UNIT 18

New criticism, formalism and structuralism

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New Criticism

New Criticism is a twentieth-century phenomenon. It is the name given to the theories developed between the 1920s and 1950s by a group of American and British writers and academics. The activity of literary criticism – commenting upon and explaining the operation and significance of literature – has been going on since Plato and Aristotle, and the newness of the New Critics derives principally from their role as advocates and practitioners of literary criticism as an academic discipline.

The literature of classical Greece and Rome had been studied in the older universities since their formation. The study of modern (that is post-medieval) literature in English gained a foothold in higher education in the late nineteenth century, and New Criticism grew out of the determined and sometimes desperate attempts to establish it as a respectable university subject. The arguments against 'reading English' were powerful. Any literate person with a modicum of intelligence could 'study' English drama and poetry: they didn't need to go to university to do so. Indeed the formal study of literature was a contradiction in terms: modern literature was part of contemporary popular culture. Literature might involve religion, philosophy or morality, but it didn't engage seriously with these issues. It combined them with the less profound activities of story-telling and acting; the decorative style of poetry bespoke intelligence and artistry, but it did not make a significant contribution to the sum of knowledge.

In Britain the attempts to answer these charges of amateurism, dilettantism and irrelevance gained credence from a growing enthusiasm for English culture. Matthew Arnold, nineteenth-century poet and education theorist, is acknowledged as the originator of a number of precepts and maxims that sustained English Studies in its late-Victorian infancy and which survive in today's debates on the national curriculum and English in the universities. Arnold argued that the study of literature would inform and, mysteriously, harmonize the fragmented ideology and social disunity of modern British society. Literary studies would supplement, perhaps even replace, the Church as a touchstone for intellectual and social cohesion: it would cultivate or 'hellenize' the new and potentially philistine influence of the middle

classes; for the working class it would promote sympathy and fellow feeling with those who might be better off but who shared with their lower brethren a deep admiration for the universality and classless beauty of literary writing (for a detailed account of these theories and their implementation, see Baldick, 1983 and Ch. 1 of Eagleton, 1983).

Arnold's ideas would be paralleled and extended by the New Critics, but the notion of literary studies as a civilizing force begged a more specific question. What is literature? If literary studies was to be a useful component of the education system its advocates must first be able to define its subject, and then show how the detailed consideration of these intrinsic qualities might procure intellectual, cultural, social, even moral benefits.

New Criticism incorporates a complex and diverse body of opinion and practical work and this is underpinned by these two objectives: define literature; justify its broader significance as an educational subject.

The poet T.S. Eliot claimed in his essay on 'The Metaphysical Poets' ([1921] 1972) that

> a poet is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary [falling in love, reading Spinoza, the noise of the typewriter, the smell of cooking]; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (p. 2024)

Eliot's definition of poetry would be preserved and elaborated by the New Critics. Arnold himself had pre-empted it. The 'grand power' of poetry, he claimed, was not in its 'explanation of the mystery of the universe' (activities devolved to philosophy and religion) but in its ability to 'awaken in us' a sense of being in contact with the 'essential nature' of ordinary, mundane events and objects 'to have their secret, and to be in Harmony with them' (Arnold, [1865] 1970, pp. 157–8).

Eliot and Arnold promoted poetry as a vehicle for harmony and unification; not as a practical solution to disagreements in theology or morality or as offering some insight into the problems of social and political disunity; rather as a kind of personal, intellectual palliative, a discourse which involved a retreat from the utilitarian paradoxes of the real world to a world created by the poet, the literary text, in which the 'chaotic, irregular, fragmentary' material of experience would be coerced into 'new wholes'.

I.A. Richards was the first British literary critic to attempt to implement these principles as an academic programme – based upon his own work in the Cambridge English Faculty. He argued in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924; references from 1966 edition) that although poetry engages with the same problems and material as referential language (objects, intellectual and philosophical questions, etc.) it does so by promoting their purely *emotive* effects: 'the question of belief or disbelief, in the intellectual sense, never arises' (1966, p. 277). In place of an engagement with the poet's philosophical credence or religious integrity, the reader and critic should pay attention to the experience that is unique and particular to the reading of the poem. The critic should not be involved in paraphrasing or historiciz-ing the text but in recreating within himself what is assumed to be the mental

condition of the poet, the 'relevant mental condition' (1966, p. 1) shared by poet and reader. This might sound like a rather vague pseudo-mystical enterprise, but Richards rooted his objective in instructive guides (in *Practical Criticism*, 1929 and *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 1924) to the stylistic features and characteristics of poems which implement and sustain the 'relevant mental condition' of reading them. An example of this will be found in Unit 1, p. 11, with his precise definition of how poetic metaphor transforms language from its ordinary, utilitarian function.

The common feature of these theories is the idea that poetry is both relevant to the modern condition, in its ability to absorb and telescope the diversities of life into particular poems, and perversely elevated from the puzzling and sordid actualities of that condition. This double assertion permeates new critical thinking and manifests itself in a number of ways.

American New Criticism gained much of its cohesion and unity from a group of academics working in Vanderbilt University, Tennessee during the 1920s: principally, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren. Ransom's essay 'Criticism Inc' ([1937] 1972) economically summarizes the concerns and objectives of the group (references from reprint in Lodge, 1972). Ransom lists those elements that contribute to but which should not dominate the critical enterprise; and the subtext of his list of exclusions is his desire to isolate literary studies from the encroachment of other academic disciplines – particularly history, philosophy, linguistics and the newly emergent social sciences. 'Personal registrations' (tears, humour, desire, excitement) can be procured by the chemist or the Broadway producer. 'Synopsis and paraphrase' is the stuff of 'high school classes and women's clubs'. 'Historical studies' tell us about the author and his circumstances but are of no necessary relevance to the particular effect of the poem. Similarly, 'Linguistic Studies' might assist with a 'perfectly logical' understanding of 'content', but not with a proper understanding of the poem – and with 'Moral Studies': 'moral content is not the *whole* content' (p. 236). Ransom claims that although the critic may inform himself of these materials 'as possessed by the artist' his real business is to 'discuss the literary assimilation of them' (p. 236). The poem is a 'desperate ontological and metaphysical manoeuvre' in which the normal registers of language, fact, logic and emotion are transformed by its 'living integrity' (p. 238).

Given that we accept that poetry is capable of uniquely refracting and transmuting the commonly perceived world the problem remains of what the critic should do with all of the (in Ransom's view) extraneous information that will affect his/her reading; very few people read poems by Donne without some prior knowledge of the religious, marital and professional aspects of his life. In 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946) and 'The Affective Fallacy' (1949, reprinted in *The Verbal Icon*, 1954) W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley set about tackling this problem. They asked: If we can clarify the 'intention' or the 'affective' (i.e. emotional) register of a non-poetic statement by enquiring into its context or motivation, why not do so with literary statements? Their answer, though more detailed and better illustrated, was the same as Ransom's: literature involves the material of non-poetic discourse, but cuts itself off from the cause-and-effect relations which govern that discourse.

