual of the total order of words. Anagogically, then, the symbol is monad, all symbols being united in a single infinite and eternal verbal symbol which is... total creative act".

Thus, in Frye’s view, it is not that poetry is written only on some subject only but that anything in the world may be its subject-matter; secondly, that a poem represents a microcosm of all literature, and thirdly that in the anagogic perspective, the symbol takes the shape of a monad i.e. a kind of centre of one’s total literary experience.

In the end, Frye draws a close connection between the modes and phases of symbolism. In Frye’s own words:
...the reader, may have noticed a parallelism gradually shaping up between the five modes of our first essay and the phases of symbolism...Literal meaning... has much to do with the techniques thematic irony... and with the view... that poetry is primarily (i.e., literally) an ironic structure. Descriptive symbolism... seems to bear a close connection with the low mimetic, and formal symbolism... with the high mimetic. Archetypal criticism seems to find its center of gravity in the mode of romance... The last phase of symbolism... will be concerned... with the mythopoetic aspect of literature... and themes relating to divine or quasi-divine beings and powers."

This means, Frye connects i) the literal symbolism with irony, ii) descriptive symbolism with low mimetic, iii) formal with high mimetic, iv) archetypal with romance and v) anagogic with the mythopoetic aspects of literature and literary works dealing with divine, quasi-divine beings and powers.

On the same analogy, Frye also connects the literal phase to the theological origin of critical categories and adduces the motif as its basic symbol. He identifies the descriptive phase with the 'outward' or 'external' direction of meaning and uses its symbol as sign. The formal symbol relates to the idea of form in an art-work and uses the symbol as image. The mythical phase concerns itself with the aspect of unification and integration of literary experience and has its symbol as archetype. And lastly, the anagogical phase, which concerns itself with the scripture or apocalyptic revelation uses the symbol as monad.

The close connection derived by Frye between the five-modes and the five phases of symbolism is to project his idea of the
underlying unity which he believes all literary art-works to possess. In Frye's view literary art-works share at their base a kind of mythic relationships among themselves and that each literary work in its individual capacity, though distinct from other art-forms, represents a microscopic unit of the larger whole.

By connecting each historical mode with a phase of symbolism Frye thus establishes the fact that a kind of connecting thread exists in substratum of all the literature in general. This view is also in tune with his general view of literature contained in his dictum "Literature is not the piled aggregate of works but an order of words".

Thus, Frye's theory of symbols aims at explaining the nature of literary language. Symbols function as motifs, signs, images, archetypes, and monads. Each of the symbolic types is found to be paired with one of the modes in historical criticism.

Frye's purpose in outlining his theory of symbols appears to be to project the underlying unity which he believes all literary art-works to possess. This is evident from the fact that the 'phasal' relationship evolved by him, includes practically all kinds of literary works. In sum, whether Frye has succeeded in touching upon other basic issues such as to evolve any fresh definition of art of literature, or, whether his theory is adequate enough to explain the origin, characteristics, or function of art is still too early to conjecture. This aspect is will be discussed in the final chapter of the thesis.

Frye's theory of symbols is comparable to that of Cassirer's
and one can trace a fundamental pattern of similarity between the two theories. Commenting on Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Frye observes:

The 'philosophy of symbolic forms' is a philosophy which states by looking at the variety of mental constructions in human life. These include science, mathematics, philosophy, language, myth and the arts, and in the aggregate are called culture. Each of these constructions is built out of units called symbols which are usually words or numbers, and which, approximately, owe their content to the objective world and their form to the categories of human consciousness... We may... divide these constructions into a logical group and another group which is either pre- or extra-logical, and which consists mainly of language, myth and the arts.

This means in Frye's view, Cassirer's conception of 'mental constructions' is derived out of words or numbers and are built out of units called symbols. Frye identifies a two-fold classification of these mental constructions in Cassirer's analogy: logical and pre- or extra-logical. In the logical group he places science, mathematics and philosophy while the second group concerns with the language, myth and the arts in general. In other words, in Cassirer's system the mind in its symbolizing powers becomes a constitutive agent, man constitutes his reality and culture its reality manifesting through the symbolic structures that he creates.

