

# Structuralism

## Structuralist chickens and liberal humanist eggs

Structuralism is an intellectual movement which began in France in the 1950s and is first seen in the work of the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908—) and the literary critic Roland Barthes (1915-1980). It is difficult to boil structuralism down to a single 'bottom-line' proposition, but if forced to do so I would say that its essence is the belief that things cannot be understood in isolation - they have to be seen in the context of the larger structures they are part of (hence the term 'structuralism'). Structuralism was imported into Britain mainly in the 1970s and attained widespread influence, and even notoriety, throughout the 1980s.

The structures in question here are those imposed by our way of perceiving the world and organising experience, rather than objective entities already existing in the external world. It follows from this that meaning or significance isn't a kind of core or essence *inside* things: rather, meaning is always *outside*. Meaning is always an attribute of things, in the literal sense that meanings are *attributed* to the things by the human mind, not contained within them. But let's try to be specific about what it might mean to think primarily in terms of structures when considering literature. Imagine that we are confronted with a poem, Donne's 'Good Morrow', let's say. Our immediate reaction as structuralists would probably be to insist that it can only be understood if we first have a clear notion of the genre which it parodies and subverts. Any single poem is an example of a particular genre, and the genre and the example relate to each other rather as a phrase spoken in English relates to the English language as a structure with all its rules, its conventions, and so on. In the case of Donne's poem the relevant genre is the *alba* or 'dawn song', a poetic form dating from the twelfth century in which lovers lament the approach of daybreak because it means that they must part.

But the *alba*, in turn, can hardly be understood without some notion of the concept of courtly love, and, further, the *alba*, being a poem, presupposes a knowledge of what is entailed in the conventionalised form as utterance known as poetry. These are just some of the cultural structures which Donne's poem is part of. You will see that your structuralist 'approach' to it is actually taking you further and further away from the text, and into large and comparatively abstract questions of genre, history, and philosophy, rather than closer and closer to it, as the Anglo-American tradition demands. Now if we use the crude analogy of chickens and eggs, we can regard the containing structures (the *alba*, courtly love, poetry itself as a cultural practice) as the chicken, and the individual example (Donne's poem in this case) as the egg. For structuralists, determining the precise nature of the chicken is the most important activity, while for the liberal humanists the close analysis of the egg is paramount.

Thus, in the structuralist approach to literature there is a constant movement away from the interpretation of the individual literary work and a parallel drive towards understanding the larger, abstract structures which contain them. These structures, as I suggested at the start of this section, are usually abstract such as the notion of the literary or the poetic, or the nature of narrative itself, rather than 'mere' concrete specifics like the history of the *alba* or of courtly love, both of which, after all, we could quite easily find out about from conventional literary history. The arrival of structuralism in Britain and the USA in the 1970s caused a great deal of controversy, precisely because literary studies in these countries had traditionally had very little interest in large abstract issues of the kind structuralists wanted to raise. The so-called 'Cambridge revolution' in English studies in the 1920s

had promulgated *the opposite* to all this: it enjoined close study of the text in isolation from all wider structures and contexts: it was relentlessly 'text-based' and tended to exclude wider questions, abstract issues, and ideas. Structuralism in that sense turned English studies on its head, and devalued all that it had held dear for around half a century, asking long-repressed questions such as: 'What do we mean by "literary"?' 'How do narratives work?' 'What *is* a poetic structure?' Traditional critics, in a word, did not welcome the suggestion that they ought to switch their attention from eggs to chickens.

### Signs of the fathers - Saussure

Though structuralism proper began, as we said, in the 1950s and 1960s, it has its roots in the

thinking of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussure was a key figure in the development of modern approaches to language study. In the nineteenth century linguistic scholars had mainly been interested in historical aspects of language (such as working out the historical development of languages and the connections between them, and speculating about the origins of language itself). Saussure concentrated instead on the patterns and functions of language in use today, with the emphasis on how meanings are maintained and established and on the functions of grammatical structures.

But what exactly did Saussure say about linguistic structures which the structuralists later found so interesting? This can be summarised as three pronouncements in particular. Firstly, he emphasised that the meanings we give to words are purely *arbitrary*, and that these meanings are maintained by convention only. Words, that is to say, are 'unmotivated signs', meaning that there is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates. The word 'hut', for instance, is not in any way 'appropriate' to its meaning, and all linguistic signs are arbitrary like this. (There is the minor exception of a small number of onomatopoeic words like 'cuckoo' and 'hiss', but even these vary between languages.) Insisting that linguistic signs are arbitrary is a fairly obvious point to make, perhaps, and it is not a new thing to say (Plato said it in Ancient Greek times), but it is a new concept to *emphasise*

(which is always much more important), and the structuralists were interested in the implication that if language as a sign system is based on arbitrariness of this kind then it follows that language isn't a reflection of the world and of experience, but a system which stands quite separate from it. This point will be further developed later.