There have been a number of attempts by new critics to explain and quantify the mysterious power of poetry to project itself into this other-worldly realm. The best known and most widely discussed are William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) and Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947). The respective themes of these studies are the linguistic effects of 'ambiguity' and 'paradox'. In non-poetic language these effects are generally the result and cause of uncertainty, misapprehension or indecision. In poetry, however, they purposively inform the text, and, rather than producing puzzlement, effectively disclose the deep-rooted tensions and unresolvable conflicts that underpin our reasonings and perceptions of the world.

Brooks, for example, analyzes the fruitful paradoxes of Wordsworth's sonnet 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge',

> Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
> And all that mighty heart is lying still.

To say they are 'asleep' is to say they are alive, that they participate in the life of nature. ... It is only when the poet sees the city under the semblance of death [heart is lying still] that he can see it actually alive – quick with the only life that he can accept, the organic life of 'nature'. (Lodge, 1972, p. 294)

Brooks's critical method is firmly rooted in the idealistic tradition of Arnold and Eliot. He argues that Wordsworth telescopes broader universal themes (the city and nature; life and death) into localized and uniquely poetic tensions and paradoxes.

The New Critical programme of focusing upon how literature refracts and transmutes ordinary perceptions of the world is consistent with their earliest objectives of establishing literary studies in the university: as I have stated, we can reinterpret Ransom's catalogue of exclusions in terms of the potential threat to the integrity of literary criticism posed by other academic disciplines. Many critics, however, claim to find more disturbing motives.

The American new critics of Vanderbilt University published a journal called *The Fugitive* (earning themselves the collective title, 'The Fugitives') which, along with literary criticism, promoted the nostalgic and rather fantastic ideal of the coherence, harmony and unity of the rural society of the Old South – as opposed to the industrialized and decadent culture of the North. Terry Eagleton (1983, Ch. 1) discusses the relation between the methods of New Criticism and its ideological underpinnings.

A typical New Critical account of a poem offers a stringent investigation of its various 'tensions', 'paradoxes' and 'ambivalences', showing how these are resolved and integrated by its solid structure ... poetry was to be the new organic society in itself, the final solution to science, materialism, and the decline of the 'aesthetic' slave owning South. (p. 49) (See also Unit 14, p. 378.)

To sum up the points that have arisen so far, we can say that the new critical enterprise involves two dimensions of literary interpretation: (a) attention to the constituent features and operations of the literary text – those which characterize it as different from non-literary texts; (b) the capacity of literature, particularly poetry, to give us rich and 'concrete' apprehensions of experience, while at the same time

remaining immune from the determinate conditions of politics, society, philosophical and religious discourse.

Point (a) has since the 1960s been challenged by a variety of theorists who for the sake of convenience we can categorize as Reader-Response Critics and Poststructuralists (see Units 19 and 20). Much more damaging challenges have focused upon point (b), and these have come from Feminists, Marxists, New Historicists and a broad range of writers who advocate that the study of literature must involve a perception of literary texts as only one dimension of the broader cultural, social and political fabric (see Units 21, 23 and 24).

In order to reach your own judgement on the value and validity of New Criticism you will need to read the critical texts cited in these units. For the time being consider the arguments of F.R. Leavis. Leavis, based along with I.A. Richards at Cambridge, has had a formative influence upon English Studies in British universities. Like his contemporaries in the United States Leavis believed that literary criticism rests upon the engagement of intuitive and irreducible values (variously described by him as 'felt life', 'maturity', 'humanity', 'sensitivity' and 'profound seriousness') which are at once addressed and concretized in our encounters with literature and which also underpin our sense of social responsibility and commitment. He describes the activity of criticism as follows: 'The critics aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing' (Lodge, 1972, p. 623). The 'this or that' can be anything, from the dominant theme of the text (the fall of Man in *Paradise Lost*, the concept of justice in Dickens's *Bleak House*) to the distribution of particular images or ideas in a poem (the city and nature, life and death in Wordsworth's 'Ode on Westminster Bridge').

> As he matures in experience of the new thing he asks, explicitly and implicitly: 'Where does this come? How does it stand in relation to ...? How relatively important does it seem?' and the organisation into which it settles as a constituent in becoming 'placed' is an organisation of similarly 'placed' things, things that have found their bearings with regard to one another, and not a theoretical system or a system determined by abstract considerations. (Lodge, 1972, p. 623)

The questions which Leavis cites for the putative critic are those which would be raised in practically all our encounters with statements on God, life, love, society, politics, philosophy – the 'this and that which claims [our] attention'. In literature, however, our response must be qualified by the realization that the organization (i.e. the textual structure) into which those issues 'settle' and are 'placed' obliges us to give attention as much to other elements of the same text ('things that have found their bearings with regard to one another') as we do to 'systems' outside the text.

You will recognize similarities between this argument, Ransom's exclusion of literary criticism from contextual matters and Eliot's notion of the 'new wholes' which constitute the fabric of poems. You might also recognize dissimilarities between it and your own experience of literature. If you are a woman you might find it difficult to completely dissociate Shakespeare's treatment of women characters from the 'systems' of gender role and displacement that have endured outside and

beyond literary texts since the seventeenth century. The 'placing' of an issue in a literary text does not necessarily strip it of the polemical, oppressive or unjust associations that it carries in the real world.

In fact, Leavis's model of critical practice is a gross falsification of his own preferences and methods. His self-created *Great Tradition* (1948) of novelists (principally Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and D.H. Lawrence) reflects his own commitment to middle-class liberalism and the moral touchstones of English non-conformity. Leavis's 'mature' and 'serious' response to these novels, to their 'universal' themes, conceals his own 'system' of partial and particular allegiances. To have supported overtly the values embodied in these texts would have dragged them into the kind of moral and political argument that is anathema to the perception of literature as detached from the 'abstract' and 'theoretical' 'systems' of the real world. To state that 'I believe D.H. Lawrence is a great writer because he expresses a disdain for the shallow and decadent intellectual condition of early twentieth-century Britain' would provoke comparisons with the writings of politicians, psychologists and sociologists, and in turn raise questions regarding the proper purpose and objective of literary criticism.

The quotation from Leavis is part of his response (later published in *The Common Pursuit*, 1952) to a letter written to the journal *Scrutiny* by René Wellek. Wellek, while admiring Leavis's book *Revaluation* (1936), observed that Leavis had failed to state explicitly and defend systematically his implicit assumptions regarding the nature and value of poetry. Wellek asked Leavis to become 'conscious that large ethical, philosophical and ... ultimately aesthetic *choices* are involved' in poetry criticism. What Wellek was seeking was an abstract, theoretical model which would specify the form and function of poetry as distinct from other discourses, and which would enable us properly to distinguish between 'ethical and philosophical' choices of the real world and those that are transformed by the 'aesthetic' of literature.

