

### Myth Criticism and the Culture and Literature of the Postcolonial Americas

The study of myth is itself an ancient practice. To understand different cultures and groups of people, early scholars such as Apollodorus (c. 90 BC) and Hyginus (c. 1 AD) created mythological handbooks that compiled Greek mythologies<sup>1</sup>. These texts, and others like them, were used as guides to understanding material such as poetry and drama that referenced classical mythologies and texts unknown to the common reader. This compilation of mythologies, however, extends beyond singular cultures and mythologies and remains in contemporary literary studies. In 1890, James Frazer published *The Golden Bough*, which not only explored Greco-Roman mythologies, but extended to “a worldwide survey of fertility myths” (Gill 397)<sup>2</sup>. From his exploration of various cultures with similar thematic myths, he concludes there is a “universal” archetype of the “figure of the dying-rising god and its annual resurrection” (Gill 397). Frazer’s discovery and assertion of an archetype present in various mythologies proved the catalyst to the practice of archetypal or myth criticism that has seemingly disappeared from the Western academy since its popularity in the twentieth century.

The first iteration of myth criticism was formally introduced by Swiss psychologist and mentee to Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, as archetypal criticism. According to Jung, archetypal criticism “theorizes the existence of discrete and interrelated symbols, including narrative forms and character types, in ancient and traditional myths, and examines their recurrence and uses them to critically interpret later literatures and cultures” (Gill 396). Jung’s

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen D. Smith, “Scholars of Myth, Ancient and Modern.” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* (2008)

<sup>2</sup> Glen Robert Gill, “Archetypal Criticism: Jung and Frye,” *A Companion to Literary Theory* (2018)

theory, though later applied to literature, focused on psychology. Pushing past Freudian ideas of the unconscious as dictated by the “Oedipal” archetype only, he suggested instead the unconscious was directly affected by the work of many. Originally categorizing them as “dominants of the collective unconscious,” Jung identified six archetypes<sup>3</sup>: the *shadow*, the *trickster*, the *wise old man* or *magus personality*, the *anima/animus*, the *kore*, and the *great* or *chthonic mother* (Gill 398). As noted above, Jung’s focus was psychological and thus much of the criticism of his work concerns the ambiguity between *who* or *what* is being critiqued. As Gill describes it, Jung’s work was quickly critiqued due to “ambiguity about whether the psyche of the author, of the character or of the text itself is being analyzed, and the fact that it forces a multiplicity of literary symbols to conform to the small number of Jungian archetypes” (Gill 402).

Inspired also by the work of Frazer, Northrop Frye, noted Canadian scholar, developed his own idea of archetypal criticism more commonly known as myth criticism. Frye based his criticism on decoding William Blake’s poetry which he claimed was created through the use of mythic archetypes. In his work *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye argues these mythic archetypes render literature “a vast system of apocalyptic and demonic archetypes constituting innumerable myths and literary works, which revolve through four mythoi or literary genres” (Gill 401). These four genres, according to Frye, are comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony/satire. Ultimately, Frye argued for seeing literature as riddled with repeating patterns that, when examined, “gives us a glimpse of the possibility of seeing literature as a complication of a

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that this number changes over time/based on publications. Some scholars claim Jung had as many as twelve archetypes, others narrow it to four main archetypes. For the purposes of this essay, I am focusing on six that are a later iteration of Jung’s *Four Theories of Consciousness*.

relatively restricted and simple group of formulas that can be studied in primitive culture” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 16-17).

Like Jung, Frye encountered criticism; however, the most notable critique was of his “totalizing” structures of literature. Queer, feminist, and postcolonial scholars alike saw the danger in these “universal” archetypes claiming they essentialized gender norms and social hierarches. It seems, then, that it is this critique, one of essentialism, that has largely pushed Frye’s myth criticism out of practice. Yet, I am interested in exploring the way in which Frye’s myth criticism was, rather than deterministic and essentialist, an early iteration of literary cultural studies that translates into contemporary conversations concerning the treatment of the literature of the Postcolonial Americas in academia. Using Robert Young’s<sup>4</sup> definition of postcolonial cultural critique, “the reconsideration of this [imperialist] history, particularly from the perspective of those who suffered its effects, together with the defining of its contemporary social and cultural impact,” I am interested in the way Frye’s myth criticism works along similar lines (4). Frye, though looking at myth through the perspective of “high literature,” still includes myth as *literature*, thus allowing for the exploration of marginal literatures while encouraging historical context.

