In literary theory and criticism[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Structuralism&action=edit&section=4" \o "Edit section: In literary theory and criticism)]

*Main article: [Semiotic literary criticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotic_literary_criticism%22%20%5Co%20%22Semiotic%20literary%20criticism)*

In [literary theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_theory%22%20%5Co%20%22Literary%20theory), structuralist criticism relates literary texts to a larger structure, which may be a particular [genre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre), a range of [intertextual](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intertextuality%22%20%5Co%20%22Intertextuality) connections, a model of a universal [narrative structure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_structure), or a system of recurrent patterns or motifs.[[13]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structuralism#cite_note-13)[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structuralism#cite_note-14)Structuralism argues that there must be a structure in every text, which explains why it is easier for experienced readers than for non-experienced readers to interpret a text. Hence, everything that is written seems to be governed by specific rules, or a "grammar of literature", that one learns in educational institutions and that are to be unmasked.[[15]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structuralism#cite_note-15)

A potential problem of structuralist interpretation is that it can be highly reductive, as scholar [Catherine Belsey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine_Belsey) puts it: "the structuralist danger of collapsing all difference."[[16]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structuralism#cite_note-16) An example of such a reading might be if a student concludes the authors of [*West Side Story*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Side_Story_%28musical%29) did not write anything "really" new, because their work has the same structure as Shakespeare's [*Romeo and Juliet*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_and_Juliet). In both texts a girl and a boy fall in love (a "formula" with a symbolic operator between them would be "Boy **+** Girl") despite the fact that they belong to two groups that hate each other ("Boy's Group **-** Girl's Group" or "Opposing forces") and conflict is resolved by their death. Structuralist readings focus on how the structures of the single text resolve inherent narrative tensions. If a structuralist reading focuses on multiple texts, there must be some way in which those texts unify themselves into a coherent system. The versatility of structuralism is such that a literary critic could make the same claim about a story of two *friendly* families ("Boy's Family **+** Girl's Family") that arrange a marriage between their children despite the fact that the children hate each other ("Boy **-** Girl") and then the children commit suicide to escape the arranged marriage; the justification is that the second story's structure is an 'inversion' of the first story's structure: the relationship between the values of love and the two pairs of parties involved have been reversed.

Structuralistic literary criticism argues that the "literary banter of a text" can lie only in new structure, rather than in the specifics of character development and voice in which that structure is expressed. Literary structuralism often follows the lead of [Vladimir Propp](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Propp), [Algirdas Julien Greimas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algirdas_Julien_Greimas%22%20%5Co%20%22Algirdas%20Julien%20Greimas), and [Claude Lévi-Strauss](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_L%C3%A9vi-Strauss) in seeking out basic deep elements in stories, [myths](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythology), and more recently, anecdotes, which are combined in various ways to produce the many versions of the ur-story or ur-myth.

There is considerable similarity between structural literary theory and [Northrop Frye](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northrop_Frye)'s archetypal criticism, which is also indebted to the anthropological study of myths. Some critics have also tried to apply the theory to individual works, but the effort to find unique structures in individual literary works runs counter to the structuralist program and has an affinity with [New Criticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Criticism).

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

# **Structuralism in Literature : An Introduction & Details**

[Home](https://alok-mishra.net/)/[Modern Criticism & Literary Theories](https://alok-mishra.net/topics/modern-criticism-literary-theories/)/Structuralism in Literature : An Introduction & Details

[Previous](https://alok-mishra.net/global-literature/) [Next](https://alok-mishra.net/jai-jawan-hindi-poem-brave-indian-army/)

## Structuralism in Literature : An Introduction & Details

### **Structuralism is a broad concept and me, you or anybody else cannot put it entirely in a single article. That’s the most important thing I thought to bring up in the very first line so that you get it first-hand that being a student of literature, you have to focus on structuralism in literature rather than the whole concept of this term (or system). Just to give you a sense of what ‘Structuralism’ is in the broader sense, I would like to write a few lines. In the beginning, Structuralism was a movement, a movement which has much to do with ‘language’ and ‘signs’. If you refer to the Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, you will find something very near:**

### **“A movement of thought in Human sciences, wide-spread in Europe, which has affected a number of fields of knowledge and inquiry…”**

### **Thus, you must know that this movement, in its flourish, intruded into literature. However, it did not only enter into the sphere of literature, it changed the very popular notion that every piece of literature reflects the reality of society. The major proposition of Structuralism tries to convey that ‘language and signs are fixed’ and ‘nothing more as such new can be added to it’. This is for a reason that Structuralist theory first entered into linguistics and then sneaked into literature as well. To conclude the definition part, Structuralism is basically a scientific study of language which tries to establish that ‘signs’ and ‘significance’ are fixed and anything a writer writes is already there in the past. It has much to do with anthropology, sociology, history and philosophy as well. Thus, structuralism entered the literary scene with bags and baggage.**

