

'This is a truly insightful book which addresses important changes in today's media landscape. It engages the reader through clear exposition, compelling examples and a lively invitation to engage in urgent debates.'

Professor Sonia Livingstone, *Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science*

Media Theory for A Level provides a comprehensive introduction to the 19 academic theories required for A Level Media study. From Roland Barthes to Clay Shirky, from structuralism to civilisationism, this revision book explains the core academic concepts students need to master to succeed in their exams. Each chapter includes:

- Comprehensive explanations of the academic ideas and theories specified for GCE Media study.
- Practical tasks designed to help students apply theoretical concepts to unseen texts and close study products/set texts.
- Exemplar applications of theories to set texts and close study products for all media specifications (AQA, Eduqas and OCR).
- Challenge activities designed to help students secure premium grades.
- Glossaries to explain specialist academic terminology.
- Revision summaries and exam preparation activities for all named theorists.
- Essential knowledge reference tables.

Media Theory for A Level is also accompanied by the essentialmediatheory.com website that contains a wide range of supporting resources. Accompanying online material includes:

- Revision flashcards and worksheets.
- A comprehensive bank of exemplar applications that apply academic theory to current set texts and close study products for all media specifications.
- Classroom ready worksheets that teachers can use alongside the book to help students master essential media theory.
- Help sheets that focus on the application of academic theory to unseen text components of A Level exams.

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Cover image: STRANGER THINGS, Winona Ryder (Season 2, aired October 27, 2017). ©Netflix/courtesy Everett Collection


Media Theory for A Level

The Essential Revision Guide



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Media language

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1 Semiotics

Roland Barthes

Until the 1950s academic study of culture was largely limited to an exploration of high culture. Literature, art, architecture, music, etc. were deemed worthy of study because, supposedly, they articulated sophisticated and nuanced modes of thinking. Popular culture, conversely, was rejected as unworthy of analysis because the stories told by advertising, cinema and the then emerging form of television were thought to be constructed with so little precision, and their effects so simple, that any academic attention was undeserving.

Barthes, however, realised that the mass media ought to be taken seriously, and his 1957 essay collection, *Mythologies*, stands as one of the first attempts to evaluate the finesse and impact of mass media narratives. Indeed, Barthes *Mythologies* revels in popular culture, analysing anything and everything from wrestling to horoscopes, from car adverts to political news. Barthes's writing intuited that mass media forms affected a deep presence within society – an ideological presence whose scope and influence far outstripped the nuanced reach of high culture.

Concept 1: denotation and connotation

Denotation/connotation

Barthes tells us that media products are decoded by their readers – in the first instance, at least – using what he calls a 'denotative reading'. Denotative readings, he suggests, occur when readers recognise the literal or physical content of media imagery. For example, a denotative reading of the 'I, Daniel Blake' poster in Figure 1.1 would simply acknowledge that the photograph depicts an older man who wears dark clothing with his fist raised in the air.