Secondly, Saussure emphasised that the meanings of words are (what we might call) *relational*. That is to say, no word can be defined in isolation from other words. The definition of any given word depends upon its relation with other 'adjoining' words. For example, that word 'hut' depends for its precise meaning on its position in a 'paradigmatic chain', that is, a chain of words related in function and meaning each of which could be substituted for any of the others in a given sentence. The paradigmatic chain in this case might include the following:

hovel shed hut house mansion palace

The meaning of any one of these words would be altered if any one of the others were removed from the chain. Thus, 'hut' and 'shed' are both small and basic structures, but they are not quite the same thing: one is primarily for shelter (a night-watchman's hut, for instance), while the other is primarily for storage: without the other, each would have to encompass *both* these meanings, and hence would be a different word. Likewise, a mansion can be defined as a dwelling which is bigger and grander than a mere house, but not as big and grand as a palace. Thus, we define 'mansion' by explaining how its meaning relates to that of the two words on either side of it. If we have paired opposites then this mutually defining aspect of words is even more apparent: the terms 'male' and 'female', for example, mainly have meaning in relation to each other: each designates the absence of the characteristics included in the other, so that 'male' can be seen as mainly meaning 'not female', and vice versa. Similarly, we could have no concept of 'day' without the linked concept of 'night', no notion of 'good' without a 'bad' to define it against. This 'relational' aspect of language gave rise to a famous remark of Saussure's: 'In a language there are only differences, without fixed terms'. All words, then, exist in 'differencing networks', like these 'dyads', or

paired opposites, and like the paradigmatic chain of 'dwelling place' words given earlier.

Saussure used a famous example to explain what he meant by saying that there are no intrinsic fixed meanings in language - the example of the 8.25 Geneva to Paris express train (see the *Course*, pp. 108-9, and Jonathan Culler's discussion of this example in *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 11). What is it that gives this train its identity? It isn't anything material, since each day it will have a different engine and carriages, different drivers and passengers, and so on. If it is late, it won't even leave at 8.25. Does it even have to be a train? I once asked at Southampton station for the Brighton train, and the ticket collector pointed to a bus standing outside the station and said, 'That's it'. It was a Sunday, and because of engineering works on the line a bus service was being used to ferry passengers beyond the sections being worked upon. Sometimes, then, a 'train' *doesn't* have to be a train. Saussure's conclusion is that the only thing which gives this train its identity is its position in a structure of differences: it comes *between* the 7.25 and the 9.25, that is, its identity is purely relational.

Thirdly, for Saussure, language *constitutes* our world, it doesn't just record it or label it. Meaning is always *attributed* to the object or idea by the human mind, and constructed by and expressed through language: it is not already contained within the thing. Well-known examples of this process would be the choice between paired alternatives like 'terrorist' or 'freedom

fighter'. There is no neutral or objective way of designating such a person, merely a choice of two terms which 'construct' that person in certain ways. Another example of the same concept is seen in the two ways of referring to the domestic tax imposed in Britain by the Thatcher government: opponents of this tax called it the poll tax, evoking images of the Middle Ages and the Peasants' Revolt. The government itself called the tax the community charge, avoiding the negative word 'tax' and making use of the favoured term 'community'. The term for this tax used by a given individual immediately indicated a political position, and, again, no neutral or 'objective' alternative was available. It has been said that there are three versions of every story, your version, my version, and the truth, but the case here is more complicated than that, since *all* the available terms are purely linguistic - there is no truth about these matters which exists securely outside language.

Wherever we look, we see language constituting the world in this way, not just reflecting it. For instance, the words for colours *make* a reality, they don't just name things which are 'there': the spectrum isn't divided into seven primary colours; all the colours merge into one another. So we might have had fourteen names rather than seven. Another example is the terms we give to the seasons of the year. We have four distinct names ('spring', 'summer', etc.), but actually the year runs continuously without any breaks or decisive changes. It isn't, in reality, divided into four. Why not have six seasons, or eight? Since change is continuous throughout the year the divisions could be made anywhere at all. The seasons, then, are a *way of seeing* the year, not an objective fact of nature. So Saussure's thinking stressed the way language is arbitrary, relational, and constitutive, and this way of thinking about language greatly influenced the structuralists, because it gave them a model of a system which is self-contained, in which individual items relate to other items and thus create larger structures.

