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**STRUCTURALISM**

According to Sable Brown, structuralism is a method of interpreting social phenomena in the context of a system of signs whose significance lies solely in the interrelationships among them. Structuralism was initiated in the linguistics of Saussure and Chomsky, and it was applied to other disciplines by Levi-Strauss, Piaget, Althusser, Lacan, Roland Barths, Foucault, and others. Most structuralists share a conviction that individual human beings’ function solely as elements of the (often hidden) social networks to which they belong. It is a methodological principle that human culture is made up of systems in which a change in any element produces changes in the others; in general, cultural systems are regarded as structured on the model of language. Specifically, literary structuralism seeks to explain the structures underlying literary texts either in terms of a grammar modelled on that of language or in terms of Saussure’s principle that the meaning of each word depends on its place in the total system of language.

In literary studies, structuralism is concerned with an analysis of texts based on some linguistic principles. It is an intellectual movement that made significant contributions not only to literary criticism but also to philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and history. Structuralist literary critics, such as Roland Barthes, read texts as an **interrelated system of signs** that refer to one another rather than to an external “meaning” that is fixed, either by the author or reader. Structuralist literary theory draws on the work of the Russian formalists, as well as the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and C. S. Peirce. According to Lois Tyson (2006), in literature, one is not engaged in structuralist activity if one describes the structure of a short story to interpret what the work means or evaluate, whether or not it is good literature. However, one is engaged in structuralist activity if one examines the structure of many short stories to discover the underlying principles that govern their composition. For example, principles of narrative progression (the order in which plot events occur) or of characterization (the functions each character performs in relation to the narrative as a whole). You are also engaged in structuralist activity if you describe the structure of a single literary work to discover how its composition demonstrates the underlying principles of a given structural system. In other words, structuralists are not interested in individual buildings or individual literary works (or individual phenomena of any kind) except in terms of what those individual items can tell us about the structures that underlie and organise all items of that kind. This is because structuralism sees itself as a human science whose effort is to understand, in a systematic way, the fundamental structures that underlie all human experience and, therefore, all human behaviour and production. Structuralism should not be thought of as a field of study. Rather, it is a method of systematising human experience that is used in many different fields of study: for example, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and literary studies.

**THE EMERGENCE OF STRUCTURALISM**

By the 1950s and 1960s, *New Criticism* had become the dominant theoretical approach that guided teaching and interpretation. Although structuralism shared some of the methods of *New Criticism* — notably an emphasis on close reading and attention to the particularities of the text — it was diametrically opposed to it in fundamental ways and took the teaching and interpretation of literature in an entirely new direction. Structuralism is a mid-20th century critical movement based on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the cultural theories of Claude Levi-Straus. Ferdinand de Saussure contends that language is a self-contained system of signs, while Levi-Straus holds that cultures, like languages, could be viewed as systems of signs and could be analysed in terms of the structural relations among their elements. Literary structuralism views literary texts as systems of interlocking signs and seeks in a scientific way the rules and codes that govern the form and content of all literature. In *Structuralist Anthropology* (1972), Levi-Strauss holds that human activity and its products, including religion, social conventions, ritual, art and philosophy, are artificial constructions and not natural. They are all elements of a structure. They derive their meanings not from the world of reality, but from their relationship to each other within a sign system which sustains our perception of reality. The world, like language, is made up of signs.

The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, postulates that language is a self-contained system or signs which did not have any logical relation with what it refers to in material or metaphysical planes. He made a distinction between the signifier and the thing signified. In his *Course de Linguistik* (translated *Course in General Linguistics*) (1916), Saussure holds that language is a structured social system that was coherent, orderly, and susceptible to understanding and explanation as a whole. He goes on to add that language could be viewed *synchronically,* that is, as it exists at any time, or *diachronically,* that is, as it changes in the course of time. He also makes use of two significant terms, *parole,* by which he means the speech of the individual person, and *langue,* the complete or collective language (such as Yoruba or English) as it is used at any particular time. According to Saussure, the proper object of linguistic study is not the individual utterance (parole), but language, the distinct system of signs. In his conception, language is a system of contrasts, distinctions and ultimately opposition since the elements of language never exist in isolation, but always in relation to one another. This became the basis of his synchronic view or language.

**PRINCIPLES AND POSTULATIONS OF STRUCTURALIST CRITICISM**

The structuralist literary theory is intimately linked with structural linguistics, drawing a parallel between the study of literature and that of language. The notions of *sign, system, part-whole* relationship became dominant features of the artistic and criticism of literature. In this way, the basic tenets of structural linguistics were fully appropriated into literary analysis by scholars who were attracted by Saussure's discoveries. Seen from the doctrine of structuralism, literature, like language, is comprehended as a system governed by specific structural laws. A piece of literature is held to be a functional structure whose individual elements can only be comprehended in their relation to the whole. Literary structuralism views literary texts as systems of interlocking signs, and signs are language based.

Structuralist analysis seeks to make explicit, in a scientific way, the logic that governs the form and content of all literatures. Structuralist critical theory is based on Saussurean language systems. Literature is seen as a sub-system of signs which derives its livelihood from the ever-complete large system of (language) signs. Literature is just one way in which language is used; it is the equivalent of *parole* within the *langue.* Indeed, every manifestation of social activities be it dress-making smoking, dancing, love making, history, sociology, or cooking, constitutes languages. Early in the 20th century, Saussure taught three innovative courses in linguistics. His students pooled their notes and published a reconstruction of the courses called *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) as earlier mentioned. This work is the basis of Saussure's fame and provides the theoretical under-pinning of both structuralism and post-structuralism. Saussure's key points about the nature of language broke new ground for studying literature.

First, a language is a complete, self-contained system and deserves to be studied as such. Before Saussure, linguists investigated the history of languages (how languages evolved and changed through time) and the differences among languages. For this kind of study, Saussure coined the word *diachronic* (literally "through time"). Saussure argued that, instead of history of a language, linguists should also study how it functions in the present, how its parts interrelate to make up a whole system of communication. This kind of study Saussure called *synchronic* ("at the same time"). Second, Saussure claimed that a language is a system of signs. He defined a *sign* as consisting of a sound plus the thing the sound represents. He called the sound the *signifier* and the thing represented the *signified.* Third, Saussure said that the sounds that make up a language system are arbitrary. Any sound, it does not matter which one, could represent a given thing. The sound for the concept "tree" varies from language to language, yet it is conventional. Fourth, any given language is self-contained. The signs that make up a language have no meaning outside the system of that language. Finally, Saussure distinguished between the whole system, which he called *langue* (French for "language"), and one person's use of the system, which he called *parole* (French for "word" or "speech"). *Langue* consists of everything that makes the system work, such as words, syntax, and inflections. *Parole* consists of these same elements but with variations from user to user. Each speaker of a language uses the same system but does so in a slightly different way.

In the 1930s and 1940s, literary critics in Europe began applying Saussure's ideas and methods to the study of literature. This application took two different but often merging paths: literary criticism and cultural criticism. A term that describes both kinds of criticism is semiotics, the systematic study of signs. Structuralist literary critics attempt to show that literature is a form of language or that it functions like language. These critics see the individual work of literature as like parole, and literary genres or literature in general as similar to langue. Just as linguists study instances of parole to understand langue, literary critics study works of literature to understand the system of signs that make up a genre or literature as a whole.

One kind of structuralist literary criticism is **stylistics**, the study of the linguistic form of texts. Stylistics can deal with both prose and poetry, but has dealt mainly with poetry, particularly with the qualities of language that distinguish poetry from prose. Some stylistic critics claim that it is only qualities of language that distinguish poetry from prose. By analysing individual poems, these critics attempt to identify those qualities. Structuralists who study entire cultures attempt to understand a culture's sign systems. The most prominent practitioner of this kind of criticism, as we noted earlier, is the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss claims that a culture is bound together by systems of signs, and that these systems are like language. He uses Saussurean linguistics as a way of describing the "grammar" of these systems. All aspects of a culture - technology, religion, tools, industry, food, ornaments, and rituals - form sign systems. The people of the culture are unaware of these systems, thus, the structural anthropologist's task is to bring them to light. Levi-Strauss is perhaps best known for his study of myth. He examines multiple versions of individual myths to isolate their essential structural units. Although Levi-Strauss applies his theories to the study of local cultures, other critics, like the Frenchman Roland Barthes, use Levi-Strauss's approach to "psychoanalyse" modern society. They look for the unconscious sign systems that underlie all aspects They look for the unconscious sign systems that underlie all aspects of Western culture, including food, furniture, cars, buildings, clothing fashions, business, advertising, and popular entertainment.

Structuralist analysis of culture and literature often merge because literature can be considered an artefact of culture. Literature is a system of signs that can be studied for itself and for its place in a given culture. As a result, structuralist critics often shy away from complex and classic works and focus instead on popular literature. Structuralist critics are also usually more interested in fitting a work within a culture or a tradition than in understanding the work itself.

Because of the close affinity between Formalism and Structuralism, many of the formalist critics made significant contributions to the theories of fiction and narrative. Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky, AJ. Grehmas and even the linguist Noam Chomsky are foremost structuralists. The formalists, Victor Shklovsky and Vladimir Prop, made extensive comments on Russian folktales and the nature of narrative structure.

In *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), Propp deals with ways in which social and behavioural structures influence and determine fictional narrative. Propp devises a system of folktale based on the two concepts of the roles filled by the characters and the functions that they perform in the plot. He demonstrates that there is a predictable and finite number of permutations of the rule-function relation. This is comparable to Jakobson's division between the syntagmatic axis of language and its paradigmatic axis.

**APPLYING STRUCTURALIST CRITICISM TO LITERARY WORKS**

Structuralism has very important implications. After all, literature is a verbal art: it is composed of language. So, its relation to the ‘master’ structure, language, is very direct. In addition, structuralists believe that the structuring mechanisms of the human mind are the means by which we make sense out of chaos, and literature is a fundamental means by which human beings explain the world to themselves, that is, make sense out of chaos. Thus, there seems to be a rather powerful parallel between literature as a field of study and structuralism as a method of analysis. Literary structuralism attempts to define, explain, and analyse literature by concentrating on signs in a given text. This means that there is only a thin line of demarcation between structuralism and semiotics – the science of signs. According to Saussure quoted in Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* (1996), language is:

A system of signs, which was to be studied ‘synchronically’ – that is to say as a complete system at a given point of time – rather than ‘diachronically’ in its historical development. Each sign was to be seen as being made up of a ‘signifier’ (second image, or its graphic equivalent) and a ‘signified’ (the concept of meaning).

