Mythologies Study Guide

Mythologies by Roland Barthes

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

This short but intellectually dense book examines contemporary mythology from two distinct perspectives. Specific manifestations of the relationship between myth and popular culture are explored in the series of short essays making up Section 1. Section 2 consists of a lengthy essay examining and defining, from the author's personal perspective, the general ways in which myths function and are defined.

Mythologies is written in two sections. The first consists of a series of essays on myths and the use of the mythic language associated with a diverse range of images in popular culture. In an introduction, the author writes that these essays were written, one a month, over a period of approximately two years. He also writes that the essays grew out of "a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common-sense constantly dress up a reality ... undoubtedly determined by history." This statement contains a key thematic element of both Section 1 and Section 2—the belief that the creation and understanding of myth is a function of human experience in particular times, places, and circumstances.

The essays in Section 1 examine a wide range of examples of such experiences, albeit a range limited to experiences in France (the country in which the author resided) in the 1950's (the time at which the book was written). Tourism, cooking, striptease, advertising, literature, film, many more - all, in the author's perspective, manifest mythic language, and all manifest the particular purpose of myth as defined by the author in the second half of the book - to manipulate public perception and experience.

Section 2 is subtitled *Myth Today*, and consists of a complex, detailed, theoretical examination of the construction and function of myth. The author begins his essay with the statement that myth is a form of language/speech, and goes on to de-construct mythic language into its various components. The arguments here are densely intellectual, defining the development of myth as a rational exercise in delineating perception. Without actually using the word, he presents the theory that myth is a kind of culturally sanctioned propaganda, using images with universal resonances and commonly understood meanings to tell individuals what and how to feel about being human.

Central to the theories developed in both Sections 1 and 2 is the idea that the need for this imposed, propaganda-like experience of culture, as well as society's perception of it, are defined by the bourgeoisie, or working/consumer class. The examples in Section 1 of how mythic language is used are all taken from bourgeoisie popular culture, while the theories developed in Section 2 are founded upon the premise that the working class has no interest in, and is indeed threatened by, any knowledge of experience beyond their own concerns. In essence, the author seems to be proposing that myth, in contemporary culture as in the past, is simultaneously a simplified explanation for human experience and a facade protecting everyday humanity from the dark, despairing, existential depths of that experience.

There is, the author acknowledges in the final section of *Myth Today*, a paradox in this idea of "myth as mask." He writes that myth, in these terms, is simultaneously necessary and dangerous—necessary because it keeps humanity from full awareness of its darker side by offering palatable explanations, dangerous because it keeps humanity from full consciousness of the dangers associated with that darker side. He writes in conclusion that a reconciliation between reality and humanity's need to protect itself from reality must be sought, implying that myth has the potential, if not the actual, capacity to act as the medium for that reconciliation.

Section 1, Part 1

Section 1, Part 1 Summary and Analysis

This short but intellectually dense book examines contemporary mythology from two distinct perspectives. Specific manifestations of the relationship between myth and popular culture are explored in the series of short essays making up Section 1. Section 2 consists of a lengthy essay examining and defining, from the author's personal perspective, the general ways in which myths function and are defined.

"The World of Wrestling" This essay is an examination of the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of what the author calls "all-in" wrestling, as opposed to competitive wrestling (in contemporary American culture, this sort of wrestling is exemplified by the "World Wrestling Federation", and in stadium-filling, spectacle filled exhibitions all over America and on cable television.) This sort of wrestling is, as the author describes it at some length, a kind of performance similar to certain forms of theatre. He defines the similarities in several ways, being careful to note the distinction between American wrestling of this sort (which he defines as portraying the ongoing battle between good and evil) and French wrestling (which he defines as portraying ongoing battles between character types). He writes that both theatre and this sort of wrestling provide ways for an audience to express and understand feelings they wouldn't necessary experience in real life, illustrating his point with a reference to classical (for example, Greek) theatre, which (he says) provides an audience with an archetypal, potentially cathartic experience of Suffering, Defeat and Justice. "Wrestling fans," he writes, "certainly experience a kind of intellectual pleasure in *seeing* [what they believe to be humanity's] moral mechanism function[ing] so perfectly." He cites examples of some of the almost ritualized moves and postures found in wrestling, making particular note of how a near-defeated character almost invariably shapes his body into a plea for mercy from his opponent—who, just as invariably, shapes his body into an expression of utter triumph. "It is," the author suggests, "as if the wrestler is crucified in broad daylight and in the sight of all." The author closes this essay with commentary on how, ultimately, wrestlers are as adept as actors in manipulating the feelings and reactions of an audience. "In the ring," he writes, "... wrestlers remain gods because they are ... the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible."

"The Romans in Films" This essay, apparently written in response to the author having seen a film version of Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, begins with a specific commentary on what the author sees as two powerful symbols in the film. The first, he suggests, is the particularly and universally Roman way (Roman, that is, as interpreted by Hollywood) in which the male characters style their hair—in other words, hair in the film defines socio-cultural identity. He goes on to suggest that how the two female characters in the film wear their hair is also symbolic. The messy hair of the youthful Portia and the carefully braided, but over one shoulder, hair of the more mature

Calpurnia, he writes, both represent the asymmetry and confusion of all the characters, and of the Rome in which the story is set.

The second major symbol in the film, the author writes, is the way in which almost all the characters perspire (noting, however, that in most cases the perspiration is evidently false). This perspiration, he suggests, is apparently symbolic of the way the characters are all going through some kind of moral/intellectual crisis. It must here be noted that *Julius Caesar* is essentially a story of betrayal - the murderous betrayal of Caesar by his trusted friends and allies. The friends and allies are sweating, the author takes pains to point out, while Caesar, who operates from a place of moral/intellectual certainty, remains cool and dry. The author uses his examination of these symbols as a springboard to examine the value of symbols in general, suggesting that rather than using symbols as an easy, shorthand explanation of a character's state of being, they ought instead to be used in ways that evoke deeper, more archetypal meanings. He describes the two symbols in *Julius Caesar* as being used reprehensibly, suggesting that rather than defining nature they are, in fact, debasing it.

These two essays, unified by their references to varieties of theatrical presentation (all-in wrestling, film) introduce the book's key themes. These are: the way contemporary imagery carries mythic resonances; the way both image and resonance image appear to be carefully contrived in order to convey a calculated meaning; and the way the apparent superficiality of the image color the experience portrayed with a similar superficiality. What's particularly noteworthy here is the language and tone with which the author writes—there is a certain sense of the sardonic in his style, of disbelief that something so superficial as hairstyle or as obviously contrived as all-in wrestling are intended, by those who present the images, to be perceived by those who view them as having significant meaning. Without this stylistic approach, a reader could easily perceive the writer was pointing out that the experiences of viewing a wrestling match or the film of *Julius Caesar* offer potential for enlightenment. Because he writes in the way he does, however, the opposite point is made - that the superficiality and calculated nature of the images render meaning, and therefore the potential for enlightenment, shallow. This stylistic perspective underlies and defines the writing in almost all the essays in Section 1. In Section 2 the author undertakes a more academic and theoretical examination of the relation between myth and meaning in contemporary society. There, he writes with an increased objectivity, largely eliminating the sense of near-contempt with which he writes in Section 1.

There is some significant foreshadowing here - the author's focus on hair in the second essay, for example, foreshadows a similar focus on the symbolic meaning of hair in his essay on Abbe Pierre (Section 1, Part 4). Also, in the second essay, the focus on film foreshadows a similar focus when the author examines the mythic resonances of the screen personas presented by actors Charlie Chaplin (Section 1 Part 3) and Greta Garbo (Section 1, Part 5).

Section 1, Part 2

Section 1, Part 2 Summary and Analysis

"The Writer on Holiday" In this essay, the author presents and develops the theory that as a group, writers are, in general, regarded by the public as a species of human being outside the norm, and uses the idea of the public perception of how a writer holidays as an example. First, he explores the idea of "the writer on holiday" by exploring its two mythic components - first, the idea of a "holiday", which he describes as a relatively recent invention in terms of European cultural history, and also as the product of the bourgeoisie (working classes). Second, he explains that most members of those classes perceive writers as taking their work with them always and everywhere - that even on a beach or in a hotel they are constantly writing, revising, and thinking. In other words, the author suggests, society perceives the author as special and different, and believes that that difference carries over into every aspect of life - even holidays.

The author develops this point further by suggesting that even when writers make details of their prosaic day-to-day lives knowable to the public, it ultimately places them even further outside the norm. He writes, with a certain tongue-in-cheek tone, that he "... cannot but ascribe to some super-humanity the existence of beings vast enough to wear blue pajamas at the very moment when they manifest themselves as universal conscience." He goes on to suggest, however, that writers and authors would both lose their aura of mysticism and transcendence if it became known that writing, to them, was as natural and as necessary as getting dressed or breathing.

"The 'Blue Blood' Cruise" This essay was evidently written in response to a cruise taken by several members of several royal families on a yacht called *The Agamemnon*, a cruise followed intently by the media and the public alike and on which, apparently, the royals acted in ways generally perceived as similar to those of so-called "real" people. The author describes the situation as essentially comic, suggesting that for royalty (who he suggests are socio-culturally different, in essence, from other people), engaging in so-called "real life" (dressing informally, getting up early, shaving oneself) amounts to nothing more than playing dress-up. He adds that by participating in these "games" while in the enclosed, safe confines of a sea-born ship, the royals are essentially preserving their identity as something separate, beyond and above those they govern. Thus, he says, "the two century-old themes are merged, that of the God-King and that of the King-Object." He adds, however, that because they feel as though they've lived like the people, the kings have acquired that "little bit of knowledge" that is a danger, citing as examples the way two of the royals in question came off the ship and immediately began playing active roles in the politics of the people.

"Blind and Dumb Criticism" The author in this essay concerns himself with an examination of why certain critics, when writing about books of philosophy, confess that they are too uneducated or un-intellectual to understand it. He suggests that critics who do so are not being modest, but are in fact quite certain of their own intellectual powers

- a status, the author says, that both the critic and the reader of criticism believe to be inherent in the position of critic. He then says that for a critic to say he/she is not intellectual is, in fact, to suggest that the problem lies with the work being criticized - in other words, that the writer is at fault, not the critic. The author goes on to suggest that criticism, in general, operates from the symbolic/metaphoric/mythic position that ideas not defined by "common sense" or "feeling" are inherently bad, a position he says springs from the Biblically-grounded premise that knowledge is evil. The author also suggests that such confessions are not nearly so harmless as they may first appear. "To be a critic by profession," he writes, "and to proclaim that one [doesn't understand] ... is to elevate one's blindness or dumbness to a universal rule of perception ...."

The linking element of these three essays is their examination of lives perceived by the majority (in the author's perspective, the bourgeoisie or working class) as lived outside the norm. It is noteworthy that ttwo of the three "species" of outsider observed here might represent other, similarly observed species—the author's theories about writers could presumably be extended to all artists, while his theories about royalty could be extended to include modern royalty (the super rich, celebrities). Critics, of course, are critics, no matter their time or place.