One other distinction made by Saussure gave structuralists a way of thinking about the larger structures which were relevant to literature. He used the terms *langue* and *parole* to signify, respectively, language as a system or structure on the one hand, and any given utterance in that language on the other. A particular remark in French (a sample of *parole*) only makes sense to you if you are already in possession of the whole body of rules and conventions governing verbal behaviour which we call 'French' (that is, the *langue*). The individual remark, then, is a discrete item which only makes sense when seen in relation to a wider containing structure, in the classic structuralist manner. Now, structuralists make use of the *langue/parole* distinction by seeing the individual literary work (the novel *Middlemarch*, let's say) as an example of a literary *parole*. It too only makes sense in the context of some wider containing structure. So the *langue* which relates to the *parole Middlemarch* is the notion of the novel as a genre, as a body of literary practice.

### **STOP and THINK**

Consider some of the points made so far in this section about language.

Firstly, can you think of other examples of language constituting reality, rather than merely naming something which is already there? Your examples may be of a similar type to those mentioned above ('freedom fighter', 'poll tax', the seasons). You may also like to consider the significance in this context of those 'speech acts' which are known as 'performatives', that is, the kind of utterance which *is* the reality it designates, such as making a promise ('I promise to tell him') or formally opening some new facility ('I now declare this bridge opened').

Secondly, can you see any flaws in the line of argument about language and reality put forward by Saussure? For instance, does it make sense to posit a category of pure difference? Do you see any force in the counter-view once put forward by the critic Christopher Ricks, that you can't just have difference, you have to have difference *between* things? (See his article 'In Theory' in *London Review of Books*, April 1981, pp. 3-6.) If you accepted Ricks's argument, and agreed that you can only have difference between things, what implications would this have for the Saussurean argument that languages have only differences, without fixed terms?

Thirdly, are you convinced by that train? Is its position in the timetable really the *only* thing which gives it its identity? Saussure supplements the example with another one:

Why can a street be completely rebuilt and still be the same? Because it does not constitute a purely material entity; it is based on certain conditions that are distinct from the materials that fit the conditions, e.g. its location with respect to other streets

(*Course*, pp. 108-9)

A counter-argument might be that the 8.25 has to be train-like before it can be the 8.25: nobody will remark, 'There goes the

8.25 to Paris' if a flock of pigeons emerges from under the station canopy: likewise, it is true to

say that a given street has a largely relational identity - you define 'X' Street by saying that it's the one that runs at right angles between 'Y' Street and 'Z' Street. All the same, a piece of string stretched between the two will not be mistaken for the street.

### **The scope of structuralism**

But structuralism is not just about language and literature. When Saussure's work was 'co-opted' in the 1950s by the people we now call structuralists, their feeling was that Saussure's model of how language works was 'transferable', and would also explain how all signifying systems work. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied the structuralist outlook to the interpretation of myth. He suggested that the individual tale (the *parole*) from a cycle of myths did not have a separate and inherent meaning but could only be understood by considering its position in the whole cycle (the *langue*) and the similarities and difference between that tale and others in the sequence.

So in interpreting the Oedipus myth, he placed the individual story of Oedipus within the context of the whole cycle of tales connected with the city of Thebes. He then began to see repeated motifs and contrasts, and he used these as the basis of his interpretation. On this method the story and the cycle it is part of are reconstituted in terms of basic oppositions: animal/human, relation/stranger, husband/son and so on.

Concrete details from the story are seen in the context of a larger structure, and the larger structure is then seen as an overall network of basic 'dyadic pairs' which have obvious symbolic, thematic, and archetypal resonance (like the contrast between art and life, male and female, town and country, telling and showing, etc., as in the 'worked example' later).

This is the typical structuralist process of moving from the particular to the general, placing the individual work within a wider structural context. The wider structure might also be found in, for instance, the whole corpus of an author's work; or in the genre

conventions of writing about that particular topic (for instance, discussing Dickens's novel *Hard Times* in terms of its deviations from novelistic conventions and into those of other more popular genres, like melodrama or the ballad); or in the identification of sets of underlying fundamental 'dyads'. A signifying system in this sense is a very wide concept: it means any organised and structured set of signs which carries cultural meanings. Included in this category would be such diverse phenomena as: works of literature, tribal rituals (a degree ceremony, say, or a rain dance), fashions (in clothing, food, 'life-style', etc.), the styling of cars, or the contents of advertisements. For the structuralist, the culture we are part of can be 'read' like a language, using these principles, since culture is made up of many structural networks which carry significance and can be shown to operate in a systematic way. These networks operate through 'codes' as a system of signs; they can make statements, just as language does, and they can be read or decoded by the structuralist or semiotician.