This objective had, to an extent, been pursued by critics such as Richards, Empson and Brooks but it was more firmly rooted in the European tradition in which Wellek (born in Vienna, 1903) had developed as a critic. And it is to this tradition that we now turn.

Eagleton (1983) and Jefferson and Robey (1982) contain good introductions to New Criticism. For more detailed accounts see Stewart (1965) on the Fugitives, and Fekete (1977) and Lentricchia (1980) on the general objectives and ideology of the New Critics. Extracts from the work of the New Critics will be found in Lodge (1972).

Formalism and structuralism

Formalism originated in Russia in 1915 with the founding of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and, in the following year, of its St Petersburg counterpart Opayaz. Its most influential founding members are Viktor Shklovsky, Vladimir Propp and Roman Jakobson. Translations of their work, along with material by their fellow theorists

Brik, Tomaskevsky, Eikhenbaum and Tynyanov will be found in Lemon and Reis (1965) and Bann and Bowlt (1973). It would be unjust and inaccurate to regard the Formalists as a united collective but few of them would have quarrelled with the following summary of their ideas.

Formalism involves the reversal of the traditional relation between form and content. In classical and in post-sixteenth-century European thought definitions of literature were drawn principally from the discipline of rhetoric. Rhetoric involves the classification of linguistic devices (metaphor, antithesis, metre, sound pattern, pun, repetition, etc.) which variously amplify and distort ideas and concepts. It is underpinned by the belief that pre-linguistic ideas and concepts (content) exist as immutable entities, and that language enables us to decorate, document, clarify or promote them (form). Literary language, principally poetry, is more prone to the use of formal devices than its practical, utilitarian counterpart. In short, literature is licensed to foreground form at the expense of content.

The Formalists challenged this assumption by arguing that language, be it literary or non-literary, is a formative rather than a reflective or transparent system of representation. All classical and post-classical modes of Western thought are founded upon the assumption that reality (involving tangible objects and events, empirical and speculative reasoning, and programmes of belief) exists before and outside its representation in words. Formalism proposes that the structure of reality is effectively determined and shaped by language: form predetermines content. (Ferdinand de Saussure's contribution to this idea will be discussed below, p. 538, and in Unit 19, pp. 547–55.)

The concept which underpins all Formalist work on literature is *ostranenie*, variously translated as making strange or defamiliarization. Donne's subtle metaphor, 'a bracelet of bright hair about the bone' makes strange familiar connotations of life (the wearing of a bracelet, having bright hair) and death (the fleshless bone) by compressing them into a single image. The Formalists did not regard *ostranenie* as a perverse distortion of reality: since reality is a construct of language, *ostranenie* foregrounds and exposes this interdependency.

Structuralism owes a considerable debt to this Formalist precept. Structuralists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (see *Structural Anthropology*, 1972) and Umberto Eco (see *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1976) are as much concerned with culture and society as they are with literature. Their basic premise is that human activity and its products, including religion, social conventions, ritual, art and philosophy, are constructed and not natural. All of our actions, beliefs and habits – from our belief in God to our proper use of a knife and fork – are elements of a structure. They are meaningful, argues the structuralist, not because they reflect a transcendent reality, but because they are related to each other within a sign system which sustains our perception of reality. Structuralism contends that our perceptions of reality and the world are made possible by signs (visual, acoustic, tactile, behavioural, etc.) whose relation to one another overrides their relation to a transcendent, immutable truth. In short, life is like language.

As we shall see, this kind of anthropological Structuralism influenced the work of a number of literary Structuralists, such as Greimas and Todorov. Such work has

earned the opprobrium of many Anglo-American critics – new, old and unaligned – for a number of reasons. It seems to them to have appropriated literature as yet another sign system, comparable with but not necessarily superior to film, rock music, or clothes (see Ransom's list of exclusions above, p. 523); and it seems to dispossess literature of the sense of neo-religious mystique from which it derives its creative power (see Leavis and Wellek above, pp. 525–6).

At the same time, however, many critics who are categorized as Formalist or Structuralist have sought to emphasize a clear distinction between literature and the non-literary sign systems which it variously reflects, redefines and unsettles. It is with this emphasis in mind that we shall consider the work of some of the major Formalists and Structuralists.

The first history in English of Formalism was by Erlich (1955); and Steiner (1984) offers a more recent exposition of their theories. The best, introductory accounts of the origins and methods of Structuralism are Hawkes (1977) and Robey (1973). Culler (1975) gives a detailed account of Structuralism's debt to linguistics and emphasizes the role of the reader in Structuralist interpretation. Lane (1970) and Lodge (1988) offer a collection of seminal Structuralist writings.

Jakobson and poetry

Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) began his work on linguistics and poetry during the Formalist heyday of the 1900s to 1920s, but the Anglo-American branch of literary studies only became fully aware of his ideas with his 1960 paper called 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics'. Jakobson's most quoted and widely debated statement is his definition of the so-called projection principle. 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination' (1960, p. 39). These two axes can be represented as follows:
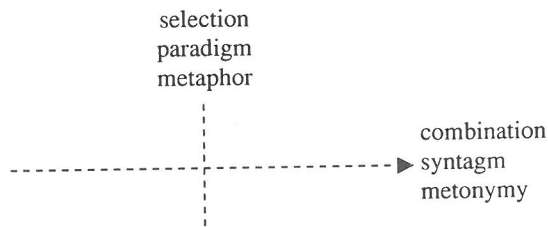
The axis of combination involves the system of rules and conventions (grammar and syntax) through which individual words are combined into larger units of meaning: the dominant, all-purpose unit of combination being the sentence, or in Jakobson's terms the syntagmatic chain. The axis of selection involves the choices made at each stage in the syntagm from the different words available for each grammatical class or type – in Jakobson's terms paradigmatic selection. For example, in order to describe the progress of a woman along the street we might use different verbs to describe the same activity:

the woman walks; the woman strolls; the woman moves; the woman strides. We can choose different verbs from the selective axis while maintaining the same syntagmatic-combinative formula (article–noun–verb).

The principle of equivalence involves the matching of the two axes; first, in terms of the rules of the syntagmatic chain ('Its woman is walk' is grammatically incorrect), and secondly, in terms of the agreed or 'equivalent' relation between the rules of the syntagm and the perceived relation between language and the prelinguistic world. If I stated that 'A tree walks' I would have satisfied the rules of the syntagm ('walks', like 'grows' or 'lives' is a verb used in its correct grammatical position), but I would have disrupted the perceived or equivalent relation between language and the prelinguistic world: trees as far as we know cannot and do not walk. This unusual and unexpected use of the selective axis is the basic principle of metaphor.

