We begin this unit with a recapitulation of the basic tenets of New Criticism, which you read in detail in Block 4. We then move on to familiarize you with the evolution of critical thought between New Criticism and the rise of Poststructuralism. Put together, the two discussions should provide you with the roots of Deconstruction.

The two important critical/theoretical movements, which precede Deconstruction and in a sense provide the soil from which it grows are New Criticism and Structuralism. New Criticism broke off from the conventional historical/biographical approach to reading literature and focused exclusively on the text—a tendency similar to the close focus on language in Structuralism. New Criticism tried to explain the effect of a poem in terms of images locked in paradox and irony. This, in a sense, fostered the structuralist tendency to break-up the literary text into its supposedly constituent units and analyze its functioning. Thus the basic parameters of the deconstructionist method—close focusing on a text and trying to analyze its structure seem to be prepared for in New Criticism and Structuralism.

1.2 NEW CRITICISM: A BRIEF SURVEY

In Block 4, you studied New Criticism as practised between 1920 and 1950 in England and America. Let us recapitulate some of the important tenets of this school:

1. New Critics believed literature to be a self-sustaining artifact and hence discussed it only through a “close reading” of texts. They worked without any
assumptions about the author's intention, the work's relation to history, society, or the sciences; and did not value any subjective response. A text's meaning was to be found through careful attention to the complex verbal texture present on the page.

2. Within literature, poetry was seen as a special kind of language saying things that could not be paraphrased—therefore a poem was said to possess an organic unity with form and content being inseparable. Further, New Criticism tried to displace content in literary analysis and treat the work's form as its content. Form was treated as a self-contained and autonomous entity deserving all critical attention. This is what is referred to as the formalism of New Criticism.

3. The form of a poem was defined by the New Critics primarily in terms of its images. A close reading involved a reader's preliminary identification of key images in a recurring pattern of opposition or tension. Paradox and Irony were posited as the controlling figures of tension. A poem operating through this tension also resolved it. Discovering images locked in tension through paradox or irony and their resolution, thus became a substitute in New Criticism for the conventional project of determining the content of a poem.

4. Paradox and irony were considered important because they were thought to reflect the structures of the human imagination itself.

1.3 FROM NEW CRITICISM TO STRUCTURALISM

New Criticism declined in the 1950s. One of the chief causes for its decline was that it concentrated on the isolated literary text and left the broader, structural aspects of literature untouched. This conflicted with the spirit of the then current North American society, which was steadily growing more scientific and managerial in its mode of thought. What was needed was a mix of the formalist bent of New Criticism together with something much more broad-based, to make criticism a good deal more systematic and scientific. The answer arrived in 1957 in the form of Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism.

Reacting mainly to the limited, 'single-text' perspective of New Criticism, Frye felt that contemporary criticism had become a matter of subjective value judgments and needed the discipline of an objective system. He believed that literature itself was an objective system and worked through certain objective laws.

Frye's theory viewed literature as a recurrence of mythic archetypes and unlike New Criticism found it an alternative history—the history of literature itself. Frye viewed each literary text as a structure composed of variants of certain fixed mythic archetypes. Literature for Frye, to put it rather simply, became a system of such individual literary structures. Criticism was set the task of identifying and classifying the objective laws of this literary system.

This view of literature, as you can see, appears more scientific and systematic. But, it was equally subjective and did not have the general validity and consensus which a systematic and scientific discipline merited. Frye, after all, was talking only about mythic archetypes.

Meanwhile criticism in this century continued to grow more scientific, objective and self-reflective and in the process, shifted its emphasis from author to text and reader. In the early years of the century, biographical/historical criticism focused on the author and his/her age; later, New Criticism focused exclusively on the text. Frye's Anatomy also concentrated on the text but was concerned only with its subjectively-mythical structure. The call of the hour was to go beyond it. And it seemed to be
answered by Structuralism. For it was Structuralism, which systematically focused
on the objective structure of the text and on certain operations involved in perceiving
them.

