MYTH POETICS

A STRUCTURALIST STUDY

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Abstract: Myth Poetics is concerned with the scientific study of myth. Though the concept of poetics is derived from Aristotle but myth poetics can be understood as engaging and exploring myth through the modern scientific approach pioneered by Claude Levi-Strauss's structural analysis of myth. Thomas Campbell describes myth as living inspiration while Carl Jung defines myth as personal. According to Campbell myth is not only the bearer of the religious beliefs, philosophical musings, artistic expressions, social formations but also is the location of scientific and technological discoveries. Jung compares myth with science, bringing out the predominance of myth over science in understanding the subjectivity in an individual life. It manifests a more individualistic approach and expresses life with more precision than Science. Science works with concepts of averages which are far too general to do justice to the subjectivism immanent in all its variety in the particular. Myth is the repository of cultural narratives of the preliterate societies. Myth Poetics explores myth beyond the limitations of human propensities towards mythopoesis and mythogenesis. Through the structural interpretation of myths, myth poetics draws attention towards the innate speculative organization of the myths. It simultaneously focuses on the specificities of a culture and the universality inherent in mythic structures.

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the concept of myth and aim to construct a myth poetics by using the works of Claude Levi-Strauss. The work intends to understand myth as a complex structural unit based on contraries. The myth according to Claude Levi-Strauss is not a structure of isolated relations but bundles of such relations. The myth is simultaneously diachronic and synchronic. In his important work *The Savage Mind* Levi-Strauss is able to establish that there is a whole system of correspondences among the elements of myth. Levi-Strauss' focus is on the unconscious relations of a myth. He believes that, myths and rites are far from being, as has often been held, the product of man's 'myth-making faculty' (Bergson 108), turning its back on reality. Their principal value is indeed to preserve until the present time the remnants of methods of observation and reflection which were (and no doubt still are) precisely adapted to discoveries of a certain type: those which nature authorised from the starting point of a speculative organization and exploitation of the sensible world in sensible terms. This science of the concrete was necessarily restricted by its essence to results other than those destined to be achieved by the exact natural sciences but it was no less scientific and its results no less genuine. They were secured ten thousand years earlier and still remain at the very basis of civilizations.

Levi-Strauss is of the view that even in the present times among the modern denizens of the so called civilized world, there exists an activity which on the technical plane gives us quite a good understanding of what a science we prefer to call 'prior' rather than 'primitive', could have been on the plane of speculation. This phenomenon Levi-Strauss refers as 'bricolage' (a French term in its modern usage, somewhat corresponding to that of 'tinkering'. A person who practices bricolage is a 'bricoleur', a 'tinkerer'. In its old sense the verb 'bricoleur' was always used with reference to some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle).

Like Bricolage on the technical plane, mythical reflection can reach brilliant unforeseen results on the intellectual plane. Levi-Strauss developed the comparison of the Bricoleur and Engineer in *The Savage Mind*. In comparison to the true craftsman, whom Levi-Strauss calls the Engineer; the Bricoleur is proficient at executing many tasks and at putting pre-existing things together in new ways, adapting his project to a finite stock of materials and tools. The Engineer deals with projects in their entirety, conceiving and procuring all the necessary materials and tools to suit his project. The Bricoleur approximates "the savage mind" and the Engineer approximates "the scientific mind". Levi-Strauss says that the universe of the Bricoleur is closed, and he often is forced to make do with whatever is at hand, whereas the universe of the Engineer is open in that he is able to create new tools and materials. But both live within a restrictive reality, and so the Engineer is forced to consider the pre-existing set of theoretical and practical knowledge, of technical means, in a similar way to the Bricoleur.

Levi-Strauss develops his idea of Bricoleur by pursuing the analogy between an Engineer and a Bricoleur, only to bring out the simmilarity between a bricoleur and mythical elements, stating that, "The 'bricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks" (Strauss 17), equipped with instruments which are 'finite' and 'heterogeneous' by nature, addressing the need to deal with not only the project at hand but also any possible usage in the future. Thus, these elements are not intrinsically fashioned for a definitive and precise use. Each one of them exemplifies 'actual and possible relations'.