Jakobson claims that 'for poetry, metaphor – and for prose metonymy – is the line of least resistance and consequently the study of poetical tropes is directed chiefly toward metaphor' (Jakobson and Halle, 1956, pp. 95–6). This does not mean that all prosaic language is metonymic; rather that metonymy is more indicative of the logic of prose while metaphor embodies the fundamental illogic of poetry. Metonymy involves a comparison between two conditions or elements that have a pre-established connection in the empirical world. We frequently refer to elements of monarchial government in terms of 'the crown' (crown forces, crown lands, etc.); and we might refer to a person's car as 'her wheels'. Metonymy involves the substitution of one element of an object or condition for its entirety; and, as Jakobson argues, it embodies the governing principle of prosaic, non-poetic language; that language should reflect and articulate the perceived condition of the prelinguistic world. Metaphor, conversely, uses the selective axis to variously disrupt and refocus the perceived relation between language and reality. In John Donne's 'The Flea', the speaker effects a number of radical shifts from the logic of metonymy to the more adventurous illogic of metaphor:

> Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
> How little that which thou deny'st me is;
> Me it suck'd first, and now sucks thee,
> And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;
> Confess it, this cannot be said
> A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead,
> > Yet this enjoys before it woo,
> > And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two,
> > And this, alas, is more than we would do.
>
> Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
> Where we almost, nay more than married are:
> This flea is you and I, and this
> Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
> Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
> And cloistered in these living walls of Jet.
> > Though use make thee apt to kill me,
> > Let not to this, self murder added be,
> > And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

> Cruel and sudden, has thou since
> Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
> In what could this flea guilty be,
> Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
> Yet thou triumph'st and see'st that thou
> Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;
>   'Tis true, then learn how false, fears be;
>   Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
>   Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

In the first stanza he combines verifiable fact (the flea has bitten both of them) with broader issues of sexual morality (a sinne, or shame, or losse of maidenhead); and in the second stanza the logic of metonymy is transformed into the persuasive anti-logic of metaphor. The literal combining of blood becomes the figurative, metaphoric image of 'three lives' and 'more than married'; the actual mixing of their physical presences (this flea is you and I) is transmuted into a compound metaphor involving their 'marriage' bed and temple, religious symbolism (*cloistered* in these living walls of jet), and the literal and figurative 'murder' of their relationship. This procedure involves a gradual shift from the axis of combination, in which words are combined according to the logical, factual meaning (the fleabite and the literal mixing of their blood) towards an extended metaphor in which the discourse is dominated by the selection of words which create new and unexpected levels of meaning.

The continuous and persistent use of metaphor in a text does not automatically define it as a poem. 'The principle of similarity underlies poetry; the metrical parallelism of lines or the phonic equivalence of rhyming words prompts the question of semantic similarity or contrast; there exist, for instance, grammatical and antigrammatical but never agrammatical rhymes' (Jakobson, 1987, p. 114). Along with their projection of the axis of selection into the axis of combination (metaphor) poems also create a continuous level of interference between poetic form (metre, rhyme, assonance and alliteration) and the practical, non-poetic registers of syntax and semantics. Consider the way in which the internal and external rhymes of 'The Flea' tend to fix our attention upon the tenor (the flea and fleabite) of the metaphor: 'this flea', 'in this', 'me is', 'Me', 'thee', 'be', 'this flea', 'and this', 'temple is', 'kill me', 'added be', 'killing three', 'guilty be', 'from thee', 'fears be', 'to me', 'from thee'. The principal themes of the speaker's argument are drawn into a network of semantic and phonetic associations – mainly 'this flea' 'is' 'thee' 'be' 'me' – that creates an almost subliminal counterpart to the metaphor. As Jakobson states, the logical meaning of the words of a poem are tied into a system of phonemic and rhythmic similarities and parallels: in this case the persuasive echoes of the rhyme scheme insinuate themselves into the rhetoric of the extended metaphor.

Jakobson describes the combined effect of metaphor and sound pattern upon the poetic function:

> Not only the message itself but also its addresser and addressee become ambiguous. ... The supremacy of the poetic function over the referential function does not obliterate the message but makes it ambiguous. The double sensed message finds correspondence in a split addresser, in a split addressee as well as in a split reference. (1960, p. 50)

Jakobson uses the term ambiguity differently from its application by William Empson (see above, p. 524). He does not refer only to instances of uncertain or paradoxical meaning, but rather to a more general 'split' between what happens in the poem (who is speaking to whom and with what intention or effect) and our expectation of how such transferences of meaning would be achieved in non-poetic language.

In 'The Flea' this split becomes apparent when we attempt to submit the poem to the circumstantial terms and conditions of non-poetic language. We know that it is a first-person, present tense discourse which draws upon immediate events and circumstances (the proximity of addresser and addressee and their shared experience of the fleabite) and which shows the ability of the speaker to adjust and improvise his argument according to ongoing events: he clearly responds to the woman's attempt and eventual success in crushing the flea. The split becomes evident when we recognize that the real-world conditions of spontaneity and improvisation are at odds with the baroque complexity of the text. No one could improvise a stanzaic structure which consists of three couplets, each involving an octosyllabic followed by a pentameter line, and which terminates with a triplet of one octosyllabic and two pentameter lines. Jakobson's point is that on the one hand we need to decode a poem in terms of its paraphrasible meaning (its 'referential' function – in this case a man responding verbally to a woman's silent rejections), while on the other we should recognize that its 'poetic' function is particular to the structure of the text in question and untranslatable into the terms and conditions of non-poetic discourse (in this case the addresser and addressee are effectively constructs of an unimprovised, self-consciously contrived system of metrical and rhyming patterns).

Jakobson's work incorporates the multidisciplinary strands of modern literary studies. He held that in order to understand the distinction between poetic and non-poetic discourses we must first conduct an exhaustive survey of the operations and the material constituents of language. His (and Jones's) analysis of Shakespeare's sonnet 129 (1970, reprinted in Pomorska and Rudy, 1987) reflects his consistent assertion that poems concentrate and crystallize the more diffuse, practical operations of non-poetic language: metaphor becomes the subject rather than the instrument of communication; metre, rhyme and sound pattern promote the phoneme and the syllable from the status of pragmatic bridges between sound and meaning to the means by which the sound of a poem organizes its meaning. On the one hand his working principle that literary studies needs the assistance of linguistics in order properly to understand literature goes against many of the New Critical doctrines of isolation (see above). On the other, many of the more recent Structuralist and Post-structuralist critics have condemned his work for advocating what they regard as the institutional elitism of literature as 'different' from ordinary discourse (see Culler, 1975, and Units 19 and 20).

Lévi-Strauss adapted Jakobson's work on phonology to his own studies of the habits and rituals of different tribes and cultures: just as the irreducible concept of the phoneme underpins our perceptions of the different meanings, and function of words in whatever language, so, argues Lévi-Strauss, there are similarly irreducible elements (eating, cooking, sexual intercourse) which underpin different codes of social behaviour (see Jakobson and Halle, 1956; and Lévi-Strauss, 1972).

