

Introduction

Literary theory in a strict sense is the systematic study of the nature of literature and of the methods for analyzing literature. However, literary scholarship since the 19th century often includes in addition to, or even instead of literary theory in the strict sense considerations of intellectual history, moral philosophy, social prophecy, and other interdisciplinary themes which are of relevance to the way humans interpret meaning. In the humanities in modern academia, the latter style of scholarship is an outgrowth of critical theory and is often called simply "theory". As a consequence, the word "theory" has become an umbrella term for a variety of scholarly approaches to reading texts. Many of these approaches are informed by various strands of Continental philosophy and of sociology.

Literary theorising from Aristotle to Leavis:

Aristotle:

The earliest work of theory was Aristotle's *Poetics*, which, in spite of its title, is about the nature of literature itself: Aristotle offers famous definitions of tragedy, insists that literature is about character, and that character is revealed through action, and he tries to identify the required stages in the progress of a plot. Aristotle was also the first critic to develop a 'reader-centred' approach to literature, since his consideration of drama tried to describe how it affected the audience. Tragedy, he said, should stimulate the emotions of pity and fear, these being, roughly, sympathy for and empathy with the plight of the protagonist. By the combination of these emotions came about the effect Aristotle called 'catharsis', whereby these emotions are exercised, rather than exorcised, as the audience identifies with the plight of the central character.

Sir Philip Sidney:

The first prestigious name in English writing about literature is that of Sir Philip Sidney, who wrote his 'Apology for Poetry' in about 1580. Sidney was intent on expanding the implications of the ancient definition of literature first formulated by the Latin poet Ovid, who had said that its mission is '*docere delictendo*'- to teach by delighting (meaning, approximately, by entertaining). Sidney also quotes Horace, to the effect that a poem is 'a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight'. Thus, the giving of pleasure is here allowed a central position in the reading of literature, unlike, say, philosophy, which is implicitly stigmatised as worthy, and uplifting, but not much fun. The notion of literature giving pleasure will now seem an unremarkable sentiment, but Sidney's aim was the revolutionary one of distinguishing literature from other forms of writing, on the grounds that, uniquely, literature has as its primary aim the giving of pleasure to the reader, and any moral or didactic element is necessarily either subordinate to that, or at least, unlikely to succeed without it. In a religious age, deeply suspicious of all forms of fiction, poetry, and

representation, and always likely to denounce them as the work of the devil, this was a very great step to take. In English too, then, critical theory came before practical criticism, as Sidney is writing about literature in general, not about individual works or writers.

Samuel Johnson

Literary theory after Sidney was significantly advanced by Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and *Prefaces to Shakespeare* can be seen both as another major step forward in critical theory, and as the start of the English tradition of practical criticism, since he is the first to offer detailed commentary on the work of a single author. Prior to Johnson, the only text which had ever been subjected to this intensive scrutiny was the Bible, and the equivalent sacred books of other religions. The extension of this practice to works other than those thought to be the direct product of divine inspiration marks a significant moment of progress in the development of secular humanism.

Wordsworth:

After Johnson came a major burgeoning of critical theory in the work of the Romantic poets: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley. One of the main texts is Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. What Wordsworth wrote in this preface was the product of collaborative discussions between himself and Coleridge. The introduction was added to the second edition of the ballads, published in 1800, after the first, of 1798, had been met with puzzlement. The book blends high literature and popular literature, since it contains literary ballads constructed on the model of the popular oral ballads of ordinary country people. The original readers of *Lyrical Ballads* also disliked the abandonment of the conventions of verbal decorum. These conventions had imposed a high degree of artificiality on poetic language, making it as different as possible from the language of ordinary everyday speech. Thus, a specialised poetic vocabulary had tended to enjoin the avoidance of simple everyday terms for things, and an elaborate system of rhyme and a highly compressed form of grammar had produced a verbal texture of much greater density than that of ordinary language. Suddenly, two ambitious young poets were trying to make their poetic language as much like prose as possible, avoiding the conventions of diction and verbal structure which had held sway for so long. Thus, this book is one of a number of significant critical works in literary theory whose immediate aim is to provide a rationale for the critic's own poetic work, and to educate the audience for it. It also anticipates issues of great interest to contemporary critical theory, such as the relationship between poetic language and 'ordinary' language, and that between 'literature' and other kinds of writing.