Drawing similarities between a bricoleur and mythical elements Levi-Strauss regards the distinctive aspect of mythical thought is, that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. This functional principle of the mythical bears a striking resemblance to the performance of a bricoleur. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual 'bricolage'- according to Levi-Strauss, which explains the relations which can be perceived between the two.

Elaborating on the median role played by the mythical thought Levi-Strauss claims that, 'the elements of mythical thought lie half-way between percepts and concepts', half-way between the representation of what is perceived and the general idea derived by specific instances. Emphasizing the functional capacity of a sign, as a tool of interpretation of the mythical thought he then, identifies signs as a negotiator forging a link between images and concepts. Now, a sign is broadly speaking, a representation of an object that implies a connection between itself and its object, but Strauss does not conform to this general definition. He delimits the meaning of sign by referring to it as a 'linguistic sign', as a 'link between images and concepts. In the union thus brought about, images and concepts play the part of the signifying and signified respectively'.

Levi-Strauss' referral here is the definition of 'linguistic sign' by Ferdinand De Saussure (a Swiss linguist and semiotician whose ideas laid a foundation for many significant developments both in linguistics and semiotics in the twentieth century) in his seminal work, *Course in General Linguistic.* According to Saussure, a linguistic sign is a double entity, which instead of uniting a thing with a name unites a concept with a sound-image. The word "concept" is replaced by the word "signified," while the word "sound-image" is replaced by the word "signifier". Saussure defines the sound-image, not as the physical sound but as the psychological imprint of the sound upon our senses. The signified and the signifier together make up the sign.

Levi-Saussure while discussing the nature of the linguist sign criticizes the notion that things precede words. He rejects the theory of language, which posits it as "a naming-process only-a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names." He does so because such a theory "assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words; it does not tell us whether a name is vocal or psychological in nature . . . finally it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation."

Levi-Saussure relates to the linguistic sign by replacing the actual referential reality with the signified. What the signifier points to, is not something which exists outside of language, but rather to a meaning which is contained within human consciousness. The division between signifier and signified, the two component units which together compose Saussure's linguistic sign, is the basis for his subsequent proposition that everything gains its meaning out of being in structural oppositional relations with other components.

When discussing the nature of the linguistic sign Saussure makes his famous statement about the linguistic sign being arbitrary. This Saussurean principle of the arbitrary character of the linguistic signs was a prerequisite for the acceding of linguistics to the scientific level. He elaborates that the sign is arbitrary because "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary." The idea of "flower" is not linked to the sound of the word "flower". The link between the idea and the sound-or the signified and the signifier-is a matter of societal convention.

Levi-Saussure further claims that the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is easily demonstrated by pointing to the fact that different languages have different signs for the same denotations. But this fact points towards the illumination of another supposition. Were words representations of pre-existing concepts all languages will have parallel words. But we do know that different languages cover the world of meaning with differently divided semantic networks. This means that language does not simply describe reality, but is in fact something separate and autonomous from it. When Saussure says that the linguistic sign is arbitrary he means it not in the sense that anyone can make up words, quite the opposite, signs according to Saussure are all conventions that are socially constructed. The linguistic sign, in other words, is arbitrary but is not open for free choice; its meaning is imposed on us by our linguistic surrounding.

Saussure's ideas regarding the nature of the linguistic signs were of huge influence in the twentieth century and were the corner stone of both structuralism and semiotics. Saussure's revolution is in making language relational into itself, it is not fixed nor predetermined, and it was now up to philosophy, sociology, linguistics and other adjacent fields to examine the manner in which a signifier is tied to a signified.

Levi-Strauss further emphasizes that, signs resemble images in being concrete entities but they resemble concepts in their powers of reference. Neither concepts nor signs relate exclusively to themselves; either may be substituted for something else. Concepts, however, have an unlimited capacity in this respect, while signs have not. The possibilities for signs remain limited owing to the particular history attached to them and due to the originally intended use of its predetermined features or the alterations it has undertaken for other purposes.

Similarly, the elements which the 'bricoleur' collects and uses are 'pre-constrained' like the constitutive units of myth, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuvre. And the decision as to what to put in each place also depends on the possibility of putting a different element there instead, so that each choice which is made will involve a complete reorganization of the structure, which will never be the same as one vaguely imagined nor as some other which might have been preferred to it.