1.4 STRUCTURALISM: AN INTRODUCTION

Roughly speaking Structuralism derives from two terms: *structure* and *ism*. The
Oxford English Dictionary defines "structure" as "manner in which a complete
whole is constructed, or a whole of the essential parts of something." Look at the pen
you use. It is a structure made up of smaller units: the body, the refill, the spring, etc.
So, when we speak of a structure we refer to a whole with certain essential
constituents. "Ism" is a suffix, which suggests a system, or principle based on the
word / concept to which it is appended. So, Marxism suggests a system or body of
principles deriving primarily from the writings of Marx. Thus, Structuralism would
refer to a system or body of principles deriving from the belief that any phenomenon
is a structure, that is, a whole with certain essential constituents. It would attempt to
investigate the nature of the structure and the general laws by which it works.

The belief that everything could be studied as a structure seems to be firmly
grounded in the 19th and early 20th century Western thought. Both Marx and Freud
considered that certain phenomena (in society or psychology), were made possible
by underlying systems and structures: for Marx the *superstructure* was a
manifestation of a system of relations at the *base*; for Freud, human behaviour could
be explained in terms of the operations of an *unconscious*. (The belief seems to
continue in the later Freudians, specially Lacan, who sees the unconscious as
structured like language.) Similarly, Saussure believed that a linguistic phenomena
could be explained in terms of an underlying system or structure. In his lectures, he
tried to outline this structure and the laws governing its functioning.

1.4.1 Saussurean Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure is considered by many to be the father of modern linguistics
because he gave a radically new turn to the study of human language. Pre-
Saussurean linguistics had studied variations in languages across time (that is, the
study was *diachronic*) and also linked these variations in a causal relationship to
linguistic as well as non-linguistic factors. These differences were usually noted by
an analysis of actual speech acts of some individuals (that is, the *parole*). So, for
example, it would study the evolution of the meaning of a word in specific utterances
and try to link the changes to social/political/cultural factors.

Saussure felt that individual speech acts were many and varied and no linguist could
hope to study all of them. Instead what linguists could do was to study what made
them all possible—that is the underlying system at a given point of time by virtue of
which a language could mean—that is its *langue*.

This shift from *parole* to *langue* is one of the most important contributions Saussure
made to modern linguistics and Structuralism. In studying the *langue*, he put forward
his view of language as a system of signs. He was trying to understand language as a
structure—composed of units called signs. Each sign was in turn seen as another
structure made up of a signifier (the sound we make in pronouncing it or the marks
we make in writing it) and a signified (the concept or meaning). The three black
marks CAT, or the sound we make in reading it are a signifier which evoke the
concept or signified CAT in every reader of English language. However, the
important point made by Saussure was that the relation between a signifier and a
signified is entirely arbitrary: there is no inherent reason why these three black marks
should mean 'cat' other than cultural or historical convention—that is, because a
particular linguistic community forged and continues to use this link between the

Roots: New Criticism
And Structuralism
Deconstruction

marks and the concept. The relation between the whole sign (signifier+signified) and what it refers to, which Saussure called the referent, (the real furry four-legged creature) is therefore also arbitrary. That is, Saussure argued about two arbitrary links: between a signifier and the signified, and the sign and the referent.

There is also a third level of arbitrariness according to Saussure, which is slightly more difficult to understand. This is the arbitrary nature of the sign at the level of the signified / concept. He argued that not only do different languages use different signifiers, they also cut up the phenomenal world differently—that is, they use different signifieds/concepts. Cutting up the phenomenal world means dividing the sensual phenomena we perceive into discrete and useful categories. The need to do this arises because the world is not available to us as an array of independently existing concepts which language goes on to name. Rather, it is in the process of cutting up and representing, that language gives these phenomenal categories their discrete and independent status. As Saussure points out "if words stood for pre-existing entities [i.e. signifieds] they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to another, but that is not true"

One of the most commonly referred to illustrations of this fact is the colour spectrum. The colours of the spectrum actually form a continuum so that blue, grey, etc. are not independently existing entities. They are rather the products of cutting up of the colour continuum by the English language in a particular way. Other languages cut it up differently as Hjelmslev shows this in the comparative study of the English and Welsh languages. In Welsh the color glas includes elements which English would identify as green or grey. The boundaries are placed differently in the two languages and thus the Welsh equivalent of the English 'grey' may be llwyd or glas.