Fashion, for instance, can be 'read' like a language. Separate items or features are added up into a complete 'outfit' or 'look' with complex grammatical rules of combination: we don't wear an evening dress and carpet slippers: we don't come to lectures in military uniform, etc. Likewise, each component sign derives its meaning from a structural context. Of course, many fashions in clothing depend on breaking such rules in a 'knowing' way, but the 'statement' made by such rule-breaks (for instance, making outer garments which look like undergarments, or cutting expensive fabrics in an apparently rough way) depends upon the prior existence of the 'rule' or convention which is being conspicuously flouted. In the fashion world recently, for instance, (late 1994) the combination of such features as exposed seams, crumpled-looking fabrics, and garments which are too big or too small for the wearer signified the fashion known (confusingly, in this context) as deconstruction. Take any one of these features out of the context of all the rest, however, and they will merely signify that you have your jacket on inside out or don't believe in ironing. Again, these individual items have their place in an overall structure, and the structure is of greater significance than the individual item.

The other major figure in the early phase of structuralism was

Roland Barthes, who applied the structuralist method to the general field of modern culture. He examined modern France (of the 1950s) from the standpoint of a cultural anthropologist in a little book called *Mythologies* which he published in France in 1957. This looked at a host of items which had never before been subjected to intellectual analysis, such as: the difference between boxing and wrestling; the significance of eating steak and chips; the styling of the Citroën car; the cinema image of Greta Garbo's face; a magazine photograph of an Algerian soldier saluting the French flag. Each of these items he placed within a wider structure of values, beliefs, and symbols as the key to understanding it. Thus, boxing is seen as a sport concerned with repression and endurance, as distinct from wrestling, where pain is flamboyantly displayed. Boxers do not cry out in pain when hit, the rules cannot be disregarded at any point during the bout, and the boxer fights as himself, not in the elaborate guise of a make-believe villain or hero. By contrast, wrestlers grunt and snarl with aggression, stage

elaborate displays of agony or triumph, and fight as exaggerated, larger than life villains or super-heroes. Clearly, these two sports have quite different functions within society: boxing enacts the stoical endurance which is sometimes necessary in life, while wrestling dramatises ultimate struggles and conflicts between good and evil. Barthes's approach here, then, is that of the classic structuralist: the individual item is 'structuralised', or 'contextualised by structure', and in the process of doing this layers of significance are revealed.

Roland Barthes in these early years also made specific examinations of aspects of literature, and by the 1970s, structuralism was attracting widespread attention in Paris and world wide. A number of English and American academics spent time in Paris in the 1970s taking courses under the leading structuralist figures (and these included Colin MacCabe) and came back to Britain and the USA fired up to teach similar ideas and approaches here. The key works on structuralism were in French, and these began to be translated in the 1970s and published in English. A number of Anglo-American figures undertook to read material not yet translated and to interpret structuralism for English-speaking readers; these important mediators included: the American,

Jonathan Culler, whose book *Structuralist Poetics* appeared in 1975; the English critic Terence Hawkes whose book *Structuralism and Semiotics* came out in 1977 as the first book in a new series published by Methuen called 'New Accents'. Hawkes was the general editor of the series, and its mission was 'to encourage rather than resist the process of change' in literary studies. Another influential figure was the British critic Frank Kermode, then professor at University College, London, who wrote with enthusiasm about Roland Barthes, and set up graduate seminars to discuss his work (though he later in the 1990s became identified, in retirement, with much more traditional approaches). Finally, there was David Lodge, Professor of English at Birmingham, who tried to combine the ideas of structuralism with more traditional approaches. This attempt is typified by his book *Working with Structuralism* (1980).

### What structuralist critics do

1. They analyse (mainly) prose narratives, relating the text to some larger containing structure, such as:
  - (a) the conventions of a particular literary genre, or
  - (b) a network of intertextual connections, or
  - (c) a projected model of an underlying universal narrative structure, or
  - (d) a notion of narrative as a complex of recurrent patterns or motifs.
2. They interpret literature in terms of a range of underlying parallels with the structures of language, as described by modern linguistics. For instance, the notion of the 'mytheme', posited by Levi-Strauss, denoting the minimal units of narrative 'sense', is formed on the analogy of the morpheme, which, in linguistics, is the smallest unit of grammatical sense. An example of a morpheme is the 'ed' added to a verb to denote the past tense.
3. They apply the concept of systematic patterning and structuring to the whole field of Western culture, and across cultures, treating as 'systems of signs' anything from Ancient Greek myths to brands of soap powder.

