



Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake

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Published in 1947, *Fearful Symmetry* was Northrop Frye's first book and the product of over a decade of intense labour. Drawing readers into the imaginative world of William Blake, Frye succeeded in making Blake's voice and vision intelligible to the wider public. Distinguished by its range of reference, elegance of expression, comprehensiveness of coverage, coherence of argument, and sympathy to its subject, *Fearful Symmetry* was immediately recognized as a landmark of Blake criticism. Fifty years later, it is still recognized as having ensured the acceptance of Blake as a canonical poet by permanently dispelling the widespread notion that he was the mad creator of an incomprehensible private symbolism.

For this new edition, the text has been revised and corrected in accordance with the principles of the Collected Works of Northrop Frye series. Frye's original annotation has been supplemented with references to currently standard editions of Blake and others, and many new notes have been provided, identifying quotations, allusions, and cultural references. An introduction by Ian Singer provides biographical and critical context for the book, an overview of its contents, and an account of its reception.

Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake Details

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John says

Don't let anyone tell you that you'll never read one of the books that has sat for decades on your shelves unread. I'm now reading Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*, a study of William Blake's poetry, the very same copy that I bought about 40 years ago, and have been lugging about for just as long in the clear and unremitting anticipation that one day I would actually read it. And so I am. I'll report later whether it was worth the wait.

Czarny Pies says

Fearful Symmetry is one of the most important works of 20th century English criticism and deserves the widest audience possible. Being the key work of Northrop Frye it must be read by anyone truly committed to understanding him. While Frye has written many other outstanding books, none contain such a complete and cogently argued statement of Frye's ideas.

Fearful Symmetry accomplishes two important things: (a) it explains why the Bible is the "Great Code" of English literature and (b): it explains William Blake's key role in the elaboration of an English mythopoia. In Blake's view the key function of art (p. 357) was is to tell the Biblical drama of :

1. Man's Fall
2. Struggle of Man in a Fallen World
3. Redemption
4. The Apocalypse

Artists must be visionaries like Christ's apostles and create works that allow men and women to perceive God. "Art, because it affords a systematic training in [divine] vision, is the medium through which religion is revealed. The Bible is the vehicle of revealed religion because its a unified vision of human life and therefore as Blake says : 'the Great Code of Art.'" (p. 45)

Through art one approaches the divine: "The place of honour in art goes to the artist who has passed through religion and come out the other side. Such an artist, in Blake's symbolism ... through the ring of fire into Eden where man is no longer a creature but a creator and is one with God." (p. 345)

In Frye's view the England's mythopoetic tradition was founded by Spencer who combined symbols from Arthurian tales, popular superstition and Biblical images in his epic the *Faerie Queene*. Spencer was able to what he did because he lived in the era when the religious capital of England had been moved from Rome to London where it was united with the political capital.

The puritan Milton brilliantly advances the tradition with his epic of the fall and redemption makes heavy use of Greek classical mythology. Milton presents Satan as being passive and unable to perceive the divine. Blake who followed Milton felt that the greatest sin was passivity. Christ's followers must active visionaries endeavouring to perceive God. Priggish morality becomes evil. Blake adds elements from the islandic Edda to the English mythopoetic mix.

In Frye's view, after Blake English literature fell into a decadent phase as Deism and romanticism pushed the heroic English Mythopoetic tradition off stage.

Many people in this century feel that Tolkien with the *Lord of the Rings* revived the English Mythopoetic tradition adding the Finish Kalevala to it. However there seems to be no way of knowing what Frye would have thought of this hypothesis. *Fearful Symmetry* was published before the Tolkien cycle. While Frye is known to have read the *Lord of the Rings* he made no public comment about it. Nonetheless, the combination of elements from English folklore, the Edda, and Bible found in Tolkien's work make it difficult to see the *Lord of the Rings* as anything else but a part of the tradition of Spencer, Milton and Blake.

One also feels that Blake's synthesis of various mythologies and his expressed belief that there this is "only one language and one religion" are consistent with those of Joseph Campbell who created the model for the on-going Star Wars saga. If popular culture counts, Blake's vision is more popular than it ever has been.

Tina Romanelli says

Love it! Frye is brilliant in his specific criticism.

Yannis Livadas says

The best book on Blake; by far.

Gabriel says

Northrop Frye is one of those amazing literary critics no one's ever heard of. I first discovered him when handed a collection of lectures he gave on canadian radio. This is a very astute reading of Blake.

James says

One of the two seminal works on Blake in the twentieth century, the second being Erdman's *Prophet Against Empire*. Frye's study of Blake led to his *Anatomy of Criticism*, a defining work within literary criticism in English. Frye's work is a study of Blake's symbols, approaching Blake's work as myth (as opposed to Erdman's, who reads Blake's work historically). It's still an excellent work for someone first venturing in to Blake's labyrinthine prophet works.

Bill says

Just brushing up on Blake for my Blake seminar. Deep work.

Keith says

As I said about in my review of William Blake's works, there is an audience for this but it's not me. If you are interested in literary criticism, 18th century philosophy, and the unusual cosmology/mythology of Blake, this is the ideal book for you. If not, then you may want to dip into this book as you read works by Blake. That's what I'm doing and Frye provides as lucid an introduction as is possible for Blake.

Auntjenny says

I used this book in college to write my senior thesis about Blake's portrayal of women in the Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Songs of Innocence and Experience, and The Visions of the Daughters of Albion. Honestly, my paper was pretty god awful, I think. I wish someone would have told me that. Instead, I got an A I believe. Anywho, that's my story. (P.S. Blake was kind of crappy toward women, like just about every one of his contemporaries.)

