**Claude Levi-Strauss**

**"The Structural Study of Myth" and Other Structuralist Ideas**

Claude Levi-Strauss' article "The Structural Study of Myth" is long and complicated, and contains a lot more information than we need to know for the purposes of this class. What I want to do here is go over some of Levi-Strauss' most important ideas.

Let's start with some ideas from Saussure that are basic to any structural analysis. Saussure examined language as a structure, as *langue*, and his ideas about the basic structures of language apply to any kind of system of making meaning, whether it's an official "language," like English or Spanish or Arabic, or just a set of signals or codes, like football referee signals. Such a system is called a *signifying system*, and can include any structure or system of organization that creates meaning out of cultural signs. For example, a work of literature, such as a poem, constitutes a signifying system; so does any tribal or community ritual (a wedding, a rain dance, a graduation ceremony), so does any kind of "fashion" (in clothes, food, cars, etc.) and any kind of advertisement. In fact, just about any part of a culture constitutes a signifying system, as long as that system contains signs that can be "read" and interpreted, along the lines Saussure laid out: by determining signification (seeing how signifiers are connected to signifieds) and by determining value (seeing how a sign differs from all the other signs in the system).

This idea is at the heart of any kind of structuralist analysis. Saussure applies it to language; Levi-Strauss applies it as an anthropologist, to kinship systems, cultural organizations, and to myth; Roland Barthes applies this system to a wide variety of contemporary Western (mostly French) cultural "signs," including food, advertising, and clothing.

For Levi Strauss and for Saussure, structuralist analysis offers a chance to discover the "timeless universal human truths" so beloved of the humanist perspective, but using a methodology that seems much more "objective" and "scientific." For Levi-Strauss in particular, such universal human truths--what all humans share by virtue of being human--exists at the level of structure. All signifying systems, all systems of cultural organization, share the same fundamental structures, regardless of their particular content. So the motive for using structuralist analysis is, in this sense, the same as the motive for using a humanist perspective: to find out what we all have in common, or what is "the human condition." Poststructuralists, by contrast, reject the whole idea of anything being universal or timeless or essentially "human"--but we'll talk about that more next week.

One of the basic structures that all human societies share, according to Levi-Strauss, is kinship: every society that has ever existed anywhere has had some system for deciding who can marry whom, who inherits what from whom, and how all of these relationships are named. Such a kinship system is a structure that operates like Saussure's *langue*, containing units (in this case, men and women, who are labelled as fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, uncles and aunts, etc.) and rules for connecting those units. Levi-Strauss' analysis of kinship systems (in his book *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*) points out two important things. The first is that kinship systems structure how goods, ideas, and people are "exchanged" within a culture. He specifically notes that kinship systems explain what he calls "the exchange of women," wherein family groups "give" women to another family to be a wife, and receive in exchange something of value (a dowry, for example).

More important to us right now is Levi-Strauss' insistence that the relations among units within the structure occur in **binary pairs**, which are either similar to each other or different from each other; this corresponds to Saussure's idea of paradigms, where one thing can be exchanged for something similar, and syntagms, where one thing is exchanged for something different. This also corresponds to the idea of metaphor and metonomy: metaphor is establishing a relationship of similarity between two things (A is like B, or A is B), while metonomy is substituting one thing for something close to it, related to it, but not it (saying "crown" instead of "king," e.g.). The main point here is that relations between units of a system can only be analyzed in pairs: you know A is A because it's not B, and A is not Q, and A is not %, but you can only examine what A is in a binary pair: A:B, A:Q, A:%. In other words, what's important to Levi-Strauss is not the identity of any individual unit--he doesn't care what "A" is--but the **relation** between any two units compared in a binary pair.

Levi-Strauss' analyses, in his writings on kinship, culture, and myth, often start to look like algebraic equations because his focus is on relations. An example would be the idea of clans and totems, which Levi-Strauss says are only understandable in structural relations to each other within a signifying system. A tribe may distinguish between an eagle clan and a bear clan, but the practices of each clan are not related to the animal they're named after, but rather to the structural relationship between all the possible clan animals. In the example of eagle clan and bear clan, what's important is not how eagle people are like real eagles, but how the difference between real eagles and real bears is reproduced in the differences between eagle people and bear people. In algebraic terms, Levi-Strauss says, you look not at why A is A, but how A is to B as C is to D-- units within the system only have meaning in relation to other units, and can only be analyzed in binary pairs.