Jacques Lacan, one of the leading post-Freudian theorists of language, literature and the unconscious has made use of Jakobson's distinction between the selective and combinative dimensions of language as a basis for his own explorations of language and the unconscious (see 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious', 1957 and Unit 22). David Lodge (1977) projects Jakobson's metonymy-metaphor model into the sphere of fictional and non-fictional prose.

For a complete survey of Jakobson's work and its relation to broader elements of literary and cultural theory see Bradford (1994).

Formalism, Structuralism and the novel

The two Formalists who have made the most significant contributions to subsequent theories of fiction and narrative are Viktor Shklovsky and Vladimir Propp.

Shklovsky reduced fictional structures to two opposing and interactive dimensions, syuzhet and fabula. Fabula refers to the actuality and the chronological sequence of the events that make up the narrative; and syuzhet to the order, manner and style in which they are presented in the novel in question. The fabula of Dickens's *Great Expectations* involves the experiences, in and around London, from the early childhood to the adulthood of Pip. Its syuzhet involves the presentation of these events in terms of Pip's first-person account of their temporal, spatial and emotional registers.

In Dickens's novel the first-person manner of the syuzhet has the effect of personalizing the fabula; Pip's description of Miss Havisham and of his relationship with Estella is necessarily influenced by factors such as his own emotional affiliations, his stylistic habits and his singular perspective upon spatio-temporal sequences and conditions. If *Great Expectations* had an omniscient, third-person narrator we might learn more about the events that contributed to Miss Havisham's condition and we might be offered a more impartial two-dimensional perspective upon the relationship between Pip and Estella. In short, the syuzhet can effectively alter our perceptions of the fabula. Shklovsky showed a particular taste for novels which self-consciously foreground the interaction between these two elements, and his essay (1921) on Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is frequently cited as an archetype of Formalist method. Throughout this novel the eponymous narrator maintains an interplay between his story (the fabula), the activity and conditions of telling it (syuzhet). There is a close relation between Jakobson's distinction between the poetic function (the operation and effect of poetic devices) and the referential function (what the poem is about) and Shklovsky's distinction between syuzhet (narrative devices) and fabula (the story; what the novel is about).

Shklovsky and Jakobson focus upon the ways in which poems and novels variously integrate and transform the non-literary registers of language and experience. Propp, in his *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), shifts our attention towards the ways in which social and behavioural structures influence and determine fictional narrative. Propp devised a grammar of the folk tale based on two

concepts: the roles filled by the characters (the kidnapper as villain, the princess as the kidnapped person, the king as provider, etc.) and the functions that they perform in the plot. In a fairy-tale several characters might be involved in a single function (the king and kidnapper might be involved in villainous activities) or one character might perform a number of functions (the king might be both hero and villain). But Propp demonstrates that there is a predictable and finite number of permutations of the role–function relation. This scheme is comparable with Jakobson's division between the syntagmatic axis of language (villain, hero, helper, etc., create narrative sequences in the same way that noun, verb and adjective create syntactic units) and its paradigmatic axis (king and hero can be substituted in particular functional roles in the same way that the verbs walk, stroll or stride are substitutable in the same place in a sentence). Both models are constrained by the agreed relation between language/narrative and perceptions of the real world. The sentence 'the tree ate its dinner and then walked home' is grammatically correct, but its paraphrasible message is implausible and absurd. Similarly a folk tale in which the princess kidnaps her father, the king, in the hope of eliciting a ransom from the villain would be dismissed as absurd because it distorts the usual realm of possibilities within the social-familial network of roles and functions in the non-fictional world.

Propp's model of a predictable relation between narrative structures and the social and mythological structures of the world outside the novel became the prototype for later Structuralist analyses of fiction.

A.J. Greimas (1966 and 1970) regards narrative patterns as involving systems of consecutive ordering very similar to the syntagm, while at the same time arguing that fictional narratives reflect the deep-rooted 'grammars' of human society: *syntagmes contractuels*, formal contracts, family bonds, close relationships, institutional ties, etc.; *syntagmes performanciels*, trials, arguments, the performance of tasks, etc.; *syntagmes disjonctionnels*, physical movements, departures, arrivals, etc. Just as in the syntagmatic chain of a sentence each word and phrase is tied into an accumulative sequence which generates larger units of meaning so in a novel single incidents such as marriages, commitments to particular professions and journeys are combined to produce extended narrative structures. Tzvetan Todorov in his analysis of Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1969) extends this parallel between syntax and narrative by reducing the latter to parts of speech (characters are nouns, their attributes adjectives and their actions verbs), propositions involving one or more of the characters (A has sex with B; D divorces Y) and sequences in which a string of propositions makes up the complete narrative structure.

Propp, Greimas and Todorov focus principally upon the fabula and less upon the syuzhet, and this raises a number of problems. In a novel such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) the activities of the characters and their socio-familial relationship with each other could, potentially, be related in the impartial third-person manner of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872). The syntagmatic–narrative structures identifiable by Greimas and Todorov would remain the same, but what would be overlooked in this procedure is the effect upon the narrative of Joyce's novel of its bewilderingly diverse range of styles and techniques. The final chapter, which consists of Molly Bloom's extended interior monologue, could be analyzed in terms

of her references to various contracts, tasks, trials, bonds and journeys; it could, in Greimas's terms, be reduced to a catalogue of *syntagmes contractuels, performanciels* and *disjonctionnels*. But such an approach would obscure the effect that the passage seeks to achieve. The following is Molly's account of a sexual liaison: 'the day I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of cheesecake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now yet 16 years ago my God after that long kiss . . .'. Our awareness of a paraphrasible, narrative structure is continually unsettled by the random, disorganized style of the discourse.

Joyce's novel is an extreme example of the way in which style, or syuzhet, can interfere with story, or fabula, but it reminds us that a constant emphasis upon the extended narrative as a catalogue of events and acts – an emphasis which underpins the work of Propp, Greimas and Todorov – should be balanced by our attention to more localized instances of the novel's style, an approach advocated by Shklovsky. (See Unit 11 for a discussion of Eliot's work and Unit 16 for Joyce.)

A more recent practitioner of the stylistics of fiction is Gérard Genette. In *Narrative Discourse* (1980, first published in French as *Figures III*, 1972) Genette evolves a theory of analysis known as focalization. In general terms focalization involves the specifying of a particular and consistent relationship between the presence which controls the discourse – in most novels the narrator – and the level of awareness offered to us, the readers. Open any novel at random, choose a passage, and you will become engaged in the process of focalization. Our basic linguistic competence will enable us to understand what the words mean, but when we focalize their meaning we create a mental image of the scene described: Who is speaking? How much are we being told about the events, the physical characteristics and mental operations of the characters? Is the narrator offering us an impartial, omniscient perspective upon the events? Is the narrator a participant in the narrative?