Despite the connection between Frye’s work and postcolonial cultural critique, the question remains: “what value does myth criticism offer to postcolonial literatures?”. Despite a plethora of answers to the question of myth criticism’s value, most contemporary scholars seem to explore myth and the literature of the Postcolonial Americas in one of three ways: deconstructing imperialist histories, disrupting narratives of progression, or establishing literary identity. With these categories of understanding myth and the literature of the Postcolonial

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2016)

Americas in mind, this essay focuses primarily on three texts: Michel R. Oudijk's "The Making of Academic Myth" (2019), Michelle R. Martin-Baron's "Mythical enjambment in *The Hungry Woman*: nation, desire, and Cherrie Moraga's utopic turn" (2018), and Paja Faudree's "What Is an Indigenous Author?: Minority Authorship and the Politics of Voice in Mexico" (2015).

## **I. Myth Criticism: Deconstructing Imperialist Histories**

The move to deconstruct imperialist accounts of the history of the Postcolonial Americas is neither new nor specific to myth criticism. Rather, myth criticism is one of the many ways proposed to actively disentangle imperialist creations of history and native histories. Through the exploration of myth, its structures, and its place in society, adaptations of Frye's myth criticism allow for a deconstruction of imperialist accounts of history through the introduction of alternative histories.

Lee Bebout<sup>5</sup> adapts Frye's myth criticism into what he calls the "mythohistorical position," a position that is, according to Bebout, less historically ignorant than Frye's original conception of myth criticism, but still focuses on the centrality of myth to the development of cultures and histories. He argues that for Chicana/o literature and culture, Frye's understanding of myth as "universal" encourages focusing on the function of narrative and resists seeing myth as "a taxonomic tool used in the service of Othering colonized peoples" (9).

Though more critical of myth criticism as a practice and its inscribed hierarchies of knowledge production, Gloria Elizabeth Chacón<sup>6</sup> suggests that Latin American literature differed from European literature in its use of oral myths and folklore, thus leading to the belief that

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<sup>5</sup> Lee Bebout, *Mythohistorical Interventions: The Chicano Movement and Its Legacies* (2011)

<sup>6</sup> Gloria Elizabeth Chacón, "Literacy and Power in Mesoamerica" (2018)

“indigenous literature ended with the imposition of a Spanish colonial system” (37). Through an exploration of myth in both pre- and postcolonial periods in Latin America, Chacón argues for a new understanding of literacy in Latin America that significantly disrupts the imperialist histories of non-literacy in indigenous populations. Alejandro Patiño-Contreras suggests that the study of myth does not simply deconstruct histories, but it also helps to create them. In looking at the Great Chacha, a deity in mythologies of Musica<sup>7</sup>, Patiño-Contreras directly traces the beginning of Spanish rule and the end of the Great Chacha concluding, “the inception of Spanish rule and the end of the age of Great Chacha are interrelated events that give birth to the colonial world” (633).

Though many moves to deconstruct false histories of colonialism have been *successfully* made in the name of “myth criticism,” Michel Oudijk suggests the very system used to analyze these myths is, itself, a product of false histories and imperialist ideologies fueled by a misuse of myth criticism. In his article “The Making of Academic Myth” (2019), Oudijk deconstructs the system used to “decode” Mesoamerican mythologies: the transgressive model. His approach is largely historical and contextual as he explores translation and the historical events surrounding the creation and popularization of Michael Graulich’s primary texts: the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* and *Codex Vaticanus A*. He begins with an exploration of Graulich’s “Myths of Paradise Lost in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico” (1983). Graulich, Oudijk claims, wanted to establish “that Nahua origin myths shared a similar structure... through a transgression by some gods, the separation of the sky and earth took place and death was introduced to the world” (341). Oudijk argues that Graulich’s conclusion of the transgressive model is historically ignorant and lacks critical analysis of its source material.