### **Structuralist Theory in Literature:**

### **Cynicism in me would not ask when did this theory enter in the domains of literature. I would rather ask that why did structuralism at all enter in literature? Language and literature, however related, are two different aspects. Judging a poem by Keats on the basis of linguistic theory would be nothing less than an extradition of poetry! However, let’s focus on the topic. There are many opinions about when did exactly structuralism enter into the purview of literature. I would like to go with the Peter Barry version because I believe he has the best opinions and facts at times. Barry observes:**

### **“Structuralism was imported into Britain mainly into the 1970s and attained widespread influence, and even notoriety, throughout the 1980s.” pp.38 (Beginning Theory)**

### **Because I know what do the students need to learn, I will keep things short and pointed. The critics of the School of Structuralism believed that ‘nothing can exist in isolation’. There is a structure, rather wider, that encompasses the ‘smaller’ fragments of a greater whole. For example, if you read a novel, say Thomas Hardy’s Far from the Madding Crowd, what do you find? As a common reader, me, you or Jack, anyone will see the quality of Hardy’s narration, his eloquence in dealing with the theme of true love and his understanding of the human emotions. Coming to the structuralists, they will enquire about the genre of the novel, then about the preceding novels of the same genre, then they will try to look if they can establish a ‘framework’ on which all the novels can be framed. At the bottom of the page, you might see something like – typical romance novel, a poor & honest lover, an arrogant girl and in the end, they unite. So, the structuralist will make you believe that Hardy has written nothing new; see, we (they) have exposed his structure that Hardy followed. In a nutshell, this is the structuralism in literature – no piece produced by an author brings anything new to the stock.**

### **The major names associated with this school of criticism might be grouped very easily. For most of the students and their teachers, the school opened with Ferdinand de Saussure. His book – A Course in General Linguistics (1915) brought into the light many new things (or old but in a new way) to the public reading. Major highlights of his book are that he believed and language and speech are two different things. For Saussure, language is permanent and speech is temporal as well as variable. Another important name will be Vladimir Propp who propagated the ‘basic plot’ theory of the Russian Fairy Tales. His theory, however, shrinks itself only to the confinements of Russian Fairy Tales. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French Anthropologist, is also very important name on the page of Structuralist Criticism. Strauss presented a theory of ‘Mythemes’ which, he advocated, are the units of myths. I must give a word to A. J. Greimas as well who has presented a theory of ‘three pairs of binaries’. These binaries are present in almost all the works of literature, he advocates, and form the core of any work. Binaries are:**

### **Subject/Object**

### **Sender/Receiver**

### **Helper/Opponent**

### **Tzvetan Todorov, a philosopher from Bulgaria, advocated the structure of five basic proposition that include:**

### **Equilibrium (Peace)**

### **Force (Enemy invades)**

### **Disequilibrium (War)**

### **Force (Enemy defeated)**

### **Equilibrium (Peace on new terms)**

### **The most recent, if not influencive, person from the School of Structuralism was, and still is, Jonathan Culler. Jonathan has presented a wonderful premise that we can only interpret the interpretations. He advocated that to give a structure or theory to something which has been written in past is almost impossible.**

### **At last, I would like to put the things in perspective once again. The school of structuralism in literature and all the subscribers of this school actually ‘write off’ everything else about literature and restlessly pursue the codes, structure, signs and similarities with ‘other’ pieces of literature. Thus, in a way, for them, human emotions, history, author’s point of view and the hard work that author has done don’t have any value at all. At the heart of their investigation is a ‘language system’. The structuralist critic in literary purview believes that human civilization is ‘governed’ by language and the follow the traces left by the linguists in the past. This very theory of ‘centre’ and ‘origin’ gave birth to the antidote that the conventional literary critics were looking for eagerly – Deconstruction! I will conclude with two major citations from two major books. First is for the students: what do the structuralist critics do?**

### **They analyse (mainly) prose narratives, relating the text to some larger containing structure, such as:**

### **the conventions of a particular literary genre, or**

### **a network of intertextual connections, or**

### **a projected model of an underlying universal narrative structure, or**

### **a notion of narrative as a complex of recurrent patterns of motifs**

### **pp.48 (Beginning Theory, Peter Barry)**

### **“…. Therefore, structuralists are interested not in the development of the novel or the transition from feudal to Renaissance literary forms, but in the structure of narrative as such and in the system of aesthetics governing a period. Their approach is necessarily static and ahistorical: they are interested in neither the moment of the text’s production (its historical context, its formal links with past writing, etc.) nor the moment of its reception or ‘reproduction’.” pp.78 (A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory, Seldon, Widdowson & Brooker)**

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx