

## Interpretation of Myths in Contemporary Literary Theory with Respect to Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss

**Sunny Anand**  
Research Scholar  
University Department of English  
Munger University, Munger

Guide  
**Prof. Bhavesh Chandra Pandey**  
Head, Department of English  
J.R.S College Jamalpur Munger

### Abstract

This study examines the structuralist and poststructuralist perspectives on myth, focusing on the influential theories of Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss. Barthes defines myth as a second-order semiotic system that transforms historically constructed realities into seemingly natural and timeless truths. By stripping events, symbols, and cultural practices of their historical origins, myths serve as ideological instruments that reinforce dominant worldviews. Barthes reveals how myth obscures its own constructed nature, making socially conditioned meanings appear universal and unquestionable. Levi-Strauss, in contrast, approaches myth as a structured linguistic system, where meaning is embedded not in individual stories but in the relationships between their components. He equates myth to language, emphasizing that its significance arises from a network of interrelated elements rather than standalone narratives. His concept of mythemes the fundamental units of mythic structure demonstrates how myths retain coherence across different cultures and historical contexts. Levi-Strauss argues that myths evolve through the reordering of mythemes, with their horizontal axis representing historical development and their vertical axis allowing for cultural variation and reinterpretation. Positioning these perspectives within the broader discourse of cultural theory, this study engages with the ideas of other thinkers also. It explores how myths function as mechanisms of meaning-making, shaping human perception by masking historical contingencies and naturalizing ideological constructs. While Barthes critiques myth for its role in sustaining ideological dominance, Levi-Strauss highlights its structural adaptability. Together, their insights provide a critical framework for understanding how myths influence cultural narratives, social traditions, and the ways in which societies construct meaning.

**Keywords:** Myth, Mythemes, Cultural Studies, Meaning-making, Semiotics

**Introduction:**

Myth, in this interpretation, is a constructed narrative that presents itself as truth, deriving its legitimacy from collective belief rather than objective reality. Its validity is contingent upon societal acceptance-myth “tells the truth” only in so far as people believe in its veracity, leading to the paradox of myth as a “lie that functions as truth.” Myth operates as a system of idea that are not merely passively accepted but serve as an unquestioned foundation for action, shaping the reality in which individuals and communities exist. More broadly, myth evolves into an institutionalized and sacralised articulation of core societal values, often detached from its literary origins and instead embedded within ideological frameworks. These frameworks may encompass expansive abstractions, such as collective unity, but are more commonly linked to concrete ideological constructs whether the mythic elevation of wealth or the near reverential status accorded to historical paradigms. At its core, myth functions within a social and psychological framework, reinforcing prevailing power structures and shaping cultural consciousness, not by merely reflecting reality, but by molding it into an unquestioned, lived experience. In the 20th century, thinkers came up with fresh ways to understand myths, highlighting their deeper layers—like how they're built, what they say about our minds, and how they push certain ideas. Claude Lévi-Strauss saw myths as a kind of language that boils down to basic patterns of opposites, mirroring how our brains naturally work. To him, myths aren't really about explaining the world out there; they're more about the mental tricks we use to sort out and fix life's contradictions.

On the other hand, Carl Jung's ideas focused on myths as a bridge to our hidden thoughts and feelings, helping people grow and understand themselves better—more about personal inner journeys than outer facts. Then there's Roland Barthes, who dove into signs and symbols, explaining how today's myths sneak into everyday culture, ads, and media. They make temporary historical stuff or political slants seem totally normal and inevitable, turning myths into tools for influencing society.

Putting it all together, these views show myths as lively ways we make sense of things—tapping into our thinking, emotions, and beliefs. They're not just old tales gathering dust; they're flexible frameworks that change with what societies need, whether it's sorting out big life questions, building our sense of self, or making the status quo feel right and unquestionable. This paper digs into the many sides of myths, looking at how these structural, psychological, and symbolic lenses all point to myths' ongoing job in structuring our world, guiding what we believe, and backing up cultural and political systems.

### **Literature Review:**

The word Myth traces its origins to the Greek term muthos, which initially referred to anything spoken aloud. Over time, its meaning evolved, intertwining with a complex anthropological and linguistic history. In Homeric literature, muthos was used to denote narrative and dialogue but was never equated with fiction, as it often is today. A notable example is Odysseus, who fabricates stories about himself, employing the term muthologenevein, meaning “to tell a tale.” Later, the Greek understanding of muthos shifted, and it came to signify a form of speech that conveyed partial truth. Several related terms reinforce the mythological tradition. The Greek verb muein, meaning “to initiate into secrets,” gave rise to words like “mystic” and “mysterious”, while muthikos came to mean “mythical”. In Latin, the concept of mythos found expression in the term fabula, referring to the construction of narratives. Within ancient Greek philosophy, muthos and logos were understood as distinct yet complementary forces. Logos represented reason, logic, and systematic thought, while muthos emerged from imagination and intuition. This division led to myths being linked with mystical traditions, prophecy, and the occult, whereas logos became the foundation for rational disciplines such as mathematics and the sciences. Despite their apparent opposition, muthos and logos have historically worked in tandem. While logos provides explanations for natural phenomena such as the movement of celestial bodies or the processes of life and death muthos addresses the deeper existential “why” behind these occurrences. Questions about the origins of life, the purpose of existence, and the mystery of death often elude purely rational answers, leaving room for myth to offer

symbolic interpretations and a sense of meaning. Thus, rather than being mere fiction, myths serve as philosophical explorations, bridging the gap between reason and imagination. They may not always provide definitive answers, but they offer a framework through which humanity can seek understanding, purpose, and a connection to the unknown (Chatterji,2015,p-137).

Levi-Strauss argues that human cognition is fundamentally structured around classification, particularly through binary opposition, which individuals instinctively impose on the world. These oppositional frameworks manifest across cultural expressions, but myth is distinctive in its ability to mediate, rather than merely reflect, these tensions. At the heart of such oppositions lies the primary dichotomy between nature and culture. However, Levi-Strauss diverges from Malinowski's perspective by asserting that myth does not function to ease human suffering or provide existential comfort. Instead, it operates as an intellectual mechanism for addressing logical contradictions that arise from the way the mind organizes reality.

For Levi-Strauss, the significance of myth is not tied to its narrative content but to its underlying structural relationships. This structuralist approach renders the distinction between literal and symbolic interpretations of myth largely irrelevant, as meaning is derived from the patterns of thought it reveals rather than from its explicit storyline. Although he seeks to revive the nineteenth-century notion of myth as a form of science do not directly oppose one another, they serve distinct functions-science engages with empirical reality, whereas myth provides a conceptual framework for understanding human experience. Yet, the contradictions that myth appears to reconcile are not intrinsic to the world itself; rather, they originate in the cognitive structures of the human mind. Myth projects these contradictions outward, shaping perceptions of reality while simultaneously attempting to resolve the tensions it has imposed. Thus, even within so-called primitive societies, myth is less an account of the external world and more a reflection of the ways in which the mind structures and interprets experience (Segal ,2021,358).

Claude Levi-Strauss's theory of myth challenges the assumption that myths are simply primitive or pre-scientific narratives. Rather than viewing myth as an out dated or irrational mode of thought, he argues that it operates as a scientific system of classification, structuring the world for early societies much like modern science does for contemporary ones. The key difference, he suggests, lies in the level at which each system functions: while modern science investigates imperceptible realms, such as the microscopic, mythic thought remains grounded in direct sensory experience.

Central to Levi-Strauss's theory is the idea that myths organize reality by categorizing elements into structured sets of oppositions-such as raw v/s cooked food. However, myths do more than just highlight these contrasts; they work to reconcile or mitigate them. Importantly, he asserts that these oppositional structures do not originate from the external world itself but rather from the cognitive tendencies of the human mind, which instinctively organizes thought in binary terms. In this sense, myths serve as a reflection of mental processes rather than an objective account of reality. By framing myth as an inherent function of human cognition rather than a primitive attempt at knowledge, Levi-Strauss's structuralist approach aligns with twentieth-century theories that emphasize myth's role in shaping human understanding. His perspective suggests that myth, far from being an obsolete or irrational form of knowledge, is an essential means through which people impose order on their world (Segal,2015,p-764)

While Freudians interpret myth as a symbolic expression of repressed and socially unacceptable desires, Jungians see it as a manifestation of the collective unconscious an innate reservoir of archetypes that have never been fully realized rather than actively suppressed. According to Jung, these archetypal patterns do not originate from personal experience or conscious awareness but instead emerge from the deep, unconscious structures of the psyche. Myth, for Jungians, serves as a pathway to engaging with this unconscious realm. Unlike classical Freudians, who view myth primarily as a means of emotional release, or even contemporary Freudians, who see it as a tool for adapting to external realities, Jungians regard myth as essential to inner development. Its function is not to help individuals conform to the world but to

facilitate the process of self – realization. This journey toward self-discovery, however, is indirect because it involves projection- people encounter aspects of their unconscious through external symbols and narratives, unknowingly mapping their own psychological conflicts onto myths. In psychotherapy, both Freudian and Jungian traditions acknowledge that recognizing and withdrawing these projections is necessary for self-awareness. However, if myth remains meaningful even after this process, then it is no longer just a medium through which individuals engage with the world but rather a direct means of exploring the depths of the self (Segal,2021,p-356).

As Hayden white suggests, historians should engage with myths as literary scholars do, analysing their symbolic frameworks and cultural functions. Understanding historical context is crucial for interpreting myth, but myth also provides insights into how societies perceive and justify their political realities. This approach is particularly relevant to archaic Greek colonial myths, such as those of Syracuse, where the absence of contemporary records makes later mythological narratives essential for reconstructing historical consciousness.

Roland Barthes' notion of myth as a means of naturalizing historical realities is exemplified in the Athenian myth of autochthony. Rather than providing an account of the city's actual origins, the myth functions as a political tool, reinforcing ideals of civic equality and Athenian homogeneity. Euripides' Praxithea reflects this ideology by not only celebrating Athens' autochthonous identity but also critiquing cities with colonial or immigrant foundations, portraying them as socially unstable and vulnerable to tyranny. The significance of myth lies not in its factual accuracy but in its narrative structures and ideological function. The myth of baby Erichthonios illustrates this, using familial imagery to legitimize democratic principles Athenians are metaphorically "born" from the earth, making them natural equals. This rhetorical strategy transforms political institutions into organic, unquestioned realities (Dougherty,2009,p-159).

Roland Barthes asserts that myth serves as a mechanism for transforming historical circumstances into seemingly natural and self-evident truths. Rather than objectively recording past events, myth functions ideologically, making specific socio-political structures such as Athenian democracy, patriarchal family dynamics, or Greek colonial expansion- appear as the only conceivable reality. According to Barthes, myth does not merely depict history; it assigns historical events an air of permanence, presenting them as inevitable rather than contingent developments. In this way, myth legitimizes existing power structures by masking their historical origins and ideological motivations. Because myth does not simply reflect history but actively shapes how it is perceived, historians must employ critical strategies to interpret it as a historical source. The key challenge is distinguishing between the ideological narratives myths construct and the historical realities they obscure. To explore this dynamic, one can examine two case studies from ancient Greece: the well documented Athenian myth of autochthony, which asserts the native purity of Athenian citizens, and the lesser known colonial myths surrounding the founding of Syracuse. These examples demonstrate that while myth may not provide a factual account of the past, it offers profound insight into how societies rationalize their institutions, construct collective identities, and justify their political orders (Dougherty,2009,p-158).

Roland Barthes, in *Myth Today*, conceptualizes myth as a mask that obscures direct engagement with reality, shielding individuals from authentic meaning. He contends that myths dominate collective consciousness by shaping how people perceive and interpret the world through culturally consciousness by shaping how people perceive and interpret the world through culturally ingrained narratives. Rather than merely reflecting reality, myths reconstruct it, stripping historical events or objects of their original significance and imposing new ideological meanings. In this transformation, an image or concept is emptied of its factual essence, reducing it to a symbolic vessel that conveys a predetermined message. Once integrated into societal discourse, myth functions seamlessly, influencing thought and perception while disguising its own artificial construction. Through this process, myths do not simply narrate stories they subtly dictate how people conceptualize and internalize their world, reinforcing dominant ideologies

without revealing their own origins. Roland Barthes conceptualizes myth as a “second order semiological system,” extending the principles of semiology the study of signs into the realm of ideology. He argues that myth operates by taking an already established sign and reinterpreting it, assigning it a new role as a signifier within a larger system of meaning. In its original, or first order, form, a sign emerges from the relationship between a signifier and a signified. Barthes illustrates this with the example of offering roses, where the act conveys the idea of “passion”. However, when myth intervenes, it does not leave this meaning intact; instead, it repurposes it, using “passion” as a building block for a broader cultural narrative. In this second order structure, passion is no longer merely a personal sentiment but becomes entangled in social and ideological constructs, shaping perceptions beyond the immediate gesture. Through this transformation, myth conceals its own artificiality, presenting cultural interpretation as natural truths, thus reinforcing dominant ideologies while disguising their constructed nature (Divyadharshini & Thamayanthi, 2022).

