



Anatomy of Criticism: 1957
Four Essays

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Northrop Frye

Here is a book fundamental enough to be entitled *Principia Critica*.

—Commonweal

Northrop Frye was one of the most important and influential literary theorists of the twentieth century, and *Anatomy of Criticism* is his magnum opus. More than any other North American critic,

Frye paved the way for the explosion of interest in literary theory that took hold in the 1960s. Breaking with the practice of close readings of individual texts, favored by the so-called New Critics before him, Frye argued that literary study should be scientific in nature, not merely impressionistic or personal. “What critics now have,” as he put it in one of many incisive formulations, “is a mystery-religion without a gospel, and they are initiates who can communicate, or quarrel, only with one another.”

Frye sought instead to give us a common basis for understanding the full range of literary forms, through a far-reaching but integrated series of essays on literary archetypes, genres, poetic language, and the relations among text, reader, and society at large. Using a dazzling array of examples—from the *Odyssey* to *The Tale of Genji* to *The Water-Babies*—he argued that understanding “the structure of literature as a total form” allows us to see the profoundly liberating effect that literature can have in freeing our imaginations from the constraints of habit and circumstance.

Princeton also published Frye’s first book, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), his masterful study of William Blake’s visionary symbolism.