Literary structuralism is an attempt to apply the above linguistic paradigm to the study of literature. The term connotes structures and is more concerned with the way elements relate with one another in a literary production. The focus of this approach is to analyse deep structures in a given literary text. It sees issues in such a text in relation to the signs employed by a writer. Thus, “structuralism focuses on the text as an independent aesthetic object and also tends to detach literature from history and social and political implications” (Jerome Beaty, 2002).

Structuralists do not try to determine whether a literary text constitutes great literature. Their focus is on the structural systems that underlie and generate literary meaning. For students of literature, structuralism has very important implications. After all, literature is a verbal art: it is composed of language. Hence its relation to the “master” structure, language, is very direct. In addition, structuralists believe that the structuring mechanisms of the human mind are how we make sense out of chaos, and literature is a fundamental means by which human beings explain the world to themselves, that is, make sense out of chaos. Thus, there seems to be a rather powerful parallel between literature as a field of study and structuralism as a method of analysis.

Furthermore, structuralist criticism deals mainly with narratives. This focus is not as narrow as it may seem at first glance; if we remember that narrative includes a long history and broad range of texts, from the simple myths and folk tales of the ancient oral tradition to the complex melange of written forms found in the postmodern novel. In addition, most drama, and a good deal of poetry, though not classified as narrative, nevertheless have a narrative dimension in that they tell a story of some sort. In any event, narratives provide fertile ground for structuralist criticism because, despite their range of forms, narratives share certain structural features, such as plot, setting, and character. It is important, however, to bear in mind that structuralism does not attempt to interpret what individual texts mean or even whether a given text is good literature. Issues of interpretation and literary quality are in the domain of surface phenomena, the domain of *parole*. Structuralism seeks instead the *langue* of literary texts, the structure that allows texts to make meaning, often referred to as a *grammar* because it governs the rules by which fundamental literary elements are identified (for example, the hero, the damsel in distress, and the villain) and combined (for example, the hero tries to save the damsel in distress from the villain).

In general, structuralism is not interested in what a text means, but in *how* a text means what it means. After all, structuralism believes that the structures we perceive in literature, as in everything else, are projections of the structures of human consciousness. The final goal of structuralism is to understand the underlying structure of human experience, which exists at the level of *langue*, whether we are examining the structures of literature or speculating on the relationship between the structures of literature and the structures of human consciousness.

**CRITIQUE OF STRUCTURALISM**

Despite being laudable and science-based, one of the shortcomings of structuralism is that literature transcends mere analysis of signs. Literature would not achieve its purpose of expressing those fundamental and socio-cultural human desires that have passed through history if all it preoccupies itself with is an analysis of signs.

According to Eagleton (1996), structuralism, as the term suggests, is concerned with structures, and more particularly with examining the general laws by which they work. Literary structuralism flourished in the 1960s as an attempt to apply to literature the methods and insights of the founder of modern structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure viewed language as a system of signs, which was to be studied 'synchronically'; that is to say, studied as a complete system at a given point in time, rather than 'diachronically', in its historical development. Each sign is to be seen as being made up of a 'signifier' (a sound-image, or its graphic equivalent), and a 'signified' (the concept or meaning). For instance, the three black marks *c* - *a* – *t* constitute a signifier which evokes the signified 'cat' in an English mind. The relation between signifier and signified is an arbitrary one: there is no inherent reason why these three marks should mean 'cat', other than cultural and historical convention. Each sign in the system has meaning only by virtue of its difference from the others. 'Cat' has meaning not 'in itself', but because it is not 'cap' or 'cad' or 'bat'. It does not matter how the signifier alters, as long as it preserves its difference from all the other signifiers; you can pronounce it in many different accents as long as this difference is maintained. 'In the linguistic system,' says Saussure, 'there are only differences': meaning is not mysteriously immanent in a sign, but it is functional, the result of its difference from other signs. Finally, Saussure believes that linguistics would get into a hopeless mess if it concerns itself with actual speech or *parole* as he calls it. He is not interested in investigating what people actually say; he is concerned with the objective structure of signs which made their speech possible in the first place, and this he called *langue.* Neither was Saussure concerned with the real objects which people speak about: to study language effectively, the referents of the signs, the things they denote, have to be placed in brackets.

Structuralism in general is an attempt to apply linguistic theory to the study of literature. As Eagleton notes, you can view a myth, wrestling match, system of tribal kinship, restaurant menu or oil painting as a system of signs and a structuralist analysis will try to isolate the underlying set of laws by which these signs are combined into meanings. It will largely ignore what the signs actually 'say', and concentrate instead on their internal relations to one another. Structuralism, as Fredric Jameson puts it, is an attempt “to rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics.”