Levi-Strauss is of the opinion that mythical thought operating on the principle of bricolage endeavours to re-arrange and re-use the available materials in order to provide solutions to the ever altering aspect of the problems of each age. The problematic paradigm of a culture in a particular age is to be comprehended by its successive ages through the interpretations of myth. It appears that the primal message of cognition is encoded in myths only to be decoded by humanity through various ages.

He further elaborates that the characteristic feature of mythical thought as of 'bricolage' on the practical plane, is that it builds up structured sets, not directly with other structured sets but by using the remains and debris of events, the fossilized evidence of the history of an individual or a society. The relation between the diachronic and the synchronic is therefore in a sense reversed. Mythical thought is like that of 'bricoleur', building up structures by fitting together events or rather the remains of events while science, 'in operation' simply by virtue of coming into being, creates its means and results in the form of events, thanks to the structures which it is constantly elaborating and which are its hypotheses and theories.

In mythic thought knowledge of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts. And even if this is an illusion, the point of the procedure is to create or sustain the illusion, which gratifies the intelligence and gives rise to a sense of pleasure which can already be called aesthetic on these grounds alone. According to Levi-Strauss, the aesthetic emotion is the result of this union between the structural order and the order of events, which is brought about within a thing created by man and so also in effect by the observer who discovers the possibility of such a union through the work of art.

Several points are suggested by this analysis. In the first place, the analysis helps us to see why we are inclined to think of myths both as systems of abstract relations and as objects of aesthetic contemplation. The creative act which gives rise to myths is in fact exactly the reverse of that which gives rise to works of art. In the case of works of art, the starting point is a set of one or more objects and one or more events which aesthetic creation unifies by revealing a common structure. Myths follow the same path but start from the other end. They use a structure to produce what is itself an object consisting of a set of events. Thus, rites and myths, like 'bricolage', take to pieces and reconstruct sets of events (on a psychical, socio-historical or technical plane) and use them as so many indestructible pieces for structural patterns in which they serve alternatively as ends or means.

In the 1960s Levi-Strauss was working on his master project, a four-volume study called *Mythologiques*. In it, he followed a single myth from the tip of South America and all of its variations from group to group up through Central America and eventually into the Arctic Circle, thus tracing the myth's cultural evolution from one end of the Western hemisphere to the other. He accomplished this in a typically structuralist way, examining the underlying structure of relationships among the elements of the story rather than by focusing on the content of the story itself. While *The Savage Mind* was a statement of Strauss's big-picture theory, *Mythologiques* was an extended, four-volume example of analysis.

Levi-Strauss identified myths as a type of human speech through which a universal language could be discovered. Through his work he tried to establish a structuralist theory of mythology, which attempted to explain that the ostensibly fantastical and arbitrary nature of the mythological tales could be prominently similar across cultures. As Levi-Strauss believed that there was not one "authentic" version of a myth, rather that they were all manifestations of the same language, he sought to find the fundamental units of myth, namely, the mytheme.

Levi-Strauss described mytheme as a "gross constituent unit". According to him, a mytheme is the essential kernel of a myth, an irreducible and an unchanging element, that is always found shared with other, related mythemes and reassembled in various ways or linked in more complicated relationships, like a molecule in a compound. Strauss broke down each of the versions of a myth into a series of basic sentences, comprising of a relation between a function and a subject. Sentences with the same function were given the same number and grouped together. These elemental groups were termed as mythemes by Levi-Strauss.

In the study of mythology Levi-Strauss applied, the concept of mytheme to understand the canonical similarities or differences between the myths from diverse cultures. For example, the myths of Adonis (who in Greek mythology, is the god of beauty and desire, and is a central figure in various mystery religions) and Osiris (an Egyptian god, usually identified as the god of the afterlife, the underworld and the dead) share several elements, leading some scholars to conclude that they share a source, i.e. images passed down in cultures or from one to another, being ascribed new interpretations of the action depicted as well as new names in various readings of icons.

It was in *Structural Anthropology* that Claude Levi-Strauss established the rationale behind employing mytheme as the comparative tool of analysis of the structure of myth from various cultures across the world by claiming that, "If one wants to establish a parallel between structural linguistics and the structural analysis of myths, the correspondence is established, not between mytheme and word but between mytheme and phoneme" (Strauss 144-46). He explained the rudimentary principle involved in the application of mytheme by comparing the structural analysis practised in the study of linguistics to the study of mythology. In linguistics a morpheme is the smallest linguistic unit that has semantic meaning and in a language or dialect, a phoneme (a sound uttered) is the smallest segmental unit of sound employed to form meaningful contrasts between utterances. Likewise in mythology, mytheme is a minimal unit of meaning within mythic utterances.

The analysis of myth as undertaken by Claude Levi-Strauss has been attempted by many thinkers. Early critics, such as Ernst Cassirer (a Jewish German historian and philosopher), explained the relation of myth to history, religion, the productions of art and knowledge-the contents of ethics, law, language, and technology, and the problematic rapport between myth and belief. The advent of psychoanalysis introduced another perspective: Sigmund Freud (an Austrian neurologist who became known as the founding father of psychoanalysis) linked myth directly to the human psyche; Carl G. Jung (a Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist who founded analytical psychology) developed the theory of the collective unconscious, focusing on the notion of archetypes; and other theorists and mythographers reinterpreted the nature of myth.

The structuralist analyzer of narratives, Vladimir Propp, a Soviet formalist scholar, perused a subset of myth, the folktale. He examined the basic plot components of Russian folk tales to identify their simplest irreducible narrative elements. Propp's theories represent an important backdrop for Levi-Strauss's later work, for Levi-Strauss enunciates his conception of myth analysis in

contradistinction to Propp's approach. In *Morphology of the Folktale,* Propp establishes a system of classification of folktales based on their functions performed within the tales. He states that the unit of analysis is the individual tale.

Although Levi-Strauss, like Propp, concentrates on the structure of narrative, the interpretative system of Levi-Strauss differs essentially from Propp's theories. First, for Levi-Strauss, the unit of analysis is not the folktale, but the myth, a form of narrative he views as more fundamental than its offspring, the tale; he asserts that folktales, through their artistic development, obscure the original logic inherent in primordial myth. From Levi-Strauss's perspective, myths represent central components of cultural consciousness, and simultaneously reflect and help form the human mind. Whereas Propp concerns himself with the aesthetic form of his object of study, Levi-Strauss focuses on the logical form, the system of ideas embodied in a mythology. He posits that the unitary mytheme, by contrast, is the equivalent in myth of the phonemes, morphemes, and sememes into which structural linguistics divides language, the smallest possible units of meaning within a language system. The structuralist approach to myth analysis thus focuses on the internal framework of the myth instead of on its external functions.

In the 1950s, Claude Levi-Strauss first adapted the technique of language analysis to analytic myth criticism. In his work on the myth systems of primitive tribes, working from the analogy of language structure, he adopted the usage of mytheme in formulating his premise that the system of meaning within mythic utterances parallels closely that of a language system.

Levi Strauss based his analysis of myth on the linguistic model set forth by such structural linguists as Roman Jakobson, a Russian–American linguist and literary theorist, who in his study of language concentrates on the examination of the simplest, most easily identifiable constituents of language and their interrelations. He shifts the emphasis from an examination of the elements themselves, as was the case with traditional linguistic theory, to an exploration of the interrelations between them. Structural linguistics divides language into a series of units called phonemes, morphemes and sememes, the smallest possible units of meaning within a language system. These units, considered in isolation, exhibit little significance; their potential for broader meaning is born out of their union, interrelationships and order.

Levi-Strauss adapts this style of language analysis to the realm of myth by taking the mytheme to be a phoneme which is without significance in itself but whose significance might be shown by cultural and sociological analysis. Levi-Strauss believed that he had discovered while examining the relations between mythemes, that a myth consists of juxtaposed binary oppositions. The myth of Oedipus, for example, consists of the overrating of blood relations and the underrating of blood relations, the autochthonous origin of humans and the denial of their autochthonous origin. Influenced by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel(a German philosopher, and a major figure in German Idealism) Levi-Strauss believed that the human mind thinks fundamentally in these binary oppositions and their unification (the thesis, antithesis, synthesis triad), and that these are what make meaning possible. Furthermore, he considered the job of myth to be prestidigitation, an association of an irreconcilable binary opposition with a reconcilable binary opposition, creating the illusion, or belief, that the former had been resolved.