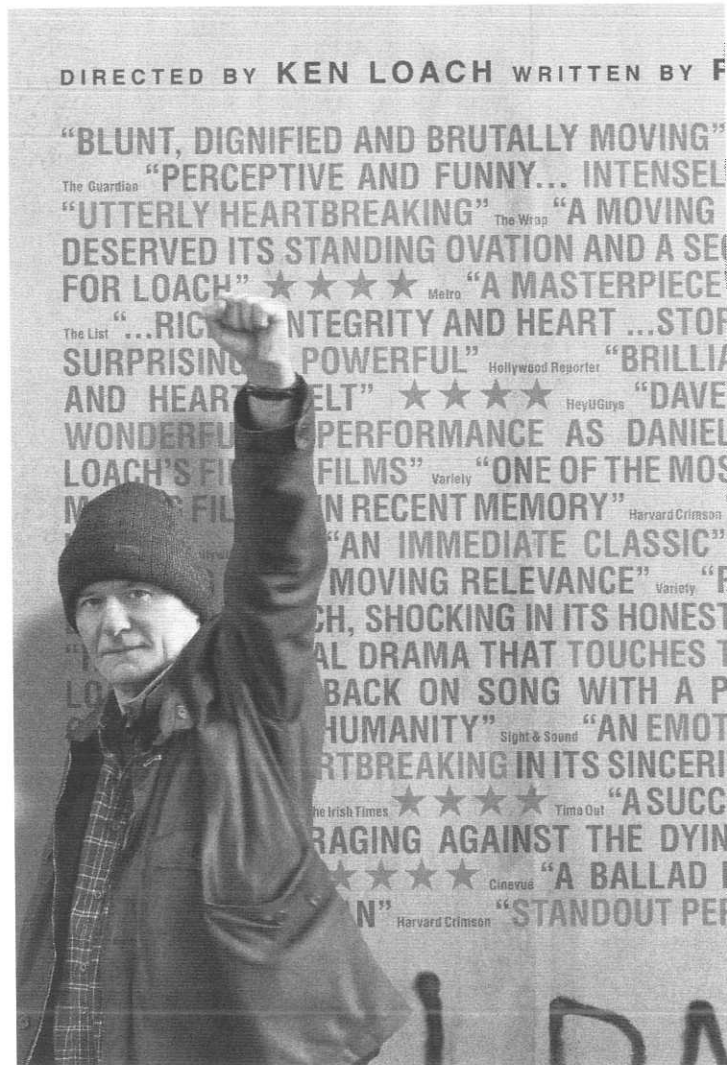


Figure 1.1 'I, Daniel Blake' film poster (2016).

© Sixteen Films.

Barthes tells us that readers quickly move beyond the simple recognition of image content and subsequently engage in what he calls 'connotative decoding'. Connotation, Barthes argues, 'makes possible a (limited) dissemination of meanings, spread like gold dust on the surface of the text' (Barthes, 2007, 9). Connotative readings, he suggests, refer to the deeper understandings prompted by media imagery and to the emotional, symbolic or even ideological significances produced as a result of those readings.

The 'I, Daniel Blake' poster in Figure 1.1, for example, signifies various meanings through a range of subtle cues: the raised fist suggests

Table 1.1 Connotative effects of photographic imagery

Image makers use a range of strategies to infer meaning within imagery – look out for the following when analysing the meaning making effects of your set texts.

Image features	Look out for
<p>Pose Subject positioning, stance or body language</p>	<p>Fourth wall breaks: where the photographic subject meets the gaze of the audience. This can create a confrontational, aggressive or invitational feel.</p> <p>Off-screen gaze: upward gazes can suggest spirituality; right-frame gazes can suggest adventure or optimism; left-frame gazes can suggest regret or nostalgia.</p> <p>Body language control: might be open or closed, passive or active, strong or weak.</p> <p>Subject positioning: the way that group shots are arranged is usually significant with power conferred on those characters that occupy dominant positions.</p> <p>Proxemics: refers to the distance between subjects – the closer the characters are the closer their relationship.</p> <p>Left-to-right/right-to-left movement: characters who travel from screen left to screen right create positive connotations – they are adventurers and we might feel hopeful about their prospects; right-to-left movements can suggest failure or an impending confrontation.</p>

continued

Image features	Look out for
<i>Mise en scène</i> Props, costume and setting	<p>Symbolic props: props are rarely accidental – their use and placement generally infer symbolic meanings.</p> <p>Pathetic fallacy: settings and scenery often serve further symbolic functions – weather, for example, infers the tone of characters' thoughts.</p> <p>Costume symbolism: character stereotypes are constructed through costuming, helping us to decipher a character's narrative function.</p>
Lighting connotations	<p>High-key lighting: removes shadows from a scene, often producing a much lighter, more upbeat feel.</p> <p>Low-key lighting: emphasises shadows and constructs a much more serious set of connotations.</p> <p>Chiaroscuro lighting: high contrast lighting usually created through the use of light beams penetrating pitch darkness and connotes hopelessness or mystery.</p> <p>Ambient lighting: infers realism.</p>
Compositional effects Shot distance, positioning of subjects within the frame	<p>Long shots: imply that a subject is dominated by their environment.</p> <p>Close ups: intensify character emotion or suggest impending drama.</p> <p>Left/right compositions: traditionally the left side of the screen is reserved for characters with whom the audience is meant to empathise and vice versa.</p> <p>Open/closed frames: open framing suggests freedom, while enclosing a character within a closed frame can suggest entrapment.</p> <p>Tilt and eye line: tilt-ups and high eyelines convey power, while tilt-downs and low eyelines connote powerlessness and vulnerability.</p>
Post-production effects	<p>Colour control: colours are often exaggerated for specific connotative effect – red: anger; white: innocence; blue: sadness and so on.</p> <p>High saturation: colour levels are increased creating a cheerier, upbeat feel.</p> <p>Desaturation: taking colour out of an image generates a serious or sombre tone.</p>

defiance, the character's costume infers poverty or that he comes from a working class background, while the dark clothing potentially constructs a sombre tone and suggests that the advertised film will deal with serious or tragic themes. In reading the meaning of these subtle cues, and of the multitude of clues that all media products present, audiences use their cultural knowledge and their experience of similar imagery to help them construct an understanding of a product's significance.