Similarly, there is nothing natural or inevitable about the way we cut up and articulate the rest of our world in a particular language. Each language cuts up the world differently, constructing different meaningful categories and concepts—creating different signifieds.

That was how Saussure conceived the nature and structure of the basic unit of language - the sign. He further went on to explore how signs had meaning and posited the principle that each sign has meaning only by virtue of its difference from others in the system. CAT has meaning not by itself but because it is not CAP or CAD or BAT. For the production of meaning it does not matter how a signified is altered, as long as its difference is preserved from all the signifiers. So, Saussure says, "in language there are only differences, without any positive terms". By positive terms he means fixed immutable entities.

This is what in criticism is referred to as the differential / relational nature of meaning and let's open it up a little further. To do this, let us return to Hjelmslev's color spectrum, and pick up anyone color in it—say green. We have seen that green is not an independently existing color but a range in the continuum cut up into a category and represented by the word 'green' in the English language. Green, in other words, is not a fact but a value particular to the English language in that it is created within that linguistic system. In Welsh there is nothing called green but two
values: gwyrrd & glas which combine the English green with blue and an undesignated color above green in Hjelmslev’s figure. So, when we speak of green or glas as concepts we should be aware that these are actually values constructed within the English and Welsh linguistic systems—constructed by their difference from other elements in the system, not, by any positive content which they independently possess. Their identity lies in their difference from others. We can verify the absence of their positive content deductively. If they had any, it would have asserted its influence in the operation of other linguistic systems. Green or glas, on the contrary simply disappear in some linguistic systems.

Let us discuss an example Saussure himself cites. Division of time into the present, past and the future, so familiar to us in English, are unknown in certain languages. Hebrew does not recognize even the fundamental distinction between the past, present and the future. Proto-Germanic has no special form for the ‘future’. This implies that the flux of time is cut up differently into one, two or three sets in Hebrew, Proto-Germanic and English. So, instead of pre-existing ideas about the division of time, we find in all the foregoing examples different modes of cutting up the flux of time. That is to say, the parts into which time is divided are values particular to a system. The future is a value particular to the English language in that it is created within that linguistic system. As we have seen, Proto-Germanic has nothing called the future. It is these values which are referred to as concepts or signifieds and are constructed within the system - constructed by the difference from other elements in the system and not by any positive content which they possess. Like in the early example, we can only deduce the absence of its positive content. If the concept ‘future’ had any positive content, it would have asserted itself in other linguistic systems too.

Language was thus understood as a system of signs in which the meaning of each sign was determined by its difference from others. This view of language had certain revolutionary implications. It challenged the commonsensical belief that language/words had any direct link with the world/object they named. The essential status of the colour green is thus brought under question. What we can be sure about is the system under which we produce an identity for a range—nothing beyond that. This de-linking of the word from the world has, as we shall see, important consequences for the interpretation of literary texts.

1.4.2 Saussure to Structuralism

We have seen that Saussure’s structural analysis of language attempts to examine the conditions that allow language and meaning to function, seeking to know how meaning is made possible. Saussure hoped that his linguistic theory would be applied to other social and cultural phenomena as well. Through his linguistic theory, Saussure claimed to have inaugurated “Semiology”: a science that studies the life of signs [linguistic or otherwise] within society.