One feels inclined to agree with Frye's observations on Cassirer's analogy. Cassirer's symbolic forms are neither subjective nor objective. They hold an intermediate position in that they take their structures from the mind and the content.
from the phenomenal world. This view, it is felt, is similar to the one advanced by Frye, for he too makes a similar observation while defining the concept of symbol. Symbol for Frye is "any unit of any work of literature which can be isolated for critical attention. In general usage restricted to the smaller units, such as words, phases, images etc." Clearly, both Frye as well as Cassirer view symbol basically as an effective means of communication or expression.

Like Cassirer's general conception of symbolic form, Frye too attempts to define the relation of myth to language on the one hand and of myth to literature on the other hand. Frye's views on myth-literature relationship have been elaborately dealt with in chapter three, hence it is proposed to discuss in some detail Cassirer's views on myth-language relationship as seen by Frye. While commenting on Cassirer's argument about myth-language relationship Frye observes:

The relation of grammar to logic may provide us with a useful analogy. Logic grows out of grammar, the unconscious or potential logic inherent in language, and we often find that the containing forms of conceptual thought are of grammatical origin, the stock example being the subject and predicate of Aristotelian logic... One wonders, for instance, about the parallelism between the parts of speech and the elements of thought in our Classical-Western tradition, where nearly all the important languages belong to the Aryan group. There is surely connection between the nouns and the conception of a material world, the verb and the conceptions of spirit, energy and will, the adjective and universals, the adverb and value, the conjunction and relation, and so forth...
This means, while illustrating Cassirer's conception of relationship of myth to language Frye draws upon logic as a derivative of grammar and holds that our conventional ways of thinking are necessarily grammatical in origin. In support of the argument, he cites a) the use to which parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions are made in practical speech and b) the sense or the ordinary meaning implied in the grammatical elements. Frye concludes his argument on the relationship of myth to language saying:

Cassirer shows how language begins in spatial mythopoeia and the projection into the outer world of images derived from the human body. He does not show how these metaphors organize our writing and thinking as much as ever today; nearly everytime we use a preposition we are using a spatial myth or an unconscious diagram.

True. Cassirer may not show the organizational role of metaphors or the manner in which they assist our thinking pattern or writing. But neither does Frye. The moot question thus remains still unanswered: Is it the metaphors that aid or organize our thinking and writing as claimed by Frye, or is it thinking and writing which necessitate the evolution of the metaphors as a proper means of effective expressiveness? Frye too seems to be silent on this point.

Referring to the relationship of literature to myth, Frye opines that myths are "communicable ideogrammatic structures of literature." Elaborating this idea, Frye refers to the comparison of literature to mathematics thus:

Literature resembles mathematics, and differs from other structures in words, in that its
data are hypothetical. Mathematics appears to be a kind of informing or constructive principle in the natural sciences: it continually gives shape and coherence to them without being itself involved in any kind of external proof or evidence.

In other words, Frye differentiates literature from mathematics on the basis of constitutive data. Secondly, the constructive principle of mathematics is hypothetical whereas literature relies on myths and on imaginative faculties of human mind, for, "the bulk of what is distinctive in the twentieth-century thought, in the non-mathematical division, has been constructed around the word myth."

Frye's observations on mathematics and its differentiation from literature is quite convincing. Unlike literature the structural or constructive principle of mathematics is rooted more in the hypothesis and less in the imaginative faculties. Secondly, unlike works of mythical nature, mathematics does not depend upon any non-rational or non-provable criteria. Thus, it is not difficult to notice a fundamental similarity between Cassirer's 'mythical thought' and Frye's 'structure of the literary verbal universe.'

Though Frye's notion of symbols in art bears a close similarity to that of Cassirer's, he seems to depart quite radically from the philosophical ideas about symbolism expressed by Suzanne K. Langer, who believes that the function of art is to objectify feeling by creating symbols for it. Frye holds that there are two opposed but equally indefensible views about the relation of art to reality. One is the vulgar conception of 'imitation' as directly reproducing the outer world or an
inner experience. According to this view painting is essentially representation, dancing the direct expression of what the dancer feels, and so on. The other conception of art as make-believe or magic which produces a trance-like state by a deliberately raised hallucination.

