

**Introduction to Literary Theory**  
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**Lecture - 17**  
**Structuralism: Claude Levi-Strauss**

Welcome back all of you to another lecture on Literary Theory. Today we are going to continue with our discussion on structuralism.

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Now as you will remember, in a previous lecture which was on Ferdinand de Saussure the linguist, we had looked at how his interpretation of how language works plays a fundamental role in formulating the theory of structuralism; however, we had also noted in our previous meeting that, Saussure's work is almost entirely a commentary on how language works. And by itself it does not become apparent how that work on language can be used to understand and theorize literary narratives.

So, for this we will have to look at the work of theorists, who utilize Saussure's structuralist argument 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 a person called Claude Levi-Strauss.

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**Claude Lévi-Strauss**  
(1908 – 2009)

• *Tristes Tropiques*

A portrait of Claude Lévi-Strauss, an elderly man with white hair, wearing red-rimmed glasses, a grey suit jacket, a white shirt, and a red patterned tie. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera.

Source: Los Angeles Times

Now here it is important to note that Claude Levi-Strauss who was Belgium born, French intellectual was actually not a literary critic.

In fact, he was an anthropologist by profession. He was born in 1908, and he died in 2009. So, he lived a long life, and during this long life which in fact, spanned over more than a century, he taught both in France as well as in America. And indeed it was in America that Levi-Strauss met Roman Jakobson you will remember Roman Jakobson from our earlier lectures on formalism. So, it is in America that Levi-Strauss met Roman Jakobson.

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**Roman Jakobson**  
(1896 - 1982)



Source: Wikipedija

And Jacobson deeply influenced his way of thinking, and it was Jacobson's influence which made Levi-Strauss turned towards structuralism and allowed him to explore structuralism as a tool for analyzing human society. And I need both Jacobson and Levi-Strauss had fled the continental Europe at the week of the Second World War. So, they shared similar kind of history, and America proved for these intellectuals a safe heaven.

Just like it proved to so many persecuted intellectuals during the second half of the twentieth century. Which is why if you note the America of the mid 20th century, proved to be a wonderful melting pot of ideas and an intellectual powerhouse. So, a number of intellectuals that you will be encountering in this course, actually drifted to America from continental Europe during the middle of the 20th century.

Anyway so, with the end of the second world war Levi-Strauss was back in France and he became a celebrity anthropologist in France, especially after his publication of his memoir titled *Tristes Tropiques* which documented among other things; his travels in the Amazonian rainforest and his ethnographic study of the native tribes in Amazonian rainforest. So, that was a very important piece of work that he did. And it became known to the wider public through his memoir *Tristes Tropiques*; though academic work based on that research was already known within the limited circle of anthropologist.

Anyway in spite of being an anthropologist primarily an anthropologist, Levi-Strauss is a significant figure for us. He is important from our perspective as students of literary

theory because of 2 reasons. And the first reason is that he expanded the insights of Ferdinand de Saussure on language, and give it a wider socio cultural relevance. So, this is the first reason.

And the second reason is that he used Saussures insights to produce structuralist analysis of myths, and these structuralist analysis of myths remain classic examples of how structuralist principles can be applied to decode narrative structures; which as you will understand is deeply significant for any student of literature.

And indeed in today's lecture, we are going to discuss one such classic examples of his analysis of myth by taking up his study of the Oedipus myth. So, one of the most interesting and far reaching arguments that Levi-Strauss forwarded was that the socio cultural existence of human being is underlined and supported by a deep seated grammar.

And here Levi-Strauss was borrowing from Saussures distinction between langue and parole. So, as discussed in our previous lecture Saussure had argued that our concrete language uses are underlined by a set of rules and regulations, just like the sequence of moves in a particular game of chess; is underlined by a set of rules that are above and beyond the individual moves made by a particular player at any given point in time.

So, Saussure identified the underlying set of rules guiding a particular language structure as langue, and the concrete language uses guided by that structure as parole. Now according to Levi-Strauss, this langue and parole distinction can be extended beyond language to encompass human socio cultural existence in general. And all major aspects of human socio cultural life, according to Levi-Strauss are guided by underlying sets of regulations; which structure human experience just like a langue within a language structures paroles.

So, Levi-Strauss exemplifies this by showing how for instance the kinship structure that locates us within our society are guided by a set of regulations that might be identified as a kind of underlying social grammar. And this was a very important piece of argument that Levi-Strauss forwarded. But this kinship structure aside Levi-Strauss is also known for his analysis of myths. And those analysis are really very important as far as we are concerned as students of literature.

Because according to Levi-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 the myths provide him with this possibility of articulating the various aspects of his existence, and by providing him with this possibility helps him negotiate his being in the world better.