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<sup>7</sup> Indigenous peoples in Columbia; also known as Chibcha

Through a close reading of Graulich's claims, Oudijk delves into the three different creation stories encountered in the texts<sup>8</sup> studied by Graulich. The first, he claims, does not contain anything that suggests the killing of a primordial being, and thus Graulich does not mention this account in his findings. The second and third accounts, found in *Histoyre du Mechique*, tell two different, but similar stories. The first story is that the gods Tezcatlipoca and Ehecatl enter into the body of Tlazolteotl and create the sky and other gods create the remainder of the world. The second narrative, still focusing on Tezcatlipoca and Ehecatl, has the gods divide Tlalteutil's body — one half creating the earth, the other the sky — which angers some of the other gods. Oudijk is skeptical, and rightfully so, of Graulich's ultimate conclusion from these three narratives that “the fundamental myth of creation of the earth deals with a familiar theme: the killing of a primordial being” (343). Though convincing in his assertion that Graulich's interpretation of the creation story of Nahua mythologies is flawed, he makes no move to interpret Graulich's motivations for perpetuating such a narrative. He focuses mainly on the historical context of the primary texts created by Spanish friars with religious motivations despite Graulich becoming a sort of secondary text for Alfredo Lopez Austin.

Oudijk goes on to demonstrate how Graulich's inherently flawed model of understanding Mesoamerican mythologies was adapted by Alfredo Lopez Austin who expanded upon Graulich's “killing a primordial being” and further suggested that an act of transgression was central to the Mesoamerican belief in creation. Using the same texts, as well as Graulich's interpretations of them, Lopez Austin claimed the transgression of the Mesoamerican gods led to the expulsion of the gods from Tamoanchan<sup>9</sup> and thus the world was created and death was introduced. Yet, as Oudijk began to point out in his exploration of Graulich's model, Lopez

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<sup>8</sup> *Histoyre du Mechique*, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, and *Codex Vaticanus A*

<sup>9</sup> Garden, paradise

Austin fails to critically and historically examine his source material. Stories of the creation of the world, Oudijk claims, are found in narrative texts meant to relate the original and creation of the world and the place of Mexico in that world. Stories of transgression are found in texts meant “to instruct friars as to the meaning of such documents” (344).

The mistranslation of these documents did not begin with Graulich and Lopez Austin. Oudijk suggests that the mantic codes — “instruments of divination” — were often mistranslated by friars and scholars alike. The desire to read Mesoamerican mythos like European literatures — to impose a narrative on the numen<sup>10</sup> depicted and its attributes — led to false beliefs and narratives concerning the Mesoamerican mythological structure. Oudijk gives the example of an image of Huehuecoyotl, often depicted as “the deceived one or the one who was deceived.” In the same image there is a woman crying and holding a bowl of feces. In an attempt to create a narrative, the “deceived” becomes “like Adam,” thus making the crying woman — often seen as Iznaxtil — “like Eve” “the deceiver” (353). Through an intricate breakdown of other images and artistic patterns, however, Oudijk asserts that the woman is most likely not a deity of any kind, but simply a negative attribute of Huehuecoyotl, and that the imposition of a Christian narrative — “the Fall” and Adam and Eve — created a false narrative that has come to dominate Western conceptions of Mesoamerican mythologies.

Though Oudijk does not directly address Frye’s myth criticism, he acknowledges the importance of exploring and understanding myth as a way of interpreting culture and rectifying misconceptions of the past. He sees the value in collecting and comparing mythologies, yet, unlike Frye, he cautions against comparing mythologies *outside* of a singular culture. He attributes the misconceptions of Nahua mythologies not just to mistranslation and

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<sup>10</sup> Deity, divine being

misinterpretation, but to a direct comparison between Christian mythologies<sup>11</sup> and native mythologies. Over time, this comparison, often reaching in its attempt to find similarities, corrupted ideas of Nahua myth resulting in “the myth invented in the sixteenth century [becoming] true modern pre-Hispanic myths of the Nahua” (370).