This means, Frye perceives the art-reality relationship in two ways: a) in its 'mimetic', 'imitative', 'representational', or 'reproductive' aspects and b) the magical and on trance or hallucinatory inducements. Apart from these two modes, Frye does not seem to conceive any other mode of perceiving art-reality relationship.

As against these two methods of understanding the art-reality relationship perceived by Frye, Langer advances yet another category and calls it the 'semblance or illusion'. Langer's third method could be said to hold an intermediate position between Frye's two modes of art-reality perception.

Frye states

The golden mean of Mrs. Langer's argument is a conception that she calls semblance or illusion, and identifies both with the German term Schein and with Aristotle's mimesis. She avoids the word because, she says it is too close to the representational fallacy. One would think that "illusion" was at least as close to the trance-fallacy, but Mrs. Langer seems to be content with it, and distinguishes the trance-fallacy as delusion. Thus painting is a spatial art, but it is neither a representation of real space, which is not pictorial, nor does it belong in a separate spatial world which is not real. It is the illusion or semblance of space, or what Mrs. Langer calls "virtual" space.

This means, in Frye's view Langer classifies major works of
art according to the virtual fields that they occupy. Painting, for example, presents virtual space, music presents virtual time and so on. Similarly, verbal art or "poesis" is seen by her either as literature proper or drama. The former, she holds, reflects "a semblance of the past, or virtual memory", while the latter is seen as "a semblance of the future, virtual act or destiny". So also, sculpture is seen by her as the "semblance of organic form"; architecture is called by her "ethnic domain" and dance "a field of virtual power: it represents the illusion of human life as a force or physical energy, which explains why it is so dominant an art in primitive society, where the mysterious powers of gods or of magic are central data of imaginative experience". Similarly, film for Langer is a new art which presents "a virtual dream, the semblance of apparition".

Frye differs with Langer's philosophy of symbolism in art and is not happy with her claim that the function of art is to objectify feeling by creating symbols for it. That Frye's views on symbols in art are at variance with that of Langer is clear from the following passage:

The work of art is its own object, standing for itself, and unattached. Just as a name like James or John can be understood as a name apart from the people it may belong to, so a work of art can articulate or express a feeling which is a part of our total experience, whether it happens to be exactly the feeling that artist or his audience has recently been preoccupied with or not. Understanding symbolism on this level is the prerogative of human consciousness, and the work of art is the emotional counterpart of the discursive or logical symbol on which reasoning is based.
Thus, unlike Langer, Frye believes that the feeling which a work of art can express or articulate is a part of our total experience. This feeling may neither be evoked nor apprehended in isolation. It may or may not be the same as the one shared by the artist or the audience. Frye sees art as a manifestation of human consciousness and symbols act as an aid to human reasoning power. Indirectly, so far as the role of symbols in art is concerned, Frye stresses their educative function and does not merely discuss it in terms of objectification of feelings.

Besides differing from Langer on the role of symbols and the function of art, Frye also rejects Langer's view that art represents an 'illusion' or 'semblance'. Langer seems to overstate her point when she argues that "all forces that cannot be scientifically established and measured must be regarded, from the philosophical standpoint, as illusory." Frye rejects the argument of Langer on this point saying:

As every poet knows, one cannot use a word without being affected by its traditional associations, and as along as "illusion" is used as a central idea about art, it will have the overtones of something opposed to "reality", and will not cut itself loose from delusion or the appearance of the unreal.

Commenting further on Langer's view, Frye maintains, the question involved here is not her taste in using the word, but her conception of "art", which seems to me to have something of what is called misplaced concreteness about it. Conceived as objectified feeling alone, art is seen only as something that interrupts or displaces reality, not as a permanent part of a world constructed by humanity out of reality.

This means, if the work of art is seen as an 'illusion', it
would mean 'something opposed to reality'. Frye's idea is diametrically opposed to Langer's view of art as illusion. For Frye, art represents a 'permanent part of a world constructed by humanity out of reality' and not something that displaces or is opposed to reality. In other words, Frye is not prepared to accept Langer's abstract notions of defining art in terms of 'illusion', 'semblance', 'displaced reality', 'something opposed to reality', or the 'appearance of the unreal'.