In other words, myths are a kind of language use myths are paroles; which are like language underlined by a set of rules a set of grammar a kind of deep seated langue. So, as I said in other words, the underlying grammar that informs the myths also structures the worldview of human beings and the ways in which the human beings conceptualized their position and their role within their surrounding environment.

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### **Terence Hawkes**

(1932 - 2014)



Source: Times Higher Education

And this is very beautifully put by the scholar Terence Hawkes, who while writing on Saussure and his analysis of the views of myths by primitive men states.

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“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’.”

*(Structuralism and Semiotics, Terence Hawkes)*

And I quote, Levi-Strauss 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 is structuralism and semiotics is a wonderfully well written and concise account of the structuralist theory. And I would highly recommend this book to anyone of you who want to understand structuralism in more details. So, coming back to the topic of our discussion, the way myths structure the human worldview, structure the human mind cannot be understood by merely listening to individual narrations of particular myths, because 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 narratives, or in other words to the mythic langue to use Saussure’s language. And Levi-Strauss shows us the way to approach this level of deep grammar by his analysis of the Oedipus myth in his essay the structural study of myth it is a very important essay by Levi-Strauss.

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### “The Structural Study of Myth”

So, to explore Levi-Strauss a 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. So, this telling of the myth that I am going to perform right now would be a kind of a parole.

So, but like paroles, the distinction shared by these individual narrations among which my narration will be one particular one are hardly significant here. Because, our effort is to go down to the level of langue which is common to all these versions. But nevertheless one particular version needs to be put on the table.

So, that we are all familiar with what we are talking about and those of you who are already familiar with the Oedipus myth, kindly bear with me for a few minutes, as I present the narrative. And I would do so not only because it will help us understand Levi-Strauss structuralist intervention or interpretation of that myth, but would also help us later when we study Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Because Sigmund Freud also makes extensive use of this Oedipus myth to come up with this theory of edible complex.

So now the story; the myth starts with a person called Cadmus, whose sister Europa was abducted by the god Zeus. Now this short over the loss of his sister Europa, his father actually instructed Cadmus and all his other siblings to go out in search of Europa. So,

the whole family therefore, scattered to different places and all of them were looking for Europa, but none of the brothers including Cadmus could find Europa. And incidentally when Cadmus during his own search for Europa reached a place called Delphi. He was told by the Oracle there Delphi in ancient Greece was a famous seat of an Oracle. He was told by the Oracle in Delphi that the search for Europa is futile you stopped looking for her, you will never find her. But instead what you do is you found a new city, because that will be something fruitful.

So, Cadmus 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 the new city. Now his men went out in search of your water, but they were however killed by a dragon. And when his men did not return after a very long time Cadmus himself went in search of them, and he subsequently encountered the dragon confronted it and killed it.

And following the suggestion of the goddess Athena, Cadmus then took out the teeth of the dragon and planted them soared them on the ground. And as a consequence of this planting of the dragon's teeth in the ground a number of warriors came up from the ground who were known as the Spartoi. And they started battling with each other.

And after much fighting only 5 of the Spartoi were left. And they subjected themselves they accepted allegiance to Cadmus. And Cadmus with their help found the city of Thebes. So, this is the first part of the myth, but it then goes on. Because it is in the family of Cadmus that Oedipus is born, the hero of our myth. Oedipus's grandfather whose name was Labdacus was one of the grandsons of Cadmus.

And the name Labdacus signifies lame; one who has difficulty in walking. And Labdacuss son was named Laios, and the meaning of the name Laios if you translate it exactly, it means in Greek left sided, right and as we shall see these meanings of the proper names will be very significant in Levi-Strauss analysis of the myth.

Now, Laios married a woman called Jocasta. And in due course Laios became the king of Thebes. Now king Laios was; however, warned by an Oracle that his own son would kill him, and to save himself from this fate he pinned together the feet of his newborn son and asked the shepherd to kill the baby by exposing it to the elements outside the city, by exposing it to rain and sun so, that the baby will die.



Now, the shepherd who took the baby from the king did not kill it, but rather he gave the baby to a friend who adopted the child as his own son, and who gave him the name of Oedipus and again this particular proper name has a very significant meaning. Significant as far as Levi-Strauss analysis is concerned because Oedipus means someone with a swollen foot.

Anyway when Oedipus was a young man, he learned from the Oracle of Delphi that he would kill his own father and he would marry his own mother. Now of course, he was very shocked by this Oracle and horrified he fled away from his home, from the home of his adoptive parents whom he believed to be his biological father and mother, and he ran away to Thebes.