In his book *The Raw and the Cooked*, Levi-Strauss goes further to discuss how binary pairs, particularly binary opposites, form the basic structure of all human cultures, all human ways of thought, and all human signifying systems. If there is a common "human nature" or "human condition," from this perspective, it's that everyone everywhere thinks--and structures their worlds--in terms of binary pairs of opposites, like "raw and cooked." Even more importantly, in every binary pair, one term is favored and the other disfavored: cooked is better than raw, good is better than evil, light is better than dark, etc. Remember this idea for next week when we start talking about Derrida and deconstruction.

And now for the assigned reading. In "The Structural Study of Myth," Levi-Strauss is interested in explaining why myths from different cultures from all over the world seem so similar. Given that myths could contain anything--they aren't bound by rules of accuracy, or probability--why is there an astounding similarity among so many myths from so many widely separated cultures?

He answers this question by looking at the structure of myths, rather than at their content. While the content, the specific characters and events of myths may differ widely, Levi-Strauss argues that their similarities are based on their structural sameness. To make this argument about the structure of myth, Levi-Strauss insists that myth is language, because myth has to be told in order to exist. It is also a language, with the same structures that Saussure described belonging to any language.

Myth, as language, consists of both "langue" and "parole," both the synchronic, ahistorical structure and the specific diachronic details within the structure. Levi-Strauss adds a new element to Saussure's langue and parole, pointing out that langue belongs to what he calls "reversible time," and parole to "non-reversible time." He means that parole, as a specific instance or example or event, can only exist in linear time, which is unidirectional--you can't turn the clock back; langue, on the other hand, since it is simply the structure itself, can exist in the past, present, or future. Think of this sentence again: "The adjectival noun verbed the direct object adverbially." If you read the sentence, you read from left to right, one word at a time, and it takes time to read the whole sentence--that's non-reversible time. If you don't' read the sentence, but rather think of it as being the structure of English, it exists in a single moment, every moment--yesterday as well as today as well as tomorrow. That's reversible time.

A myth, according to Levi-Strauss, is both historically specific--it's almost always set in some time long ago--and ahistorical, meaning that its story is timeless. As history, myth is parole; as timeless, it's langue.

Levi-Strauss says that myth also exists on a third level, in addition to langue and parole, which also proves that myth is a language of its own, and not just a subset of language. He explains that level in terms of the story that myth tells. That story is special, because it survives any and all translations. While poetry is that which can't be translated, or paraphrased, Levi-Strauss says that myth can be translated, paraphrased, reduced, expanded, and otherwise manipulated--without losing its basic shape or structure. He doesn't use this term, but we might call that third aspect "malleability."

He thus argues that, while myth as structure looks like language as structure, it's actually something different from language per se--he says it operates on a higher, or more complex level. Myth shares with language the following characteristics:

1. It's made of units that are put together according to certain rules.

2. These units form relations with each other, based on binary pairs or opposites, which provide the basis of the structure.

Myth differs from language (as Saussure describes it) because the basic units of myth are not phonemes (the smallest unit of speech that distinguishes one utterance from another, like a letter), morphemes (the smallest unit of relatively stable meaning that can't be subdivided, like a non-compound word), or sememes (the meaning expressed by a morpheme), or even signifiers and signifieds, but rather are what Levi-Strauss calls "mythemes." His process of analysis differs from Saussure's because Saussure was interested in studying the relations between signs (or signifiers) in the structure of language, whereas Levi-Strauss concentrates on sets of relations, rather than individual relations--or what he calls "bundles of relations."

His example for this is a musical score, consisting of both treble and bass clefs. You can read the music diachronically, left to right, page by page, and you can read it synchronically, looking at the notes in the treble clef and their relation to the bass clef. The connection between the treble and bass clef notes--the "harmony" produced--is what Levi-Strauss calls a "bundle of relations."

Basically, Levi-Strauss' method is this. Take a myth. Reduce it to its smallest component parts--its "mythemes." (Each mytheme is usually one event or position in the story, the narrative, of the myth). Then lay these mythemes out so that they can be read both diachronically and synchronically. The story, or narrative, of the myth exists on the diachronic (left-to-right) axis, in non-reversible time; the structure of the myth exists on the synchronic (up-and-down) axis, in reversible time.

Here's an example of how mythemes work. In class we used the basic categories of a "myth": a hero, a villain, a fight, obstacle, or conflict, and a reward. I asked everyone to come up with their own ideas for each category. When we listed the variations on the board, we had Hercules, Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, and Batman as heroes, and the hyrdra, Voldemort, Darth Vader, and the Joker as villains. The obstacles were chopping off the hydra's heads, defeating Voldemort, destroying the death star, and defeating the Joker, and the outcomes were, universally, the good guy wins and happiness prevails. We then looked at the "story" of each version by reading horizontally, left to right, to get the narrative; we saw the structural relations among elements by "reading" the vertical axis, and looking at connections between all the heroes, for example, all of whom had absent fathers, or between all of the outcomes, which were all "bad guy loses, good guy wins."

