

Archetypes of Literature: Theory, Importance, and Relation to Orson Scott Card's Ender's Game

Archetypal Literary Criticism is a type of critical theory that was largely popular in the 1940s and 1950s, though it still has an important place in learning criticism today. Northrup Frye, 20th Century literary theorist and critic, was one of the major proponents of studying the archetypes of literature when interpreting/criticizing literature. In his essay, *The Archetypes of Literature*, he discusses at length the concepts behind archetypes and it is through the lens of this work that this theory shall be discussed in this essay. An archetype is a recurrent symbol; something that represents a universally understood meaning. Archetypes of literature are symbols used in written work that seem to occur over and over again, in different works and across centuries. An example of a prominent archetype in literature is that of the hero, a main character that goes through trials and tribulations and either succeeds or fails depending on the nature of the story (comedy vs tragedy).

Frye's take on archetypes of literature comes from a desire to make criticism of literature less based on feeling and more based on a defined set of characteristics. Literature is not a science, and thus criticism is largely not recognized as a scientific process or study. However, Frye feels that by studying literature at a level void of casual value judgements and meaningless criticism, a "coordinating principle" can be found and followed when examining works. In the first paragraph of his essay, Frye says "there is surely no reason why criticism, as a systematic and organized study, should not be, at least partly, a science." With this goal in

mind, the idea of a set of archetypes of literature was further developed by Frye. The purpose is to give a set of characteristics that, over time, can be traced through many works and used to relate the universal human experience through all of them.

By examining and comparing many works, common threads, or archetypes, can be found among them. These archetypes are what separates great works of literature from the mundane. Frye says on page 1309 of the document, “the study of mediocre works of art, however energetic, obstinately remains a random and peripheral form of critical experience, whereas the profound masterpiece seems to draw us to a point at which we can see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance.” Historical and anthropological knowledge must be used in order to identify these archetypes, such as the study of rituals and other patterns apparent in human life. Frye has done this in order to compile a set of archetypes that can be looked at when criticizing works of literature.

He finds the myth as the archetype, based around various cycles normal to human life, as a defining factor in his lists of archetypes. One set of archetypes he describes on pages 1311,1312 of the document is a series of four: “1. The dawn, spring and birth phase... 2. The zenith, summer and marriage of triumph phase... 3. The sunset, autumn and death phase...4. The darkness, winter and dissolution phase.” These archetypes can be phases in a central narrative, such as in the aforementioned hero myth. Often works of literature will work these archetypes in the narrative, and thus structured criticism can be done.

Meanings can be both universally known and also individually held, but on page 1315 of the document, Frye says, “one essential principle of archetypal criticism is that the individual and the universal forms of an image are identical” and thus a known idea of what common

imagery means is important. From this idea, Frye attempts to classify the central pattern of comedic and tragic narratives, with common themes and motifs involved in each. He lists them on pages 1314 and 1315 of the document, paraphrased here: "1. comic vision: the human world is a community, tragic vision: it is tyranny or anarchy, 2. comic vision: the animal world is a community of domesticated animals, tragic vision: it is seen in terms of beasts and birds of prey, 3. comic vision: the vegetable world is a garden, grove or park, tragic vision: it is a sinister forest, 4. comic vision: the mineral world is a city, tragic vision: it is seen in terms of deserts, rocks and ruins, 5. comic vision: the unformed world is a river, tragic vision: it is the sea." He describes these visions more thoroughly, and these images are common in many works.

In essence, when studying literature, one begins to see patterns of symbols and imagery that have almost universal meaning. These are the archetypes that are studied through archetypal literary criticism. Through this, a more standardized way of looking at art, with less personal bias and meaning that comes from one's own experiences, can be found. Orson Scott Card's "Ender's Game" is one such work that can be examined through archetypes of literature. The story is one of a brilliant young boy, Ender Wiggin, whose birth as a third child was only allowed by the government due to the brilliance of his parents. This story has a "happy" ending in which the main characters win their war, but the whole experience is psychologically damaging to Ender and he finishes the story depressed. For that, this story fits in the tragic vision. The story includes many aspects in Frye's archetypes, such as a "mineral world" where most of the setting is in cold space stations or gutted asteroids and military set-ups. The "human world" is in a state of war, with overpopulation, strict laws, and an imminent threat of annihilation. The "animal world" is represented by the alien bug-like race, named formics but

nicknamed “buggers” that is a threat. There isn’t much by way of a “vegetable world”, as the setting is largely in the desolation of space. The “unformed world” in this case can be interpreted as open space; more unpredictable and unknown than the sea.

The narrative arc in “Ender’s Game” seems to follow a natural cycle attested to in Frye’s Archetypes. Ender’s story begins with him at 6 years still in public school, where he kills another kid who is bullying him. Seeing this action as decisive leadership, he is accepted into Battle School, where young geniuses are trained up to fight in a war against the distant alien “buggers”. This can be seen as his spring, with him starting out bullied and small, but coming into his own despite adversity. Ender is isolated, but his skills grow despite it and he is able to get a group of friends. This is his summer, when he is able to experience close bonds and the pleasure of being excellent. Then, school continues to push him and throw spirit breaking adversity at him, but he perseveres. However, it seems to psychologically damage him, and he is very depressed. Only the thought of his sister dying from the war pushes him forward. This seems to be his autumn, where the joy is gone and dying. Ender is still motivated to move on, but it is weak.

He completes training, but his last section is in actuality the real war, which he is tricked into commanding in. He completely eradicates the enemy and is even more depressed as he had committed genocide. His winter is represented here, when his goals are complete, but he feels isolation and supreme guilt. In order to avoid being used for political reasons, he leaves for a bugged planet on a colonizing mission and finds a remaining bugged egg. The egg is able to communicate with Ender, and he spreads the story of her race in a narrative. The novel ends with him travelling around the universe finding a safe place to establish the egg. Later books

follow Ender as a space traveler working with different races and a religion established following his narratives about the buggers. This could represent the cyclical nature of things and could be a return of Ender's spring as he finds new purpose and forgiveness.

Analyzing "Ender's Game" using archetypes allows the work to be compared to other similar works, and helps examine what popular tropes were built up to create the mood of the novel. Archetypes of literature is a valuable theory of criticism because it allows critics to look at works of literature as part of a whole literary paradigm. Criticism of literature can sometimes be bogged down by biases, such as past personal experiences or personal taste. By having a solid set of criteria mapped out from generations of works, one theory of criticism can be widely applied for generations of art. Criticism would become more like a science in this way. With universally agreed upon ideals, there is little room for variation due to bias. On the other hand, only thinking about archetypes when analyzing literature and sticking to one set of ideas does not allow for much nuance and individuality. Art is above all a human creation, and humans are not all the same. Criticism needs to include that individuality, or else literature becomes a field bereft of new ideas.