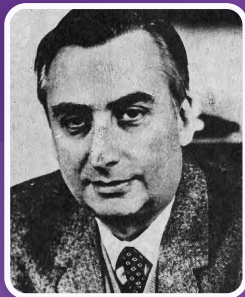


JRF SPECIAL PDF

Roland Barthes



1 Barthes's Biography

1.1 Who He Was

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was a French **literary theorist** and **semiotician** — a scholar of **signs** and how they make meaning. He is one of the most important figures in twentieth-century **literary theory**. His career runs across two great movements: he began as a leading **structuralist** and then moved on to **post-structuralism**, helping to invent both.

His best-known ideas are the **"death of the author"** (meaning is made by the reader, not fixed by the writer), **myth** as a hidden language of modern culture, and the split between **"readerly" and "writerly"** texts. He showed that everyday things — adverts, food, wrestling, photographs — can be read like a language.

CONCEPT

What is semiology (semiotics)? The study of **signs** — how words, images, and objects carry meaning. Barthes was one of its chief developers. He treated culture itself as a system of signs to be decoded.

1.2 Quick Facts

Detail	Information
Born	1915 , France
Died	1980
Nationality	French
Field	Literary theory, semiology, cultural criticism
Movements	Structuralism , then post-structuralism
Famous for	"The Death of the Author" , myth , readerly vs writerly , the five codes

1.3 His Place Among the Theorists

Barthes belongs to the great French generation of post-war thinkers. He was **born in 1915** — after **Walter Benjamin** (1892), **Mikhail Bakhtin** (1895), and **Simone de Beauvoir**

(1908), and before **Jean Baudrillard** (1929) and **Jacques Derrida** (1930).

He shared important ground with **Derrida**. Both believed in the **endless play of meaning** in language: a text's meaning is **never final, no meaning is fully reliable**, and meaning comes from how words relate to one another rather than from a word in isolation. Derrida called this idea **différance**; Barthes reached it through his "**death of the author**." (Where they part: Derrida stresses how meaning shifts over time, a point Barthes does not focus on.)

CONCEPT **Structuralism and post-structuralism:**

Structuralism explains meaning through deep, shared systems — like the rules of a language. **Post-structuralism** keeps the focus on language but argues those systems never settle into one fixed meaning; meaning stays open and unstable. Barthes moved from the first to the second, and helped build both.

1.4 What He Was NOT

Barthes is a French theorist, not part of the **American "Yale School"** of deconstruction. The **Yale critics** were **Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller** — Barthes was not among them.

A few works are often wrongly given to him. *Madness and Civilization* is by **Michel Foucault**, not Barthes. *Allegories of Reading* is not his; nor is *Some Versions of Pastoral*. *What is an Author?* is by **Foucault** (Barthes wrote *The Death of the Author*, the companion piece).

2 Important Works

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>Writing Degree Zero</i>	1953	Literary theory	His first major work ; on language, writing, and ideology
<i>Mythologies</i>	1957	Cultural criticism	Myth as a second-order sign-system; "depoliticized speech"
<i>Elements of Semiology</i>	1964	Theory	Foundational outline of the science of signs
"Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives"	1966	Essay	Three levels of narrative: functions, actions, narration
"The Death of the Author"	1967	Essay	Reader, not author, makes meaning
<i>The Empire of Signs</i>	1970	Semiotic study	Reading Japanese culture as a system of signs
<i>S/Z</i>	1970	Criticism	The five codes ; readerly vs writerly ; on Balzac's <i>Sarrasine</i>
"From Work to Text"	1971	Essay	The Text is plural and a methodological field
<i>The Pleasure of the Text</i>	1973	Theory	Pleasure (plaisir) vs bliss (jouissance) in reading

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>Image–Music–Text</i>	1977	Essays (collection)	Semiotics of image, film, music; includes key essays
<i>Camera Lucida</i>	1980	Photography theory	The punctum and the studium ; his last book

CONCEPT

Order they were published: *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) → *Mythologies* (1957) → *Elements of Semiology* (1964) → *S/Z* and *The Empire of Signs* (1970) → *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) → *Image–Music–Text* (1977) → *Camera Lucida* (1980). Among the wider theory canon, *Mythologies* (1957) comes before Lacan's *Écrits* (1966), Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967), and Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).

3 Important Works in Detail

3.1 The Death of the Author (1967)

In one line: meaning is created by the reader, not handed down by the writer – so the author's authority over the text "dies."

This famous **essay** overturns the old idea that a text means whatever its **author** intended. Barthes argues that once a work is written, the author's intentions no longer rule it. To **give a text an author**, he says, is to **"impose a limit on that**

text," to fix a single final meaning and **close the writing**. Removing the author opens the text up.

In his most-quoted lines, a text is **"not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."** A text is **"a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture"** — it is built from other texts and cultural references, never one original creation. This idea is called **intertextuality**.

Because no single meaning is fixed, the focus shifts from author to **reader**. As Barthes puts it, the **birth of the reader** must be **at the cost of the death of the Author** — it is the reader who now holds the threads of meaning together. By refusing to assign a secret, ultimate meaning, literature performs an **"anti-theological"** act: to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse "God and his hypostases — reason, science, law."