In his example of laying out the Oedipus myth this way, Levi-Strauss begins to see, in the synchronic bundles of relations, certain patterns developing, which we might call "themes." One such theme is the idea of having some problem walking upright. Levi-Strauss then takes that theme and runs with it, seeing it as an expression of a tension between the idea of chthonic (literally, from the underground gods, but here meaning an origin from something else) and autochthonic (meaning indigenous or native; here, meaning self-generated) creation. He then sees that tension--or structural binary opposition--as present in myths from other cultures. This, to Levi-Strauss, is the significance of the myth: it presents certain structural relations, in the form of binary oppositions, that are universal concerns in all cultures.

This is the subjective part of Levi-Strauss' analysis. We might come up with different interpretations for what he sees in the bundles of relations. For example, we might notice that, in one column are different ideas about walking upright; we might interpret that as an anxiety about physical ability and disability, which is an expression about fitness for survival versus needing charity and kindness, and then read that tension (between selfishness and altruism) as the fundamental structure the myth is articulating.

And here's where you can start to see how this structuralist reading might actually apply to literary interpretation as we know it. Once you've found the mythemes, the constituent units, of a myth or story, and laid them out in Levi-Strauss' pattern, you can interpret them in an almost infinite number of ways. (And that, of course, raises the idea that what you choose as mythemes, or units, and how you lay them out might well vary from person to person, depending on how you read a story. And this raises the idea that structuralism maybe isn't so "objective" and "scientific" as it hopes to be, since its basic units aren't self-evident. But Levi-Strauss, like Saussure, doesn't admit that).

After laying out this basic method, Levi-Strauss goes on to talk about perfecting his system to make it useful to anthropologists. We don't have to worry too much about this section because the details he discusses aren't as relevant to the analysis of literature as they are to anthropology. In these pages he talks about doing a structural analysis of all possible variations of a myth. This would be desirable because it would prove that all variants really do have the same structure, which goes back to Levi-Strauss' initial point that myth is a language, and that structural analysis can account for any version of a particular myth. To prove his point, he goes into a rather lengthy analysis of a Zuni myth; this uses the same methods as his analysis of the Oedipus myth; he also analyzes a Pueblo myth with a similar structure.

He concludes that the structural method of myth analysis brings order out of chaos, as it provides a means to account for widespread variations on a basic myth structure, and it "enables us to perceive some basic logical processes which are at the root of mythical thought." This is important to Levi-Strauss because he wants to make the study of myth logical and "scientific" in all its aspects, and not to have to rely on any subjective interpretive factors.

So here, in sum, is what you need to remember from Levi-Strauss:

* 1. the idea of analyzing units in a structure in **binary pairs**.
	2. the idea that what's important in analyzing these binary pairs is the **relation** among pairs, which can be expressed in algebraic formulae or in ratios: A is to B as C is to D.
	3. the idea of reversible and non-reversible time, and the idea of reading a narrative structure (like a myth) as a two-dimensional structure (rather than simply as linear, as Saussure says).

Levi-Strauss says that myths function in cultures to "provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction." Such a contradiction might consist of believing in two precisely opposite things, such as chthonous and autochthonous origins, or selfishness and altruism. The important thing for Levi-Strauss is that every culture has these contradictions, because every culture organizes knowledge into binary opposite pairs of things, and that these contradictions have to be reconciled logically (and again, he wants everything to be explainable through logic and "science).

This is echoed in his insistence that the "logic" of myth is just as rigorous and "logical" as the logic of science. It's not that science is somehow smarter or more evolved than myth, but rather that the two modes of understanding and interpreting the world share the same basic structure (that of logic) applied to different things.

And yes, one might critique this view of Levi-Strauss' by pointing out that his own explanations favor science over "myth," as he insists that his method of myth analysis is scientific, and therefore better than other methods. But that's a deconstructive reading, and we'll get to that with Derrida.

All material on this web site are written by, and remain the property of, Dr. Mary Klages, Associate Professor of English, University of Colorado at Boulder. You are welcome to quote from this essay, or to link this page to your own site, with proper citation and attribution. For more information on citing electronic sources, see [Citing Electronic Resources](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/resources/cite/index.html#guides).

Last revision: January 29, 2013.
For comments, send mail to Mary Klages