Coleridge:

A second significant work from the Romantic era was Coleridge's misleadingly titled *Biographia Literaria*. The title might lead us to expect a work like Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, but in fact much of it directly addresses the ideas contained in Wordsworth's *Preface*, showing by a close consideration of aspects of his work that Wordsworth writes his best

poetry when he is furthest away from adherence to his own theories of what poetry should be. Indeed, in the years during which he and Coleridge had drifted apart as friends, they had also taken radically different views about the nature of poetry. Coleridge came to disagree completely with the view that the language of poetry must strive to become more like the language of prose. He saw this as an impoverishment of the poetic effect which must ultimately prove suicidal. The argument dovetails neatly with the works already cited: if maintained, and if poetry, unlike other kinds of writing, aims to teach by entertaining, then the major way in which the entertaining is done must be through the language in which it is written. The language entertains by its 'Active' qualities - this is the source of the aesthetic effect.

Shelley:

Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) which sees poetry as essentially engaged in what a group of twentieth-century Russian critics later called 'defamiliarisation'. Shelley anticipates this term, since for him poetry 'strips the veil of familiarity from the world ... it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity ... It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know'. This remarkable critical document also anticipates T. S. Eliot's notion of impersonality (put forward in his 1919 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent') whereby there is a distinction between (as we might call it) the author (who is the person behind the work) and the writer (who is, so to speak, the 'person' *in* the work). In Eliot's view, the greater the separation between the two the better, since 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates', so that poetry is not simply the conscious rendering of personal experience into words. Shelley registers all this a hundred years earlier in his characteristically magisterial prose: the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, *and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or of its departure.*

John Keats:

There is also an anticipation here of the Freudian notion of the mind as made up of conscious and unconscious elements. Indeed, the idea of the unconscious is an essential one in Romanticism, and implicit in everything written about poetry by another major Romanticist, John Keats. Keats did not write formal literary theory in the way Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley did, but he did reflect on poetry in a sustained way in his letters. He too formulates a notion of the workings of the unconscious, for instance in a letter to Bailey of 22 November 1817 when he speaks of how 'the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repetition of its own silent Working coming continually on the Spirit with a fine suddenness'. The 'silent working' of the mind is the unconscious and the 'spirit' into which it erupts is the conscious. Keats's idea of 'negative capability' also amounts to this same privileging of the unconscious, this same desire to allow it scope to work, negative

capability being 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (letter to his brothers, 21 December 1817). In the critical writings of the Romantics, then, there are many anticipations of the concerns of critical theory today.

Two distinct tracks in the development of English Criticism:

The main developments in critical theory were the work of mid and late Victorians, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, and Henry James. George Eliot's critical work ranges widely over classical and continental writers, and philosophical issues, as did Coleridge's. It is worth emphasising this, since there are two distinct 'tracks' in the development of English criticism. One track leads through Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold to T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis. This might be called the 'practical criticism' track. It tends to centre upon the close analysis of the work of particular writers, and gives us our familiar tradition of 'close reading'. The other track lies through Sidney, Wordsworth, Coleridge, George Eliot, and Henry James. This track is very much 'ideas-led' rather than 'text-led'.

Matthew Arnold:

The insistence upon 'close reading' in the 1920s sprang partly from the work of Matthew Arnold in the previous century. Arnold has remained a key canonical figure in the history of English criticism, partly because F. R. Leavis adopted and adapted several of his ideas and attitudes and gave them twentieth century currency. Arnold's most significant thinking is contained in the essays 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' and 'The Study of Poetry'. He stresses the importance for literature of remaining 'disinterested', by which he means politically detached and uncommitted to any specific programme of action. The goal of literary criticism is that of attaining pure, disinterested knowledge, that is, to use another of his favourite phrases, of simply appreciating 'the object as in itself it really is' without wanting to press the insight gained into the service of a specific line of action. Arnold's key literary-critical device is the notion of the Touchstone, which avoids any definitions of desirable literary qualities, and merely suggests using aspects of the literature of the past as a means of measuring and assessing the literature of today. The way the Touchstone works is concisely explained in J. A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*.

A touchstone is ... so-called because gold is tried by it. Matthew, Arnold used the word in his essay *The Study of Poetry* (1880) in connection with literary criteria and standards: Arnold advises that we should 'have always in mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and apply them as a Touchstone to other poetry'. He suggests that his Touchstone method should provide the basis for a 'real' rather than an 'historic' or 'personal' estimate of poetry.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the key critical names in Britain were F. R. Leavis, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, and I. A. Richards. All except Eliot were at Cambridge in

the 1920s and 1930s, involved in the pioneering English School there which had a powerful influence on the teaching of English worldwide up to the 1970s. Eliot's contribution to the canon of received critical ideas was the greatest, his major critical ideas being:

- the notion of the 'dissociation of sensibility', developed in the course of his review article on Herbert Grierson's edition of *The Metaphysical Poets*,
- the notion of poetic 'impersonality', developed in the course of his two-part essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', and
- The notion of the 'objective correlative', developed in his essay on *Hamlet*.