Text and image

Barthes, of course, understood that photographic imagery does not construct meaning by itself. Imagery, in print-based products, works alongside text-based components. Headers and taglines give meaning to photos, while photos themselves provide an accompanying visual explanation for news copy. The interplay between text and image, Barthes tells us, is determined by the positioning of textual components and by the relative size of each element. Barthes also details the use of text to 'anchor' image meanings in advertisements and print news. Photo captions, headers and taglines, Barthes tells us, guide readers towards defined significations.

Within the 'Tide' advertisement depicted in Figure 1.2, for instance, readers are encouraged to question why the woman is holding the box of washing powder in what looks, to all intents and purposes, to be a romantic embrace. The image presented could connote a whole range of meanings, from the surreal to the nonsensical. Has the woman actually fallen in love with a box of washing powder? Has she found real love as a result of the product? Perhaps, we might conclude, the woman has a strange washing powder fetish.

It is not until we read the strapline at the bottom of the advert, 'Tide gets clothes cleaner than any other washday product', that the meaning of the image is explicated. The woman loves Tide as a result of its cleaning powers. In the sense, the text component anchors the meaning of imagery. Without anchorage, Barthes suggests, media imagery is likely to produce polysemic connotations or multiple meanings. Anchorage, Barthes tells us, constructs, 'a vice which holds the connoted meanings from proliferating' (Barthes, 2007, 39).

No wonder you women buy more TIDE than any other washday product!

TIDE'S GOT WHAT WOMEN WANT!

NO SOAP-NO OTHER "SUDS"-NO OTHER WASHING PRODUCT KNOWN-WILL GET YOUR WASH AS CLEAN AS TIDE!

ONLY TIDE DOES ALL THREE:

- 1. World's CLEANEST wash!**
Yes, Tide will get your wash cleaner than any other washing product! (Tide, unlike soap, removes both dirt and soap film.) No wonder more Tide goes into American homes than any other washday product!
- 2. World's WHIEST wash!**
It's a miracle! In hardest water, Tide will get your shirts, sheets, towels whiter—yes, whiter—than any soap or any other washing product knows!
- 3. Actually BRIGHTENS colors!**
Treat all your washable colors to Tide. With all its terrific cleaning power, Tide is truly safe . . . and actually brightens soap-dulled colors.

REMEMBER!
TIDE GETS CLOTHES CLEANER THAN ANY OTHER WASHDAY PRODUCT YOU CAN BUY!

There's nothing like PROCTER & GAMBLE'S TIDE

TIDE'S A SUDSING WHIZZ EVEN IN HARDEST WATER

Figure 1.2 Tide washing powder advert (1950).

Source: image courtesy of Advertising Archive.

Box 1.1 Apply it: diagnose the connotations constructed by media set texts

Use the following questions to help you construct a detailed analysis of the media language effects of relevant set texts:

Pose connotations

- Who is pictured within key imagery? And with whom? What kind of relationship do the characters have with each other?
- What is significant about their pose? Where is the character looking and in what ways is that significant?
- What does their body language reveal?

Mise en scène

- What is the significance of props, setting and costuming?
- Do costumes tell us who the character is or what role they play in the overarching narrative?

Lighting

- What kind of lighting is used and with what emotional or connotative effect?
- Who is placed in shadow? Who is given light?

Composition

- What sort of shot distance is used to depict the subject?
- Is the shot composed with the subject on the left or right side of the frame? What connotations does this positioning create for the audience?
- Is the shot constructed as an open or closed frame shot?
- Is tilt applied to the composition and with what effect?

Post-production

- What colours are foregrounded and with what connotative effect?
- Is colour taken out of the shot?

Anchorages

- What elements, if any, anchor the meanings constructed by your set texts?