These questions cannot properly be answered in terms of such traditional distinctions as first- or third-person narrator. There can be very different types of what Genette calls the extradiagetic (third-person, apparently impartial, omniscient) narrator. Jane Austen's narrator in *Northanger Abbey* describes the principal character of the novel in its opening sentences. 'No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her.' Throughout the novel the narrator never discloses any personal, social or familiar relation with the characters. But it is clear from this brief extract that the narrator has a knowledge of Catherine's life, experiences and mental condition that only Catherine herself or someone with whom she has had a close personal relationship would have. Throughout the novel the narrator maintains the peculiar position of someone who knows things that only Catherine herself could plausibly know yet who is able to offer us insights into the motivations and psychological make-up of other characters, of which Catherine is obviously unaware. At the beginning of Chapter IX we are offered a detailed survey of Catherine's mental condition, her movement from 'The Rooms' to Pulteney Street, her hunger, her longing for bed and the exact duration of her 'sound sleep' (9 hours). Within the next 100 words we are offered a detailed account of the habits and mental idiosyncracies of one Mrs Allen,

whom Catherine encounters next morning. The narrator is not entirely omniscient since the narrative never extends much beyond the activities and movements of Catherine; but at the same time the narrator is able to tell us things about Catherine's acquaintances (Mrs Allen for example) that Catherine could not know.

In Genette's schema, the narrator is the focalizer, in that he/she has ultimate control over what we know of each character's acts, movements and thoughts; while Catherine is the focalizing agent, in that her presence, physical and mental, operates as a centralizing focus for the focalizer's narrative design. This distinction offers us a much more accurate means of analyzing narrative than general designations such as first- and third-person narrative (see Unit 2 for discussion of these narrative positions).

At the beginning of Dickens's *Great Expectations* the first-person narrative of Pip is split between his own controlling perspective of adult, retrospective focalizer and the focusing agent of his remembered self, aged about 10. This is the account of the young Pip's experiences after having stolen the pork pie.

> The gates and dykes and banks come bursting at me through the mist, as if they cried as plainly as could be, 'A boy with Somebody else's pork pie! Stop him!'. The cattle came upon me with like suddenness staring out of their eyes and steaming out of their nostrils 'Holloa young thief!'. One black ox, with a white cravat on – who even had to my awakened conscience something of a clerical air – fixed me so obstinately with his eyes ...

It is likely that a child would have experienced a combination of guilt, fear and anxiety in these circumstances, but it is less likely that, at the time, he would have mentally transformed the non-human entities of gates and dykes into vengeful human presences or perceived the white collar on the cow as a correlative for that symbol of correctness and morality, the clergyman. The sophisticated focalizer, aged thirty-something, employs his acquired intellectual and linguistic skills to transform and organize his memories of childhood fear.

Compare this act of retrospective focalization with the opening of Joyce's third-person narrative, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916):

> Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo ...
>
> His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.
>
> He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived; she sold lemon platt.

The focalizer of this novel is an unidentified third-person narrator, but, as this passage shows, this focalizer attempts to integrate the disorganized mental and linguistic resources of the focalizing agent, the child, as the dominant feature of the narrative; whereas Dickens employs the mature intellect of the focalizer as the normative stylistic feature.

Focalization enables us to specify the relationship between the narrator and the constituent parts of the narrative. The use of dialogue and reported speech is the point at which narrational control is at its least secure or intrusive. Leech and Short

(1981) and McHale (1978) offer a typology of relations between narrative discourse, speech and conversation.

The two most frequently used methods of differentiating speech from narrative are direct and indirect speech (DS and IS).

DS: She said, 'I'm going home'
IS: She said she would go home.

Narrative reports of speech arts (NRSA) offer us the meaning of the character's speech while leaving us uncertain about whether the report is a verbatim account of the words used (IS) or the narrator's paraphrase of their message.

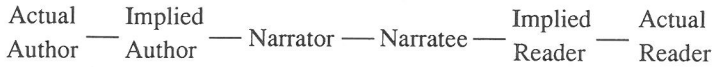NRSA: She spoke for five minutes. She wanted to go home.

Free direct speech is dialogue with the reporting clause ('she said') left out. Novels will sometimes include extended sequences of FDS, but these will always be enclosed by contextualizing narrative passages.

The most puzzling interaction between narrative and speech is free indirect speech (FIS) where the borders between narrative and reported speech become blurred. In *Northanger Abbey* the narrator describes Catherine's thoughts about the possible departure of Captain Tilney. 'But Captain Tilney had at present no intention of removing; he was not to be of the party to Northanger, he was to continue at Bath' (Ch. XIX). A more economical way of summing up Catherine's knowledge of the intentions of Captain Tilney would be to state that: Captain Tilney would not be going to Northanger; he would remain at Bath. The elaborate specification of his intention in the use of two subclauses following the semi-colon makes us suspect that the narrator's report of Catherine's thoughts involves in turn her memory of his particular verbal communication of those details.

This method of integrating speech acts with narrative (FIS) is taken to its most extreme in Molly Bloom's interior monologue: 'I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was the one true thing he said in his life ...'. The conventions that enable us with *Northanger Abbey* to distinguish between the narrator's discourse, Catherine's thoughts and the remembered speech of Captain Tilney are here eroded. We will never be certain if this is a recollection of 'I near lost my breath. "Yes", he said'; or, 'Yes, he said I was "a flower of the mountain ..."'. Interior monologue or stream of consciousness (used also by Woolf and Faulkner – see Unit 16) can also involve free indirect thought (FIT). On the one hand, Molly's discourse is verbalized (it is in the novel, and it can be read aloud); on the other, it is a verbal facsimile of unspoken, 'interior' mental operations, where the distinctions between the remembered speech acts of other people, of the thinker herself, between immediate concerns and past incidents, coalesce as a fluid, ungrammatical sequence. (See Unit 16, p. 457, for an example of FIS in Lawrence's *Women in Love*.)

As we have seen the analysis of fiction can range from attempts to reduce the structure of complete texts to predictable and transferable 'grammars' (Propp, Greimas, and Todorov) to the decoding of localized interactions between focalizer, focalizing agent and reported speech (Genette, Leech and Short). Wayne Booth

(1961) and Seymour Chatman (1978) have devised a diagrammatic representation of how these general and local perspectives relate to each other.

$$\frac{\text{Actual}}{\text{Author}} \text{—} \frac{\text{Implied}}{\text{Author}} \text{— Narrator — Narratee —} \frac{\text{Implied}}{\text{Reader}} \text{—} \frac{\text{Actual}}{\text{Reader}}$$

Narrator and narratee are constructs of the text, fixed and determined by the conventions of the novel in question. When Jane Austen's narrator begins *Northanger Abbey* with a description of the life history, circumstances and mental condition of Catherine we as narratees begin to adapt our range of expectations to the level of interaction between focalizer and focalizing agent, teller and tale, that will be established and maintained throughout the novel. We respond to the text's own structural and stylistic conditions; to adapt Coleridge's dictum, we suspend disbelief and at the same time reassemble our world view according to the methods used to create the world of the novel.

The relationship between implied author and reader operates on a more impartial, analytical plane. Whereas narrator and narratee confine themselves to the terms and conditions of the fictional plane, implied author and reader take a step back to a point where comparisons are possible between the world constructed by the novel in question, the perceived non-fictional world at the time the novel was written and is read and other methods of relating fictional to non-fictional worlds.

Real author and reader are extended versions of their implied counterparts. You and me, as real readers of the 1990s, can supplement our experience as narratees (of the world created by novels), and as implied readers (of the structural mechanisms involved in their creation) with historical and biographical details that could have contributed to the real author's decisions in creating his or her fiction. For example, scholarly work has disclosed details regarding Emily Brontë's use of the asexual pseudonym Ellis Bell for her novel *Wuthering Heights* (see Unit 23, p. 621). The status and experience of a woman author in the mid-nineteenth century was, we know, very different from that of her male counterpart. The prospect of a woman writing about a relationship which appeared to transgress accepted levels of behaviour and decency might well have prompted Brontë both to disguise her own gender and to submerge the story of Catherine and Heathcliff in a complex multiplicity of narrators and narratees (see Units 23 and 24). The diagram's emphasis on the dynamic relation between the text and the real world reflects the influence of Structuralism upon earlier Anglo-American notions of literary autonomy (see Ransom above, p. 523).

Booth's and Chatman's six categories of interaction with the novel do not exist in isolation from each other but they do allow us to identify interpretive foci. Shklovsky and Genette are principally concerned with narrator and narratee, implied reader and implied author. Principally, but not exclusively, their work on narrative structure prompts questions as to why and how the Victorian novel and its Modernist counterpart differ so radically in terms of their respective uses of the syuzhet and methods of focalization. As Colin MacCabe (1978) and David Lodge (1981) demonstrate, the reluctance of a Victorian novelist such as George Eliot to problematize the relation between narrator and narratee and the enthusiasm of Joyce to foreground and investigate this relation can be explained properly only if we pay attention to the social, cultural and intellectual environment of each real author. Similarly Propp, Greimas and

Todorov seek to locate abstract formulae, based upon grammatical and syntactic rules, by which real authors translate their own experiences and perceptions into the fictional worlds controlled by their implied authors and disclosed by their narrators.

Culler (1975) offers a good introductory guide to Structuralism and the novel and Selden (1989) provides basic, worked examples. Toolan's *Narrative* (1989) is a useful guide to detailed linguistic analysis. Rimmon-Kenan (1983) provides an excellent guide to the style and form of narrative fiction.

Binary oppositions

Peruse any introduction to structuralist criticism and you will find that Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1915) is cited as its founding moment. Saussure was a linguist and his theories provide a bridge between the study of language *per se* and the use of language as a methodological foundation for the analysis of the sign systems (linguistic and non-linguistic) that enable us to perceive and organize our social, cultural and intellectual life – the latter activity being variously known as Structuralism and Semiotics.

We have already seen how theorists such as Jakobson, Shklovsky, Propp, Greimas and Todorov made use of the systems and conventions of language to define literary writing and to indicate parallels and distinctions between literary meaning and the circulation of meaning in non-literary discourse. In what follows I shall examine what is arguably the simplest and most effective borrowing of literary Structuralism from Saussurian linguistics: binary oppositions.

Saussure's fundamental proposition is that languages are systems, constituted of signs that are arbitrary and differential: in language there are only differences without positive terms. There is no natural or necessary relationship between the sound of the word 'house' (the signifier) and the thing or idea that the word represents (the signified). The most radical and influential feature of Saussure's observation is that the system, language, which enables us to organize individual signs as larger units of meaning is, in part, a means of constructing and organizing the prelinguistic world. We use binary distinctions between signifiers to mark differences in an otherwise apparently random sequence of features and thus to give shape and cohesion to our experience of the world. The world as we know it consists partly of tangible objects and events, and our ability to perceive and articulate the relation between them is based upon fundamental oppositions between their signifiers: up/down; sky/earth; air/water; vertical/horizontal; inside/outside. These empirical, verifiable oppositions enable us to build bridges between the tangible world and its intellectual, emotional or spiritual counterpart. Mortality (which we experience) enables us to postulate its opposite, immortality (about which we can only speculate).

Binary oppositions are fundamental to the dependent relation between language and reality. Archetypal binary oppositions inform all of our perceptual and linguistic experiences: man/woman; good/bad; hot/cold; day/night; high/low; open/closed; happy/sad; old/young; rich/poor; black/white. Indeed it is the relations between different pairs of oppositions (known as homologous relations) that have sustained a number of

enduring cultural and social beliefs. Feminists have successfully challenged the assumption that there is a natural or genetic relation between the following homologies:

Man	Woman
Male	Female
Active	Passive
Intellect	Intuition

Feminists have demonstrated that it is social custom and practice, sustained by linguistic habit, that perpetuates the false belief in these homologies as intrinsic or natural; and Saussure's formulation that systems of language can support and maintain systems of belief and perception is here clearly validated (see Unit 24).

Binary oppositions provide us with a tool for comparing the world created by the literary text with the world experienced and perceived outside the text.

The following is a diagrammatic representation of binary oppositions in Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure*:
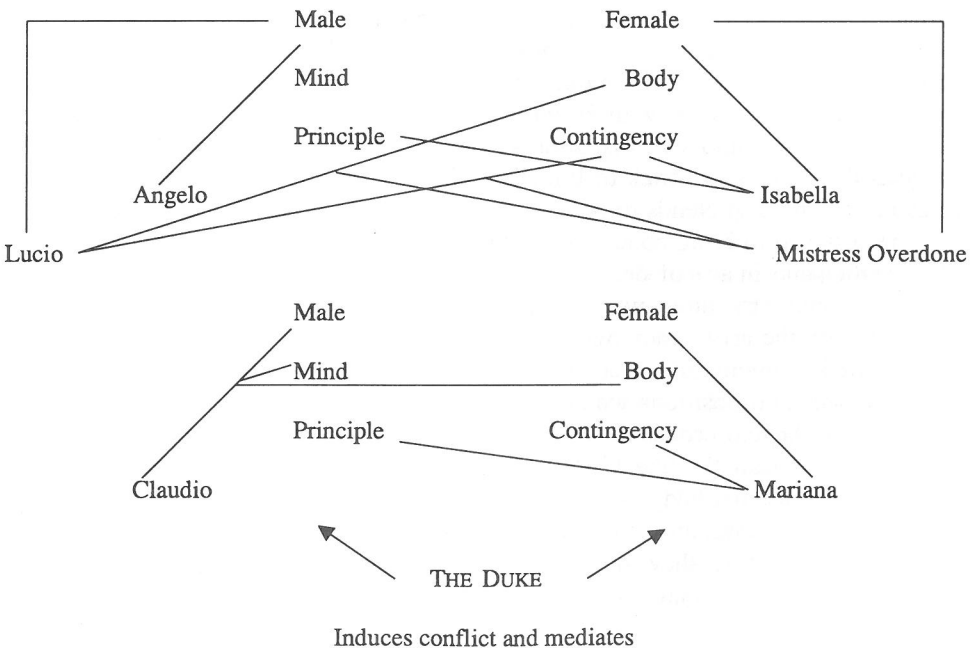
A structuralist diagram for *Measure for Measure*