Interestingly, like Oudijk, Bebout, Chacón, and Patiño-Contreras all refrain from evoking Frye’s myth criticism directly in their conversations concerning myth and its place in literary studies. Despite significant similarities in their conceptions of myth, the fear of the label “deterministic” and “essentialist” often attributed to Frye’s interpretations of myth and its relationship to literature seem to dispel scholars from engaging directly with his criticism. That being said, Oudijk’s exploration of Nahua myth could benefit from direct engagement with Frye’s work and a further conceptualization of “universalizing” myth. Frye is not suggesting that myth looks the same throughout all cultures, but that *similar* cultures have *similar* mythologies. In an attempt to deconstruct imperialist reconstructions of Nahua mythologies, Oudijk focuses on refusing a “universalizing” narrative when in reality he is refusing the imperialist narrative, which, I would argue, Frye does from the beginning simply by *acknowledging* the existence and importance of non-Western mythologies.

## **II. Myth Criticism: Disrupting the Narratives of Progression**

In similar form to the deconstruction of imperialist histories, myth criticism has recently been used as a way to disrupt not only the histories, but also the notions of progress associated with imperialism. If “progress,” loosely defined in conjunction with colonialism, refers to the improvement or betterment of a society — here specifically referring to literacy — upon the

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<sup>11</sup> Here, mythologies simply refers to “stories” or “narratives”



arrival of colonizers, myth criticism works to deconstruct linear notions of time. Unlike Section I, these explorations of myth and its relationship to literature focus not specifically on historical context and challenging contemporary versions of history, but rather challenging the way these peoples, authors, and texts functioned and continue to function throughout time.

Frederick Luis Aldama<sup>12</sup> proposes a reading of Chicana/o literature that looks not at the past or the origins of Chicana/o peoples and histories, but instead at the way in which the past and present influence the writing and reception of these texts. Unlike other literatures, Aldama claims Chicana/o literature is “the result of a rich and varied history of multiple spatiotemporal projects and impacts... the result of creators writing for their ideal audiences that coincide and *don't* coincide in time and place” (200). The constant devaluation and dismissal of Chicana/o myth and creative thought necessitates its existence across boundaries not only of race and ethnicity, but of place and time.

Thomas Phillips<sup>13</sup> exploration of the function of myth in Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo El Supremo* and what he calls the “*texto ausente*” echoes Aldama's multispatiotemporal projection model. Phillips defines *texto ausente* as “the space between the Spanish text and the effaced Guarani elements themselves” (698). It is in this space, Phillips asserts, that myth allows for a plethora of voices that undermine the idea of a single voice of authority. In other words, like Aldama's multispatiotemporal projections, the stories from Guarani myth appear and reappear in contemporary settings allowing for a variety of voices that stretch across space and time. Through these voices, Phillips asserts that myth in the text functions as an opportunity for the “indigenous presence” to resist obscurity and speak across time and space.

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<sup>12</sup> Frederick Luis Aldama, “Chicana/o literature's multispatiotemporal projections and impacts: or back to the future” (2015)

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Phillips, “An Absent Author? Myth in Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo El Supremo*” (2011)

Like Aldama's multispatiotemporal projections and Phillips *texto ausente*, Michelle R. Martin-Baron proposes "mythical enjambment" as a way to disrupt ideas of Postcolonial progression. In her article "Mythical enjambment in *The Hungry Woman*: nation, desire and Cherrie Moraga's utopic turn," Martin-Baron proposes a deconstruction of myth itself — seeing it not as a product of ancient understanding, but as stretching into and adapting in light of contemporary issues. For Martin-Baron, "mythical enjambment" represents this act of "reorder[ing] these imbricated mythologies to explore and expose further levels of meaning and myth-making" (244).