The second noteworthy element of this essay is that the author's ultimate point about all these outsiders can be found in the last words of the first essay—that, for all these outsiders, their apparently "super-normal" way of living is as natural as breathing. Conflict arises when these sorts of people either pretend they're something they're not (royalty pretending they're bourgeois) or pretend they're not something they are (critics pretending to be unlearned and/or critical)—in other words, when so-called "others" act in the way the bourgeois norm sees as not fitting with their mythologized perceptions.

The author is, in these essays, manifesting his theory (developed in depth in Section 2) that bourgeois perceptions about individuals, such as those he describes, are myths, created by bourgeois culture and society in order to make comprehensible those whose outsider style of living is, to the bourgeois mind, entirely incomprehensible. In the author's perspective, the self-absorbed bourgeois mentality simply cannot comprehend why and/or how anyone could live outside bourgeois culture. To make understanding possible, bourgeois mentality endows "others" like artists, royalty and critics with a mythic set of characteristics, effectively stereotyping and pigeon-holing them into comprehensibility. The point the author is making, however, suggests that what's actually at work is different definitions of normal. What is not normal for a member of the bourgeoisie is completely normal for the writer, the royal, or the critic - therefore, bourgeois mythologizing of outsider lives is, in effect, perpetrating a deliberate, albeit easy, misunderstanding.

The reference to the insular nature of life on board the good ship *Agamemnon* foreshadows the author's examination of the mythic meaning of ships like the *Agamemnon* in Section 1, Part 7, "The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat." Meanwhile, for additional analysis of criticism, its techniques and values, see Section 1, Part 10, "Neither/Nor Criticism."

Section 1, Part 3

Section 1, Part 3 Summary and Analysis

"Soap Powders and Detergents" In this essay, the author undertakes an in-depth analysis of various types of cleaning products and the symbolic/mythological meanings of their advertising campaigns. He divides his analysis into several categories, defining bleach-oriented products as being portrayed as "a sort of liquid fire", while abrasives are portrayed as aggressive products that "kill" dirt. He describes soap powders as a kind of separating agent, pushing dirt away from the object, "keeping public order not making war." He then describes the "whiteness" promised by so many of these products as playing to the vanity of consumers, in particular the bourgeois concern with appearances. Finally, he discusses the way in which so many soap products foam, describing in some detail how foam, on almost every level, represents non-productivity and luxury, yet, when juxtaposed with the power of the cleansing agents, is endowed with a kind of power. He concludes the essay with a suggestion that can be seen as applying (in general rather than specific terms) to many of the subjects of his essays - that "what matters is the art of having disguised ... function ... under [a] delicious image ...."

"The Poor and the Proletariat" The author here focuses on the screen persona of actor Charlie Chaplin, a persona he defines as consistently both proletarian (working class) and poor - for Chaplin, the author suggests, being proletarian equals being poor and vice versa. The Chaplin-Man persona, he writes, is unaware that the possibility exists for change, feeling a vague desire to rebel but ultimately being more concerned with feeding himself. He cites the extensive food imagery in Chaplin's films as a manifestation of this circumstance, but then suggests that no other film actor/persona has dramatized the need for revolution more effectively—"To see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see." The author concludes this essay with the suggestion that because Chaplin's screen character always triumphs, always remains independent, and never invests in anything but man himself, his is perhaps the purest, truest, most human revolution of all - a reinforcement of the old maxim, every man for himself.

"Operation Margarine" This essay suggests that publicly reviled agencies such as the Army and the Church can redeem themselves in the public eye using a particular advertising technique - present the worst and then overcome it with the better, or present preconceptions and then overcome them with realities. He describes this technique as a kind of immunization, a way of preventing negative thoughts by introducing them into the system. He provides examples of how works of literature and popular culture apply this technique to their examinations of the Army and the Church, suggesting "a little 'confessed' evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil."

The linking principle defining these three essays is the way they manifest the author's theories about the relationship between the bourgeois and their mythology. In Section 2,

the author defines a key component of this relationship as the bourgeois desire to think neither deeply nor negatively about oneself and/or the world in which one functions. Here, all three essays manifest this point. Foam, for example, is endowed with mythic qualities because it makes the dirty work pretty. Chaplin, who in all his art merely struggles to survive within the system and never to change the system or escape, embodies the bourgeois principle of not risking what one has, even if it's less than what one wants. For their part, the advertising techniques described in "Operation Margarine" play into this bourgeois desire to have good and believe good - it's easier to believe, or at the very least be convinced, that what's bad is good, rather than either change what's bad or discover what's truly good. At this point the author's analysis, his theories about the way myth is developed and functions, begins to bear a strong resemblance to analysis of propaganda. Propaganda intends, at a fundamental level, to convince those who observe it that what may be perceived as bad is good, or vice versa. In other words, propaganda functions to change people's minds. What, then, is advertising but a commercialized form of propaganda, and what is the technique of mythic formulation described in all three essays but a form of advertising?

Section 1, Part 4

Section 1, Part 4 Summary and Analysis

"Dominici, or the Triumph of Literature" The inspiration for this essay was the apparently well-publicized trial of Gaston Dominici, whom a footnote describes as an eighty year old farmer convicted in 1952 of murdering a family found camping near his land. The author begins his examination of the trial by commenting on how Dominici was convicted more by psychology than by fact, and implies that the conviction was essentially fraudulent. He asserts that those prosecuting and judging the trial evaluated Dominici's psychology according to their own standards and/or what they gleaned from books, rather than by coming to a true understanding of the individual. He also suggests that while both judge and accused spoke the same language (French), they spoke very different kinds of French—what might be described as legal and/or psychological French in the case of the judge, and as regular/bourgeois French in the case of the defendant. The author suggests that Dominici was convicted by the fact that he couldn't communicate—that he was found and proclaimed guilty by the literary techniques of the press and even of police witnesses, determined to create a psychologically defined and definable character for Dominici, rather than uncover the truth of what happened

"The Iconography of the Abbe Pierre" This essay examines the question of how the public perception of a well known cleric, the Abbe Pierre of the essay's title, is shaped by the way his physical appearance is popularly represented. The author pays particular attention to the Abbe's hair, both in terms of that on his head (styled in a fashion which, the author says, instantly identifies him as saintly) and on his face. Pierre's beard, the author suggests, defines him as genuinely spiritual, whereas if he (Pierre) were clean shaven, he would be perceived as being much more worldly. He suggests that the public is getting used to experiencing spiritual radiance as a shallow, commercialized quality, adding that he gets "worried about a society which consumes with such avidity the display of charity that it forgets to ask itself questions about its consequences, its uses and its limits."

"Novels and Children" This essay is evidently written in response to an article in *Elle*, a French magazine for women, in which several accomplished female writers were defined not only by what they had written but by how many children they had had. The author suggests that this comes from a societal belief, manifested in the magazine, that women's success in any field must be both measured and tempered by their relationship to their traditional roles. He goes on to suggest that while there is little or no mention of men in the article, their presence is implied and constant - as the measuring stick by which the success of women is defined. He concludes with the suggestion that *Elle*, by producing the article in the way it did, is contributing to this apparent limiting of women's roles and work. He suggests that *Elle* is essentially saying "Write, if you want to, we women shall all be very proud of it; but don't forget on the other hand to produce children, for that is your destiny...", describing this perspective as an example of traditional Jesuit (ie conservative Roman Catholic) morality.

These three essays are linked by their thematic focus on limited perception. Dominici, Abbe Pierre, and the *Elle* women are all defined by how they are perceived, how certain elements of the community want and/or need to perceive them. As he again explores his theme of how mythic construct is used to shape and/or accommodate bourgeois perceptions and beliefs, the author for the first time portrays this usage of myth as specifically limited, and, in the case of Dominici, dangerously so.

Meanwhile, it's interesting to consider how far the author's theories can be extended into other iconic, mythic imagery in other times and places. Consider the great crimes of the latter half of the 20th Century, the OJ Simpson trial, for example. Was the use of racially defined arguments in his defense a kind of mirror image of what happened to Gaston Dominici — rather than convicted by a language he didn't understand, was OJ acquitted as a result of the use of language that he, and the mostly black jury, understood all too well? The author claims that for the most part, beards on clerics denote a deep, reverent spirituality — but when was the last time there was a bearded pope? Conversely, in contemporary culture it is the dangerous fanatics who have beards — the Charles Mansons, the Ayatollah Khomenis in Iran, for example. Are these examples manifestations of the old saying that the exception proves the rule, or do they open up the possibility that the author's theory might be flawed? Finally, how much have the views of women (propounded, so the author says, by *Elle* magazine) truly changed? How much genuine, relevant difference is there between the lifestyle promoted by *Elle* and that promoted by, for example, *Oprah*, *Martha Stewart Living*, *Cosmopolitan*, or any of the other mass market magazines being published in contemporary society?

Section 1, Part 5

Section 1, Part 5 Summary and Analysis

"Toys" The author writes in this essay, with a certain degree of sadness, of the nature of French toys (though several of his comments apply to all toys). He first comments on how they are, for the most part, smaller versions of adult objects and as such function as smaller versions of adult experiences. The result of this, he writes, is that children are trained to be adults without actually discovering how for themselves—they are given information, rather than unearthing or experiencing something themselves. The second part of the essay is taken up with a kind of elegy for wood toys, which he says are warmer and gentler to the touch, friendlier to the spirit, and, perhaps most importantly, evolve and change with the user. Dangerous edges and corners are worn down, stains remain, repairs are performed, and evidence of both childhood and adulthood remains. Plastic toys, the author says, are cold, easily breakable and easily discarded ... much like, he suggests, contemporary childhood.

"The Face of Garbo" The author writes in this essay about film actress Greta Garbo, famed over the world in the first third of the twentieth Century for her beauty, charisma, and reclusiveness. All three of these aspects of her character and screen persona come under scrutiny, some more directly than others, as the author examines the particular qualities of her face and its archetypal meaning. He comments particularly on the mask-like design of her makeup (evoking both ideal beauty and hidden-ness), and the way human experience shines through her eyes (evoking beauty and charisma). Most notably, he describes the way that certain contours of her face, in spite of her heavy makeup, represent a transition between archetype and individual (evoking the symbolic value of both her beauty and her charisma). He contrasts Garbo's face with that of another world famous actress, Audrey Hepburn, whose face, the author suggests, is much more the face of an individual than that of a universal archetype. "The face of Garbo," he says, "is an idea, that of Hepburn, an Event."

Once again, in these essays the author develops his theme of how myth, manifesting in childhood toys and in the face of a glamorous movie star, lessens the potential for true, lived experience. Toys and Garbo's face both, in the author's opinion, do the work of living for those who come in contact with them. They are both, again in the author's opinion, mythic constructions that ultimately serve to make life easy and superficial—plastic toys (cars, fashion dolls, miniature kitchen appliance, etc) bring adulthood to childhood and childhood to adulthood, when in fact they are two separate, profound experiences. Meanwhile, the analysis of Greta Garbo's face becomes an examination of how humanity and womanhood are narrowly defined by makeup, camera work, and Hollywood storytelling - Garbo, in her beauty and evocativeness, delineates a way of being a woman, a way of feeling, that for most women has nothing to do with reality. He infers that problems can and do arise when "The Face of Garbo" is taken as the face of reality, rather than as an opinion of reality ... an opinion which, for the bourgeois moviegoer, is much more appealing than the real thing.