### **Theoretical Analysis:**

Structuralism, especially the version cooked up by Claude Lévi-Strauss, has been a game-changer in how we make sense of myths. He basically said that myths aren't just random stories thrown together—they're like a well-organized language with rules and patterns. Think of it this way: just like words in a sentence only click when they're connected to each other, myths can be split into basic building blocks he called “mythemes.” These bits don't mean much on their own; it's how they link up in bigger setups that gives them real punch.

At the heart of this approach are these pairs of opposites—stuff like nature versus culture, life versus death, raw versus cooked, or male versus female. Lévi-Strauss figured these are the core ways our brains naturally sort things out. Myths don't wipe out these clashes; instead, they step in like a mediator, using symbols to smooth them over and make them easier to wrap our heads around. So, myths aren't really trying to explain

actual history or the physical world—they're more like mirrors showing the built-in mental tools we all use to organize and understand life.

For him, the real magic of myth isn't in the plot you see on the surface; it's buried in those underlying logical patterns that clue us in on how human thinking ticks. By mapping our inner conflicts onto the outside world, myths help societies tackle those big, messy questions about existence that logic or science can't fully untangle. This shifts the focus away from the person telling the story or the specific culture it's from, and spotlights the shared brain wiring that myths tap into everywhere. Myth isn't just some old cultural relic—it's like a philosophical gadget for puzzling through the built-in contradictions of being human. Even with all our modern science, it doesn't lose its spark; it just offers a different angle, one that's all about symbolic thinking and piecing together our experiences.

The semiotic take on myths, especially as Roland Barthes laid it out, flips the script on what we think of as ancient folklore. He didn't see myths as leftover scraps from some "primitive" era—instead, he viewed them as clever, sneaky ways that cultures create and spread meaning in everyday life. In his classic book *Mythologies* from the 1950s (later translated in the '70s), Barthes breaks it down like this: myth is basically a "second-layer" system of signs. At the basic level, you've got a signifier (like the actual thing or image) teaming up with a signified (the idea it points to) to make a sign. Take roses: handing them over signals "passion" in a straightforward way. But myth kicks it up a notch by grabbing that whole sign and turning it into a fresh signifier, hooking it onto some bigger ideological vibe. Suddenly, that "passion" isn't just about love—it's peddling stuff like old-school upper-class romance or the urge to buy fancy gifts in ads.

Barthes called this sneaky move the "theft of language," where the original sign gets robbed of its real history and context, hollowed out, and then stuffed full of whatever agenda fits the bill. Myths aren't out there mirroring the real world; they're busy making temporary, man-made values feel like they've always been there—eternal, obvious, and just plain natural. That's what makes them such a powerhouse for pushing ideologies. Back in post-World War II France, for example, Barthes pointed out how everyday

things like glossy magazine covers, billboards, or national symbols were quietly propping up middle-class attitudes, slipping political messages into the humdrum of daily life without anyone batting an eye.

This angle sets it apart from the structuralist crowd, who were all about myths as logical puzzles that sort out opposites like black and white. Barthes zoomed in on the cultural and political heavy lifting myths do—he argued they're always loaded with ideology, dressing up power setups as undeniable facts of life. And boy, does this hit home in today's world: think about how TV shows, social media memes, celebrity culture, or even political speeches weave these mythic threads to shape what we accept as normal.

So, if we are a critic or just someone paying attention, our job is to pull back the curtain—pick apart how these myths tick and shine a light on the tricks they play. Barthes turned "mythology" into a toolkit for calling out the BS in our cultural chatter, showing how myths quietly uphold social ladders and keep the big shots in charge. Bottom line: myths aren't harmless bedtime stories; they're like invisible hands molding how we all think and see the world together.

### **Conclusion:**

Myth operates seamlessly within public discourse, making its distortions seem transparent and unquestionable, only the critical analyst recognizes its manipulative underpinnings. Mythology, therefore, serves as a crucial analytical tool, capable of exposing the illusions embedded in mass media and revealing how they subtly reinforce dominant social structures. Furthermore, the contradictions that myth seeks to resolve originate within the human mind, which projects them onto external reality and subsequently engages with them as if they were intrinsic to the world itself. This suggests that myth, even for so-called primitive societies, is not truly about the external world but rather about the internal processes of human thought.

Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and other thinkers have examined the role of myth, extending their analysis to modern contexts and explored contemporary myths operates as a mechanism for legitimizing the

bourgeois worldview of post-war France, embedding ideological narratives within everyday objects and symbols. As a result, the function of myth shifts from an abstract engagement with existential or natural realities to a tool of ideological reinforcement, severing its connection to the physical world and embedding itself instead within the structures of power and cultural discourse.

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