Now, while on his way he ran into a chariot which was being driven by Laios himself and of course, Oedipus did not know Laios and Laios did not know who Oedipus was. And they had an altercation which led to Oedipus killing Laios. Now, after killing Laios when Oedipus finally, arrived at Thebes he saw that a sphinx was killing the inhabitants of the city by asking them different kinds of riddles, and when they fail to answer those riddles the sphinx would kill them.

Now, Oedipus answered the riddles and he got rid of the sphinx, and became the savior of Thebes. And as a savior of Thebes he was made it is king. And as the king of Thebes he subsequently married the existing queen who was Jocasta, who you would remember was Oedipus's own mother. Now of course, Oedipus did not know any of this.

But it was later revealed to him and this fact that he had killed his own father and he had married his own mother led to his being expelled from the city of Thebes. And his place on the throne was taken up by the 2 sons. Eteocles and Polynices and they were the son of Oedipus and Jocasta.

Now, the 2 brothers after Oedipus was removed from the throne, the 2 brothers fell apart and during a war Eteocles killed Polynices. But after the death of Polynices, it was decreed by the king of Thebes that Polynices body would not be buried. And anyone who would bury him, who would perform the rituals and who would properly bury Polynices, would himself or herself be buried alive. So, that was a royal decree; however, despite this injunction Polynices sister, Antigone buried the body of his brother. And then later committed suicide herself to escape the fact of being buried alive.

Now, the way Levi-Strauss analyzes this mythic narrative or parole, is to first segregate it to the level of mythemes, what he calls mythemes. So, what are mythemes? Mythemes are the constituent units of a myth and as far as the mythic structure is concerned, they are equivalence of the word sounds which when we were studying a language structure, we identified word sounds as the constituent unit. So, just like word sounds are constituent units of a language structure, mytheme is the constituent unit of a myth.

So, what Levi-Strauss does is he first reduces the Oedipus myth to the level of individual mythemes; which are its constituent building blocks. And he then arranges them in a unique pattern of rows and columns. And you can see this unique pattern of rows and columns that a Levi-Strauss constructs out of the mythemes of the Oedipus myth in the slide now.

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Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4
Cadmos seeks his sister Europa, ravished by Zeus	The Spartoi kill one another	Cadmos kills the dragon	Labdacos (Laios' father) = <i>lame</i> (?) Laios (Oedipus' father) = <i>leftsided</i> (?)
	Oedipus kills his father	Oedipus kills the Sphinx	Oedipus = <i>swollenfoot</i> (?)
Oedipus marries his mother, Jocasta	Eteocles kills his brother, Polynices		
Antigone buries her brother, Polynices, Despite prohibition			

So, let us try and understand this slide. First of all, as you can see all the units that are listed in this chart are actually individual mythemes. So, for instance Cadmus seeking his sister Europa is one mytheme. Cadmus killing the dragon is another mytheme. The Spartoi killing one another is another mytheme and so on and so forth.

So, each a unit that you see in front of you represents one mytheme. Now Levi-Strauss says that if you read the mythemes horizontally by disregarding their division in columns, you will get the narration of the myth, you will get something like what I just did the parole the narration of the myth; however, in order to understand the structuring

of this myth you will need to read it vertically, and pay attention to the columns; instead of reading it horizontally.

Indeed, if you do that you will see that the first 2 columns in the left are in an oppositional relationship to each other. And similarly the last 2 columns in the right are in an oppositional relationship with each other as well. We will come to the specificities of these oppositional relationships in a moment.

But what I would like to point out here is that this is the typical way in which a structuralist critic would engage with a narrative. So, she would first segregate the narrative into its constituent blocks. And then she would try to figure out the oppositional relationships that exist between them; to find out the grammar of relationship that structures these constituent parts.

So, typically a structuralist criticism would produce such neat rows of binary opposites for the analysis as you can see in this slide. But now let us come back to Levi-Strauss chart again. And if you focus on the 2 leftmost columns, 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 over rating of family relations. In column 2, we see it is exact opposite; which is an under rating of family relations.

But then what do I mean by overrating and under rating? So, if you see the mythemes arranged in column 1, you will see that all of them speak about excessively intimate blood relationships. And this is for instance expressed in the excessive grief that Cadmus and his family feels for Europa. It is expressed in the incestuous relationship between Oedipus and his mother; which is again an excessively deep relationship. Or for instance it is expressed by Antigone's decision to risk her own life to bury her brother. Now this is what Levi-Strauss calls the over rating of blood relations; which ties the mythemes of column 1 into a single bundle, they make it a single category.

Column 2 presents the binary opposite to this. So, the Spartoi killing each other, Oedipus killing his father, Eteocles killing his brother are all expressions of what Levi-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.

Now, column 3 refers to 2 monsters the first being the dragon and the other being of sphinx. Now both of them are described by Levi-Strauss as chthonian creatures; which means that they are regarded as creatures who are born out of the earth.