Further set text help is available for a range of products for all exam boards at www.essentialmediatheory.com

Barthes five code symphony

Barthes's denotation/connotation model provides an excellent framework for analysing print media. We can use it to diagnose the effects of costume choices or settings, or to think about the significations created through shot distance or shot composition. Barthes's denotation/connotation model, however, is less effective when we have to consider the way in which elements combine to produce singular effects. Narratives, for instance, set up meanings at the start of stories that are connected to later narrative events – stories, for example, tease audiences with mysteries that are only resolved at the end. Similarly, some connotations are used throughout a text in a way that gives them a deeper connotative meaning than if they appeared just once. For example, the repeated use of food-oriented references in the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale – breadcrumbs, the gingerbread house, the cooking of the witch – creates an enhanced symbolic effect.

To account for this, Barthes produced a more nuanced version of his denotation/connotation model in which a symphony of five explicit coding effects are used to create meaning. These connotative effects, he argues, operate like voices or instruments in a band – sometimes playing in unison, while at other moments they are muted so that single codes can deliver solo effects.

Barthes details his five code symphony as follows:

- **Hermeneutic codes (enigmas):** construct moments of mystery to intrigue the reader or viewer. Enigmas also hook readers, compelling further reading or viewing to locate answers to the questions posed. The header of the 'Tide' advert in Figure 1.2, for instance, constructs a hermeneutic response through the header element. Readers are prompted to ponder what it is that 'women want', while the enigma is only resolved if the rest of the advert is consumed. Some products, Barthes tells us, rely on hermeneutic codes more than others – crime dramas, for instance, usually convey and reinforce long standing enigmas throughout their narratives.
- **Proairetic codes (actions):** narratives also offer moments in which meaning is conveyed through action or demonstration. Action provides explanation or excitement, sometimes working to resolve the enigmas that earlier narrative sequences might pose.

The depiction of the washing machine in the top right hand corner of the 'Tide' advert (Figure 1.2), for example, constructs a proairetic moment in that the imagery illustrates how the washing powder is used. Again, some products deploy proairetic codes more than others: science fiction, thrillers and crime dramas, for instance, typically rely on moments of concentrated action to generate viewer excitement.

- **Semantic codes (connotative elements):** refers to any element within a media text that produces a single connotative effect. Semantic codes include lighting, *mise en scène* and colour usage. They also refer to the use of compositional effects, pose or even to typographic decisions and the significations that text size or font selection convey. Semantic code connotations, for example, are created in the 'Tide' advert (Figure 1.2) via the wavelike arrangement of the 'What Women Want' header (connoting an upbeat jaunty tone), while the repeated use of exclamation marks throughout the advert construct energy and volume.
- **Symbolic codes:** semantic and symbolic codes are highly similar and often quite hard to tease apart. Perhaps one of the easiest ways to seek out the symbolic codes within a product is to search for repeated symbols that convey a deeper meaning. In television, symbolic codes often surface as repeated themes or visual motifs and are referenced throughout the story in a thread of continuous underlying meaning. In the 'Tide' advert (Figure 1.2), the repetition of the word 'clean' and the way that cleanliness in general is presented could be considered to be symbolic meaning making.
- **Cultural codes (referential codes):** refers to the inclusion of material that generates meaning from outside the product. Cultural codes might include the use of proverbs, sayings or idioms. They might also include references to scientific or historical knowledge – in short, anything that relies on the audience's knowledge beyond the text. Intertextual references, too, can be considered to be a form of cultural code in that they reference meanings from outside the product. Tide, for instance, offers cultural coding through the intertextual reference made to the 'We can do it' Second World War propaganda poster (Figure 1.3). The reference here constructs the suggestion that Tide is a patriotic product.