Section 1, Part 6

Section 1, Part 6 Summary and Analysis

"Wine and Milk" Wine is described at the beginning of this essay as being the archetypal, almost stereotypical French drink, in the same way tea is for the British. The author suggests that the overriding reason for this is wine's transformative powers, its capacity "...for reversing situations and states, and [for] extracting from objects their opposites— for instance, making a weak man strong or a silent one talkative ... an alibi to dream as well as to reality." He discusses the way in which wine has become an integral and defining component of French culture and society—part of the reason France is what it is. He contrasts the public perception of wine with that of milk, which he says is a much less popular and well regarded beverage. Because of its association with childhood, he writes, it is associated with purity, innocence, non-repelling strength, calm, and lucidity. Wine, the author seems to be suggesting, helps people live, while milk smoothes life over. He concludes his argument by reminding the reader that however spiritually ennobling the French perceive their wine, the beverage is still an integral part of the French economy. "There are thus," he writes, "very engaging myths which are however not innocent."

"Steak and Chips" The author likens the Frenchman's relationship with steak to his relationship with wine, suggesting that both provide externalization of the faith that states, essentially, that all is well. Wine, the author suggests, brings out in those who drink it a sense of wellness in possibility. Steak, on the other hand, gives rise to a sense of wellness through an almost primordial strength. This sense, the author proposes, emerges from the evident presence of blood that, he adds, is a manifestation of life and power (the irony seems to escape him that the animal from which the steak came from is, in fact, dead). He goes on to describe how steak represents strength to Frenchmen of all classes and all intellectual tendencies, has connotations of patriotism, and when served with chips (French fries), is a universal sign "of Frenchness."

On one level, the myths associated with both wine and steak are a kind of shorthand, an easy way to express being French. Their connotative associations (the former with ease, the latter with strength) are defined in succinct detail in these essays, and interestingly enough are both positive values. Negatives associated with the realities of wine and beer (potential alcoholism, potential heart disease) are downplayed in favor of what the author maintains is the bourgeois necessity for positiveness. On another level, however, this positiveness can be seen as a shortcoming, for in the final analysis is it truly wine and/or steak that makes a person French, or is it their language, their political and/or religious affiliations? It's easy to say one is French because of what one eats, but isn't it truer to say that one is French because of what one believes? It could be argued that there is ultimately no qualitative difference between being French one way or another - but the author's point in this, and all the essays in Section 1, is that the superficiality of myth is, in and of itself, a selling short of the human capacity for understanding and being.

Section 1, Part 7

Section 1, Part 7 Summary and Analysis

"The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat" The focus of this essay is a critical analysis of the work of author Jules Verne, whose work is described as focusing intently, almost exclusively, on the ambition of the individual to create and control a private world. The author defines this desire as the wish of an individual to design a world according to his particular beliefs, needs and desires, and to shut out any outside influences that could challenge his sense of control and safety. He uses two different pieces of Verne's writing as examples, the first being *Mysterious Island*, "in which the man-child re-invents the world, fills it, closes it, shuts himself up in it ... while outside the storm, that is the infinite, rages in vain." In other words, the author is suggesting here that creating an individual universe is the individual's way of resisting what he cannot control.

The second example of Verne's writing the author uses to illustrate his point is *The Nautilus*. In the body of the essay, he offers no explanation of what *The Nautilus* is, apparently assuming that it is so much a component of popular culture that the reader will automatically know it. To understand the point, it is essential to note that *The Nautilus* is the name of the submarine in Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, a ship captained by the archetypal literary eccentric Captain Nemo—the very embodiment of the individual described by the author in the first part of his analysis. He describes *The Nautilus* as the ultimate in created, isolated worlds, adding that it serves an additional function. Because *The Nautilus* is mobile, where *Mysterious Island* is not, it gives Nemo the opportunity to travel with his world, explore the outer chaos, see it and interpret it according to his own vision ... and yet remain utterly safe. "The ship," the author says, "then is no longer a box, a habitat, an object that is owned; it becomes a traveling eye, which comes close to the infinite; it constantly begets departures." The author suggests that *The Nautilus* itself is an embodiment of a mythic archetype - the journeying and exploring ship, enabling those who sail on it to experience both the joy and safety of a closed environment as well as the wonder of exploring the chaos outside that environment. He concludes his essay by suggesting the antithesis of what is represented by *The Nautilus* is in turn represented by a boat created by the author Rimbaud in his work *Drunken Boat*, a boat which symbolically enables those who sail on her to not only observe the chaos, but to participate in it.

This essay is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it presents the interesting idea that man in general, and bourgeois man in particular, desires to protect himself from the dangers of the outside world. *The Nautilus* is a manifestation of this desire, as is the Citroln (the French national car, the mythic resonances of which are explored in detail in the later essay "The New Citroln"). The second, and perhaps more important, reason this essay is important is that *The Nautilus*, as a manifestation of humanity's desire to insulate itself from the world, can be seen as a metaphor for myth in general—at least as defined by the author. This perspective is explored in great detail in Section 2, where myth as defined as the means by which the bourgeois classes simultaneously define their

experience of the world and protect themselves from other experiences. In other words, for the bourgeoisie, myth is *The Nautilus* and *The Nautilus* is myth. It is interesting to note, however, that in spite of his eccentric, obsessive quest for insulation from the world, the captain of *The Nautilus* is, at heart, an explorer. The reader might well wonder how many members of the bourgeoisie, or at least the bourgeoisie as defined by the author, have any desire at all to explore - not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually.

Section 1, Part 8

Section 1, Part 8 Summary and Analysis

"The Brain of Einstein" This essay examines and defines the myths surrounding Albert Einstein, one of the most famous mathematicians of the contemporary era. The author specifically examines the varying ways in which Einstein's brain is presented in popularized, mythic culture. The first is as a potential source of logical insight able to reduce the many mysteries of life to a simple mathematical equation similar to E=mc?, Einstein's famous distillation of the relationship between matter and energy. This representation, the author suggests, evokes a sense of magic, mystery, and spirituality. The second, and perhaps contradictory, representation of Einstein's brain is as a construction of deep complexity, capable of immense amounts of hard work, the meaning of which only Einstein himself could fully understand. The author suggests that the mythic resonances of Einstein's image reconcile two manifestations of the illuminative power of myth—to bring into consciousness both the magical (ie Einstein's insight) and the purely functional (Einstein's mathematical prowess).

"The Jet-Man" A more accessible term for "jet-man" in contemporary culture might be "astronaut," given that the author describes the "jet man," both concept and reality, in terms that have over the years come to be associated with astronauts. These terms, the author suggests, have come to define the "jet-man" in heroic, idealized, almost saintly terms - intelligent, dedicated, dispassionate ... and, in his own way, willfully separated from the everyday world and everyday life. People, the author suggests, need to believe in the transcendence of the "jet-man", someone who experiences things no mortal can, in the same way as they need to believe in priests, who also experience things no mortal can.

There are powerful contrasts inherent in the juxtaposition of these two essays, and yet there is a simultaneous similarity. One contrast is the focus of the first on an actual individual, as contrasted with the focus of the second on a type. Another contrast lies in the fact that the individual in the first essay is, in essence, a thinker, while the individual in the second is a doer. Yet another, and perhaps the most powerful, contrast can be found in the way the individual in the second essay is portrayed as heroic, surpassing who he is, while the individual in the first is portrayed as simply manifesting who he is. But in this contrast, this apparent difference, lies the similarity between the two individuals - both are transcendent of ordinary, normal, bourgeois experience. The jet-man makes the effort to transcend, Einstein transcends simply by being, but they are both more than human. They are both "other", of the sort that the author contends is necessary to serve as inspiration for the bourgeoisie, and as such are mythologized in such a way as to make them inspirational.

Section 1, Part 9

Section 1, Part 9 Summary and Analysis

"The *Blue Guide*" The *Blue Guide* is, essentially, a tourist guidebook the author uses as an example of what is wrong with all such books. He suggests that they reduce the experience of traveling to experiences of the obvious, the showy, and the superficial, adding that they "constitute a charming and fanciful dycor, meant to surround the essential part of the country: its collection of monuments." He cites the commentary in the *Blue Guide* to Spain as an example of how a rich, complex culture is defined by broad strokes that reduce its various peoples to stereotypes, its history to that which is politically supportive of the regime of the day, and the experience of visiting to a search for views, good toilets, or both.

"Ornamental Cookery" Here again the author refers to *Elle* magazine, which in his words "is a highly valuable journal ... since its role is to present to its vast public which (marketing research tells us) is working class, the very dream of smartness." The specific focus of this essay is *Elle's* cookery section, which the author suggests focuses ultimately on ways of disguising the reality of food in several ways. These range from the literal disguising of food in sauces, icings, and fancy shapes to the glamorizing of it in photographs that eliminate the possibility of looking at a steak, for example, and remembering the cow. The way *Elle* portrays food, the author implies, is similar to the way it and other similar magazines portray life—focusing on superficialities and externals rather than realities and internals.

The thematic link between these two essays is again superficiality of experience, as experienced by the bourgeois classes who make tours such as those led by the "Blue Guide" and meals such as those portrayed in *Elle* both necessary and possible. These essays take the development of this theme one step further, in that they both examine techniques for disguising realities that the bourgeois neither want to be aware of, nor want to be bothered with. The indication here from the author is that the bourgeoisie are content with sensation, rather than understanding, and myths suggesting that monuments define culture and/or that sauces define food perpetuate and reinforce this contentment. It is clear in these two essays that the author's opinion of myth is that it is reductive—not in the sense of distilling an experience into its purest essence, but in the sense of devaluing the valuable.

Section 1, Part 10

Section 1, Part 10 Summary and Analysis

"Neither-Nor Criticism" The author takes the title of this essay from his analysis of an anonymously published commentary on criticism, an analysis beginning with the suggestion that "criticism must be 'neither a parlour game nor a municipal service'—which means that it must be neither reactionary nor communist, neither gratuitous nor political." The author goes on to suggest that such "neither/nor" perspectives are based on a linguistic philosophy of exclusion—that is, that there are certain terms which society views with total negativity and others that it views with equally total good favor. As a result, society and criticism alike have become simplistic, a theory apparently based on two key beliefs. The first is that freedom has come to be understood as the blanket, assumed rejection of previous judgments (themselves viewed as automatically and totally negative), while the second is that Style (as practiced by writers, artists and critics) is more of a defining quality than content or perspective. He goes on to suggest that "neither/nor" critics, in following both principles, are ultimately writing from the same sort of previous judgments and lack of individual style they apparently purport to reject. In rejecting previous judgments, they in fact make a judgment about those judgments, while in striving to define style, they do so in terms of what they are not—trying so hard to not be something that in fact they are nothing, neither truly themselves nor truly independent thinkers.