Saussure’s linguistic theory was reconstructed by his friends and colleagues on the basis of his notes and lectures delivered between 1907-1911 at the University of Geneva. However, it was only in the 1950s that some thinkers started applying his linguistic theory to other disciplines. Chief among them were Claude Levi Strauss and Roland Barthes working in the fields of anthropology and culture respectively. After a gap of about four decades, semiology, as Saussure had envisaged, had finally taken off. And Structuralism was another term used to designate the basic premises of its operations.

Thus, Barthes defined Structuralism as a mode of analysis of cultural artifacts, which originates in the method of contemporary linguistics. "I have been engaged in a series of structural analyses which all aim at defining a number of non-linguistic languages"
writes Barthes in his early days. Structuralism slowly spread into other fields to the extent that in the 1960s and 70s, it permeated almost every sphere of human thought. This all-pervasiveness is evident in the definition of a theorist like Frederic Jameson: Structuralism is an attempt "to rethink everything in terms of linguistics".

But why should the method of linguistics be used for an analysis of social and cultural phenomena? Jonathan Culler in his book Structuralist Poetics offers two fundamental insights by way of suggesting an answer: (a) because social and cultural phenomena are also signs of a different signifying system just as words are signs of the linguistic system; (b) like linguistic signs they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations. So, when one studies the meaning of a cultural artifact or social event, one discovers that like a linguistic sign, its defining qualities are the features which distinguish it from others and enable it to bear meaning within the system.

### 1.4.3 Binary Oppositions

An interesting insight offered by Structuralism into the operations of human language, cognition and thought was the concept of 'binary oppositions'. Binary means dual or involving pairs, so binary opposition would refer to a pair in which the two terms are in a state of opposition. Structuralism argues that human language and discourse can be understood as structured in terms of binary oppositions. For political reasons, these oppositions always function as a hierarchy.

Consider the ideology of colonialism for example. It can be seen as structured around the binary opposition white / black. The opposition also functions as a hierarchy and sees white as arbitrarily superior to black and constructs a whole world-view on it. Or consider the Freudian theory of the human mind. It is structured around the binary opposition: unconscious/ conscious and considers the unconscious superior to the conscious. We have grown up accepting these oppositions as valid ways of ordering and understanding all spheres of our life: familial, cultural, or political.

Forms of binarism have been present in human thought from the earliest times. Human discourse has always used binary oppositions to mark differences in an otherwise random sequence of features and thus give shape to experience and the universe. Dualisms in philosophy like subject/object, God/man, temporal/eternal are the very foundation of entire world-views.

The structural linguist, Roman Jakobson, about whom you will read in some detail later, showed that we identify a phoneme (the smallest meaningful unit of sound) by consciously using a number of binary oppositions which make it possible to differentiate between otherwise similar sounds. We distinguish "puck" from "buck" because the binary opposition "voiced/unvoiced" makes it possible to distinguish between two plosives (/p/ is voiced /b/ is unvoiced). Thus, what would otherwise be heard as the same sound is heard differently. So, binary oppositions help us mark differences, and structure our discourses on them.

### 1.5 LITERARY STRUCTURALISM

We have seen that Saussure's linguistic theory reviewed language as:

(a) delinked from the real world.
(b) a self-sufficient system functioning by its own rules.

Some structuralist critics borrow these fundamental theoretical insights from Saussure and interpret literature as language. They say that literature is a self-sufficient system which functions through an inter-relation between the units it is composed of, having little to do with objective reality. Literary Structuralism originates in this impulse.
1.5.1 Linguistics and Literary Structuralism

Interpreting literature as language is in practice a complex process. Literary Structuralism does borrow its approach from linguistics but these approaches are varied. Jonathan Culler outlines three distinct ways in which linguistics has influenced literary structuralism:

A. As a scientific discipline, linguistics suggested to critics that a rigorous and systematic study did not necessarily mean looking for causal explanations—that is, linking elements in the text to objective cultural/personal facts through cause and effect. An element in a literary text, like an element in a linguistic system, could be explained by its place in a network of relations rather than in a chain of cause and effect. It therefore justified the desire to abandon historical and biographical criticism.