### Structuralist criticism: examples

I will base these examples on the methods of literary analysis described and demonstrated in Barthes's book *S/Z*, published in 1970. This book, of some two hundred pages, is about Balzac's thirty-page story 'Sarrasine'. Barthes's method of analysis is to divide the story into 561 lexies', or units of meaning, which he then classifies using five 'codes', seeing these as the basic underlying structures of all narratives. So in terms of our opening statement about structuralism (that it aims to understand the individual item by placing it in the context of the larger structure to which it belongs) the individual item here is this particular story, and the larger structure is the system of codes, which Barthes sees as generating all possible actual narratives, just as the grammatical structures of a language can be seen as generating all possible sentences which can be written or spoken in it. I should add that there is a difficulty in taking as an example of structuralism material from a text by Barthes published in 1970, since 1970 comes within what is usually considered to be Barthes's post-structuralist phase, always said to begin (as in this book) with his 1968 essay 'The Death of the Author'. My reasons for nevertheless regarding *S/Z* as primarily a structuralist text are, firstly, to do with precedent and established custom: it is treated as such, for instance, in many of the best known books on structuralism (such as Terence Hawkes's *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Robert Scholes's *Structuralism in Literature*, and Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*). A second reason is that while *S/Z* clearly contains many elements which subvert the confident positivism of structuralism, it is nevertheless essentially structuralist in its attempt to reduce the immense complexity and diversity possible in fiction to

the operation of five codes, however tongue-in-cheek the exercise may be taken to be. The truth, really, is that the book sits on the fence between structuralism and post-structuralism: the 561 lexies and the five codes are linked in spirit to the 'high' structuralism of Barthes's 1968 essay 'Analysing Narrative Structures', while the ninety-three interspersed digressions, with their much more free-wheeling comments on narrative, anticipate the 'full' post-structuralism of his 1973 book *The Pleasure of the*

*Text*. The five codes identified by Barthes in *S/Z* are:

1. *The proairetic code* This code provides indications of actions. ('The ship sailed at midnight' 'They began again', etc.)
2. *The hermeneutic code* This code poses questions or enigmas which provide narrative suspense. (For instance, the sentence 'He knocked on a certain door in the neighbourhood of Pell Street' makes the reader wonder who lived there, what kind of neighbourhood it was, and so on).
3. *The cultural code* This code contains references out beyond the text to what is regarded as common knowledge. (For example, the sentence 'Agent Angelis was the kind of man who sometimes arrives at work in odd socks' evokes a preexisting image in the reader's mind of the kind of man this is - a stereotype of bungling incompetence, perhaps, contrasting that with the image of brisk efficiency contained in the notion of an 'agent').
4. *The semic code* This is also called the connotative code. It is linked to theme, and this code (says Scholes in the book mentioned above) when organised around a particular proper name constitutes a 'character'. Its operation is demonstrated in the second example, below.
5. *The symbolic code* This code is also linked to theme, but on a larger scale, so to speak. It consists of contrasts and pairings related to the most basic binary polarities - male and female, night and day, good and evil, life and art, and so on. These are the structures of contrasted elements which structuralists see as fundamental to the human way of perceiving and organising reality.

As the last two codes have generated the greatest difficulty (especially in distinguishing one from the other) I will use each in turn as the basis of an example, beginning with the symbolic code, which I will illustrate in use as the organising principle for the interpretation of an entire tale, the story being 'The oval portrait' (reproduced in Appendix 1), by the early nineteenth-century American writer Edgar Allan Poe, an author who has received considerable attention from both structuralists and poststructuralists.

In terms of the 'What structuralists do' list of activities above, this is an example

of category I.(d), treating narrative structure as a complex of recurrent patterns and motifs.

In discussing it I will enlist your help as a co-writer of this structuralist critique. The points at which your help is requested are indicated by the 'stop and THINK' heading.

A brief working summary of the plot may be useful. During what appears to be a civil war in an unnamed European country a wounded officer (as we may assume him to be) takes refuge in a recently abandoned chateau. The room he sleeps in contains an extremely lifelike portrait of a young woman, and a written account of this portrait, which he finds in the room, tells how the artist was her husband, who had become so carried away with the creation of the portrait that he failed to notice that as 'life' was kindled in the painting it simultaneously drained away from the sitter. At the end of the tale the placing of the final touch of colour which renders the portrait perfect coincides with the death of the sitter.

