

Structuralism and literature

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Jonathan Culler is an important figure of the structuralism movement. *Structuralist Poetics* was one of the first introductions to the French structuralist movement in English. The structuralism movement believes that language, culture, and literary phenomena have a system that operates these and give them meaning. It is concerned with the analysis of language, culture and society. Structuralism argues that a specific domain of culture may be understood by means of the structure of the language. Culler defines structuralism as a theory that rests on the realization that, if human actions or productions have meaning, there must be an underlying system that makes this meaning possible.

Culler posits that language and human culture operate in similar ways. He argues that linguistics can be used to analyze human culture for two reasons. First, "that social and cultural phenomena are...objects or events with meaning"(Culler 56). Second, "that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations."(56) Structuralists believe that if the actions of the individual have meaning, it is an evident that there is a system or a set of rules that these actions follow to create those meanings. Culler gives an example to support his idea: that "actions are meaningful only with respect to a set of institutional conventions" (Culler 56). He shows the similarity between language and culture phenomena. Language is also a set of rules that must be followed to create meaning. Social and cultural practices are signs that combine in a certain way, and this proves the fact that these practices and actions have an underlying system that operates them. This system does not exist to control or direct actions or behavior, but can provide expectations of certain behaviors.

Culler examines cultural phenomena by using two linguistic approaches. First, de Saussure believes that speech acts and language are different. His analysis focuses not on the use of language, called "parole," or speech, but rather on the underlying system of language, called "langue." Language is a structured system and rules that control speech. Cultural phenomena share some elements with language in that both of them are purely dependent on the relationship between signs and the rules that they follow to create these relations.

According to de Saussure, an utterance has meaning only in the context of a pre-existing system of rules and conventions. The meaning of speech comes only from their relationship to other words in the system. De Saussure also believes that language is the system and that speech define this system and gives it meaning. Culler indicates that “memoriz[ing] a set of utterances” is not adequate to know the English language; instead, conquering the system and the rules that operates the language is necessary “to produce and understand the utterances” (57). The second linguistic approach is by Lévi-Stauss and is called “phonological revolution.” The concept of phonetics, which studies the sounds of speech and (phonology), is concerned with the system and behavior of sounds in any language. Language and speech are seen as rules and behaviors. That language is a set of rules and the speech is the behavior. On the other hand in human culture, rules also are from behavior: “In social and cultural systems behavior may deviate frequently and considerably from the norm” (58).

A structuralist analysis of *The Sick Rose* by William Blake can clarify more the theory of Culler. According to Culler the relation between the words and signs gives this poem its meaning as it operates under a larger system which is the conventions of a poem. The word “Rose” is in relation with “art” gives the meaning of beauty. Also the relation between “sick, worm, invisible, destroy” gives the meaning of death, danger and concealment. In this poem the rose stands for something beautiful or good. The worm stands for some corrupting agent. The poem gets its meaning from the relation between the “Rose” and the “worm”.

O Rose, thou art sick!

The invisible worm

That flies in the night,

In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed

Of crimson joy,

And his dark secret love

Does they life destroy. (Blake 82)

Structuralism is definitely a different approach than New criticism. New critics search for patterns and identify some intensions, but they do not go beyond the text they study. The system they study is the text that is before them nothing more. They isolate the text from any external elements or influences. On the other hand, for structuralism the text is a part of a larger system, and one cannot begin to study it without knowing the larger system and master it.