When this essay is considered in combination with the essay "Blind and Dumb Criticism" (Section 1 Part 2), it seems that the author's view of critics and criticism is not particularly favorable. In both essays, the author tends to avoid specifically identifying the sorts of critics to whom he refers—critics of art, politics, writing, society (ironically, the author might be considered such a critic). In Section 1 he refers to critics of philosophy, but the nature of his criticism of their criticism is phrased in such a way that he actually seems to be referring to all critics—as he also seems to be doing here. That said, when both this essay and "Blind and Dumb Criticism" are considered in combination with *Myth Today*, the essay that makes up the entirety of Section 2 of *Mythologies*, it seems that the author's view of critics is that they are ultimately the voice of the bourgeois—its perspectives, attitudes, and needs. In the first essay, he criticizes critics for pretending to know less than they do, shifting blame for incomprehensibility onto the object being criticized (this tactic, by the way, is easily applied to art, dance, and writing, as well as philosophy). This, plain and simple, is a bourgeois attitude, as defined in detail in Section 2. Meanwhile, in "Neither/Nor Criticism" the author writes that criticism and society alike have become over-simplified, with socio-cultural thinking and analysis reduced to the lowest common denominator. This is, in so many words, the criticism he himself levels at the bourgeoisie, their habits and their beliefs, in Section 2. It might not be going too far to suggest that in the author's mind, critics are, to coin a phrase, an unnecessary evil. Is not the point of life and existence to live independently, not according to the dictates and beliefs of someone else? Do not critics of society and its behavior perform exactly that function, and is not the author, in criticizing both critics

in general and the society in which they function, doing exactly what he condemns others for doing?

Section 1, Part 11

Section 1, Part 11 Summary and Analysis

"Striptease" The author begins this essay by clarifying that the style of striptease to which he is referring is French, and specifically Parisian, striptease. Later in the essay, he draws a clear distinction with American striptease, suggesting that in France striptease is, in essence, making the private public. The implication is that in America, the opposite is taking place - that public sexuality (striptease) is, in fact, a manifestation and a redirection of private desire. The body of the essay is focused on the way French striptease essentially separates who the women are from what they do, detailing near-ritualistic use of costume, music and dancing to create a mythic presentation of the female anatomy that, in fact, de-sexualizes them. In other words, the author is suggesting that in French striptease, a woman's removal of her clothing is a mythic representation of womanhood and private sexuality, rather than an act of public seduction.

"The New Citroln" The author begins this essay with a clear statement of his opinion that cars have become an object of veneration in contemporary society. He adds that anything manufactured is "the best messenger of a world above that of nature ... one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life) and in a word a *silence* which belongs to the realm of fairy tales." The rest of the essay is taken up with the author's various explanations of why this has happened in the case of the new Citroln. His first explanation is that the Citroln carries with it the same sense of a protective, self-contained world that *The Nautilus* (the submarine referred to in *The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat*, Section 1 Part 7) does. His second explanation is that the smooth, almost seamless way in which the car is assembled gives the sense that it's being held together by miracle, not by nuts and bolds. His third explanation is that by virtue of the way its interior is designed, particularly its dashboard, it feels much more like something one would find in a home rather than the control panel of a machine. He concludes the essay with commentary on how the Citroln, on display in the showroom, is constantly touched and caressed, helping the driver to believe that he is in fact driving with his whole body. "The object," he says, "is totally prostituted...." The implication here is that the author sees a sexualized physical relationship between car and driver, adding that such a relationship is ultimately a symbol and an embodiment of working class desire and delusion ... much in the same way as *Elle* magazine presents similar symbols in its cookery section.

"Photography and Electoral Appeal" This essay examines, in extensive detail, the ways in which photographs included in political campaign literature present clearly defined, and defining, images of political candidates. Ways of dressing (uniform/casual clothing/athletic wear/suit-and-tie), setting (family/work environment/religious), facial expression (intense/smiling/thoughtful), even placement of the face (full on/three quarter/profile) all, according to the author, define the individual in the photograph

without actually revealing anything about who he truly is. He suggests "a photograph is a mirror, what we are asked to read is the familiar, the known; it offers to the voter his own likeness, but clarified, exalted, superbly elevated into a type ... the voter is ... invited to elect himself," or the better and/or idealized part of himself.

"The Lost Continent" This essay was inspired by a documentary called *The Lost Continent*, a documentary on "the East." The author describes the techniques with which the documentary makes its point that ultimately, those who live and worship and strive in the so-called "Eastern" way are ultimately just like those in the west. He describes ways that the specifics of life in the East are never defined as being socio-culturally unique, but are in fact presented in a narrative context with an ultimate point that the East is the same as the west. He suggests this particular documentary, in the manner of many other documentaries, presents its subject without the benefit of a historical context ... without, in other words, reference to that which makes it truly itself.

The linking theme between these four essays is the way they each analyze the manipulation of image— that of womanhood, machine power, politicians, and unfamiliar cultures and traditions. This manipulation is, according to the author's explanations of myth in Section 2, a key function of myth—to shape perception and understanding within certain acceptable confines. In other words, each of the subjects in each of these essays is creating an acceptable myth. The striptease artist is creating a particular asexual myth about womanhood, while the new Citroln is the embodiment of myth about the relationship between man and machine (a myth in part defined by the principle of separateness defined in "The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat", Section 1 part 7.) Politicians, meanwhile, create myths about themselves in their campaign photographs and publicity, while the documentary *The Lost Continent* creates a myth about Eastern culture.

Once again, the point of each of these essays, and indeed of the image manipulation they explore, is that they are deliberate efforts at limiting perception and experience. In part, they offer the bourgeois consumer a truth he wants to hear, in part they prevent that consumer from thinking and/or understanding more deeply. On all levels, the mythic presentations defined in these essays are ultimately shallow, shorthand versions of reality—the safe, comfortable, unquestionable and unquestioning bourgeois versions. This, in the author's perspective is what myth was, and is, designed to do—define an easy, unchallenging "version" of life.

Section 1, Part 12

Section 1, Part 12 Summary and Analysis

"Plastic" The author describes plastic, in its myriad uses and colors, as "a miraculous substance [given that] a miracle is always a ... transformation of nature." He describes humanity as being amazed by the fact that plastic exists, and that humanity created it. He then adds, however, that its presence is ultimately a negative one—it has no character of its own, no real warmth, and at the core of its being the purpose of cheaply reproducing not only that which is expensive, but that which is natural. "The age-old function of nature is modified," he writes. "It is no longer the Idea, the pure Substance to be regained or imitated: an artificial Matter, more bountiful than all the natural deposits, is about to replace her, and to determine the very invention of forms." He goes on to suggest that plastic is "wholly swallowed up in the fact of being used: ultimately, objects will be invented for the sole pleasure of using them." The ultimate example of this supplanting of nature, at least in this essay, is the author's concluding comment that plastic aortas (blood vessels) are now being manufactured.

"The Great Family of Man" This essay was apparently inspired by a photographic exhibition called *The Great Family of Man*, which the author describes as reducing the human experience to a few essential universals (ie birth and death), but also removing those universals from the world of meaning by depriving them of historical context. He suggests, for example, that the community, family, and economy into which a child is born are ultimately more relevant and more meaningful to that child's overall existence than the simple fact of his birth. He also writes that there is really no need to celebrate and/or comment on the universal fact of death—what is more important is how death can, and must, be fought. He concludes the essay with the suggestion that to describe individual experience as being universal in fact defuses their power and meaning.

The thematic link between these two essays is their portrayal of myth as supporting and defining artificial constructs, limited interpretations of reality. Plastic, for example, is defined in bourgeois mythology as miraculous, therefore everything it can be used for should also be perceived as miraculous—or, at the very least, should be used, whether it is in fact useful or not. Meanwhile "The Great Family of Man," as inclusive a title as it seems to be, is a myth-mask for a truth that the exhibition bearing its name conceals—it is experience, more so than the simple fact of being born that defines an individual. The race into which a baby is born, the economic/educational/geographical/religious circumstances—all are more relevant to defining a life, the author contends, than the fact that fertilization occurred, a fetus grew, and a mother gave birth. Is the fact of birth enough to unite every human being into a "Great Family?" The myth put forward by the exhibition, the myth assented to by its bourgeois audience, is yes. Reality, according to the author, makes a very different statement.

The essay on plastic is another example of the way the focus of a particular essay (plastic, foam, ships, the new Citroln) can be interpreted as a manifestation of the

overall theme of the book. In other words, the author defines plastic as an artificial concept devoid of identity and humanity—so, according to his arguments (particularly in Section 2), plastic is myth. At the same time, there is considerable irony here in the author's reference to plastic aortas (blood vessels). In the context in which the reference is made, the author seems to be suggesting that such an invention is a bad thing—anti-reality, anti-humanist, for example—in the same way as anything made of plastic is (such as the toys he referred to in Section 1, Part 5). He seems unaware of the fact, or unwilling to acknowledge the possibility, that such an invention has the potential to save many, many lives. Is he deliberately avoiding this information in order to make his point more vividly? Or is he actually of the opinion that all plastic, merely because it's artificial, is a bad thing? If this is indeed his perspective, does he apply it to myth as well—does he believe that all myth is bad, anti-humanist, or dangerous?

Section 1, Part 13

Section 1, Part 13 Summary and Analysis

"*The Lady of the Camellias*" This essay examines the mythic resonances of a famous French story, *The Lady of the Camellias* (originally a play, rewritten in English as *Camille*, and known internationally as the opera *La Traviata*). The story is that of a courtesan or high-class prostitute, Marguerite, who falls terminally ill with tuberculosis but refuses to tell her lover, Armande, for fear of humiliating him. Armande eventually finds out the truth, professes his love and vows to help her, but too late—Marguerite dies in his arms.

The author defines the two central characters as experiencing love in very different ways, suggesting that Marguerite expresses hers in the hope of being recognized and loved in return, while Armande, expresses his in what the author describes as terms of working class sentimentality - romantic, passionate, selfless, idealized. The author describes this difference as ultimately destructive. Marguerite cannot achieve fulfillment in love until the ultimate sacrifice (renouncing the care of her beloved and eventually dying) gets her the ultimate in recognition, while Armande cannot achieve fulfillment until he too makes the ultimate sacrifice, confessing his love and ruining his reputation, thereby making him the embodiment of romantic sentiment. He goes on to suggest that Marguerite knows that as a courtesan, she exists in a state of alienation—outside of what is perceived as traditional behavior—and is both unable and unwilling to do anything to transcend this situation. If she was not aware of this borderline masochistic aspect of her personality, if (as the author says) she had simply been stupid, she might have opened the eyes of her working class audience to their own lack of self-awareness. Self-aware and noble, he says, "she only sends them to sleep."

One last time the author examines an important, broadly understood element of French popular culture in a way that not only defines it as superficial, but also embodies the thematic focus of the book as a whole. The closing lines of this essay can be seen as the ultimate statement of the author's opinion on the subject of bourgeois mythology—it sends the human spirit to sleep.

Section 2, Part 1

Section 2, Part 1 Summary and Analysis

This section is entitled *Myth Today*, and is an in-depth analysis of the meanings and manifestations of myth in contemporary society—contemporary, that is, to the author's time (mid-twentieth century).