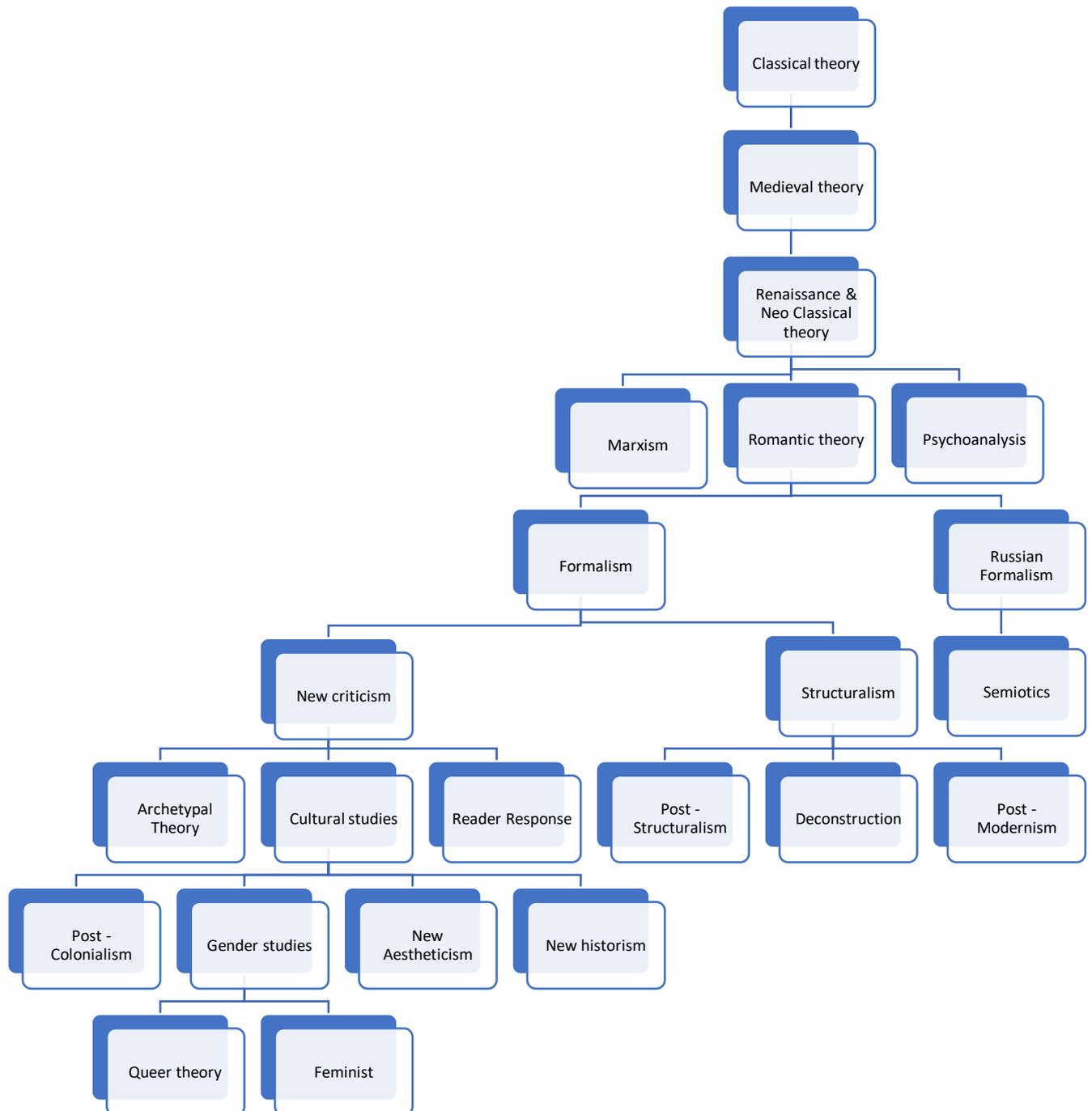
F.R. Leavis:

The most influential British critic prior to the theory movement was F. R. Leavis. Leavis, like Arnold in the previous century, assumed that the study and appreciation of literature is a pre-condition to the health of society. He too distrusted abstract thought and looked for a system of literary appreciation (like Arnold's Touchstones) which by-passed fixed criteria, arguing instead for an openness to the qualities of the text. Like Arnold, finally, he rejected any attempt to politicise either literature or criticism directly.