Binary oppositions

Ideals

Order	Anarchy
Justice	Injustice
Honesty	Deceit
Marriage	Promiscuity

Rogue oppositions

Induces conflict and mediates

The homology of 'Ideals' refers to the principles of governance, morality and social order which inform both the play and the English state of the early seventeenth century. Order, Justice and Honesty belong together and are respectively opposed to Anarchy, Injustice and Deceit. The association of Marriage with the left-hand column and Promiscuity with the right is the moral premise upon which *Measure for Measure* is based. The law, broken unwittingly by Claudio, is the thematic foundation of the play: it is argued that a slippage away from the ideals of Marriage and towards Promiscuity will promote broader shifts away from the moral and social ideals of Order, Justice and Honesty.

The homology of 'Rogue' oppositions relates to the activities of the characters in the play. The biological and social distinctions between Male and Female underpin the major events of the plot: the physical, intellectual and circumstantial relations between Isabella and Angelo, Angelo and Mariana, Lucio and Isabella, Claudio and Julia, Claudio and Isabella generate and intensify the language of the text. In each instance there is supplementary conflict between the mental and physical dimensions (Mind/Body) of the respective characters. Angelo is perceived as a man who is governed principally by strength of Mind, a figure whose intellectual and judicial character earns him the position of ruler in the absence of the Duke. However, when Isabella addresses his Mind regarding the judicial equity of her brother's death sentence, his motives and subsequent actions become governed by her physical presence and his physical desire.

Isabella is similarly presented as someone whose mental character lifts her above the state of unbridled physicality that the Duke and Angelo are attempting to control. With typical Shakespearian irony it is Lucio, the embodiment of hedonistic incaution, who persuades her to leave the nunnery and approach Angelo. And here the opposition between Principle and Contingency is drawn into the thickening homology of rogue oppositions. During Act II, scene ii, as Isabella and Angelo address the moral and judicial principles of Claudio's case, Lucio acts as a kind of theatrical prompter, almost certainly aware that her bodily demeanour will have as much effect upon Angelo as her intellect. This reduction of moral Principle to the Contingency of circumstance is maintained with the intervention of the Duke (the figure of Contingent secular authority temporarily disguised as the embodiment of religious Principle) who suggests the famous bed-trick to Isabella. The bed-trick, in which Mariana, Angelo's abandoned fiancée, pretends to be Isabella, is the archetype of Contingent practice. It may be designed to bring about a fair and equitable result, but it actually involves all of its participants in acts of deceit, falsification and disguise.

The social structure, which supposedly reflects the moral and intellectual superiority of the aristocracy over the ungoverned opportunism of the lower orders, is disrupted. Angelo and Isabella are drawn by a combination of desire and circumstances into positions which unsettle their presentation of and belief in their real identity. Angelo proves to be a far more cruel and far less efficient opportunist than Lucio and Isabella, like Mistress Overdone, is obliged, albeit symbolically and vicariously, to use her body as an instrument of trade.

Structuralist diagrams such as this are not designed to unlock a puzzle or enigma of the text. Rather, they operate as intermediaries between the text and the conditions and circumstances upon which it feeds.

The non-literary text with which the play invites comparison is the pamphlet *Basilicon Doron* (or 'Royal Gift') by James I, which offers a survey of how 'Lawes ... ordained as rules of vertuous and social living' should be interpreted and enforced. It is known also that the extreme Puritan faction in English social and religious life of that period was arguing for laws which would transform the sin of adultery into a crime punishable by death. Within such non-literary discourses the homologies of the diagram would be perceived as the immutable truths of statesmanship and religion: in Saussurean terms the configuration of the signifiers Male, Mind and Principle as opposed to Female, Body and Contingency would be regarded as an accurate representation of the natural order and its manifestation in social and intellectual life. Shakespeare's play is involved in a very different form of representation; throughout the text the words the characters use to maintain or promote beliefs, practices and ideals are continuously undermined by the disclosure, in language and action, of an almost limitless fabric of deceptions, hypocrisies and untruths. Literary texts such as *Measure for Measure* foreground the unsteady, unpredictable slide between language and actuality, signifier and signified; whereas it is the function and purpose of non-literary discourse to maintain that there is a secure unitary relationship between the perceived and idealized world and the system of signs through which we represent it. (For a consideration of New Historicist approaches to Renaissance drama, including *Measure for Measure*, see Unit 21.)

The most intriguing binary opposition of the play is also its most obvious and tangible: it is written partly in prose and partly in blank verse (see Unit 5, pp. 105–6). The latter is patently and self-consciously literary. As Jakobson has shown, verse at once releases and encloses the meaning of language: it discloses the intention and situation that prompted the words, but at the same time freezes them in a self-evidently unreal and contrived artefact. Its status bespeaks culture, refinement, taste, literacy; and, appropriately, the higher social classes of the play (and indeed of most Renaissance plays) converse and reflect primarily in blank verse. The lower orders, however, such as Lucio and Mistress Overdone, seem more comfortable with prose: where the stylistics and structure of each statement are governed more by exigency and circumstance. Note for example the amusing exchange between Claudio (aristocrat, blank verse) and Lucio (lower-class opportunist, prose) (Act I, scene ii, 133–205), in which Lucio seems rather puzzled by Claudio's habit of dressing the details of his dreadful situation in poetic language. However, just as the play disrupts the binary ideals of order and justice versus anarchy and corruption so it unsettles their linguistic distinction in verse and prose. In Act III, scene i, Claudio and Isabella debate – unhappily and inconclusively – their respective circumstances and the moral implications of Angelo's sexual bribe – in blank verse. Later in the same Act the Duke proposes to Isabella the only solution to the judicial problem, the pragmatic if morally questionable contingency of the bed-trick – in prose (see Bradford, 1993 for a survey of this passage). The tension between the two stylistic patterns of the play underpins its engagement with moral and judicial themes. Spoken prose is driven by contingency and pragmatism (both of which involve male desire and the female body) while

verse tends towards the contemplation of the absolutes of principle. In the aesthetic and intellectual realms of the text the latter can claim superiority; in the realm of pragmatism and necessity, the former has seized control.

Jakobson and Halle consider the linguistic basis of binary oppositions in *Fundamentals of Language* (1956), Lévi-Strauss their use in the analysis of social and cultural structures (1972) and Culler (1975) contends that they enable us to impose order upon, rather than find it in, literary texts. Selden (1989) shows how they operate in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

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