"Myth is a Type of Speech" The author begins his examination of myth by asserting that myth is, in its essence, a form of speech, a communication of meaning. He extends the definition of speech to include what is written and visual as well as verbal, supporting this argument by pointing out that prehistoric cave paintings have, for several years, been identified as forms of speech. He also asserts that myth exists solely within historical context, and within the language of its context, arguing that "...it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language ... myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things." He goes on to suggest that myth-as-speech develops one step removed from actual experience. Myth/speech, he claims, is an interpretation of both experience and meaning, adding that "myth ... belongs to the province of a general science, coextensive with linguistics, which is *semiology.*"

The author begins this essay with a clear perspective —myth is an artificial construct created to shape meaning. It is not an expression of human nature or human truth, but a manipulation of both. This perspective is in direct contrast to the work of many mythologists, notably the psychoanalyst Carl Jung and the American writer and philosopher Joseph Campbell, who over the last century have argued persuasively that myth is, in fact, an illumination of humanity in both its universality and uniqueness of individual experience. The author makes no reference at all in his book to this alternative perspective on myth—but this point is not made to suggest the author is wrong. On the contrary, his arguments are as persuasive as those of his peers, and equally as valid. He is, however, writing with a definite purpose, a purpose defined in highly academic terms throughout this essay: to analyze and reveal ways in myth is shaped and circulated with a particular purpose or agenda at its core. His argument is, at times, difficult to comprehend, and at other times seems unnecessarily convoluted. The point must be made, however, that his points are valid, if limited in perspective—an ironic situation, given that this is exactly what he proclaims myth to be.

Section 2, Part 2

Section 2, Part 2 Summary and Analysis

"Myth as a Semiological System" The author makes two important points about what he calls the science of "semiology" (defined on a cover note as "the science of signs and symbols, and their role in culture and society). The first is that at the time of writing, it doesn't officially exist, except in theory. The second is that it "studies significations apart from their content." In other words, it might be described as the science of connotation, of what images mean. The author suggests that myth can be categorized as part of this particular science (rather than, for example, a spiritual and/or literary phenomenon) since semiology, for him, suggests "a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified," an object and the meaning suggested by that object—which he then states is what myth is. He then posits a third semiological condition—that of being the sign, an entity made up of the union between signifier and signified. He uses the example of a bouquet of roses to illustrate this theory. The object (the bouquet) is the signifier ... the meaning of the object (romance, love) is the signified ... the union of the two (bouquet and meaning) is the sign. He concludes this phase of his argument with the suggestion that semiological analysis can only have one function—reading and understanding symbolic communication.

The author then develops the argument that myth is, in fact, a second level semiological system. The images in myth-speech, verbal, linguistic or pictorial, are in fact signifiers, not signs. In other words, the language of communication, developed at the end of one process of myth-speech relation, is the beginning of a second process, in which symbols combine with symbols to give even larger meaning. He uses the example of a picture on a magazine cover to illustrate his point.

In this picture, a black man in a military uniform salutes a flag. Each component is symbolic myth speech in its own right, with the juxtaposition of images building on one another to make a symbolic point. The black man speaks of multiple races (signifier, or on this level of mythic language, "form"). The uniform and the salute combine to make the powerful suggestion of militaristic patriotism (the signified, or on the level of mythic language, "concept"). The total image, the author suggests, both enables understanding and imposes an attitude (the sign, or on the level of mythic language, the "signification") —all races are united in commitment to the safety and preservation of a national way of life.

In this section of the argument, the author begins what amounts to an analysis of his analysis, a detailed breakdown of how he (and by extension any viewer or student of myth) breaks down image to discover meaning ... or, conversely, how images are combined to convey meaning. It is evident from the author's approach that for him the accumulation and delineation of meaning is an almost mathematically precise process —there are resonances here of his essay on Einstein in Section 1, in which he portrays Einstein's mathematical equations as giving logical meaning to the mysterious and

illogical. In other words, myth as a concept carries with it the connotation of something spiritual in origin and purpose—the author's approach in this part of the essay, and indeed throughout the essay itself, is to de-mystify the mysterious.

It is interesting to note that as he develops his example of the bouquet of roses, and his definition of "sign" as being the product of the union between "signifier" and "signified," the author does not come out and say what the sign actually is, or means. The reader is then left to question whether the sign is in fact something different from the signified—or, in broader terms, whether meaning is something different from connotation (what an object is understood as or believed to represent). It is clear that on the second level of semiological analysis, the level of myth, the end product of the combination of images is something different from the images themselves—the whole is indeed greater, or at least something other than, the sum of its parts. The following section of the essay goes into greater detail about what those parts (the components of the author's second level of semiological analysis) are and how they function.

Section 2, Part 3

Section 2, Part 3 Summary and Analysis

"The Form and the Concept" In this section, the author develops the idea that "form" (signifier) is empty of meaning until endowed with it by "concept" (signified). He suggests that while the black man may have symbolic value of his own (perhaps as a representation of racial tension), that value recedes into the background when juxtaposed with the military patriotism of his posture—he is, essentially, more military and patriotic than he is black. The author makes it clear, however, that the black man's particular symbolic value does not disappear completely. It ebbs and flows in relation to the imperative defined by the overall image—and how, and by whom, that imperative is perceived. He goes on to suggest that a particular "concept" (ie military patriotism) can have several "forms", and those "forms" can come in a variety of sizes. He writes, "...a whole book may be the [form] of a single concept; and conversely, a minute form (a word, a gesture, even incidental, so long as it is noticed) can serve as a [form] to a concept filled with a very rich history." The author concludes this part of his argument with the suggestion that because myth has its basis in history, myths and their meaning are, like history, constantly in a state of change or transition. For that reason, he writes, the ultimate meanings of myths are determined by their relationship to "concept"—larger, broad-stroke qualities of humanity (patriotism, militarism, goodness, kindness, etc.)

"The Signification" The author suggests that "signification" is myth itself. He then suggests that myth hides nothing. Its function, he writes, "is to distort, not make disappear ... there is no need of an unconscious in order to explain myth." These distorting effects, he suggests, are the result of influence of "concepts" since, as previously discussed, the meaning of myth is defined by the presence of such archetypal human qualities. He goes on to say myth is a representation of a value, and that truth is not necessarily a component of that representation. He writes,"... myth is a type of speech defined by its intention ... much more than by its literal sense ... an intention [which] is somehow frozen, purified ...." In other words, there is no room in myth for the infinite variety of human experience—myth is reductive and simplistic.

In that context, the author further suggests that the "signification" has a sense of urgency about it, a sense of intent towards particular, personal, intimate connection. He goes on to suggest that it is up to the individual to determine the levels of relationship between "form", "concept" and "signifier," to interpret the mythic statement based on personal perspective. In using as an example the various levels of mythic meaning associated with an architecturally Spanish house in a French neighborhood, he suggests that an individual ask questions like "What is the essential meaning of the "form"?" "What additional, distortive meanings have been applied to that "form" by the "concept"?" "What value, what intention, what "signification" is defined by the combination of "form" and "concept"?" He then suggests that there is a kind of artfulness, a kind of manipulation in this aspect of mythic communication, suggesting

that ultimately no myth is presented and/or developed without motivation, a purpose - an intention to affect both individual, and therefore socio-cultural, perspective. This, he says, is the reason myths are developed ... to apply an agenda into human behavior and experience.

The author concludes this part of his argument with an analysis of the ambiguity of meaning in mythic "signification". He says that on the one hand, "signification" appears to make a clear and purposeful statement, one which by its absoluteness, its aggressiveness and determination eliminates questioning ... and yet, by its very nature (ie exclusive of human truth and variety of experience) it invites questioning and interpretation. "A complete image," he writes, "would exclude myth ... in general myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is ... ready for a signification ... ." In other words, myth provides meaning for life, rather than life filling in the meaning of myth. Finally, he suggests that myth, both as a form of communication and as a means of understanding the human race, has worn out. This situation, he says, is further defined by the way in which a larger value, a universal truth, a depth to human experience is seen, without good or justifiable reason, is now often seen as manifested by trivial "form".

Beneath a great deal of verbiage and analysis, the author's essential points are these. First, mythic symbols have varieties and levels of meaning, all of which are defined ultimately by the function they are to serve and the way in which they are perceived— in short, myth has an agenda. Second, that agenda is to reduce human experience to a value unencumbered by truth. Third, these values are themselves defined by the socio-historical culture in which myths are created. They are not, as other mythologists claim, expressions of universal human experience. They are, the author suggests later in this essay, both the product and producer of shallow, superficial, bourgeois mentality.

Section 2, Part 4

Section 2, Part 4 Summary and Analysis

"Reading and Deciphering Myth" The author begins this phase of his examination of myth by suggesting there are three ways of understanding it, all of which depend on the way in which the "signifier" is interpreted. If seen as empty, the concept is seen as filling it and therefore providing meaning. If seen as filled (by the concept), the "signifier" can be understood to be not a symbol of meaning, but a concealer of it. If the signifier is seen as a part of an entire symbolic/mythic system, it becomes an embodiment of concept. All this, the author contends, is defined by the perception and experience of the individual viewing the myth—in other words, the meaning of myth is always subjective. The author then suggests, however, that the process of placing myth under his second-level semiological analysis leads to the ultimate naturalization of the myth —"... the very principle of myth ... it transforms history into nature."

In this context, the author suggests that it's important for the so called "myth reader" to discern the reasons why the myth is presented and/or has been developed ... to manifest a pre-existing condition of nature, or to re-define a condition of nature in a particular way. In other words, does myth offer explanation, or does it offer alibi? As an exploration of his point, he offers an example of how a news headline about a reduction in the price of vegetables, which with its large print and aggressive language is, in fact, a mythic statement offering the ultimate "signification" that government is engineering the reduction. He then writes that the article beneath the headline suggests that the price reduction is due, at least in part, to there being an increase in supply, and uses this example to demonstrate two more key principles of myth. These are that the presentation of myth, in whatever form (visual, linguistic, oral), is intended to cause an immediate impression, and that its purpose of transforming history into nature whether its "signification" is obvious (through that immediate impression) or more subtly defined.

Again the author breaks myth down into components, continuing the process of de-mystification. His core point here is the same as that of the previous part of the essay, and indeed of the essay as a whole—that myth transmutes attitudes unique to a particular time and place into what at least appear to be expressions of human value. Myth, he maintains, is a function of language, which in turn is a function of historical context.

At this point, it might be valid to consider the point of whether the author's theories can be applied to classical mythology as well. At the most fundamental level, classical myth does indeed offer simple explanations of human experience. Creation myths provide an answer to how the world and its populations came to be, nature myths provide explanations of how the sun travels the sky, how a particular flower came into being, why spring comes, etc. The key question is this—are they reductive? Do they eliminate deeper human experiences and understandings, or do they in fact light the way to such experiences?

One of the basic components of the human condition is an awareness of an unknown—the great mystery of why things are as they are. Yes, science can answer a great many of these unknown questions, and is answering more and more all the time. But as noted physicist Richard Feynman once indicated, science can only go so far—the more questions are answered, the more there are to ask, and eventually the scientist gets closer to there being no other answer other than a simple "because that's the way it is." Myths go further than science, giving an explanation for that because ... and since human beings are, for the most part, uncomfortable with both the concept and the experience of the unknown, myths fulfill a basic, universal need. They provide an answer.

The author's concern in this book, however, is the way this fundamental purpose of myth is used and manipulated by those with an agenda. That agenda could be to convince a population that a certain kind of soap powder is better than another, or to convince the public that the justice system is fair to a person who can't understand what's being said, or to convince an everyday working class woman that her experience of life is as rich as Greta Garbo's. In the author's perspective, there is danger in this manipulation of myth. The second section of the book, the essay entitled *Myth Today,* is an attempt by the author to make both those who need myth and those who study it aware of the manifestations of this danger.