The most basic difference between liberal humanist and structuralist reading is that the structuralist's comments on structure, symbol, and design, become paramount, and are the main focus of the commentary, while the emphasis on any wider moral significance, and indeed on interpretation itself in the broad sense, is very much reduced. So instead of going straight into the content, in the liberal humanist manner, the structuralist presents a series of parallels, echoes, reflections, patterns, and contrasts, so that the narrative becomes highly schematised, is translated, in fact, into what we might call a verbal diagram. What we are looking for, as we attempt a structuralist critique, and where we expect to find it, can be indicated as in the diagram below. We are looking for the factors listed on the left, and we expect to find them in the parts of the tale listed on the right:

Parallels Plot

Echoes Structure

Reflections/Repetitions in Character/Motive

Contrasts Situation/Circumstance

Patterns Language/Imagery

Listing some of the parallels, etc., which might be picked out in Poe's tale is perhaps the best way of illustrating all this. Firstly, then, the tale itself has a binary structure (a structure of paired opposites) made up of two contrasting halves: the first part is a 'framing' narrative, containing the first-person account of the wounded officer, while the second is the story-within-the-

story which he reads in the commentary on the painting. There is a very marked difference in narrative pace between these two halves, the first being leisurely, ponderous even, reflecting the down-to-earth, rationalistic mind of the officer, while the second moves with increasingly disjointed rapidity, reflecting the frenzy of artistic creation, and the rapid downward spiral of the victim/sitter's health.

A second contrast within the tale is that the chateau itself performs very different functions in the two halves. In the first half it is a place of refuge and recuperation for the officer, where he finds safety from his enemies and, we may assume, recovers his health. In the second half, by contrast, it is a place of danger and ultimately destruction for the sitter, where she is delivered to the whims of her artist-husband and her life is drained away.

### **STOP and THINK**

Now, look for other contrasts between the two halves. For instance, each half features a relationship between two people (the officer and the valet in the first part and the artist and his wife in the second): how do these two relationships differ? There is an unequal distribution of power within each relationship, but the effects are different. How, exactly? Is there a similarity in what the members of each couple do to and for each other?

The main 'actors' in the two halves are (respectively) the wounded officer and the artist. What contrasts are observable in the mental state of these two?

Both the officer in the first part and the artist in the second are, in a sense, engrossed in a painting, but the role of art in the two halves is very different. What exactly is the contrast?

All these are contrasts, parallels, etc., between the two halves. There are also many more *within* the two halves. Firstly, there is a strongly implied contrast between the husband's self-absorbed artistic frenzy on the one hand, and a more conventional outwardly directed sexual passion of the kind which might be expected in a husband for a new bride. Instead of being fascinated by her, this husband is 'entranced before his work' in auto-erotic contemplation. Indeed, the marriage is in a sense bigamous, since the husband is described as 'having already a bride in his art'. The several weeks he spends alone with his new bride executing the painting are a kind of sustained negative parody of a honeymoon. Locked up together for several weeks, the husband painter 'took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task and wrought day and night', and towards the end 'the painter had grown wild with the ardour of his work'. In fact, he has spent this 'honeymoon' in passionate involvement with the first bride rather than the second.

A third level of contrasts and parallels are those which concern narrative mechanisms such as presentation and language, as well as content. One such, for instance, is the parallel between the narrators of the two halves. Both have a degree of anonymity, and in the second case the anonymity is complete, since we are given no information at all about the identity of the author of the 'vague and quaint words' of the story-within-the-story. (The only named character is Pedro the valet, the least important figure in the tale.) But structuralists are encouraged by Roland Barthes to ask of a text the question '*qui parle?*' - 'Who is speaking?' and if we ask that question of the second part of the tale, then the answer will involve dislodging the narrator from the position of a neutral spectatorial recorder, for this account must have been written by someone who witnessed these events without attempting any intervention. At the very least, this witness is someone without insight, indistinguishable from those who, having seen the portrait, 'spoke of its resemblance in low words, as of a mighty marvel, and a proof not less of the power of the painter than of his deep love for her whom he depicted so surpassingly well'.

### **STOP and THINK**

The first narrator, too, can be seen as to some degree culpable, and as wilfully blind to the events witnessed. Could we go further? Is there a parallel between the two narrators, such that the first is aligned, through the language used, with the attitudes of the artist-husband? For instance, what do you make of his prolonged contemplation of the painting? Are there elements in that part of the text which parallel the displaced eroticism of the artist's protracted gazing on his wife as he makes the painting? There are two examples, not just one, of an intense masculine gaze in the story. Look at the distribution of the words 'gaze' and 'glory' (or 'gloriously') in the text. Look at the way the passing of time is depicted in each of these cases. In both cases there is a moment when the gaze is averted: what is the significance of this parallelism?