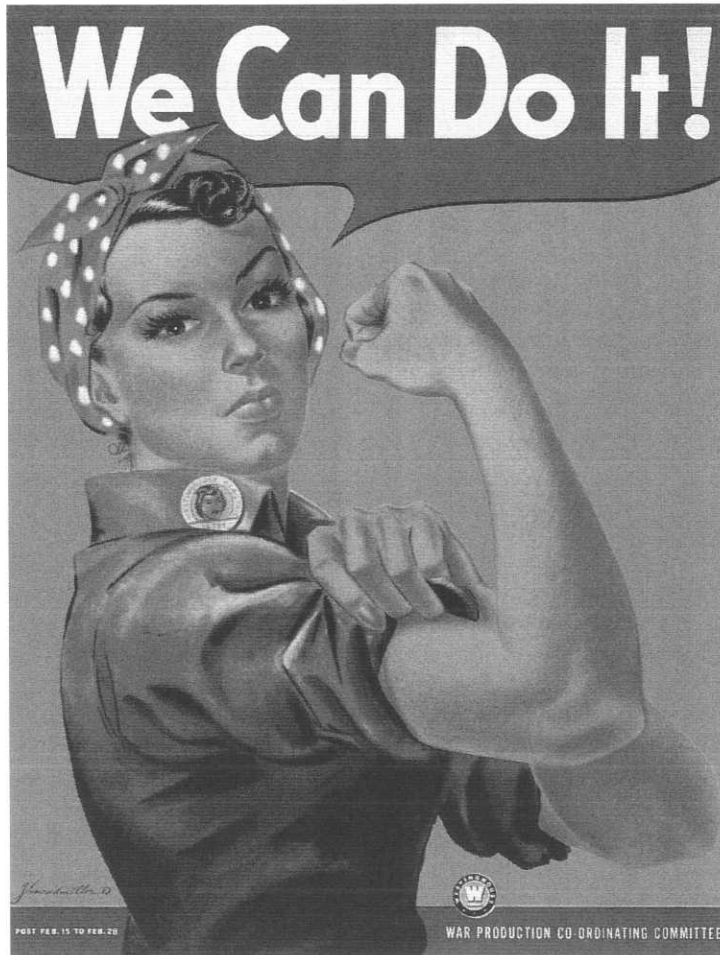


Figure 1.3 'We Can Do It!' American Second World War propaganda poster (1943).

Source: image courtesy of Advertising Archive.

Box 1.2 Apply it: apply Barthes's five code symphony to set texts

Work through set texts that require an understanding of the effects of media language. Identify how each text crafts hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, cultural and symbolic codes to create meaning.

Further set text help is available for a range of products for all exam boards at www.essentialmediatheory.com

Concept 2: the media's ideological effect

Media as myth

Traditional myths, Barthes tells us, are important because they present a collective representation of the world. Myths have an elevated status; they are important enough to be passed down from one generation to the next, while the anonymisation of their authors further suggests that mythic tales represent a collective rather than a singular view. Myths, too, are allegorical – they present moral outlooks and tell us how we ought to behave. When, for instance, Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection, we, too, are being warned about the dangers of vanity and self-absorption.

Barthes suggests that the media has replaced, or at least replicates, the functions of traditional myth making. The press, television, advertising and radio, he argues, convey meaning with the same sort of authority as myths and, more, importantly, induce similar ideological effects.

Indeed, Barthes's hugely influential essay collection, *Mythologies*, sought to identify those mythic effects, suggesting that advertising invests cars with a godlike spirituality, that politicians manufacture imagery to convince us of their ordinariness and that soap detergents effect a 'euphoria' of cleanliness through their marketing appeals (Barthes, 2009, 32).

Barthes identifies the following ideological effects of media consumption:

- **Naturalisation:** as a result of the media's uncanny ability to look and feel realistic, media products, Barthes tells us, present ideas as

natural, matter of fact or common sense. Indeed, if a range of media texts repeat the same idea enough times audiences come to believe that those ideas are not a matter of perspective but are, in fact, an immutable social norm. For instance, advertising that positions women as mothers or as responsible for domestic chores naturalise the idea that a woman's place ought to be in the home.

- **Media myths are reductive:** Barthes tells us that the media, by and large, simplifies, reduces or purifies ideas, turning complexity into easily digestible information. The use of simplicity creates audience appeal, Barthes argues, and also has the effect of de-intellectualising and depoliticising ideas. Message reduction also discourages audiences from questioning or analysing media content too closely.
- **Media myths reinforce existing social power structures:** 'The oppressed is nothing, he has only one language, that of his emancipation,' Barthes writes, while 'the oppressor is everything, his language is rich, multiform, supple' (Barthes, 2009, 176). He argues that those who have power tend to control the myth-making process, either owning or indirectly channelling media content through privileged access arrangements. The powerful, in this sense, hold all the cards, and are able to harness the creative allure of the media industry to maintain the illusion that the system we live in, the system that benefits the powerful the most, is naturally ordered and unchangeable.

Box 1.3 Discuss it: what effect do media products have on society?

- Can you think of a media product that consistently turns complexity into a simplified or reductive message?
- Do any of your set texts deploy message reduction? Why?
- Can you think of an idea, behaviour or norm that the media naturalises?
- Are modern audiences more suspicious of the media than Barthes suggests?
- Do media products reinforce existing power structures? Can you think of any media products that challenge those who have power?

