Many critical approaches to literature may be practiced in the classroom: selections may be considered for their socio-political, moral, or psychological significance; their forms and structures may be analyzed; literary genres may be studied. Although each approach has a validity of its own, none by itself is capable of providing a concept of structures that the human mind uses when it creates the art form called “literature.” The result is that a student may leave school carrying only vague random impressions of particular poems, plays and stories he has encountered, remembering that he found some to enjoy, that he had to struggle to “appreciate” or “understand” others, and that he found many difficult to relate to the experience of his own life. Such a student does not have what is essential to education: a sense of continuity, of one step leading to another, of details fitting gradually into a larger design.

Literature can be the subject of a systematic and progressive study, rather than a succession of unrelated encounters. It is based on the conviction that literature is structure as well as content, and that the study of literature—what we call criticism—can follow an inductive pattern. The student can learn the principles of literary structure by encountering them in a systematic way, by relating every work of literature to all other literature he knows and to all his verbal experiences. Because he learns to generalize and relate, he develops a sense of literature that goes beyond individual works—however significant these may be as separate entities—to a realization of the even greater significance of literature as a totality.

To find the structural principles of literature, it is necessary to go to literature itself. Most literary criticism is commentary, which means that it explains the meaning of the work in other words or discusses its relationship to psychology, history, or sociology. Commentary almost never goes further than discussion of the content of literature. But literature is both content and form, and the content of literature is really inseparable from its form. Moreover, literature has a context of its own, and a realization of this can lead to a sense of its overall unity and coherence. As works of literature are studied in
the context of literature itself, certain recurrent patterns are discovered there, and something of the shape of literature as a totality begins to emerge.

The ability to make such connections brings with it an awareness of literature as an expression of man’s imaginative attempt to bring shape, order, and structure to human experience.

**THE STRUCTURES OF LITERATURE**

Literature grows out of itself: everything in literature is new and yet recognizably the same thing as the old, just as a baby is a new and a unique individual as well as an example of a human being, a descendant of a long line of human beings. A writer does not create out of nothing; whatever he has to say he says in a recognizably literary way. He employs certain conventions to express the typical and recurring. . . Every form in literature has a pedigree, we can trace its descent back to the earliest times.

Literature begins in myth, which is man’s imaginative effort to explain the natural world in human terms, his attempt to feel at one with an alien and impersonal universe. The earliest form of myth, for example is a metaphor in action, a story about a sun god or a fire god who is human in character and yet totally identified with some force in nature. Man’s impulse to identify his human mind with the world “outside” it is shown not only in myth but in later literature as well, where this impulse can take the form of metaphor and simile—identity and analogy. Simile and metaphor, primitive and archaic forms of thought, are still used by imaginative writers to associate the human and natural worlds. In the logic of literature, a logic that has nothing to do with verifiable proofs, two quite different things may still be like each other, even be each other.

Literature is imaginative thought; its fundamental concern has always been with identity, with seeing the unity in things rather than their distinctions. Confronted with a world that he felt “apart” from, man imaginative created a golden age or a garden of Eden where he and the universe were in complete harmony. This world or time was lost, but man seeks to lead our imagination back to it. It is this metaphorical quest for identity or unity that is the framework for all literature.
THE FOUR PLOTS

The four narrative plots form two opposed pairs: tragedy is opposed to comedy, romance is opposed to irony. But they are far from being mutually exclusive; comedy is close to irony and satire in a novel like *Vanity Fair*, and close to romance in a play like *The Tempest*; romances may be either comic or tragic; tragedy extends from high romance in *Romeo and Juliet* to bitter and ironic realism in *Death of a Salesman*. The four plots are also aspects of a central unifying quest-myth, and instead of contrasting pairs they should be considered as a circle of stories. Conflict, adventure, and triumph are the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the first story; catastrophe is the archetypal theme of tragedy, the second story; defeat, confusion and anarchy, and the loss of the heroic are the archetypal theme of satire and irony, the third story; the rise and recognition of a new, free society are the archetypal theme of comedy, the fourth story.