All these contrasts are of a very particular kind, proper to just this one tale. We may then

perform a simplifying move which is rather like finding the lowest common denominator of a set of numbers, for these items might be reduced to a set of more generalised ones: the contrast and conflict between *life* and *art*, *male* and *female*, *light* and *dark* (in the sense of enlightenment and moral benightedness, as well as in purely physical terms), *looking* and *doing*, *reality* and *representation*. The thesis of the structuralist is that narrative structures are founded upon such underlying paired opposites, or dyads, so that contrasts such as these are the skeletal structure on which all narratives are fleshed out. If we had to reduce even this list of dyads, to achieve a single pair, then it would have to be the art/life contrast, since the tale seems most to be about life and art viewed as factors in an overall psychic economy.

The obvious final question is to ask which side of this dichotomy the tale is on. There can surely be little doubt that it is on the side of art, for it is the act of artistic creation, and, to a lesser extent, that of contemplating a work of art, which is most vividly and passionately described in the tale, rather than any sense of the waste of a young life. The frenzy of this 'passionate, wild, and moody man' produces a work of art so lifelike that it seems the product of a divine being. This is no way to champion 'life'. 'Officially' the story is a pious protest at the sacrifice of a young life, but in practice the making of the sacrifice is presented with a kind of loving envy. As D. H. Lawrence didn't quite say, never trust the moral, trust the tale.

So much, then, for the symbolic code. The second example centres on the operation within a text of the *semic code*. This code, as we have said, is linked with the process of characterisation and thematisation but operates on a smaller scale than the symbolic code. For Hawkes, in the book mentioned earlier, it 'utilises hints or "flickers of meaning"', and given that it operates through the nuances of individual words and phrases, the best way to appreciate it in action is to use a variation of what educationalists call 'cloze procedure', which involves deleting words from a text and having readers fill these gaps by drawing inferences from context and overall structure.

The passage below is the opening of a novel by Mervyn Jones. The central character, Mr Armitage, is presented in the opening scene and his character immediately established. I have left gaps in the text and have listed at the end of the relevant sentences several words which might fill that gap (one of which, in each case, is the word actually used by the author). You will see that the character is decisively altered, according to the word you choose to fill the gap, enabling us to feel the *semic code* actually at work. The paragraphs have been numbered for ease of reference. In terms of the 'What structuralists do' list, this is an example of 1.(c), that is, of relating the text to a projected model of an underlying universal narrative structure, since the critic would assume that the five Barthesian codes are fundamental to the workings of all narratives. Spend time now selecting a word for each gap before going on to my commentary.

### STOP and THINK

1. John Edward Scott Armitage: fifty-five years old, five feet eleven inches tall, weight thirteen stone three\_\_\_\_\_

[*pounds, ounces*]

2. June the eighth: a fine morning, nine-fifteen by the programme change on the car radio, also nine-fifteen

exactly as he checked the time on his\_\_\_\_\_watch.

[*multi-function, Swiss, Swatch, Timex, Pocket, Mickey Mouse*]

3. Hendon Way, north-bound. Armitage was driving a

Jaguar, just run in. Its newness pleased him - the \_\_\_\_\_

smell of the leather, the neat zeros on the mileage dial. He was among those men whose car is never more than a year old.

[*rich, sweet, heady, sexy, opulent*] There is further description, then Armitage slows the car to look at two hitch-hikers. They meet his standards of acceptability, and he offers them a lift, but the response to his offer is a momentary hesitation. The text resumes:

4. The boy still presented his pleasant smile, but did not get into the car. Now he seemed to be considering, not only the directions, but also the car, and even Armitage himself. The hitch-hiker, in fact, was deciding whether to accept the driver instead of the other way round. Armitage was \_\_\_\_\_ In a few seconds more he might have been

indignant. But the girl said: 'This is fine - yes it is - super, really'.

[*baffled, stumped, gob-smacked*]

5. She spoke eagerly, indeed with some impatience at the boy's hesitation. And she too smiled at Armitage, but more

than pleasantly, \_\_\_\_\_, he thought. Of course, they were

lucky to get a long ride in a new Jaguar. The girl clearly realised this; she seemed, moreover, to be happy to travel with Armitage. As soon as this notion occurred to him Armitage saw that it

was absurd. Yet it was an attractive thing for her to give such an impression.

*[happily, cheerfully, invitingly, gleefully]*

6. She \_\_\_\_\_ into the front seat, and the boy got into the back.

Armitage pulled away quickly to get ahead of a removal van. He drove in a thrusting style, seizing every opportunity, overtaking in roaring third gear. He met, and then dismissed, the thought that the girl's presence beside him had made him show off his skill.