The two differ, however, in a few notable regards: Arnold, for example, takes the pantheon of past great writers more or less for granted: he does not question the excellence of Dante, for instance, which is why Dante can become a Touchstone. By contrast, Leavis sometimes wrote essays attacking the reputations of major established figures, and, indeed, it was the essence of his method to argue that some reputations would *not* stand up to the kind of close textual scrutiny he constantly recommended. Arnold, in his critical ideas, seems essentially to license and encourage the amateur. You may not have read *everything*, he implies (how could you, since you don't have the unlimited time of the professional critic?), but if you have read the best, and can identify its qualities, then you can be confident in looking at new writing and reaching a true judgement on it. This 'protestant' aesthetic encourages a direct relationship between the individual reader and the literary greats.

F. R. Leavis began as an admirer of Eliot's critical work as well as of his poetry, but later greatly modified his views. He avoided the coining of critical vocabulary, and instead used as critical terms words and phrases which already had established lay senses: 'life', for instance, is used by Leavis almost as a critical term, as is the notion of 'felt experience'. For Leavis the crucial test is whether the work is conducive to 'life' and vitality. Leavis's extreme popularity was partly due to the fact that he was essentially a kind of combined avatar of Johnson and Arnold, offering again the former's moralism and the latter's social vision and anti-theoretical critical practice. Leavis is still so pervasive an influence that little more need be said about him here.

The transition to 'theory':



The growth of critical theory in the post-war period seems to comprise a series of 'waves', each associated with a specific decade, and all aimed against the liberal humanist consensus just illustrated, which had been established between the 1930s and the 1950s. In the 1960s, firstly, there were two older, but still unassimilated, rival new approaches, these being *Marxist criticism*, which had been pioneered in the 1930s and then reborn in the 1960s, and *psychoanalytic criticism*, which was of the same vintage and was similarly renewing itself in the 1960s. At the same time two new approaches were mounting vigorous direct assaults on liberal humanist orthodoxies, namely *linguistic criticism*, which came into being in the early 1960s, and early forms of *feminist criticism*, which started to become a significant factor at the end of the decade.

Then, in the 1970s news spread in literary-critical circles in Britain and the United States of controversial new critical approaches, in particular *structuralism* and *post-structuralism*, both of which originated in France. The effect of these two was so powerful as to produce, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, a situation which was frequently referred to as a 'crisis' or 'civil war' in the discipline of English. The questions these two approaches centred upon concerned matters of language and philosophy, rather than history or context. In the 1980s a shift occurred which is sometimes called the 'turn to history', whereby history, politics, and context were reinstated at the centre of the literary-critical agenda. Thus, in the early 1980s two new forms of political/ historical criticism emerged, *new historicism* from the United States and *cultural materialism* from Britain. Both these take what might be called a 'holistic' approach to literature, aiming to integrate literary and historical study while at the same time maintaining some of the insights of the structuralists and post-structuralists of the previous decade.

Finally, in the 1990s a general flight from overarching grand explanations seemed to be taking place, and there was what seemed a decisive drift towards dispersal, eclecticism, and 'special interest' forms of criticism and theory. Thus, the approach known as *post colonialism* rejects the idea of a universally applicable Marxist explanation of things and emphasises the separateness or otherness of post-imperial nations and peoples. Likewise, *postmodernism* stresses the uniquely fragmented nature of much contemporary experience. Feminism, too, shows signs of dissolving into a loose federation known as gender studies, with gay and lesbian texts emerging as distinct fields of literature, and hence implying and generating appropriate and distinct critical approaches: also part of this 1990s federation is black feminist (or 'womanist') criticism. The necessary limits on a book like the present one make it impossible to include everything, and for the time being it does not venture beyond postcolonialism and postmodernism.

Some recurrent ideas in critical theory

These different approaches each have their separate traditions and histories, but several ideas are recurrent in critical theory and seem to form what might be regarded as its common bedrock. Hence, it makes some sense to speak of 'theory' as if it were a single entity

with a set of underlying beliefs, as long as we are aware that doing so is a simplification. Some of these recurrent underlying ideas of theory are listed below.