LITERATURE IN PERSPECTIVE

Every literature, as we have said, develops out of a mythology. Myths provide a society with a sense of its contract, of its abiding
relations with the gods, with the order of nature, and with itself. Literature begins in the oral society where history, religion, law and politics are all more or less united in a common mythology. At first the poet’s job was to remember and to teach. He told men who they were, where they came from, who their enemies were, and who their heroes were. He told what they owed the gods, what days were good for planting crops, and even how to conduct a battle. He also preserved for a society its vision of the future. As the writing culture developed, myths of concern, all the important beliefs of a society, split off and preserved themselves in laws and constitutions, in religion and philosophy. Works of imagination, although they continued to deal with the same issues, begin to be seen as separate, as “fiction” rather than fact. But the social function of literature descends from the function of its mythical parent: literature, like the myths, still provides mankind with and imaginative vision of the entire human situation.

As civilization develops, man becomes more preoccupied with human life and less conscious of his relation to non-human nature. If we examine literature historically, we see that it reflects this: as a civilization evolves, its literature seems to concern itself more and more with purely human problems and conflicts. The gods and heroes of the old myths eventually fade away and give place to people like ourselves. Yet, if we look at the figures of speech a writer uses, his images and symbols, and his title, we realize that, underneath all the complexity of modern life, the uneasy stare of an alien and threatening nature is still haunting us. We are still engaged in a metaphorical search for our sense of identity, for a way of unifying the outer world and the human one. Literature is still doing the same job that mythology did earlier, but in ways that relate to life as we now experience it.

We have said that as a society develops, its myths are “displaced,” made morally acceptable or rationally credible to new audiences. Where myths were concerned with gods and demons, later stories are about heroes rather than divinities, but a good bit of the power and magic of the gods still clings to them. Gradually, we get the stories that belong to the group we call “realism,” where the mythic elements have largely dropped out in favor of more plausible heroes and settings. Indeed, if we chart the course of Western literature historically, we can
trace this displacement of myth in terms of the diminishing power given to the hero or the principal character in a story.

Yet, as we said earlier, every writer is “conventional.” Whatever genre or form he chooses will show evidence, through its conventions, of a large number of literary relationships, affinities, and traditions. He will make use of the basic story shapes and patterns of imagery that are fundamental to the imagination. Literature as a whole is a direct descendant of mythology, although it deals with many areas, especially in “realism” and irony, that mythology barely touches. As a whole, literature, like mythology, offers us a panoramic view of the human situation. A consideration of the conventional structures and images of literature (archetypes), therefore, is the principal means we have of seeing how all of literature forms a related interlocking “family.”

THE USES OF IMAGINATION

The underlying principles that give structure to literature provide the framework for these books. Within the framework, the student is asked to see relationships among works, to note the similarities and differences among the elements they are composed of. He can make connections between the conventionally literary and the non-literary aspects of imaginative experience (comics, advertisements, television, films). Finally, he should be able to see individual words as part of “one story,” the story of man in all his innocence and experience.

When we look at literature in this way, we can avoid those subjective value-judgments that often take place in class. When we think only about the content of a particular literary work, we are apt to evaluate it in terms of our own anxieties, preferences, beliefs and experience. This invariably leads to an explanation of its “meaning,” because we are relating it directly to our own experience. Literary works should be treated for what they are: verbal art forms that have their own meaning, appeal and autonomy. We do not have to go outside of literature to test their validity. Literature is concerned with the hypothesis “Let this be” rather than “This is.” A valid response to literature requires that we accept its postulates; we do not ask, “Is there a yellow brick road?” but “Is it imaginatively conceivable that there could be?” The important consideration is not whether one dislikes or likes a work, but how we can understand it for what it is in the context of all the other literature we know, of “man’s story told to man.”

The direct experience of a work of literature will always have its impact on the
individual reader or listener: he may be bored, inspired, baffled, interested, or annoyed. But direct experience and personal evaluation do not by themselves build up a systematic structure of knowledge. . . . The structural principles of literature [must] be seen through a process of discovery. It will not work if the student is simply “told” that literature is an order of words with structure and unity. He will gain an awareness of the unity of literature only in discovering it for himself, with the teacher guiding him and helping him to apply all his imaginative and verbal experience, inside these books and out. With this awareness must come some sense of the power and the ultimate uses of the human imagination, which refuses to accept the experience of life without breaking it down, ordering it, transforming it, until the whole world of man’s experience is transcended in a vision of a free human society. Imagination creates the vision; only if he has this vision will man strive to make it a reality.

. . . Why [do] people place value on order? What good is it? Why do we praise people create order (a poet, a physician who cures a diseased body, a plumber who repairs a faulty pipe)?] Is it because they aid the community, because they bring society one small step closer to being as perfect, smooth-running, healthy, and happy as man imagines it was in a Golden Age? Why do people reject chaos or fear it? [Why do we condemn creators of chaos (a drug pusher, an assassin, a polluter)?] Is it because they are the conveyors of nightmare?