*[jumped quickly, plumped heavily, slid seductively, slid easily, squeezed awkwardly, slipped quietly]*

I'll comment briefly on the gaps in each of these paragraphs.

In the first, the word in the published text is 'ounces', the precision of which immediately suggests a man with a very precise and ordered attitude to life. (How many people know their weight to the nearest ounce?)

In the second paragraph the character of Armitage is completely changed if we change his watch. In the text his 'Swiss' watch reinforces the image of the well-ordered, well-to-do life already established in the first few lines of the book. But the semic code's 'flicker of meaning' can instantly change him into an ageing gadget-faddist with a multi-function digital timepiece, or a dedicated follower of fashion with a trendy Swatch Watch, or an old fogey with a pocket watch, or a hearty life-and-soul-of-the-party type with a jokey Mickey Mouse watch.

In the third paragraph the words 'sweet', 'heady', and 'sexy' all come close to turning Armitage into a leather fetishist, while 'rich' has a certain directness and vulgarity which implies that his pleasure in things is in direct proportion to their cost. The text's 'opulent' retains an element of this but seems to imply an appreciation of quality and craftsmanship for its own sake.

In the fourth paragraph (as often in fiction) the kind of word used by the narrating voice reflects the character being described. 'Stumped' suggests an undignified cluelessness, as, even more so, does 'gobsmacked', whereas the text's 'baffled' implies the offended dignity of a man of some standing accustomed to a degree of respect.

In the fifth paragraph Armitage's perception of the nature of the girl's smile is a crucial element in his characterisation. The text has him seeing her as smiling 'cheerfully', indicating that he is pleased to perceive a positive reaction towards him. If she were smiling, in his view, 'invitingly', then the implication would be that his motives were entirely sexual. 'Gleefully', on the other hand, would make her into a child rather than an adult.

In the final paragraph the missing phrase indicates that, all the same, Armitage finds the girl attractive and is physically aware of her. The text tells us that she 'slid easily' into the front seat, implying a certain slender gracefulness. Armitage's attention is less directed towards the boy, so he simply 'got into' the back. If we reverse these two phrases the implication is that Armitage is more interested in the boy than the girl, thus: 'She got into the front seat, and the boy slid easily into the back'. This has the effect of tending to construct Armitage as homosexual, even though no such explicit statement is made.

This simple 'cloze' exercise, then, indicates something of the small-scale, but none the less crucial, workings of the semic code in the construction of character, while also showing how, in sequence, this code can begin to activate thematic motifs, such as the notion of orderliness and control associated with Armitage.

The operation of two other codes could easily be illustrated from the same passage. The *hermeneutic code*, for instance, is obviously important in it. Right at the beginning of a novel the reader has to be drawn into the process of speculating about possible outcomes, working out enigmas, and predicting the possible patterns of events and motives. Thus, with this example we are immediately involved in answering questions like 'What is going to happen as a result of this meeting?' 'Are the hitch-hikers as innocent as they seem?' 'Will Armitage's confidence be shaken in some way as the novel progresses?' Finally, an example of the *cultural code* is seen in the third paragraph when we are told that Armitage 'was among those men whose car is never more than a year old', where the text appeals to our prior knowledge of this kind of man as a distinct type with a whole range of related characteristics and habits. The last code, the symbolic, would be difficult to detect in such a brief and early extract from a novel, and has already been demonstrated at length on the Poe example.

#### Selected reading

Barthes, Roland, *The Semiotic Challenge*, translated by Richard Howard (Blackwell, 1988).

Essays by the best-known structuralist critic; see chapter in section three 'Textual analysis of a tale by Edgar Allan Poe', on 'The facts in the case of M. Valdemar'.

Barthes, Roland, *A Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (Vintage, 1993).

Culler, Jonathan, *Structuralist Poetics* (Routledge, 1975).

A book which immediately established the author's reputation as a 'mediator' of difficult theories.

Thorough, but seldom succinct.

Culler, Jonathan, *Barthes* (Fontana, 1983).

Culler, Jonathan, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford Paperbacks, 2002).

Hawkes, Terence, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Methuen, 1977).

A pioneering book in a key series. Equivalent to Culler, but does it better, in my view, because the series format makes for brevity and tightness.

Scholes, Robert, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (Yale University Press, 1974).

An admirable book. Don't be put off by its age. You won't find anything to match it.

Sturrock, John, *Structuralism* (Paladin, 1986).

Covers structuralism in a variety of fields (language, social sciences, etc.). Chapter four is a good, succinct account of literary structuralism and its antecedents.