Section 2, Part 5

Section 2, Part 5 Summary and Analysis

"Myth as Stolen Language" The author suggests in this section that myth, in its purposeful bestowing of "concept" upon image (linguistic and visual) is, in fact, "language robbery," taking from language its original purpose of straightforward communication. Conversely, he also argues that language by itself is rarely rich enough in meaning to convey meaning's fullest depths. Here he draws a contrast between the use of myth-language and contemporary poetry, which he suggests have opposite intents (in a footnote, he writes that classic poetry uses mythic structure and technique to considerable effect). Myth-language, he writes, transforms meaning into signification, while contemporary poetry attempts to endow signification with meaning. The author suggests, however, that here is another paradox—that in striving so vigorously to avoid mythic techniques and meaning, contemporary (minimalist) poetry is in fact an embodiment of the mythologizing process.

The author then develops the theory that "a voluntary acceptance of myth" has defined the entire system of literature, and the process of creating it. He suggests that literature is in fact a mythological statement, with the idea of communicating through literature being the "concept" or the "signified," the literary product being the "signifier," and the "signification" being the communication experienced. He writes that there was, for a time, an attempt to separate myth from literature, but that the relationship between literature and myth is so tightly bound that separation is nearly impossible. He suggests that one possibility for creating such a separation is to create a third level of semiological analysis. This, he writes, is done through making the "signification" of literature the "signifier" of an artificial myth—in other words, writing in such a way that a work of literature's attempts at communication, at development of character, relationship and thematic meaning, are deliberately presented as being empty. In this context, the author develops an examination of what is truly realistic in both myth and literature, suggesting that language, because it is (in semiological terms) merely a symbol or a representation, cannot truly be considered realistic. He then suggests that a reader or viewer must judge the relative realism of a work of literature by its ideological (thematic) value or its semiological (symbolic) value rather than by its literary, or linguistic, value.

The author's first point in this part of the essay is actually arguable, as are many of his other points. How much of language is, as the author maintains, straightforward communication and how much is symbols? Names (of human beings, plants, animals) are ultimately symbols. Verbs are verbal symbols of action, nouns are verbal symbols of objects. All are shorthand expressions of meaning and identity. In the author's perspective, they would all be considered myths.

Meanwhile, the author's second point, that myth simultaneously enriches and impoverishes language, can at first glance appear paradoxical. It is important to remember, however, that the author is writing with an agenda (in the same way as he

maintains, negatively, myth creators do). That agenda is to bind myth creation and interpretation with shallow bourgeois perspectives and experiences. In this context, therefore, the enrichment offered by myth can be seen as a manifestation of the almost limitless bourgeois desire for stimulation and variety, while the impoverishment manifested in myth is in fact the spiritual and emotional impoverishment exhibited by the bourgeois classes as they pursue that stimulation. In other words, myth (like many other aspects of existence) has two aspects operating at the same time—one conscious (its enrichment of language), the other unconscious (its impoverishment of same).

The author's point about the relationship between myth and poetry can be distilled in this way—myth language strives to convey simplistic meaning with vivid imagery, and poetry strives to convey vivid meaning with simplified imagery. Meanwhile, his proposing a third level of semiological analysis takes his argument even further into the esoteric, into realms of discussion comprehensible only to other mythologists and literary critics (whose work and function, it must be remembered, the author in Section 1 indicates that he has little or no time for). Finally, he enters into another paradoxical statement in the conclusion to this section of the essay—in arguing that language cannot ultimately be perceived as realistic, he contradicts his initial contention that language is intended to be straightforward communication. It could be argued that realistic does not necessarily equal straightforward, but ultimately in this context such an argument holds little or no water, since argument consists essentially of language and language, in the author's attitude, cannot be trusted to have any genuine meaning or value at all.

Section 2, Part 6

Section 2, Part 6 Summary and Analysis

"The Bourgeoisie as a Joint-Stock Company" The author begins this section with an examination of the term "bourgeoisie," a term for the French working class that, he says, has essentially lost all meaning. He suggests that one reason for this is that those of the "bourgeoisie" (the so-called "petit-bourgeois") do not want to be associated with the socio-political-economic connotations of the term—"bourgeoisie" having been defined on the leftist side of the socio-political-economic spectrum as the Marxist/Communist "proletariat," On the rightist side, they are deemed the hard-working cogs of the machinery of capitalism. He then suggests that another reason the term has lost its meaning is that over time it has become synonymous with the term of "nation." He writes that the "bourgeoisie" having nurtured this development in the hope of gaining broader support from those outside the bourgeoisie for their socio-economic-political aims and goals. These goals, the author suggests at detailed length, essentially boil down to a determination to remake the world in a bourgeois image in reaction to bourgeois views of the world, relationship, and human values. He writes, "...bourgeois norms are experienced as the evident laws of a natural order ... the fact of the bourgeoisie becomes absorbed into [the] universe, whose sole inhabitant is Eternal Man ... ." In other words, the bourgeois ideal is that man is worthwhile for his own sake, and that there is no real, essential difference between individuals. He goes on to write that "Bourgeois ideology ... records facts or perceives values, but refuses explanations; the order of the world can be seen as sufficient or ineffable, it is never seen as significant." He concludes this section with the suggestion that this philosophy produces an image of unchanging humanity, combined with an indefinite repetition of the human identity. For the bourgeois, he says, their experience of reality is transformed into an ideology - a perception into a belief system.

"Myth is Depoliticized Speech" The author then continues his examination of bourgeois philosophy and belief systems by suggesting that the transformation of perception into a belief system is, in fact, the core of the development of any kind of mythology. "In myth," the author suggests, "things lose the memory that they once were made ... it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage or an evaporation ..."—in other words, a disappearance of reality and of origin. Here, he writes, can be found the full definition of myth in a bourgeois society, that "myth is de-politicized speech." He makes clear that in this context the term "political" refers not to government, but to "the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world... ." He again writes that the purpose of myth is to purify human experiences, simplify them, distill them, giving them "a natural and eternal justification" ... but adds that the necessity for myth in human relations, the power of individual myths, and the specific conceptual attributes of both general and particular myths all ebb and flow over time. They are all, and in all ways, subject to change—change defined by human need.

The first point to consider in relation to these two parts of *Myth Today* is what, exactly, is meant by the term "joint stock company." The author offers no explicit definition, but it is possible to understand from the overall content and perspective of the writing that he is referring to the bourgeoisie as joint stock holders in its own company. In other words, the bourgeoisie both invest in, and gain benefit from, its self-contained, self-defined, self-motivated, and self-centered existence.

The second point to consider in relation to these parts of the essay is that there seems to be a contrast between the way the author views the bourgeoisie and its attitudes here and throughout the essays in Section 1. Here he seems to be of the opinion that bourgeois myths are distillations of human experience, while in Section 1 he seems to be writing from the perspective that bourgeois myths are in fact shallow versions of human experience. They are, in other words, a narrowing and shrinking of experience, a reduction not to essence but to lowest common denominator—that denominator, the author suggests, being that of defining experience in terms of sensation and appearance, nothing more.

The third point to consider here relates to the author's point at the conclusion of the "demythologized speech" part of his essay—specifically, his contention that myths and their attributes change according to changes in human need and perception. This is a re-statement of one of his central contentions, stated at the beginning of this section and reiterated throughout— the creation and interpretation of myth is a function of history, of time and place and need, rather than of universal human experience. This, in turn, is one of the key themes of the book as a whole.

Section 2, Part 7

Section 2, Part 7 Summary and Analysis

"Myth on the Left" Before exploring the nature of so-called "left wing myth," and indeed before answering the question of whether such myth is possible, the author expends a great many words defining ways in which language is used, saying that ultimately words either define the essence of an object/experience or simply name it. In this context, he suggests there is only one form of language that does not have at least some element of myth in it—language used "...to transform reality and no longer preserve it as an image." The author defines this form of language as revolutionary language, the sole purpose of which is to transform reality (as opposed to myth which, as the author is about to suggest, is all about maintaining reality as it is). This, he goes on to suggest, is why there can be myths on the socio-political Left since the Left, in his opinion, is ultimately not interested in revolution (change). He explains this point by writing at length about how "...the Left always defines itself in relation to the oppressed, whether proletarian or colonized ..." and how the language and imagery of the oppressed is as poverty stricken as their spirits and financial conditions. The author suggests that for these reasons, and because myth is, after all, a manifestation of a kind of spiritual/linguistic richness, the oppressed and their advocates (ie those on the Left) by their very nature can neither possess nor understand.

"Myth on the Right" The author states outright that myth permeates every expression and every experience of conservative, Right wing philosophy and behavior. He likens the Right with oppression, saying the language of the oppressor expresses his essential intent, to conserve and preserve the status quo—which is, he suggests, one of the key purposes of myth. He comments that it is at times difficult to define the socio-geographic terms of a myth's generation, its growth and evolution, but adds there are several ways through which the expression of Right-wing myths can be defined. He calls the first "inoculation", or admitting a smaller evil in order to prevent society becoming aware of a larger one (several examples of this can be found in Section 1 Part 3). The second he calls "the privation of history"—the elimination of historical context from the consideration of an object or concept. He illustrates his point by referring to the *Blue Guide* (Section 1, Part 8), a publication that presents historically and geographically significant aspects of Spain as merely tourist attractions.

The author's third definition of the way myth is used by the Right is to eliminate the possibility of identification with others—to eliminate any possibility for empathy. Here he uses as an example the way Dominici (Section 1, Part 4) was both presented and perceived, by both the court in which he was tried and the media writing about him, as less than fully human. He writes that in Right wing mythology, "The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown ... he no longer threatens the security of the home." The fourth definition of Right wing myth the author defines as "tautology," the reducing of like to like ("drama is drama") or the reduction of imperative to opinion ("because I said so").

The fifth use of myth by the Right, the author writes, is to equate a pair of opposites, making them equally undesirable. In such a situation, "one no longer needs to choose, but only to endorse." The Section 1 example of this can be found in the essay "Neither/Nor Criticism" (Section 1, Part 10). The quantification of quality is his sixth example of how the Right uses myth. He uses the example of theatrical performance to illustrate this point, suggesting that such a performance is judged as effective by bourgeois audiences not by how deeply they were moved or how much they were entertained, but by how much was paid to be moved or entertained, and whether the money is considered well spent. The seventh and final example offered is the presentation of opinion as a statement of fact—as a simplistic application of so-called "common sense" and natural experience, as opposed to offering humanity an opportunity for individualized experience and understanding.

In summing up his argument, the author likens the Right's use of myth to the ink squirted out by the cuttlefish—in the same way as the fish is defending itself from attack, the Right squirts out its myths to defend itself, and the status quo it believes to be so secure, from being questioned and challenged. "Thus," the author writes, "every day and everywhere, man is stopped by myths, referred by them to this motionless prototype (of human existence) which lives in his place, stifles him in the manner of a huge internal parasite and assigns to his activity the narrow limits within which he is allowed to suffer without upsetting the world... ."