CONCEPT

Why is the author "capitalist"? Barthes calls the figure of the Author the **"epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology"** — capitalism glorifies the lone individual creator to keep authority over the text and to push aside the reader's role in making meaning.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- Essay: **"The Death of the Author" (1967)**; meaning is made by the **reader**, not the author.

- To give a text an author is **"to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."**
- A text is a **"multi-dimensional space"** and a **"tissue of quotations"** — no single, original meaning (intertextuality).
- Barthes calls the Author the **"epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology."**
- The essay appears in the collection *Image–Music–Text* (1977).
- *What is an Author?* is **Foucault's** companion essay, not Barthes's.

3.2 Mythologies (1957)

In one line: everyday culture — adverts, food, wrestling — hides political meanings by making them look "natural"; Barthes calls this "myth."

In *Mythologies* Barthes reads ordinary cultural things — advertisements, popular films, food, wrestling — as carriers of hidden messages. He shows how **modern myths** are made by turning **culture into something that looks "natural."** A myth takes a social or political idea and dresses it up as plain common sense, so that no one questions it.

The key move is that myth **naturalizes connotative meanings**: it takes the extra, suggested meanings (connotations) attached to a sign and makes them seem obvious and innocent. By doing this, myth disguises **ideology** as neutral fact. In a famous phrase, Barthes defines myth as **"depoliticized speech"** in **bourgeois**

(middle-class) society — it drains the politics out of things and presents them as natural and timeless.

CONCEPT **Myth as a second-order semiological system:**

ordinary language is the **first level** — a sign (word + meaning). **Myth builds a second level on top of it:** it takes that whole first sign and uses it as a fresh signifier to carry a new, ideological meaning. So myth is a **sign-system stacked on a sign-system** — meaning made out of meaning.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- *Mythologies* (1957) helped found **semiotics** and **structuralist** criticism.
- Barthes defines **myth** as "**depoliticized speech**" in **bourgeois society**.
- Myth works by **naturalizing connotative meanings** — making cultural ideas look natural.
- Myth is a **second-order semiological (sign) system** built on top of ordinary language.

3.3 S/Z (1970)

In one line: a line-by-line reading of Balzac's story "Sarrasine," from which Barthes draws his readerly-writerly split and the famous five codes.

S/Z is Barthes's close, almost word-by-word analysis of a short story by **Honoré de Balzac** called **Sarrasine**. From this single tale Barthes builds two of his most important ideas:

the **two kinds of text** and the **five codes** that run through every narrative.

First, the split. A **readerly (lisible)** text is traditional and straightforward: the reader **passively absorbs** a meaning that is already fixed, with little effort — like a classic plot-driven novel. A **writerly (scriptible)** text is open, complex, and **self-conscious**; it makes the **reader a producer** of meaning, demanding active interpretation — like experimental literature (Joyce's *Ulysses*). Barthes prizes the writerly text because it frees the reader to create.

Second, the **five codes**. Barthes sees **meaning as the effect of several linguistic codes working together** in the act of reading; the codes are the threads from which any narrative is woven.

CONCEPT

The five codes of S/Z: the **hermeneutic** code (mysteries and unanswered questions), the **proairetic** code (actions and the sequence of events), the **semic (semantic)** code (connotations and character traits), the **symbolic** code (deeper oppositions and themes), and the **cultural (referential)** code (shared real-world knowledge and references). The proairetic, semic, hermeneutic, and symbolic codes are described as common to **all narratives**.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- *S/Z* (1970) is a close reading of **Balzac's** story *Sarrasine*.
- It defines the **readerly (lisible)** text (passive, fixed meaning) vs the **writerly (scriptible)** text (active, reader as producer, self-conscious).

- A **writerly text** makes the reader a **producer** and **draws attention to its own artifice/structure**.
- It sets out the **five codes: hermeneutic, proairetic, semic (semantic), symbolic, cultural**.
- Barthes saw "**meaning**" as an **effect of interconnected linguistic codes**; he developed **semiology** and questioned criticism as a hunt for the author's hidden truth.

3.4 The Pleasure of the Text (1973)

In one line: reading gives two kinds of enjoyment — comfortable "pleasure" and a disruptive, ecstatic "bliss."

This short book studies the **enjoyment a reader feels** in the act of reading, and the **active role** the reader plays in making meaning. Barthes separates two experiences. **Pleasure (plaisir)** is the comfortable, cultured enjoyment of a text that fits our expectations. **Bliss (jouissance)** — sometimes translated "bliss" or "ecstasy" — is a stronger, **disruptive** force that unsettles the reader and breaks the usual ways of understanding a text.

The distinction lines up with his earlier split: the readerly text tends to give pleasure, while the unsettling, writerly text reaches toward bliss.