Frye thus differs with Langer on two main points: i) on the function of art (Langer had stated that art objectifies feelings by creating symbols for it); and ii) on the nature of art (Langer regarded art as a delusion of sort).

It is remarkable that Frye's notion of art is both 'concrete' and valuable in that he sees art as a 'permanent part of a world constructed by humanity out of reality', and a 'manifestation of human consciousness'. He thus explains the nature of art in very concrete terms and secondly, he tends to go closer to the Aristotelian perspective of art as representation and mimesis. This point is further stressed in Frye's reference to Aristotle when he states,

If we think of such words as culture or civilization, we can see that we do in fact live in the world created as an artistic image. It is because of its clear reference to the two orders of nature in human life that Aristotle's word mimesis seems to me a safer guide than the most cautious use of illusion or semblance.

Frye's preference for the Aristotelian notions of mimesis is based on the fact that like Aristotle Frye too believes in the
'two orders of nature' namely the natural world that man ordinarily perceives and the world created in the 'artistic image' that man apprehends. Frye's views on art appreciation and his preference for Aristotelian notion for the understanding of art-works appear to be convincing.

An overview of the entire argument of Frye on Cassirer's and Langer's views on art reveals the following features:

a) Both, Frye and Cassirer agree on the functional aspects of symbols in art. Symbols for them act as representational agents acting as aids or means of communication and making the act of verbal expressiveness possible;

b) Frye agrees with Cassirer that disciplines like mathematics, science, philosophy, language, myth and the arts constitute a 'variety of mental constructions'. These 'mental constructions' are represented by words or numbers, which in turn are called symbols.

c) The 'mental constructions' derive their content from the objective world and are constituted from the 'categories of human consciousness'. This means, the mind in its symbolizing power function as constitutive agent for the 'mental constructions'.

d) Both Frye as well as Cassirer believe that our thinking pattern is 'mythical' in its origin and notion.

e) Frye differs quite radically with Langer's approach to the study of symbols in art. He refutes quite successfully the basic argument of Langer, namely that 'the function of art is to objectify feeling by creating symbols for it' and that art represents 'illusion' or 'semblance.'

f) Frye puts stress on the educative function of symbols and thus enlarges the scope of symbols so far as their role in art-interpretation is concerned.

The foregoing argument also makes it clear that while advancing his views on art, art-symbolism and art-interpretation Frye does not depend upon abstract notions such as 'illusion',

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'delusion', 'semblance', or for that matter on the role of metaphors to organize our thinking and writing pattern. Rather, Frye stresses on two important elements in perceiving and appreciating art-works namely, the 'form' and 'content'. By giving more weightage for the form-content relationship and by inclining towards the Aristotelian model about the nature of art Frye seems to strive for 'completeness', 'concreteness', and clarity in his view of art and thus seems to gain better insight in art than both Cassirer and Langer. His views on art are more comprehensive and inclusive than that of Cassirer or Langer.

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Chapter Notes

3. Ibid. p.168.
5. Ibid. p. 73.
6. Ibid. p. 76.
7. Ibid. p. 76.
8. Ibid. p. 76.
9. Ibid. p. 74.
10. Ibid. p. 74.
11. Ibid. p. 83.
12. Ibid. p. 82.
15. Ibid. p. 105.
16. Ibid. p. 106.
17. Ibid. p. 106.
18. Ibid. p. 106.
19. Ibid. p. 106.
20. Ibid. p. 106.
21. Ibid. p. 106.
22. Ibid. p. 107.
24. Ibid. p. 112.
25. Ibid. p. 119.
26. Ibid. p. 119.
27. Ibid. p. 121.
28. Ibid. p. 121.
29. Ibid. p. 121.
34. Ibid. p.230.
35. Ibid. p.235.
36. Ibid. p.228.

38. Ibid. p.314.

39. Ibid. p.314.

40. Ibid. p.314.

41. Ibid. p.314.

42. Ibid. p.314.

43. Ibid. p.314.

44. Ibid. p.314.

45. Ibid. p.314.

46. Ibid. p.316.

47. Ibid. p.316.

48. Ibid. p.317.

49. Ibid. p.317.