The imagination of man deals with both order and chaos. How? To get into this important subject, you might [think about] two ways in which our minds work. How can we link, for instance, and experience that happened today with one that happened months or years ago? How can we tell why a car has stalled, or what will happen when the barometer rises or falls? Reason, off course. But in addition to being able to reason, our minds can also create. We can imagine things that we are not. In our minds we can travel beyond time and space. We can amuse, frighten, inspire ourselves by our thoughts. We can use our imaginations.

While man uses his reason to analyze, compare, contrast, trace causes and effects, he can use his imagination to create what he does not find in the world around him. With imagination, he can discover connections among the elements of his experience, connections that reason alone often does not allow. Some of the first connections man ever made between the external world that he saw and the internal world that he felt can be called myths. With myths, man began his long career as imaginative creator.
...Creation stories describe some of man’s first imaginative attempts to come to terms with order and chaos. Creation was the filling of the Void, and telling creation stories also filled a void—the empty feeling of ignorance and fear that defined life itself for the first man. Just as “chaos” described the universe before it was set in order, so it describes the jumble of experiences and doubts and vague memories that inhabit our minds before imagination—that combination of reason and emotion—puts things in order. It is through this “order of words” created by the imagination that we can effectively communicate our thoughts and desires about who we are and what life is all about. The ordering power of the imagination gives public shapes to our private experiences. Those first public shapes were myths.

...Myths are stories about gods and their relationships to one another and to man, stories accepted and believed at one time by an entire society. All civilizations that we know of have preserved from their earliest times a body of myths. Although these stories may go back as far as four thousand years, they are not the products of ignorant minds. Myths are not primitive science. They are the outpouring of the imagination, functioning in a universal and elemental way. Though we have (primarily through reason) immeasurably increased our control over the natural world, our imaginations have not changed their function or method: our earliest stories continue to be told and retold. They may wear different “costumes” as they move from age to age, but they have not fundamentally changed.

Originally, myths were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Each “poet” would be able to tell those stories his people considered central to their society, stories he had learned from other story tellers, and to that number he might add new narratives. In the course of time, a body of interrelated myths grew up into what we call a mythology. Eventually, mythology came to be written down. Almost all the great writers in the history of Greek literature, beginning with Homer (9th century B.C.), contributed to the oral myths a form or shape which can be called literary. In the 2nd century B.C., when Greece fell under Roman rule, the principal Roman writers continued to work with the Greek myths. The
individual stories were finally collected into one whole by Ovid, a Roman writing at the beginning of the Christian era. All later retellers of the Greek myths, right up to our own time, have based many of their stories on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

Perhaps the greatest contribution that Ovid made to mythology was his organization of the Greek myths into a complete body of stories intended to lay before the reader, in the proper order, the mythical story of the human race from the creation of man down to his own day. If we look at the body of Greek myths in this way, we see that they begin with the stories about the gods alone. In the earliest stories, such as “The Beginning of Things,” we can see that the gods are all associated, in various ways, with some aspect of the natural world. They are identified with the sun and the moon, earth, sky, ocean, woods, thunder, fire, wind, and so on. These creatures of the imagination are endowed with the superhuman power and energy that early man observed in the awesome features of the natural world. Just as the forces of nature confronted man with grandeur and terror, so these immortal beings, in man’s stories, possess a power beyond his control. Yet, at the same time, these forces are humanized, fashioned in the image of man.

They are all related by birth; they form a family. And in their social relationships they behave very much as men and women behave. They are jealous and loving, possessive and generous, crafty and gullible, vindictive and forgiving. By identifying the powers of the universe as divinities with human characteristics, the imagination gave a human shape to the world, and gave man a means of understanding and communicating with its forces.

“A human order,” then is . . . the primary thrust of all imaginative literature. The ideal human order is generally called the Golden Age, a perfect world of peace and harmony. [You know what is meant by a “happy ending” Elements of a “happy ending” to a story are similar to] the images of the Golden Age: love, peace, reconciliation, harmony of man with nature, spring or summer images, abundance, and so on.

{The simple single story of all literature is the possession of, the loss of, and the quest to regain the ideal world. If [you can] grasp this concept, [you] will see into the heart of literature.}

Man the mythmaker, then, is a seeker not only of order but of human order—to humanize the universe, to universalize the truly human.

Sections in [ ] are edited heavily, but retain original meaning.