In her quest to explore myth itself, she takes a rather deconstructionist approach as she breaks down the idea of myth and its origins. Exploring myth first as folklore, she demonstrates the way in which myth itself became both fantastical and true. The goal of mythical enjambment, then, is to "get at the seam of the two — to understand when the myth tells a 'truth' that is actually another layer of myth" (246). Martin-Baron identifies two main myths in Moraga's *The Hungry Woman*: the folklore of La Llorona and the myth of Medea. In both instances, Moraga acknowledges the "deeply political" aspects of two myths that feature scorned, and often scornful, women (246). Through Moraga's insertion of a cultural myth into a classical myth, Martin-Baron argues that "the distinction between one mythology and another is blurred, so that where one myth ends and the other begins is unclear" (247). In other words, Martin-Baron asserts that the use of mythical enjambment not only confuses time and place — ancient Greece to the Postcolonial Americas — but also works to disrupt deep-rooted oppressions hidden and dispelled under the guise of contemporary progression narratives such as gender equality.

Interestingly, unlike Aldama and Phillips, Martin-Baron's exploration of Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* takes myth criticism and the practice of disrupting progressive narratives in a

distinctly feminist direction. While Aldama and Phillips both point to the opportunities for disrupting social normality and gender hierarchies, Martin-Baron's exploration provides an avenue that is perhaps more tangible for further exploration. Aldama and Phillips' concepts of multispatiotemporal projection and *texto ausente* both provide opportunities for exploration, but Martin-Baron's mythical enjambment allows for practical application of both concepts in the field of feminist literary studies. Furthermore, this area of opportunity does not limit itself to the Postcolonial Americas. In fact, in identifying the mythical enjambment of classical mythology and mythology of the Postcolonial Americas, Martin-Baron's work moves alongside Frye's "universal" mythologies and opens the possibility of disrupting hegemonic ideas of culture and the progression of cultures across time.

### **III. Myth Criticism: Establishing a Literary Identity**

This final section of works revitalizing Frye's myth criticism in relation to the Postcolonial Americas is perhaps the narrowest in its application. Moving from the larger, more daunting tasks of decolonizing histories and disrupting narratives of progression, this final section focuses on Frye's myth criticism in direct relationship to cultural studies and the creation of the indigenous<sup>14</sup> author. As it is narrow in its scope, this section focuses more on Frye's conception of myth criticism as a system of patterns allowing for connections across cultures and time and less on Frye's specific notions of four literary genres. Instead, both Domino Renee Perez<sup>15</sup> and Paja Faudree's<sup>16</sup> work encourages a literary identity for indigenous authors that extends beyond

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<sup>14</sup> This term is used by both scholars noted in this section to refer to the peoples native to the Americas pre-colonization and remaining in the Americas post-colonization.

<sup>15</sup> Domino Renee Perez, "The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream" (2012)

<sup>16</sup> Paja Faudree, "What is an Indigenous Author?: Minority Authorship and the Politics of Voice in Mexico" (2015)

specific genres and the idea of myth itself and disrupts current notions of cultural politics and literature.

Perez's work more directly interacts with myth criticism as she expertly explores the cultural myth of La Llorona. Looking at contemporary television shows such as *Supernatural* alongside novels like Mel Odom's *Bruja* and Tony Hillerman's *The Weeping Wind*, she suggests that while the myth of La Llorona has superseded indigenous culture and in many ways its inclusion in mass media may be construed as inclusion, media such as these "sever La Llorona from her cultural community or primitivize the members of her parent culture who gave rise to the legend" (155). The myth of the scorned woman changes over time and through publications in a way that damages the original cultural understanding of the narrative. La Llorona, a figure of empowerment for indigenous females, is painted as a vicious and scornful woman in non-indigenous mass media. Thus, Perez argues, it is the job of the Mexican<sup>17</sup> community to resist these mass misinterpretations of their mythology and culture and reject notions of severing culture from myth. Alongside myth criticism, it becomes the myth-scholar's job to compare and disentangle the repeating patterns present in La Llorona mythologies and expose those that are nothing more than cultural appropriation.