1. Many of the notions which we would usually regard as the basic 'givens' of our existence (including our gender identity, our individual selfhood, and the notion of literature itself) are actually fluid and unstable things, rather than fixed and reliable essences. Instead of being solidly 'there' in the real world of fact and experience, they are 'socially constructed', that is, dependent on social and political forces and on shifting ways of seeing and thinking. In philosophical terms, all these are *contingent* categories (denoting a status which is temporary, provisional, 'circumstance-dependent') rather than *absolute* ones (that is, fixed, immutable, etc.). Hence, no overarching fixed 'truths' can ever be established. The results of all forms of intellectual enquiry are provisional only. There is no such thing as a fixed and reliable truth (except for the statement that this is so, presumably). The position on these matters which theory attacks is often referred to, in a kind of shorthand, as *essentialism*, while many of the theories discussed in this book would describe themselves as *anti-essentialist*.
2. Theorists generally believe that all thinking and investigation is necessarily affected and largely determined by prior ideological commitment. The notion of disinterested enquiry is therefore untenable: none of us, they would argue, is capable of standing back from the scales and weighing things up dispassionately: rather, all investigators have a thumb on one side or other of the scales. Every practical procedure (for instance, in literary criticism) presupposes a theoretical perspective of some kind. To deny this is simply to try to place our own theoretical position beyond scrutiny as something which is 'commonsense' or 'simply given'. This contention is problematical, of course, and is usually only made explicit as a counter to specific arguments put forward by opponents. The problem with this view is that it tends to discredit one's own project along with all the rest, introducing a *relativism* which disables argument and cuts the ground from under any kind of commitment.
3. Language itself conditions, limits, and predetermines what we see. Thus, all reality is constructed through language, so that nothing is simply 'there' in an unproblematical way - everything is a linguistic/ textual construct. Language doesn't *record* reality, it shapes and creates it, so that the whole of our universe is textual. Further, for the theorist, meaning is jointly constructed by reader and writer. It isn't just 'there' and waiting before we get to the text but requires the reader's contribution to bring it into being.
4. Hence, any claim to offer a definitive reading would be futile. The meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting, multi-faceted and ambiguous. In literature, as in all writing, there is never the possibility of establishing fixed and definite meanings: rather, it is characteristic of language to generate infinite webs of meaning, so that all texts are necessarily self-contradictory, as the process of

deconstruction will reveal. There is no final court of appeal in these matters, since literary texts, once they exist, are viewed by the theorist as independent linguistic structures whose authors are always 'dead' or 'absent'.

5. Theorists distrust all 'totalising' notions. For instance, the notion of 'great' books as an absolute and self-sustaining category is to be distrusted, as books always arise out of a particular socio-political situation, and this situation should not be suppressed, as tends to happen when they are promoted to 'greatness'. Likewise, the concept of a 'human nature', as a generalised norm which transcends the idea of a particular race, gender, or class, is to be distrusted too, since it is usually in practice *Eurocentric* (that is, based on white European norms) and *androcentric* (that is, based on masculine norms and attitudes). Thus, the appeal to the idea of a generalised, supposedly inclusive, human nature is likely in practice to marginalise, or denigrate, or even deny the humanity of women, or disadvantaged groups.

Five points for theory:

- Politics is pervasive,
- Language is constitutive,
- Truth is provisional,
- Meaning is contingent,
- Human nature is a myth.

Structuralism

In sociology, anthropology, and linguistics, **structuralism** is a general theory of culture and methodology that implies that elements of human culture must be understood by way of their relationship to a broader system. It works to uncover the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel.

Structuralism Critical Terms:

Signifier & Signified:

Signified and signifier is a concept, most commonly related to semiotics, that can be described as "the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation." Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the two founders of semiotics, introduced these terms as the two main planes of a sign: *signified* pertains to the "plane of content," while *signifier* is the "plane of expression."

Langue & Parole:

Langue and *parole* is a theoretical linguistic dichotomy distinguished by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. The French term *langue* ('[an individual] language') encompasses the abstract, systematic rules and conventions of a signifying system; it is independent of, and pre-exists, the individual user. It involves the

principles of language, without which no meaningful utterance, or *parole*, would be possible. In contrast, *parole* ('speech') refers to the concrete instances of the use of *langue*, including texts which provide the ordinary research material for linguistics.

Semiotics:

Semiotics (also called semiotic studies) is the study of sign process (semiosis), which is any form of activity, conduct, or any process that involves signs, including the production of meaning. A sign is anything that communicates a meaning, that is not the sign itself, to the interpreter of the sign. The meaning can be intentional such as a word uttered with a specific meaning, or unintentional, such as a symptom being a sign of a particular medical condition. Signs can communicate through any of the senses, visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory

The Scope of Structuralism:

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 Levi-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 Citroen 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

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.

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-with in 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.

Reference:

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002.