Anima says

"Cosmology is a literary art, but there are two kinds of cosmology, the kind designed to understand the world as it is, and the kind designed to transform it into the form of human desire. Platonists and occultists deal with the former kind...

Cosmology of this type is speculative, which(..) is ultimately intellectual narcissism, staring into nature as the mirror of our ordinary selves.

What the mirror shows us is what Blake calls "mathematic form," the automatic and mindless universe that has no beginning nor end, no up nor down. What such a universe suggests to us is resignation, acceptance of what is, approval of what is predictable, fear of whatever is unpredictable.

Blake's cosmology, of which the symbol is Ezekiel's vision of the chariot of God with its "wheels within wheels," is a revolutionary vision of the universe transformed by the creative imagination into a human shape.

.....

....I wrote Fearful Symmetry during the Second World War, and hideous as that time was, it provided some parallels with Blake's time which were useful for understanding Blake's attitude to the world. Today, now that reactionary and radical forces alike are once more in the grip of the nihilistic psychosis that Blake described so powerfully in Jerusalem, one of the most hopeful signs is the immensely increased sense of the urgency and immediacy of what Blake had to say. "

NORTHROP FRYE

joshuA says

Bookmarked at page 72.

John says

best book i have read about Blake

Stephen says

I'm always returning to this book in conjunction with reading William Blake. I'd love to contact my old college prof and ask if he would please send me a copy of his notes on the class he taught on Blake and Whitman.

Josh says

Well... this book is alternately fascinating and frustrating, a long, discursive summary of "Blake's thought" as Frye sees it. Because of how labyrinthine and involuted Blake's writing was - especially in the prophetic books - there are necessarily quite a few 25-30 page sections of pure summary, things like "Urothria is the son of Spooptapulus, wife of Borg, which means that the artistic imagination reigns supreme in the third dyad, blah blah blah." I just made those names up, but I'm going to guess that the effect of them is about the same as the effect of Blake's real counters on someone (like me) who hasn't read the thousands of pages of poetry/myth that Frye is describing. In other words, ka-what?

However, once Frye has laid the pieces in front of you, his hands are free for some amazing analysis. Essentially, he suggests that Blake's mythology illuminates a pattern that is repeated, not just in a few other world mythologies, but in all of them. So a close reading of Blake's canon provides a blueprint of the creative imagination.

Frye is a fantastic writer. Some of his statements are so fluent and persuasive that I almost forgot that I was studying Blake: after a certain point I was much more interested in what Frye's anatomizing intelligence could tell me about how poetry is made.

I don't know who I'd recommend this book too. Probably people with patience and a strong strain of intellectual masochism.

Steven Roosa says

Frye offers up a compelling interpretation of the entire corpus of Blake's work. If you love Blake, you will love Fearful Symmetry.

Mary Overton says

"There is only one false religion as there is only one true one; and it has two infallible marks. First, it postulates some kind of God who is unknown and mysterious because he is not inside us but somewhere else: where, only God knows. Second, it preaches submission, acceptance and unquestioning obedience. The sting is in the tail. Religion of this kind being invented only to buttress the *status quo*, it is always 'State Religion, which is the source of all Cruelty.'....

"In the unfallen world objects of perception are alive and intelligent; and a faint echo of the animation of that world survives in the animism of primitive religion. The nymphs, satyrs and fauns of Classical mythology are older and more authentic than the Olympian hierarchy. With the separation of existence and perception, however, the natural object became attached to the latter and its spirit or Genius to the former, so that gradually a belief in invisible deities grew up. The eleventh plate of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the paragraph beginning 'The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses,' traces this process with a clarity that might impress even a modern student of the subject. In the later poems Blake contrasts the 'fairies' of the more original belief with the 'heathen gods' who succeeded them. These gods were invariably selfish and cruel, as a God whose interests do not run counter to those of man cannot be invoked in support of a tyranny. Ovid shows them particularly interested in stifling and suppressing the

artists who attempted to rival them (i.e., create better gods), as in the stories of Marsyas and Arachne." pp. 60-61

"... art is neither inferior nor equal to morality and truth, but the synthesis of civilized life in which alone their general laws have any real meaning. Art is neither good nor bad, but a clairvoyant vision of the nature of both.... Art is neither true nor false, but a clairvoyant vision of the nature of both....

"....

"Now just as the poet is brought up to speak and write one particular language, so he is brought up in the traditions of one particular religion. And his function as a poet is to concentrate on the myths of that religion, and to recreate the original imaginative life of those myths by transforming them into unique works of art. The essential truth of a religion can be presented only in its essential form, which is that of imaginative vision....

"The artist *qua* artist neither doubts nor believes his religion: he sees what it means, and he knows how to illustrate it. His religion performs two great services for him. It provides him with a generally understood body of symbols, and it puts into his hands the visionary masterpieces on which it is founded: the Bible particularly, in the case of Christian poets. Many of these latter have petrified into sacred Scriptures supposed now to impart exclusive formulas of salvation rather than vision. It is the business of a poet, however, to see them as poems, and base his own poetry on them as such." pp. 117-119

P. Wilson says

This is quite a book, and one that you wade through the first time, and go back to a second. Frye's first major work of criticism, it rescued the poetry of William Blake from allegations of obscurity. As someone who reads, writes and enjoys paranormal literature, I was fascinated by Blake's idea that all languages and religions have their roots in a primordial myth. Rich stuff to play around with!

Peter says

This is a profound work of criticism, the subject being the life work of William Blake. It's very unusual in its poetic and visionary content. This is a very far out book, which altered my conceptions of Blake, as well as the Bible, and world history.

Zachary Martin says

An excellent book about Blake's theories and concerns. If your thinking about trying to make sense of his intense poetic visions, this is a good place to start.

Peter says

Among the three books of prose about poetry essential to me.