It is more of a stretch to see Frye's myth criticism in Faudree's work specifically because Faudree himself does not deal directly with "myth." Rather than focusing on the "mythical" aspect of Frye's criticism, Faudree's works deal more with the original ideas of archetype and the repetition of literary patterns. His approach is largely anthropological as he deconstructs Michael Foucault's definition of authorship in order to assert his definition does not work to define indigenous authors. Like Perez, Faudree shares the opinion that culture should not be

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<sup>17</sup> She uses this title interchangeably with "indigenous" throughout her article

stripped from authorship (or origin of myth, in Perez's case), but rather that indigenous authorship requires a distinct literary identity. Faudree moves away from Perez's cultural coagulation to focus on the individual within the larger structure of indigenous authorship. For Faudree, the indigenous author needs not only his own identity within literature as a whole, but his own identity as an individual author.

Relating to Frye's interpretation of myth criticism as repeating patterns organizes into genres, Faudree recognizes these repeating patterns within indigenous literatures – focus on time, place, space, and culture – but rejects the “vocal constriction” of associating these “universal” mythologies relating to space, place, time, and culture to every author (9). Instead, he argues for a “re-invigor[ation of] conversations within the discipline about individuals as (distinct) individuals, rather than as representatives of social types” (12). In other words, while Frye's “patterns” may be present in indigenous literatures, they should not define how they are studied and categorized. Genre, while an important aspect of myth criticism for Frye, is less of a concern for Faudree. Instead, Faudree wants to focus on cultural similarities, and differences, that bring indigenous authors into a light of their own, compared not to Western-inspired works of literature, but reflexively compared to the indigenous self.

#### **IV. The Future of Myth Criticism**

For the majority of this essay I have explored what academia has done and is doing with the oft-marked “outdated” practice of myth criticism. I have demonstrated three different directions in which I believe Frye's interpretation of myth in conjunction with literature have progressed. First, by focusing on Michel Oudijk's critique of the system of studying Mesoamerican myth, I presented a critique of past iterations of myth criticism and the way in which a correct

application of Frye's concept, one that considers historical context, allows for a deconstruction of imperialist histories. Second, a closer look at Michelle R. Martin-Baron's "mythical enjambment" provides a useful tool for not only refining Frye's mythical repetitions through an examination of the "scorned woman" in classical and cultural mythologies, but also for extending his ideas through time and space to contemporary conversations surrounding the study of culture and literature. Finally, through a deconstruction of the meaning of authorship and its relationship to indigenous authors, Faudree suggests a step away from Frye's four genres and instead argues for a distinct literary identity for authors of the postcolonial Americas that supersedes genre similarities and instead focuses similarities within culture and the identity provided through these similarities and differences.

The question remains, however, "what value, if any, does myth criticism present to the study of the literature of the Postcolonial Americas?". Through an exploration of the publications in this essay, I would argue the value of Frye's myth criticism in the exploration and understanding of the literature of the Postcolonial Americas is invaluable. These cultures, founded on literatures and languages beyond that of European understandings of literacy and literatures, have deeply interwoven their myths and their voice. In an attempt to disengage this literature from its mythology, as demonstrated by Perez, Martin-Baron, Oudijk to name a few, academia risks misinterpreting and continuing narratives of cultural oppression. It is important, it seems, to take Frye's myth criticism and re-introduce it into academia to further dismantle largely white, European interpretations of the literature of the Postcolonial Americas.

It is important to note that Frye, himself, saw the limitations and deterministic nature of his original work and strove to re-evaluate his categories of interpretation. He continued to refine his ideas of myth criticism until his death in 1991, writing *Words with Power* (1990), a sort of

successor to *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), where he redefined his ideas of archetypes and instead renamed them *variations* allowing for different ideological adaptations of archetypes (Gill 404). Rather than seeing Frye's model of myth criticism as deterministic and outdated, it seems academia is beginning to recognize the underlying cultural critique that was central to Frye's examination of various cultures and mythologies and that became more inclusive in its later years. Though Frye's exploration of myth as literature came from an arguably elitist perspective, his dedication to viewing myth as literature was itself a cultural revolution ahead of its time.

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