

Lecture 17

Structuralism: Claude Lévi-Strauss

Welcome back all of you to this lecture series on literary theory. Today we are going to continue with our discussion on structuralism. In our previous lecture, we had focused on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure whose interpretation of how language works is fundamental to the literary theory of structuralism. However, as we had discussed in our previous meeting, Saussure's work is entirely a commentary on language and by itself does not make apparent how it can be used to understand and theorise literary narratives. For this, we have to look at the work of theorists who utilized Saussure's arguments to construct a framework of literary theory. And in today's lecture, we are going to do just that by focusing on the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

Now here it is important to note that Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was a Belgium-born French intellectual, was actually an anthropologist by profession. He was born in 1908 and died in 2009, and during this long life which spanned over more than a century, he taught both in France as well as in America. Indeed, it was in America that he met Roman Jakobson who influenced his thinking and made him turn towards structuralism as a tool for analyzing human society. Both Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss had fled continental Europe at the wake of the second world war and America provided for them a safe haven just like it provided to so many persecuted intellectuals during the second half of the twentieth century. Which is why the America of the mid-twentieth century proved to be a wonderful melting pot of ideas and an intellectual powerhouse. Anyway, with the end of the second world war, Lévi-Strauss was able to return to France where he became a celebrity anthropologist especially after his publication of his memoir *Tristes Tropiques* which

documented among other things his travels in the Amazon rainforest to produce an anthropological study of the native tribes there.

But in spite of being primarily an anthropologist, he is important from our perspective as students of literary theory because of two reasons. The first is that he expanded the insights of Ferdinand de Saussure on language and gave it a wider socio-cultural relevance, and the second is that he used Saussure's insights to produce structuralist analyses of myths which remain classic examples of how structuralist principles can be applied to decode narrative structures. Indeed, in today's lecture, we are going to discuss one such classic examples which is his analysis of the Oedipus myth.

One of the most interesting and far-reaching arguments forwarded by Lévi-Strauss was that the socio-cultural existence of human beings is underlined and supported by a deep-seated grammar. Here Lévi-Strauss was borrowing from Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*. As discussed in our previous lecture, Saussure argued that our concrete language uses are underlined by a set of rules and regulations just like the sequence of moves in a particular chess game are underlined by a set of rules that are above and beyond the moves made by any individual player at any given point in time. Saussure identified the underlying set of rules guiding a particular language structure as *langue* and concrete language uses guided by those underlying structural rules as *parole*. According to Lévi-Strauss, this *langue parole* distinction can be extended beyond language to encompass human socio-cultural existence in general. All major aspects of human socio-cultural life are guided by underlying sets of regulation which structures human existence just like *langue* structures *parole*. Lévi-Strauss exemplifies this by showing how the kinship status that locates us within our society are guided by a set of regulations which might be identified as a kind of underlying social grammar.

But what is more important from our perspective is Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth, which he argues is structured by the same underlying set of rules that otherwise govern human social relationships. According to Lévi-Strauss, myths are the "language" which helps humans or at least those that he identifies as "primitive men" to articulate various aspects of his existence – and by providing him with this possibility of articulation, helps him negotiate his being in the world. In other words, the underlying grammar that informs the myths also structures the worldview of human beings and the ways in which they conceptualise their position and their role within their surrounding environment. Thus, as Terence Hawkes points out in his book *Structuralism and Semiotics*:

Lévi-Strauss's concern is ultimately with the extent to which the structures of myths prove actually formative as well as reflective of men's minds: [...]. And so his aim, he says, is not to show how men think in myths, but 'how myths think in men, unbeknown to them'.

By the way, this book that I have just quoted from, which is Terence Hawkes' *Structuralism and Semiotics*, is a wonderfully well written and concise account of Structuralist theory, and I would highly recommend this book to all of you who want to understand structuralism in more details. Anyway, coming back to the topic of our discussion, the way myths structure the human worldview cannot be understood by merely listening to individual narrations of particular myths. They are, what Saussure would call, paroles. To understand the structuring aspect of myths we will need to go to the deeper level of rules which govern these individual narrations – or in other words to the mythic langue. And Lévi-Strauss shows us the way to approach this level of deep grammar through his analysis of the Oedipus myth in his essay "The Structural Study of Myth".

To explore Lévi-Strauss's structural study, we need to begin with a telling of the myth and in this case, it will be my individual version among the many versions available. But like parables, the distinction shared by these individual narrations are hardly significant here because our effort is to go down to the level of langue which is common to all of these versions. Those of you who are familiar with the Oedipus myth, kindly bear with me for a few minutes as I present the narrative which will help us understand not only Lévi-Strauss's structuralist intervention but also some of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory which we will explore in our future lectures.