There are a couple of particularly noteworthy elements in this section of *Myth Today*. The first is yet another opinion from the author on the meaning and purpose of language. Earlier (Section 2, Part 5), he suggests that the basic purpose of language is straightforward communication, and here he suggests that language either defines an essence of an object or gives it a name. In the first place, names are a kind of definition of the essence of an object—at the very least, they are a form of shorthand. In the second place, is defining an essence ever a straightforward consideration? The author's basic argument would seem to suggest that it is not—myth, he has stated several times in this essay, is an attempt at such distillation, but he has also stated several times, and in several ways, that the meaning of myth is defined by both its intent and the context of each individual who become aware of it. Because each individual, each context, and each perspective is different, communicating an essence would seem to be anything but straightforward, since essence can and will be different things to different people.

The second noteworthy element of this section is the way in which the author explicitly ties together the book's two sections—specifically, by using examples from Section 1 to illustrate his theories in Section 2. While Section 2 would have been more comprehensible had he applied this technique throughout rather than only in this section, the value of this tying together lies in the way it also ties together manifestations of bourgeois perspectives (the narratives in Section 1) with the reasons those perspectives are held (Section 2). These reasons are defined in the "Myth on the Right" section of the essay—bourgeois perspective is, after all, essentially right wing and conservative in nature. In short, the idea that the writings in Section 1 are, in effect, an indictment of shallow bourgeois perspectives are reinforced by the writing here, with

the result that the bourgeoisie can easily, and perhaps justifiably, be likened to the cuttlefish cited by the author.

Section 2, Part 8

Section 2, Part 8 Summary and Analysis

"Necessity and Limits of Mythology" The author begins this concluding section of his essay with a commentary on the nature and experience of mythologists, those who examine and understand myths (referring, it seems, and at least to some degree, to himself). He suggests first that "mythology is certain to participate in the making of the world," adding that "mythology harmonizes with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself." He then goes on to write that that mythologists, by the very nature of what they do (examine and understand myths, their meaning and purpose) exist outside of both the meaning and purpose of myths, as well as outside the experience of the general, unenlightened humanity myths are clearly intended to affect. He presents the theory that mythologists are ultimately responsible for the destruction of society that is, after all, entirely founded upon and defined by its myths.

The author concludes this section, and indeed the book, with an implication that society cannot function without myth, since myth defines experience and protects humanity from a full, terrifying understanding of its own darkness. "And yet," he writes, "this is what we must seek: a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge."

The key component of this section of the essay, and indeed of the book as a whole, is the way in which it sums up the author's thematic and intellectual premise—that myth shapes the world without necessarily participating in it, defines it without necessarily understanding it, and protects those that buy into it from such understanding. The author here seems to contradict himself—on other occasions (Section 2, Part 3), he suggests that myth does not conceal or hide, it only distorts ... here he suggests that concealing uncomfortable truths is, in fact, one of myth's primary purposes. It could be argued that he is, in fact, suggesting that only bourgeois myths perform this function, but since he makes no distinction between bourgeois and classical myths, at times seeming to tar all myths with the same bourgeois brush, this particular argument would appear to hold no water. That being said, his contentions about the nature and purpose of bourgeois mythology do carry with them a ring of truth, as does his concluding call for reconciliation between experience and interpretation. The question becomes whether he believes it is possible for myth to evolve into a state where it can facilitate that reconciliation.

Characters

The Author

The Bourgeoisie (Working Class)

Wrestlers

Writers, Royalty

Critics

Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo

Gaston Dominici

The Jet-Man

Albert Einstein

Marguerite and Armande

Objects/Places

Myths

Myths, according to the author, are intellectual constructs—language (visual as well as linguistic) shaped to give a particular, intended, propagandistic message about the human experience. It is important to note that for the author, myths are essentially bourgeois, constructed by the working / non-intellectual class to reinforce bourgeois experiences, perceptions and values. He develops this theory throughout the book. At no point does he explore the perspective, developed in the writings and theories of mythologists like Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung, that myths are profound expressions of fundamental human spiritual and/or psychological experiences.

Symbols

Symbols are, for the author, the components of myth—words, images, ideas, are all symbols which, when combined, form a lesson, story or explanation of human experience.

Archetypes

The term "archetype" is used to describe a universal human experience and/or position, each with a defining set of conditions. For example, the archetype "mother" is defined as a woman who has given birth and nurtures a child into adulthood. The archetype "church" is defined as a building and/or group of people brought into existence as a manifestation of a certain set of religious (usually Christian) beliefs.

Semiology

Semiology is the study of how symbols and archetypes are combined to make mythic statements—the analysis of how meaning is conveyed, rather than of the meaning itself. Semiological analysis is at the heart of every essay in Section 1 of *Mythologies*, with the author examining the symbolic and archetypal components and meanings of everything from soap to cars to movie stars.

Foam

Foam is one of the symbols whose meaning is defined by the author in Section 1 as an example of the way myth is used in advertising. The author defines foam as having value (beauty, attractiveness) with no real substance—a condition that, upon consideration, can be seen to apply to most if not all the mythological constructs examined by the author in Section 1. In other words, foam in *Mythologies* is a symbol of

the attractiveness but ultimate emptiness of particular bourgeois myths and mythic constructs in general.

Signifier / Signified / Sign

These three terms form the first stage of the author's semiological analysis of myth. "Signifier" is an image, "signified" is what the image represents (its connotation), "sign" is what the combination of "signifier" and "signified" means. For example, the image of a baby's crib (the signifier) can be seen as representing birth (the signified). The sign, the combination of crib and connotation, can therefore be interpreted as a mythic expression of new life. It is important to note that signifiers are not necessarily limited to visual images—words can be signifiers as well.

Form / Concept / Signification

These three terms form the second stage of the author's semiological analysis of myth.

The "sign" in the first stage is the "form" of the second stage, given meaning by the "concept," the larger human value the myth is intended to exploit or dramatize. The "signification" is the mythic message conveyed by the combination of form and concept. For example, the crib, a mythic expression of new life, can have different meanings depending upon differing concepts. A new crib in a brightly lit, colorful room can represent the concept of new life bringing hope, while a decrepit, abandoned crib in a dark room can represent the concept that while new life begins, somewhere else life ends, that in life, there is death. In either case, the signification is ultimately a shorthand expression of either of these fundamental, equally valid and equally true, human experiences.

Elle Magazine

Elle is a magazine referred to several times throughout the essays in Section 1 as a kind of French *Cosmopolitan, Oprah Magazine* or *Martha Stewart Living*—a compilation of tips on how to dress, cook, live, think, and present oneself. Throughout Section 1 the author suggests that *Elle* is the ultimate in bourgeois superficiality, manifesting a variety of ways in which the shallow is presented as ideal.

Wine and Steak

The author defines wine and steak as two potent symbols of the French way of life, mythologized as embodiments of French-ness. He portrays them as bourgeois and superficial, suggesting that most Frenchmen consider wine and steak as more significant definers of identity than language, politics or religion.

Ships, the Citroln

On one level, these vehicles of transportation are defined by the author as constructs enabling individuals to carry their worlds with them, thereby avoiding that which might challenge or change their worlds and belief systems. On a metaphoric level, this perspective can be seen as a manifestation of the author's overall perspective on all myth, that it is ultimately a bourgeois construction designed to insulate the bourgeoisie from reality, defining reality on bourgeois terms rather than on larger, broader, more spiritually complex terms.

Themes

The Mythology of the Everyday

The central theme of the book is that myth, in its exploration of the relationship between experience and meaning, is a powerful component of contemporary human existence. It is important to note that the term "myth" in this context refers to the concept of myth formulation (the way images are combined and juxtaposed to illuminate a principle and define an experience) as opposed to mythic stories themselves (the narrative results and effects of that combination). It is also important to note that the author is not writing about the way contemporary or popular culture manifests classical myths, but uses classical mythic techniques to create its own myths. His focus is on the way that contemporary, everyday society and culture, uses myths to initiate and perpetuate certain belief systems, rather than to awaken deeper and broader understanding of the human condition. In the author's perspective, this is the everyday purpose of what historically is regarded as an aspect of the human experience that simultaneously transcends and illuminates the everyday. Manifestations of this purpose are the focus of the book's theoretical and practical analysis, and define the book's secondary themes—the use of myth as a mask, and the premise that myth exists as a function of history and context.

Myth as Mask

In Section 1of *Mythologies*, which focuses on specific practical examples of mythic semi-propaganda, and Section 2, which focuses on the theories behind the practicalities, the author emphasizes that myth's essential function is to ease, simplify, and at times completely block full awareness and experience of being human. It is his contention that myth does assist in defining and understanding the human condition, but in limited, shallow terms. Myth, the author contends, keeps human beings from living life in depth and is deliberately constructed to do so—the understanding of human nature that myth provides, he writes, is shallow and superficial. Myth, he implies, makes life easy.

This theme is developed in several ways. The author refers to it in almost every essay in Section 1, albeit in various manifestations. It appears, for example, in his commentary on the nature of foam (Section 1, Part 3), on representations of the physical appearance of Abbe Pierre (Section 1, Part 4), and on the metaphoric meaning of ships like *The Nautilus* (Section 1, Part 7) . It also forms the core of his argument in Section 2, an argument that states myth's essential purpose is to protect those who create and propagate it from the inevitable, and inevitably painful, process of change.

Throughout the book the author refers almost exclusively to mythic constructs found in contemporary society and in popular culture. Classic myths, those of the Romans, Greeks Egyptians and indigenous peoples, are not referred to. Does this mean that the

author believes such myths to be, in intent and execution, identical in purpose to contemporary myths? Are all myths the same for him? It is impossible for the reader to answer for certain, but possible to infer that the answer is yes.

Myth as a Function of History and Context

Like the thematic idea of myth as mask, the idea of myth as a function of history and context is developed throughout the book. This idea is built upon the foundational premise that the ultimate function of myth is to protect humanity from too close contact with reality. The reality that humanity needs to be protected from is, of course, a function of when and where reality is experienced—the reality of 1950's France is, at least in its specifics, different from the reality of 2007 America. In other words, since myth is constructed in response to history and context, it is therefore a function of history and context. Specific examples of this principle abound in Section 1—society needed reassurance that the trial of a nearly illiterate old man for murder was fair, therefore it created the myth of harmonized language that arose from the trial of Gaston Dominici (Section 1, Part 4). Society needed reassurance that the relationship between humanity and the universe can be both quantified and understood, therefore the myth about the transcendent yet measurable intelligence of Albert Einstein came into being (Section 1, Part 8).

Section 2, meanwhile, analyzes and details the techniques of construction at the core of every myth, contemporary and, presumably, classical. These techniques, as Section 2 also details, evolve according to societal needs as defined by history and context. Rather than focusing on specific examples that prove his theory, in the second section the author focuses on the theory behind the examples, presenting the semiological basis for how myth works.

Style

Perspective

The author of *Mythologies* was a prominent exponent of the science of semiology, the analysis of signs and symbols, and of their relationships with culture and society. His authorial perspective, therefore, is essentially scientific in its approach—analytical, intellectual, dispassionate, and objective. Rarely, if ever, does his writing in *Mythologies* either display emotional sensibility or evoke emotion in the reader. This point is not made to suggest that his analysis is invalid. On the contrary—the theses he presents in the book, about the ways myth is used and manipulated, are as valid when considering contemporary popular culture as they were when his writings were first published (the mid 1950's). There is the sense, however, that the author is either unaware of, deliberately avoiding, or ignoring any emotional or spiritual resonances of myth and meaning. In other words, his perspective is clear but short sighted, detailed but limited in scope, almost propagandistic in its exclusive and didactic nature. The irony, of course, is that this is exactly what he suggests myth is, in both form and function.