Now, in the third column these creatures are all killed; which signifies a denial of the chthonic existence. Column 4 on the other hand o being the logic of structuralism and it is rule of binary opposition, upholds the notion of chthonic origin and chthonic existence. Now, this upholding of the chthonic origin is gathered from the fact that all the characters mentioned in the 4th column be it labdacos for instance or Laios or Oedipus. All of them have defective feet or have some problem in walking.

Now, this according to a levi-strauss is the typical character that various myths across the world associates with creatures who are born out of the earth chthonic creatures. So, we have now in front of us 2 sets of binary relations. The first relation represented by column 1 and column 2 presents the binary of overrating of blood relations versus underrating of blood relations. And the second opposition is represented by column 3 and column 4; which presents the denial of chthonic existence and the assertion of chthonic existence. And if we place these 2 sets of oppositional relationships side by side, they would look something like this as you can see on the slide.

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<u>OVERRATING OF BLOOD RELATIONS (COLUMN 1)</u>	<u>DENIAL OF CHTHONIC EXISTENCE (COLUMN 3)</u>
UNDERRATING OF BLOOD RELATIONS (COLUMN 2)	ASSERTION OF CHTHONIC EXISTENCE (COLUMN 4)

Where on the one side we have overrating of blood relations and beneath it under rating of blood relations and then on the other side we have denial of chthonic existence and below it assertion of the chthonic existence.

So, this then reduces the mythic narrative in a neat set of structural opposition. But it does not produce any obvious explanation as of yet about how this underlying mythic structure provides human beings with a tool to negotiate his or her sense of being in the world or how does it is structure his or her worldview. To connect this structural opposition underlying the Oedipus myth with a larger socio cultural content, Levi-Strauss argues that this underlying language of the Oedipus myth actually provides a tool to the primitive human being through which he articulates the conflicting notions of his origin.

So, according to Levi-Strauss the society which produced this myth, and was in turn structured by this myth was torn between 2 notions of human origin; how did human being came into being. The first notion was that human beings were autochthonous; which means that they had originally sprung out of the earth, they were born out of the earth.

The second notion of human origin was in fact, validated by their quotidian existence; quotidian experience of life, which was that human beings originated from sexual union between male and female within the social structure of a family. So, this was validated by their quotidian experience. Now, the deep structural grammar underlying the Oedipus myth does not actually help us to solve this conflict between the 2 notions of human origin. What it does it, it gives us a language through which to coherently articulate this opposition, and place them side by side for a better understanding.

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“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?”

So, in Levi-Strauss own words; the myth, and he is talking about the Oedipus myth here, 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 1 or born from 2. That is the original problem, to the derivative problem; born from different which means born out of the sexual union of male and female who are different, or born from the same which means born from the same earth.

So, if you follow this logic then the first 2 columns of Levi-Strauss chart gets 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 and assertion of the notion of human origin through sexual union. On the contrary column 2 since it speaks of under rating 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 2 columns. Column 3 which speaks of a denial of existence of the chthonic creatures can be taken to signify a denial of the notion of human beings autonomous origin.

Whereas column 4 which upholds the chthonic existence can be taken to signify an assertion of human beings autochthonous origin thus, the 2 sets of opposition can be written as this.

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$$\frac{\text{Assertion of birth through sexual union}}{\text{Denial of birth through sexual union}} = \frac{\text{Denial of autochthonous origin}}{\text{Assertion of autochthonous origin}}$$

Where on the one side you have assertion of birth through sexual union, and below it the denial of birth through sexual union both of them form binary unit, and this equals on the other side denial of autochthonous origin of human being and the opposition to this is provided by assertion of autochthonous origin.

And look at the equal sign that I have put between them, because the assertion of birth through sexual union equals on the other side denial of autochthonous origin; whereas, if you look at the sections below you will see that the denial of birth through sexual union equals the assertion of autochthonous origin.

So, for Levi-Strauss this is ultimately what the Oedipus myth means at a deeper level. This is the langue of the Oedipus myth, Oedipus narrative and irrespective of any individual kind of paroles it is the structural grammar that is presented by this langue which guides the Oedipus narrative. So, whether you tell it, whether I tell it, whether someone else tells it and there will be variations individual variations of these paroles. But it will be this same langue that will guide all that will structure all of these paroles. So, as you can see here the structuralist analysis of narratives depend on identifying the underlying structural principle, the structuring principle rather, that informs any

narrative. Be it mythic narrative like the Oedipus myth, or say for instance an 18th century British poem or a contemporary Indian novel.

This is the way we can approach structurally any narrative. And we will see how this structuralist theory of reading and understanding texts gets worked upon by someone called Roland Barthes. And we will take up Roland Barthes in our next lecture.

Thank you.