Oedipus myth

The story starts with Cadmos whose sister Europa was abducted by Zeus. Distraught over the loss of his daughter, Cadmos's father sent him along with his brothers to look for Europa. The whole family scattered to different places but none of the brothers could find Europa.

Incidentally, when Cadmos, during his own search for Europa reached Delphi, he was told by the oracle there to leave the futile search and to found a new city. Cadmos heeding to this advice sent his men to bring some pure water so that he could perform a ritual of sacrificing a cow to goddess Athena and start building a new city. But his men in their search for water were, however, all killed by a dragon.

When his men did not return, Cadmos went in search of them and subsequently confronted the dragon. In a battle, Cadmos was able to kill the dragon and at the suggestion of the goddess Athena, he sowed the teeth of the dragon in the ground. As a consequence of this action, a number of warrior men called the Spartoi raised themselves from the ground and started battling with each other. After much fighting, only five of the Spartoi were left who subjected themselves to Cadmos, and Cadmos with their help founded the city of Thebes.

It was in this family of Cadmos that Oedipus was born. Oedipus's grandfather Labdacos was one of the grandsons of Cadmos and his name signifies "lame". Labdacos's son was named Laios which means left-sided, and as we shall see these meanings of the proper names will be significant in Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the myth. Now Laios married Jacosta and in due course became the king of Thebes. King Laios was, however, warned by an oracle that his own son would kill him. To save himself from this fate he pinned together the feet of his newborn son and asked a shepherd to kill the baby by exposing it to the elements outside the city. The shepherd, however, rather than killing the child gave it to a friend who adopted the child as his son and gave him the name of Oedipus which literally means swollen foot. When Oedipus was a young man he learnt from the Oracle of Delphi that he would kill his own father and marry his mother. Horrified by this news he fled from the home of his adoptive parents whom he believed to be his biological father and mother, and made way for Thebes. On the way, he ran into the chariot being driven by Laios himself, and after an altercation Oedipus killed him. When he arrived at Thebes, he saw that a sphinx was killing the inhabitants of the city. Oedipus got rid of the Sphinx and as the savior of Thebes was made its king, and as the king, he eventually married the widowed queen Jacosta without knowing that she was his mother.

This fact was however later revealed and this led to the expulsion of Oedipus from Thebes. His place on the throne was taken up by the two sons, Eteocles and Polynices whom he had fathered with Jacosta. The brothers however soon fell apart and Eteocles ended up killing Polynices. Now after his death, it was decreed by the king of Thebes that Polynices body would be denied burial and anyone who would bury him would, in turn, be buried alive by royal decree. However, despite this injunction, Polynices's sister Antigone buried the body of his brother and then later committed suicide herself to escape the fate of being buried alive.

Mythemes

Now the way Lévi-Strauss analyses this mythic narrative or parole is to first segregate it to the level of “mythemes”. So what are “mythemes”? Mythemes are the constituent units of a myth. So as far as a mythic structure is concerned, they are the equivalents of the word sounds which are the constituent units of a language structure. And just like word-sounds, mythemes too gain their meaning from the oppositional relationship that they share with each other. So Lévi-Strauss first reduces the Oedipus myth to the level of individual mythemes which are its constituent building blocks and then arranges them in this unique pattern of rows and columns:

[SLIDE]

Column 1

Cadmos seeks
his sister
Europa ravished
by Zeus

Column 2

The Spartoi
kill one
another

Oedipus kills
his father,

Oedipus
marries his
mother,
Jocasta

Antigone

Column 3

Cadmos kills
the dragon

Oedipus kills
the Sphinx

Column 4

Labdacos (Laios'
father) = *lame* (?)
Laios
Laios (Oedipus'
father) = *leftsided*
(?)

Oedipus = *swollen*
foot
(?)

Eteocles kills
his brother,
Polynices

buries her
brother,
Polynices,
despite
prohibition

So let us try and understand this chart. First of all, all the units that you see listed in this chart are individual mythemes. So, for instance, Cadmos seeking his sister Europa is one mytheme, Cadmos killing the dragon is another mytheme, the Spartoi killing one another is another mytheme and so on and so forth. Now Lévi-Strauss says that if you read the mythemes horizontally, by disregarding their division in columns you will get the narration of the myth, which I have just presented to you. However, in order to understand the structuring of this myth, you will need to read it vertically and pay attention to the columns. Indeed, if you do that you will see that the first two columns in the left are in an oppositional relationship to each other. And similarly, the last two columns in the right are in an oppositional relationship with each other. We will come to the specificities of these oppositional relationships in a moment, but what I would like to point here is that this is the typical way in which a structuralist critic engages with a narrative. She first segregates the narrative into constituent building blocks and then tries to figure out the oppositional relationship that exists between them. So typically a structuralist criticism would produce such neat rows of binary opposites for their analysis as you can see in this slide.