CONCEPT

What are plaisir and jouissance? Plaisir is settled, agreeable reading-pleasure that confirms what we know. **Jouissance** is an intense, almost physical enjoyment that **shatters** our assumptions — it comes when a text breaks free of comfortable meaning.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) explores the reader's **pleasure** in engaging with a text.
- It divides reading into **pleasure (plaisir)** and **bliss/ecstasy (jouissance)** – bliss being the disruptive force.

3.5 Writing Degree Zero (1953)

In one line: Barthes's first book – on how "writing" carries ideology, and on a neutral, blank style that tries to escape it.

This was Barthes's **first major work**, published in **1953**. It explores the relationship between **language, writing, and ideology**. Barthes argues that beyond a writer's personal style and the shared rules of language there is "**writing**" (écriture) – a level of choice that carries social and political weight. The book's title points to a **neutral, colourless "zero-degree" style** that tries to strip writing of this ideological baggage.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) is Barthes's **first major work**.
- It examines the link between **language, writing, and ideology**.

3.6 "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966)

In one line: a structuralist essay that breaks every narrative into three levels — functions, actions, and narration.

In this 1966 essay Barthes applies **structuralist** method to storytelling. He proposes that narratives have **three levels of structure: functions** (the basic units of action — the events that drive the plot), **actions** (what the characters do), and **narration** (how the story is told — the level of the narrator and the telling).

CONCEPT

Functions and indices: within the level of "functions," Barthes distinguishes **functions** proper — units of action that move the plot — from **indices**, which are informative details that tell us about a character or a setting rather than advancing events.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- The three levels of narrative structure are **functions, actions, and narration**.
- **Functions** are the basic units of action; **indices** give information about characters and settings.

3.7 From Work to Text (1971)

In one line: the difference between a "work" (a fixed object you can hold) and a "Text" (an open, plural process of meaning).

This essay separates two ideas. A **work** is a finished, physical object — a book you can hold in your hand — and is **ordinarily the object of consumption**. A **Text**, by contrast, is not a thing but a **process**: it is **plural** (open to many meanings), it is **held in language** (it exists only within language, not as a physical object), and it is a **methodological field** — a site for analysis and interpretation rather than a finished product. The reader takes an active part in the Text.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- In "*From Work to Text*" (1971), the **Text is plural** and the **work is ordinarily the object of consumption**.
- The **Text is held in language** and is a **methodological field** (it cannot be physically held; the work can).

3.8 The Empire of Signs (1970)

In one line: Barthes reads Japan — its food, cities, theatre, gestures — as a culture of pure signs.

A **semiotic study of Japanese culture**, published in 1970. Barthes treats Japan as a system of **signs and symbols** and reads its everyday life — food, the layout of cities, packaging, manners — as a kind of writing, finding there a culture of surfaces and signs without a fixed "deep" meaning behind them.

3.9 Image-music-text (1977)

In one line: a collection of Barthes's major essays on the signs in images, film, music, and narrative.

Published in **1977** (the date is often tested), this is a **collection of essays** translated by Stephen Heath. It gathers Barthes's key work on the **structural analysis of narrative**, on **semiotics of the photograph and film**, and on **music and voice**. It consolidates ideas from *Mythologies* and *S/Z*, and includes "**The Death of the Author**" and his thinking on **intertextuality**. (This book is sometimes wrongly attributed to **Edward Said** — it is Barthes's.)

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- *Image-Music-Text* (**1977**) is a collection of Barthes's essays on **image, film, music, and narrative**.
- It contains "**The Death of the Author**" and develops **intertextuality**.

3.10 Camera Lucida (1980)

In one line: Barthes's last book — a meditation on photography built around two ideas, the studium and the punctum.

Camera Lucida (**1980**) is Barthes's final book, a reflection on **photography**. He distinguishes two ways a photograph affects us. The **studium** is the general, cultural interest a photo holds — the things we can study and understand in it. The **punctum** is the sharp, personal **detail that pierces the viewer** — an accidental, wounding point that touches you directly and cannot be planned by the photographer.

CONCEPT

What is the punctum? Latin for a "prick" or "sting." It is the small, unexpected detail in a photograph

that **pierces** the viewer and moves them personally — set against the **studium**, the photo's broad, learnable, cultural meaning.

4 Criticism

Critic / Source	What they said
Roland Barthes (own position)	The Author is " the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology " — a figure to be set aside so the reader can make meaning.
Jacques Derrida (point of convergence)	Shares Barthes's view of the endless play of language : meaning is never final and no meaning is reliable ; meaning lies in the relations between words.
Walter Benjamin (<i>The Storyteller</i>)	A near-contemporary point of contrast: Benjamin held that every real story has something useful in it — moral or practical wisdom.
Structuralist lineage	Barthes built on Ferdinand de Saussure's science of signs (<i>Course in General Linguistics</i> , 1916) to develop semiology .

CONCEPT

Where Barthes sits in theory: he did **not reject** the structural analysis of narrative — he **expanded** structuralism into **post-structuralism**. He saw **meaning as the effect of interconnected linguistic codes**, helped develop **semiology**, and **questioned the idea that criticism uncovers a hidden truth intended by the author**. This shift from author-centred to **reader- and text-centred** reading is his lasting mark on literary theory.