B. Linguistics provided a number of concepts, which could be applied arbitrarily in discussing literary works. Some common examples already encountered, are signifier, signified; langue, parole; diachronic, synchronic etc. These concepts can be employed skilfully or ineptly on the literary text but they do not by virtue of their linguistic origin produce valid insights. However, the use of such terms may help one identify relations of various kinds in a text, which are responsible for the production of meaning.

C. Linguistics provides structuralists with a model of how one should go about studying systems of signs. In this case, linguistic concepts are not used arbitrarily but as constituents of a model. This is a stronger claim about the relevance of linguistics and in Culler’s opinion characterizes Structuralism proper.

But within the third perspective, there are different ways of interpreting and applying the linguistic model. To borrow from Culler again, four distinct ways of interpreting can be outlined:

1.5.1.1 Jakobson’s Poetic Analyses

In the first category are linguists like Jakobson who claim that linguistics provides a discovery procedure which can be applied directly to the language of literature to reveal poetic structures. That is, linguistics can define the structures in a given piece of language that make it poetic.

Let us spend some time understanding this claim. Jakobson, the linguist believed that a linguistic utterance fulfilled any one of the six functions—one of which was the poetic. He also believed that the fundamental aim of linguistics was to study verbal forms in relation to any one of the six functions. That is, which characteristics of a verbal form are performing what function in a text. In the context of poetry, it means identifying which features make the language poetic.

Further, the poetic function is defined as the maximum foregrounding of the text itself, and, not its content. For Jakobson, the principal technique used for foregrounding is the use of highly patterned language—i.e making conspicuous use of words and phrases, using them as much more than message carriers.

Put simply, the poetic use of language involves selecting and placing in a sequence items that are phonologically and grammatically related. A linguistic analysis would aim at revealing these patterns formed by the repetition of these related items.
"Any unbiased, attentive, exhaustive, total description of the selection, distribution and interrelation of diverse morphological classes and syntactic constructions in a given poem surprises the examiner himself by unexpected, striking symmetries and anti-symmetries, balanced structures, efficient accumulation of equivalent forms and salient contrasts..." writes Jakobson.

We are now in position to understand the claim with which we began. This passage suggests that if we follow patiently and correctly the procedures of linguistic analysis we can produce a complete inventory of patterns in a text. That is, linguistics provides a discovery procedure for poetic patterns in that, if followed correctly it will yield an account of the patterns present in the text responsible for the poetic effect. Jakobson's problem is that he thinks these structures are static and objectively present in a text. As we will see later, they may be fairly dynamic and relative.

1.5.1.2 Greimas’ Semantic Analysis

In the second category we can consider the semantic analyses by linguists like Griemans which illustrate that although linguistics does not provide a procedure for the discovery of literary structures, some of the complex operations of reading may at least be partially identified by applying linguistic techniques directly to the language of literature.

Griemans starts on the assumption that linguistics and particularly its subset ‘semantics’ ought to be able to account for meaning of all kinds, including, literary meaning. But as he works out his theory, it emerges that literary meaning cannot be explained by a method which works up from smaller units to larger ones. That is, literary meaning is not as simple an affair as general meaning would be. We may be able to specify a broad framework of meaning for a text. But the process by which individual units contribute to the filling up of a reader’s framework of meaning of a literary text, involves some complex expectations and semantic operations. His theory, thus, only partially explains the complex operations involved in making sense of a literary text.

1.5.1.3 Todorov’s Grammar of Decameron

Todorov’s analysis of Boccaccio’s Decameron represents the third category which works on the assumption that if we apply linguistic categories metaphorically to a body of texts we can produce results which are as valid as an account of a linguistic system. Todorov segments and classifies the Decameron in the hope of producing a grammar or general set of rules, of the way the narratives or plots are structured out of their basic units. The strategy works on the dubious assumption that the Decameron is structured like language, which can be revealed through a systematic dismantling of its constituent units. This, to say the least, may not be true. A large variety of structures can be found within the Decameron depending on the linguistic category one starts the investigation with. For example, reading each story as a sentence and defining its units as noun, adjective and verb is one way of discovering its structure just as reading each story as an argument may lead to identifying it as structured out of a subject, predicate, etc. None of these two views and others like them can be seen as privileged—as revealing the real structure of the Decameron.