But now let's come back to Lévi-Strauss's chart again. If you focus on the two left-most columns, that is column 1 and column 2, you will see that they have something or the other to do with family. But whereas in column 1 we see an overrating of family relations, in column 2 we see its exact opposite, that is an underrating of family relations. But then what do you I mean by

overrating and underrating? So if you see the mythemes arranged in column 1 you will see that they all speak about excessively intimate blood relations. This is expressed in the excessive grief Cadmos and his family feels for Europa, or the incestuous relationship between Oedipus and his mother, or Antigone's decision to risk her own life to bury her brother. This is what Lévi-Strauss calls the overrating of blood relations which ties the mythemes of column 1 into a single bundle. Column 2 presents the binary opposite to this, and the Spartoi killing each other, Oedipus killing his father and Eteocles killing his brother are all expressions of what Lévi-Strauss calls the "underrating of blood relations".

Now let us come to the binary opposition between column 3 and column 4 which will require some explanation. Column 3 refers to two monsters, one being a dragon and the other being a sphinx. Both of them are described by Lévi-Strauss as "chthonian" creatures which means that they are creatures who are born of the earth. In the third column, these creatures are all killed which signifies a denial of their chthonic existence. Column 4, however, obeying the logic of structure and its rule of binary opposition upholds the notion of chthonic origin and existence. This upholding of the chthonic origin is gathered from the fact that all the characters mentioned in the 4th column, be it Labdacos, or Laios or Oedipus have defective feet or have a problem in walking. This, Lévi-Strauss argues, is the typical character that various myths across the world associates with creatures born of the earth. So we have now in front of us two sets of binary relations. The first relation represented by column 1 and column 2 presents the binary of overrating the blood relations vs underrating the blood relations. The second relation represented by column 3 and column 4 presents the denial of chthonic existence and the assertion of chthonic existence. If we place these two sets of relationship side by side they would look something like this:

Overrating of blood relations (Column 1)

Denial of chthonic existence (Column 3)

Underrating of blood relations (Column 2)

Assertion of chthonic existence (Column 4)

This reduces the mythic narrative in a neat set of structural opposition but it does not produce any obvious explanation as yet about how this underlying mythic structure provides human beings with a tool to negotiate their sense of being in the world or how does it structure their worldview. To connect this structural opposition underlying the Oedipus myth with a larger socio-cultural content, Lévi-Strauss argues that this underlying langue of the Oedipus myth actually provides a tool to the “primitive” human through which to articulate the conflicting notions of their origin. According to Lévi-Strauss, the society which produced this myth and was in turn structured by this myth was torn between two notions of human origin. The first notion was that human beings were autochthonous which means that they had originally sprung out of the earth. The second notion which was in fact validated by their quotidian experience was that humans originated from a sexual union between male and female within the social structure of a family. The deep structural grammar underlying the Oedipus myth does not help us to solve this conflict between the two notions of human origin but gives a language through which to coherently articulate this opposition and place them side by side for a better understanding. In Lévi-Strauss’s own words:

The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous, to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Although the problem obviously cannot be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates

the original problem – born from one or born from two? – to the derivative problem: born from different or born from the same?

If we follow this logic, then the first two columns of Lévi-Strauss's chart get translated as follows. Since column 1 speaks of overrating of blood relations and the upholding of the family structure it can be taken to signify an assertion of the notion of human origin through sexual union. On the contrary, column 2, since it speaks of underrating of blood relations and the family structure, can be taken to mean a denial of the notion of human origin through sexual union. Similarly, we can also translate the remaining two columns. Column 3 which speaks of a denial of the existence of the chthonic creatures can be taken to signify a denial of the notion of human being's autochthonous origin. Whereas column 4 which upholds the chthonic existence can be taken to signify an assertion of human being's autochthonous origin. Thus the two sets of opposition can now be written as this:

Assertion of birth through sexual union		Denial of autochthonous origin
_____	=	_____
Denial of birth through sexual union		Assertion of autochthonous origin

For Lévi-Strauss, this is ultimately what the myth of Oedipus means at a deeper level. This is the langue of the Oedipus narrative and irrespective of any variation in the individual paroles, it is the structural grammar that is represented by this langue which will guide the narrative. So as you can see here, the structuralist analysis of narratives depends on identifying the underlying structuring principle that informs any narrative be it a mythic narrative like the Oedipus myth or

a piece of 18th century British romantic poetry or a contemporary novel. We will see how this structuralist theory of reading and understanding texts gets worked upon by Roland Barthes in our next lecture. Thank you