# Lecture 30: Notes

**Structuralism and Literary Texts**

**Overview**

This lecture discusses the basic principles of structuralism and its use in the production of meaning. It argues that basic function of literary text is not a way of knowing reality but to take it as an autonomous verbal structure cut off from any reference beyond itself. All the system ever does is reshuffling its symbolic units in relation to each other, rather than in relation to any kind of reality outside it.

**Review points:**

1. Structuralism has its origins in New Criticism.

What had happened to literary *history?* What was needed was a literary theory which, while preserving the *formalist* bent of New Criticism, its dogged attention to literature as aesthetic object rather than social practice, would make something a good deal more systematic and 'scientific' out of all this. The answer arrived in 1957, in the shape of the Canadian Northrop Frye's mighty 'totalization' of all literary genres, *Anatomy of Criticism.*

1. Objective laws and criticism could itself become systematic
2. These laws were the various modes, archetypes, myths and genres by which all literary works were structured.
3. At the root of all literature lay four 'narrative categories', **the comic**, **romantic**, **tragic** and **ironic**>correspond respectively to the four *my thai*of spring, summer, autumn and winter
4. A theory of literary '**modes'** could be outlined, whereby in **myth** the hero is superior in kind to others, in **romance** superior in degree, in the **'high mimetic'** modes of **tragedy and epic** superior in degree to others but not to his environment, in the **'low mimetic'** modes of **comedy and realism** equal to the rest of us, and in **satireand irony** inferior.
5. you become a card-carrying **structuralist** only when you claim that the meaning of each image is wholly a matter of its **relation to the other**. The images do not have a **'substantial' meaning**, only a **'relational' one**. You do not need to go outside the poem, to what you know of suns and moons, to explain them; they explain and define each other
6. Literary structuralism flourished in the 1960s as an attempt to apply to literature the methods and insights of the founder of modern structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure
7. Saussure's linguistic views influenced the Russian Formalists, although Formalism is not itself exactly a structuralism.
8. Meaning was neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurrence: it was the product of certain shared systems of signification.
9. All communication for Jakobson involves six elements: an addresser, an addressee, a message passed between them, a shared code which makes that message intelligible, a 'contact' or physical medium of communication, and a 'context' to which the message refers.
10. The Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp had already made a promising start with his *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928), which boldly reduced all folk tales to seven 'spheres of action' and thirty-one fixed elements or 'functions'.
11. A. J. Greimas's*Semantiquestructurale*(1966), finding Propp's scheme still too empirical, is able to abstract his account even further by the concept of an *actant,* which is neither a specific narrative event nor a character but a structural unit.
12. The six *actants*of Subject and Object, Sender and Receiver, Helper and Opponent can subsume Propp's various spheres of action
13. TzvetanTodorov attempts a similar 'grammatical' analysis of Boccaccio's *Decameron,* in which characters are seen as nouns, their attributes as adjectives and their actions as verbs.