1.5.1.4 Culler’s Structuralist Poetics

In the fourth category fall theorists like Jonathan Culler who believe that the linguistic method cannot serve as a discovery procedure. We cannot transport concepts or theories from linguistics and apply it to literature in the hope of discovering its meaning. Instead, linguistics should be used as a general model for semiological investigation. That is, we should try to construct a poetics, which will
stand to literature as linguistics stands to language. This, according to him, is the most appropriate use of the linguistic model.

Put simply what Culler is saying is that instead of copying linguists, literary critics should learn from them. Saussure observed meaning in circulation and set out to explain how it is possible for language to mean. Similarly literary critics should observe certain accepted readings of literary texts and try to construct a theory about how such meanings arise. In other words, the structuralist critic ought to evolve a theory of the practice of reading. Culler himself sets out to construct a poetics of the lyric and the novel in his book *Structuralist Poetics*

This view has its own limitations. Culler seems to be inspired by the assumption that the process of reading literature can be caught within a set of principles. Just as Greimas believed that a theory of semantics could explain literary meaning, similarly Culler seems to believe that a theory of reading can catch literary reading too. As his efforts demonstrate, the project is destined to be incomplete.

### 1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this preliminary survey of the development of literary theory between the 1920s and the 1960s, a tendency becomes clear. With New Criticism started a project of reading literature systematically by breaking it into its constituent units. This project was limited in many senses. Two of the important limitations were the privileging of the images and the single-text approach. Northrop Frye in his works addressed these limitations but advanced the project in a powerful mythic-subjective direction. It was only with Structuralism that the project of studying literature in a systematic and structural way really began. The structuralist believed that s/he had succeeded in splitting the literary text into objective structures and worked on the assumption that an explanation of the inter-relationship of these structures could explain the literary experience. In the next Unit, you will study how this assumption was limited and the structuralist had been actually constructing the structures when s/he thought s/he was discovering them.

### 1.7 QUESTIONS

1. Identify two common features between the new critical and the structuralist approaches to criticism.

2. Outline the sign theory of language as propounded by Saussure highlighting its specific features.

3. Explain with two examples how linguistics has affected literary criticism.

### 1.8 GLOSSARY

**Archetypes**

Certain original or primordial ideas which have been present in the human imagination in one form or another across many cultures and eras. For example, the story of a king and a queen losing and regaining their prince/princess is an archetype, which recurs across many cultures and eras.

**Base and Superstructure**

In the writings of Karl Marx, Base refers to the system of production and the economic relations of a society. The Superstructure
Deconstruction refers to all the other social, cultural and political activities undertaken by the society.

Langue and Parole: Langue refers to the complete grammatical system used by a particular linguistic community. Parole on the other hand refers to an individual's particular use of language, the actual speech act.

Phonology: Science of vocal sounds or the system of sounds in a language. So, a phonological analysis would try to study the way sounds are arranged in a sentence and the effect they achieve.

Semantics: A branch of Linguistics dealing with the production of meaning.

Signs: In Saussure's theory of language, a sign refers to a combination of the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the graphic or the verbal element of a word—that is, the mark that we make while writing it or the sound which we make while uttering it. The signified refers to the concept that we evoke in the mind of the reader or the listener.

Synchronic and Diachronic: Two approaches to the study of a subject. Synchronic relates to the study at a particular period, without considering its past or present. Diachronic refers to its study through its historical development.

Syntax: Refers to the grammatical arrangement of words in speech or writing.

1.9 SUGGESTED READINGS