Box 1.4 Apply it: diagnose the ideological subtexts of your set texts

Use the following questions to help you identify the ideological subtexts of set text products:

- **Naturalisation effects:** in what ways does the set text present key ideas, values or behaviours as common sense or the norm?
- **Simplification effects:** in what ways does the text create appeal for those ideas through a simplistic presentation? How does that simplicity discourage audience questioning?
- **Reinforcement of existing power structures:** who has power within the set text? How does that power mirror real world power?

Exemplar analysis and further set text help is available for a range of products at www.essentialmediatheory.com

Table 1.2 Speak Roland Barthes

Anchorage	The process of fixing the meaning, usually the meaning of an image, through the use of another component – usually a text-based feature such as a header or caption.
Denotation/ connotation	Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a media element, whilst connotation refers to the emotions, ideas or symbolic meanings produced by that element.
Hermeneutic codes	Hermeneutic elements construct mystery or enigma, encouraging the reader to engage further with a product in order to discover the answer to the puzzle posed.
Naturalisation	The process of making ideas or viewpoints feel like they are common sense when, in reality, they are constructed or manufactured by media producers.
Message reduction	Barthes argues that the media tends to simplify or purify complex ideas. This reductive impulse discourages audiences from questioning the ideas presented.
Proairetic codes	Refers to moments of action within a media text. Proairetic moments create excitement or provide explanation for audiences.
Signification	The process of meaning creation. Media elements signify or produce meanings when consumed by audiences.

Table 1.3 Barthes: ten minute revision

Concept 1: *the media constructs meaning through a process of denotation and connotation*

- We read the media imagery in the same way that we read conventional language.
 - We decode media imagery in two distinctly different ways: first, producing a denotative reading that recognises the literal content of an image, and then producing a connotative reading that diagnoses a deeper symbolic meaning.
 - Image based connotations are created through: props, post-production effects, pose, costuming, composition and lighting.
 - Media imagery is polyvalent – likely, in other words, to produce a number of connotative effects.
 - Text-based elements can provide anchorage – tying down the meaning of an image for the reader.
 - Barthes suggests that meaning is produced by the simultaneous deployment of hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, cultural and symbolic features.
-

Concept 2: *the media has an ideological effect on audiences*

- The media is powerful because it has the capacity to produce a realistic portrayal of the world.
 - The media has a myth like capacity to guide and influence our behaviours and actions.
 - The media naturalises ideas through repetition.
 - The media reduces or simplifies ideas, discouraging audiences from questioning its specific presentation of the world.
 - The media tends to reinforce the worldview of those who affect social power.
-

Two theorists who challenge Barthes's thinking

- **Claude Lévi-Strauss:** would be more interested in the way that media products articulate oppositions than in the effect of any single ingredient or moment. Lévi-Strauss would also argue that media products are informed by universally shared structures; Barthes argues that media products are constructed as a result of temporal or social influences.
 - **Tzvetan Todorov:** would argue that media products produce meaning through narrative features and that isolated instances of connotation are less significant.
-

2 Structuralism

Claude Lévi-Strauss

Lévi-Strauss painstakingly analysed the structure and narrative content of hundreds of mythic tales he collected from around the globe. From the tribal stories of the Amazonian rainforest to the ancient myths of Greece, he sought to uncover the invisible rule book of storytelling in order to diagnose the essential nature of human experience; he believed that any common themes or motifs located in those myths would reveal essential truths about the way the human mind structures the world.

All stories, Lévi-Strauss ultimately concluded, work through oppositional arrangements – through the construction of characters or narrative incidents that clash or jar. Moreover, stories and storytelling, in Lévi-Strauss's view, perform a vital social function: oppositional presentations are resolved to outline societal taboos and socially acceptable behaviours.

Concept 1: binary oppositions

Lévi-Strauss outlines the key academic ideas used to explore media products in his 1962 book, *The Savage Mind*, in which he suggests that a subliminal set of structural rules inform myth production. Individual cultures might speak different languages, Lévi-Strauss argues, but all stories told across the globe and throughout history employ a remarkably simple but stable formula. Myths, Lévi-Strauss infers, universally explore human experience using polarised themes: birth has to compete against death, success against failure, wisdom trades blows with innocence. The Old Testament, for instance, suggests that the Earth was formed from a series of oppositional constructs – God separated light from darkness, the sky from the sea, the land from the water. In fairy tales, the innocence and youth of Little Red Riding Hood takes on the greed and cunning of the Big Bad Wolf.