In a pair of introductions, one written at the time of the book's original publication and another written at the time of the publication of a second edition, the author indicates that his reasons for writing the book were to "account *in detail* for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature." In other words, he intends to demystify myth, defining its meaning, its medium and its purpose in terms that go beyond what he calls "the bourgeois norm"—the shallow, superficial living of a life based on appearances empty of genuine meaning. Myth, he writes, is the chief means at the disposal of the bourgeoisie for maintaining that "norm," and in deconstructing myth he is deconstructing the bourgeoisie itself. Is he attempting to hold a mirror up to the bourgeoisie to show it the error of its ways? Or is he writing for his fellow mythologists and semiologists in an effort to help them understand with greater efficiency and depth the shallowness of their pop culture world? There is the sense that he is attempting to do both. There is also the sense, however, that because the bourgeois is what it is (in the author's mind, not interested in anything beyond the superficial), he is in effect preaching into the wind—the people who most need to hear his words are the least likely to hear them, let alone take them to heart.

Tone

While there is a definite tone of intellectual, academic objectivity about the book, there are points at which the author's commentary, as opposed to his theories, is sarcastic and at other times almost patronizing. In Section 1 in particular, when he points out the shallowness in the meanings and manipulations of myths in popular culture, there is the sense that he is barely able to keep his contempt and amusement in check. Throughout Section 1 there is an uneasy blend of the subjective and objective, made even more so by the fact that the author clearly intends his theories to be perceived as scientifically

and analytically sound. Section 2 is much more unified in tone, with the analytical aspect of the author's perspective being the dominant tonal quality.

Even taking the different tone and content of Sections 1 and 2 into account, there is the overall sense that in developing his theories on the nature and manipulation of myth, and in presenting them in the way he does, the author intends to make his point sharply and definitively. That point, discussed in practical terms in Section 1 and in theoretical terms in Section 2, is that in popular culture, myths usage is confined to and defined by a certain class of society—the bourgeoisie, or working class. While there is strength in this thematic unity, there is also the sense that this strength is also the book's weakness. How can this narrow usage, which is the object of the author's analysis, become deeper and richer in the way the author seems to want it to be, if he himself offers no sense that such expansion is possible, or even warranted? In other words, there is the definite potential here for the author's words to ring hollow in the experience and understanding of his reader. Yes, there is undeniable value in the author's examinations and commentaries. There is also, however, undeniable shallowness in the way his theories (about what he portrays as a shallow means of communication) are developed. A reader seeking a broader perspective and/or a deeper understanding of myth might do well to balance the author's perspective with examination of the writings of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, two mythologists who balance their equally academically and intellectually secure analysis of myth with an awareness of myth's deeper emotional and spiritual resonances.

Structure

The book, as previously discussed, is divided into two clearly defined parts. Section 1 consists of a series of several separate essays on different aspects of popular culture, all unified by a central point of exploration—the way popular culture evolves its own myths, and the way the bourgeois consumers of such culture depend upon those myths to define and sustain their views about themselves. Also as previously discussed, the literary tone of this section is somewhat sardonic—pointed, at times almost patronizing.

Many of these essays appear to have been written in response to specific incidents or circumstances at the time the essays were written (the mid-1950's). There are certain disadvantages to this. One is the fact that the contemporary reader is forced to rely solely on the author's explanation and interpretation of these incidents in order to understand their relation to the author's intent and analysis. In other words, the reader has no way of objectively judging whether the author's perceptions are correct—the reader only has the author's word that what he's referring to is actually the way he says it is. A perhaps similar disadvantage is that, in general, the author seems to presuppose that reader has knowledge of the popular culture element to which he's referring. Without that knowledge, the reader's analysis is unfortunately limited. A glaring example of this can be found in Section 1, Part 7 ("The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat"), in which the author assumes that his readers know what *The Nautilus* is and what it represents, and so doesn't explain. This lack of explanation and context for his arguments comes

close to undermining the overall effectiveness of the way in which the author presents his theories.

There are no such concerns about Section 2, which is a detailed academic, intellectual breakdown of the process by which image and understanding and need combine in popular culture to define both the necessity for myth and the myth itself. There is, in fact, almost too much detail and explanation in this section—definition layers upon definition, terminology doubles and redoubles back on itself, all to the point that a reader may very well come to a place of longing for a clear, simple statement. Yes, each aspect of the core argument is presented under its own heading, a structural technique that makes comprehension somewhat easier. However, the structure of sentence and argument within Section 2 is such that the clarity of the broad strokes outline is sometimes muddied by language which, to use a coloring book metaphor, sometimes goes outside the lines.

Quotes

"We are therefore dealing with a real Human Comedy, where the most socially-inspired nuances of passion (conceit, rightfulness, refined cruelty, a sense of 'paying one's debts') always felicitously find the clearest sign which can receive them, express them, and triumphantly carry them to the confines of the hall ... it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in the theatre." "The World of Wrestling," p. 18.

"What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things' it is the euphoria of men, raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction." "The World of Wrestling," p. 25.

"Signs ought to present themselves only in two extreme forms: either openly intellectual and so remote that they are reduced to an algebra, as in the Chinese theatre, where a flag on its own signifies a regiment; or deeply rooted ... revealing an internal, a hidden facet, and indicative of a moment in time, no longer of a concept ..." "The Romans in Films," p. 28.

"... it is both reprehensible and deceitful to confuse the sign with what is signified." "The Romans in Films," p. 28.

"...if one is amused by a contradiction, it is because one supposes its terms to be very far apart." "The 'Blue Blood' Cruise," p. 32.

"... while 'common sense' and 'feeling' understand nothing about philosophy, philosophy, on the other hand, understands them perfectly." "Blind and Dumb Criticism," p. 35.

"Foam can even by the sign of a certain spirituality, inasmuch as the spirit has the reputation of being able to make something out of nothing, a large surface of effects out of a small volume of causes." "Soap-Powders and Detergents," p. 37.

"...this psychology has nevertheless the pretension of giving as a basis for actions a pre-existing inner person, it postulates 'the soul': it judges man as a 'conscience' without being embarrassed by having previously described him as an object." "Dominici ...," p. 45.

"Justice and literature have made an alliance, they have exchanged their old techniques, thus revealing their basic identity, and compromising each other barefacedly." "Dominici ...," p. 45.

"Women are on the earth to give children to men; let them write as much as they like, let them decorate their condition, but above all, let them not depart from it: let their Biblical fate not be disturbed ..." "Novels and Children," p. 50.

"All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man ..." "Toys," p. 52.

"...motion is no longer the optical perception of points and surfaces; it has become a kind of vertical disorder, made of contractions, black-outs, terrors, and faints; it is no longer a gliding but an inner devastation, an unnatural perturbation, a motionless crisis of bodily consciousness." "The Jet-Man," p. 71.

"It is, in the fullest meaning of the word, a cuisine of advertisement, totally magical, especially when one remembers that this magazine is widely read in small income groups" "Ornamental Cookery," p. 79.

"...we see the professionals of striptease wrap themselves in the miraculous ease which constantly clothes them, makes them remote, gives them the icy indifference of skilful practitioners, haughtily taking refuge in the sureness of their technique: their science clothes them like a garment." "Striptease," p. 86.

"... cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals ... the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object." "The New Citroln," p. 88.

"...photography constitutes here a veritable blackmail by means of moral values: country, army, family, honour, reckless heroism." "Photography and Electoral Appeal," p. 93.

"...the diversity of men proclaims [God's] power, his richness; the unity of their [experiences] demonstrates his will." "The Great Family of Man," p. 100.

"...this is a difficulty pertaining to our times: there is as yet only one possible choice ... either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history ... or, conversely, to posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable [and] irreducible and, in this case, poeticize." "Myth Today," p. 158.

Topics for Discussion

Consider the author's comments on foam (Section 1, Part 3). In what ways can the principle he describes in this quote be applied to other examples of myth-based popular culture described in this book? In what other ways is something made of nothing? In what other ways do "effects" proportionally outstrip their perhaps superficial, perhaps trivial causes?

Consider the references in Section 1, Part 1 and Section 1, Part 4 and the way physical appearance can become a kind of shorthand for personal, spiritual qualities. Examine the emphasis placed on appearance by pop culture since the beginning of the 20th Century, and discuss what personal qualities have come to be symbolized by which aspects of physical appearance. What, for example, has blond hair come to represent ... red hair ... green hair ... spiked hair ... thinness and/ or obesity ... large and/or small breasts in women ... well-defined musculature in men ... clothing choices. Research and examine this question decade by decade, commenting on similarities and differences between periods.

Discuss ways in which contemporary society has, or has not, evolved from the perception of women and their roles described by the author in "Novels and Children" (Section 1, Part 5).

Consider this quote from "The Jet-Man", suggesting that "...motion is no longer the optical perception of points and surfaces; it has become a kind of vertical disorder, made of contractions, black-outs, terrors, and faints; it is no longer a gliding but an inner devastation, an unnatural perturbation, a motionless crisis of bodily consciousness." In what ways can this idea be applied not only to physical motion, but emotional and spiritual motion, emotional and/or spiritual growth or transformation?

In what ways do the principles defined in Section 1, Part 7 defineother aspects of contemporary culture? In what ways are basic elements of life (clothing, food, shelter, sexuality/relationships, relaxation, transportation) disguised to prevent consumers from understanding their realities (cost, usefulness, difficulty of achievement / attainment / acquirement, etc)? What are some contemporary examples of publications and/or advertising programs that perform similar functions to the *Blue Guide* and/or the food section of *Elle*?

Consider the principles of electioneering discussed in Section 1 Part 9 ("Photography and Electoral Appeal") in the context of the political scene in general. In what way do photography and other media (television, websites, newspapers, etc) shape and define the image of political figures / social commentators / activists? How much of an influence to such images have? Discuss ways in which an individual can get past images presented to the real meaning and character of politicians and/or other public figures.

Debate the author's premise, outlined at the beginning of Section 2 and developed in various ways throughout the entire section, that myth is solely a function of history and of context. In what ways is this statement true? In what ways might it be false? What relevance does the presence of similar myths in very different cultures have to the author's theory—is it challenged, or supported? Examine various cultures (Classical Greek, Ancient Egyptian, Native American, etc) and their myths with an eye to discovering both similarities and ways in which historical context defines differences.

Consider the author's attention to the relationship between the so-called bourgeoisie and myth. In what way do his writings in Section 1 (his examinations of myth resonances in popular culture) prove or disprove his point? To what extent are those myth resonances defined by bourgeois attitudes/experiences/perspectives?

Discuss the author's contentions that "mythology is certain to participate in the making of the world" and that "mythology harmonizes with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself." Are these statements true or false? To what degree does mythology, classical and/or contemporary, its construction and/or its purpose, "participate in the making of the world"? Is mythology a means to understand the world as it is, or to alter it to something it wants to be?

What are some of the ways the thematic principles of "myth as mask" and "myth as a function of history and context" apply in contemporary culture and society? What are some contemporary myths? What uncomfortable truths do they conceal and/or illuminate?