In *Structural Anthropology* Levi Strauss also sets forth his views on culture. He considers culture a system of symbolic communication. His reasoning makes best sense when contrasted against the background of an earlier generation's social theory. A preference for "functionalist" explanations dominated the social sciences from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1950s, which is to say that anthropologists and sociologists tried to state the purpose of a social act or institution. The existence of a thing was explained, if it fulfilled a function. The only strong alternative to that kind of analysis was historical explanation, accounting for the existence of a social fact by stating how it came to be.

Historical information seldom is available for non-literate cultures. The anthropologist fills in with comparisons to other cultures and is forced to rely on theories that have no evidential basis whatsoever, the old notion of universal stages of development or the claim that cultural resemblances are based on some unrecognized past contact between groups. The German educated Franz Boas came to believe that no overall pattern in social development could be proven; for him, there was no single history, only histories.

There are three broad choices involved in the divergence of the schools undertaking the analysis: each had to decide what kind of evidence to use; whether to emphasize the particulars of a single culture or look for patterns underlying all societies; and what the source of any underlying patterns might be, the definition of a common humanity.

Social scientists in all traditions relied on cross-cultural studies. It always was necessary to supplement information about a society with information about others. So some idea of a common human nature was implicit in each approach. The critical distinction, then, remained: does a social fact exist because it is functional for the social order, or because it is functional for the person? Do uniformities across cultures occur because of organizational needs that must be met everywhere, or because of the uniform needs of human personality?

For Levi-Strauss, the choice was for the demands of the social order. He had no difficulty bringing out the inconsistencies and triviality of individualistic accounts. But the accepted way of discussing organizational function didn't work either. Strauss applied the methods of linguistics to examine societies. His analogies usually are from phonology (though also later from music, mathematics, chaos theory, cybernetics, and so on).

"A really scientific analysis must be real, simplifying, and explanatory," he says (in Structural Anthropology). Phonemic analysis reveals features that are real, in the sense that users of the language can recognize and respond to them. At the same time, a phoneme is an abstraction from language–not a sound, but a category of sound defined by the way it is distinguished from other categories through rules unique to the language. The entire sound-structure of a language may be generated from a relatively small number of rules.

Levi-Strauss accentuates the idea of treating culture as the product of the axioms and corollaries that underlie it, or the phonemic differences that constitute it, he is also concerned with the objective data of field research. The purpose of structuralist explanation is to organize real data in the simplest effective way. All science, he says, is either structuralist or reductionist. The social scientist can only work with the structures of human thought that arise from it. The structural explanations can be tested and refuted. A mere analytic scheme that wishes causal relations into existence is not structuralist. Levi Strauss strongly advocates the application of structural analysis to the interpretation of culture in order to fully understand the universal patterns of the mythic rooted in the varied cultures.

Myth Poetics is special as it deals with the specificities of a culture according to the idiosyncratic weltanschauung of its people. Myth springs from the particular problems and concerns of a culture. Culture is the germinal soil which not only enables myth to blossom but also eternally nourishes it.

Levi-Strauss has explored the universal structures of a myth as well as examined whether a myth could be culture specific. The Cultural Specificity is the quality of being specific to a particular culture. Specificity with its peculiar and unique aspect is a facet of the particular. In the myth construct, the cultural specificity relates to the myth having a particular referent as opposed to referring to the universal. A cultural universal can be comprehended as a pattern, characteristic, component, or custom that is common and applicable to all human cultures worldwide.

It can thus, be proposed that myth along with being universal is also culture specific. Myth as a unit may have analogical structures but each culture, region generates its own myths. The aesthetics of a myth is simultaneously universal and differential. Claude Levi-Strauss theory has made it possible to construct a literary practice of a unique paradox: the paradox of universality and cultural specificity.

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