

OEDIPUS: TIME AND STRUCTURE IN NARRATIVE FORM

- *Terence S. Turner University of Chicago*

I. Introduction

The story of Oedipus is among the most prominent and persistent tales in the lore of Western Civilization, from the earliest Greek times to Freud and Cocteau. Most recently, in the hands of Levi-Strauss and Leach, the Oedipus story has become the prototype of the structuralist analysis of myth and other forms of oral narrative. The analysis of the tale presented in this paper is intended as a partial reformulation and extension of the structuralist approach. Its major difference from earlier structuralist treatments of myth is that it lays great emphasis on the temporal structure of the narrative as well as the logical structure of relations between its component elements. On the basis of a re-examination of the nature and significance of narrative structure, a set of general propositions concerning the functions of narrative forms as cultural models is proposed. A reanalysis of the tale of Oedipus is offered as an illustration of this set of propositions.

II. Levi-Strauss' Analysis of the Oedipus Story in Relation to the "Structural Study of Myth"

Before going on to my own analysis, I should like briefly to review Levi-Strauss' treatment of the Oedipus story and to raise certain questions with regard to it. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that Levi-Strauss' study of the tale of Oedipus represents only his first experiment in myth analysis. It would be ludicrous to use it as an example of Levi-Strauss' total oeuvre or current position in the field of myth analysis. It nevertheless remains true that "The Structural Study of Myth," in which the Oedipus analysis appeared, has attracted far wider attention in English speaking countries than any of Levi-Strauss' other works on myth, which have for the most part remained untranslated, at least until the last few years. Partly for this reason, and partly because in it Levi-Strauss dealt with certain general problems of theory and method which he has not explicitly treated since, this article, and the Oedipus analysis which has been taken as its chef d'oeuvre, have been widely received as definitive formulations of Levi-Strauss' (or at any rate the "structuralist") position. A careful re-examination of this pioneering study may therefore have considerable value in the context of the current discussion of "structuralism." Levi-Strauss prefaces his analysis of the tale of Oedipus with a brilliant statement of the essential characteristics of myth, in which he makes three basic points. First, the meaning of myth