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Structuralism

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Structuralism

From: *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*

Structuralism believes that the world is organized as structures. Structures are forms made up of units that are arranged in a specific order. These units follow particular rules in the way they are organized or related to each other. literature' is a system, or structure, whose constituent parts include the poem, the essay, the novel and drama. In this structure called literature each form (or unit) generates meanings in particular ways. Structuralism is interested in the relationship between the elements of a structure that results in meaning. Since it believes that meaning is the effect of the coming together of elements, it follows that if we understand the rules governing the relationship between elements, we can decipher the processes of meaning-production. Structuralism is the study of structures of texts— film, novel, drama, poem, politics, sports—with specific attention to the rules, or grammar, of the elements.

Structuralism emerged as the most rigorous form of critical analysis in the 1950s. However, its origins lay further back, in the work of the early twentieth century linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure makes three significant moves in his analysis of language. First of all, he divides language into two main components.

- 1- The set of rules by which we combine words into sentences, use certain words in certain ways, rules which are rarely altered and which all users of a language follow. This he termed *langue*.
- 2- Everyday speech where we use words in particular contexts. This he called *parole*.

The three principles regarding language that Saussure puts forward:

- i. Arbitrariness: Words have no real connection to their meanings or the things they describe. The connections are established by convention.
- ii. Relationality: Words make sense to us, or have 'value' (Saussure's term) for us in their relationality: in their difference from other words. Words are therefore related to each other in the form of difference and have no absolute value of their own. As we have seen above, every word is opposed to, different from another word, and meaning emerges in this difference.
- iii. Systematicity: The structure of language, or the system, ensures that we recognize difference.

Structuralism and Narrative Theory

Narrative is an extraordinarily complex term in literary and critical theory. It is used interchangeably with story, form, plot and even structure. Paul Cobley provides a definition when he states: 'narrative is a particular form of representation implementing signs' (2001: 3). Thus, narrative is a system of signs in a particular sequence or order. For purposes of literary and cultural analysis, we can define narrative as:

- 1- The act of representation using signs in particular sequences so that we construct specific notions of reality, self and the world.
- 2- The construction and interpretation of the world through the use of words, sounds, figures, gestures and relations.
- 3- Intrinsically linked to language (since, as we have already noted, sounds, words.

The study of narrative is called narratology, a term often used interchangeably with 'poetics. A term that is often used to describe the language of narrative, and has come to occupy centre stage in almost every theory today is 'discourse.' Discourse traditionally meant spoken or written presentation. It is what we read or listen to. In the case of structuralism this is the sense in which 'discourse' is used.

Structural Semiotic

One of the earliest practitioners of structuralist narratology was A. J. Greimas, whose work in Structural Semantics built upon Saussure's idea of binary oppositions to develop what has been called structural semiotics. He suggested that there are semantic units that work in opposition. He termed these 'semes', and argued that meaning emerges in the contrast between semes. Some common semes would be:

light-dark
up-down
male-female

Greimas evolved a set of six actants, that is, a set of 'semes' or binary oppositions that provide the grammar and rules for all narratives as follows:

Subject/Object

Sender/Receiver

Helper/Opponent

Tzvetan Todorov, like Greimas, builds on the notion that there is a definite grammar to all texts. Todorov isolates three specific components of texts:

- semantic: which would be the form
- syntactic: which would be the arrangement of structural units
- verbal: words and phrases through which the story is

Todorov's interest lies mainly in the syntactic arrangement of units within a narrative. He identifies two key structural components of all texts: propositions and sequence. Propositions are the basic actions in a narrative. propositions have to be arranged in a sequence to generate a story. There can be many sequences in a text. Propositions can be arranged in any of the three sequences:

- 1 .Temporal: where there is a sequence in time (this happened and then this happened).
- 2 .Logical: where there is a cause–effect sequence (this happened and therefore this happened).
- 3 .Spatial: where the plot has many sub-divisions (this happened meanwhile this other thing also happened).

Roland Barthes and His Codes

Barthes is an interesting figure in literary theory because he is located at the intersection of structuralism and poststructuralism. His early work is inspired by structuralist ideas and later works on the ‘death of the author’ gesture at his post-structuralist sympathies. Barthes in his *The Structural Analysis of Narrative* (1977) and *S/Z* (1970) developed a detailed model of narrative. Like the structuralists, Barthes believed that one can break up a narrative into its constituent elements and discover how they combine with each other. Barthes suggests that units of meanings are divided into five main groups, all working in combination in a narrative. That is, the five groups, or codes as he called them, are the narrative's modes of organizing the units so that meaning is generated. these codes are:

- 1- Proairetic Code: This is the most visible aspect of a narrative, and refers to the sequence in which the events of a story unfold. It is often a temporal sequence: This happened and then this happened. This code governs our expectations of a narrative: If this happened, then this must certainly happen.
- 2- Hermeneutic Code: This is the code that informs our interpretation and the questions we ask of the narrative: What happened? How? Why? By Whom?
- 3- Cultural Code: This is the code that narratives assume we all share. Cultural codes are those elements of common knowledge that we share as a community and therefore do not require a glossary. This can be medical, literary or even symbolic knowledge.
- 4- Semic Code: This is the code that draws upon, like in the cultural code, a common set of stereotypes that are self-descriptive and self-evident. When, for example, we see a man in white clothes and wearing a Gandhi cap, we know immediately that he is a politician. The stereotype is well in place for all readers and, therefore, does not require explanation. On the other hand, like the cultural code, semic codes require explanations to a person coming from outside the community.
- 5- Symbolic Code: This is very similar to the semic code. It extends beyond the immediate icon or stereotype to refer to something larger. For example, a horror film thrives on the images of darkness.

Gerald Gennett's Narratives and Their Intertexts

Genette's work on narrative discourse has spread across many areas. His contributions include studies of narrative voice, levels of narration, and, more interestingly, on what he calls 'paratexts'. His book, *Paratexts* (1997) is an excellent analysis of such 'odd' narratives and narrative devices. Intertextuality, it must be remembered, is a system of relationships that link texts to other texts or parts of the same text. Genette proposed the term transtextuality as a more wide-ranging one, and isolated five main types of intertextuality:

- **Paratexts** are epigraphs, prefaces, forewords, epilogues, addresses to the reader, acknowledgements, footnotes, drafts, illustrations that are somehow connected to the main narrative.
- **Intertextuality** refers to the allusions, references to other works, echoes, quotes and citations, and even plagiarized sections of a work.
- **Architextuality** is the relationship of a text to other texts in the same genre. For example, the connection between a twentieth-century satirical poem by W. H. Auden has an architextual connection with the satires of Alexander Pope.
- **Metatextuality** is the relationship between a text and the critical commentaries, biographical commentaries and other references on the main text.
- **Hypertextuality** resembles metatextuality in that it refers to texts that come later or after the main or original text. The original text is hypotext and the later text is hypertext. Thus, parodies, spoofs, adaptations are linked to the original text by hypotextuality. The examples of this would be, *Frankenstein According to Spike Milligan*, a hypertext, a spoof on Mary Shelley's hypotext *Frankenstein*. Edward Bond's *Lear* is an adaptation of, and a hypertext to, Shakespeare's play.