Deconstruction

Deconstruction’s admirers see it as a way that begins to let us question the presuppositions of the language we think in. Its detractors condemn its subtle and convoluted readings as narcissistic self-reflexivity.

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The term **deconstruction** sends many readers running for cover, partly because it is one of the most radical approaches to reading that has appeared on the scene, but also because its terminology presents difficulties of its own. Why, then, does anyone want to understand it or use it to read a poem or story? Perhaps the best answer is that because its terminology presents difficulties of its own. Why, then, does anyone want to understand it or use it to read a poem or story? Perhaps the best answer is that to understand the revolution that poststructuralism has created in literary criticism, it provides a way of playing with language and meaning that teases and delights. It is not a methodology or school or even a philosophy. Instead, it is, says its founder Jacques Derrida, a strategy, some “rules for reading, interpretation and writing.”

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Deconstruction is the best-known (and most significant) form of literary criticism known as **poststructuralism**, and in fact many people use the terms interchangeably. To understand the revolution that poststructuralism has created in literary criticism, it is necessary to look at some of its predecessors, both structuralism—the movement that it both incorporates and undermines—and those that structuralism itself challenged.

The revolutionary nature of deconstruction can be summarized by saying that in general it challenges the way Western civilization has conceived of the world since Plato. More specifically, it overturns the principles that have provided basic beliefs about truth and meaning since the eighteenth-century French philosopher, scientist, and mathematician René Descartes (1596–1650) applied the rational, inductive methods of science to philosophy. Refusing to accept the truth of anything without grounds for believing it to be true, he began with the one thing he could know, that consciousness of his thinking proved his own existence. “**Cogito, ergo sum,**” he declared. “I think, therefore I am.” From that one certainty all other knowledge could proceed. The Cartesian approach, which elevated the importance of reason over passion, superstition, and imagination as a means of finding truth in the natural world, has had an impact well beyond the eighteenth century. It has helped shape the thinking of humanists, artists, and philosophers into the twenty-first century, providing them with the conviction that they could make a better world. If meaning and truth could be found by thinking and acting rationally, humankind could solve social problems, cure illnesses, and create new technologies. In short, through the use of reason progress was possible, perhaps inevitable.

The confidence inspired by such a worldview came into question toward the end of the nineteenth century with a radical revisioning of “reality” that took place in a wide variety of disciplines. The long-held view of the world as a knowable, objective entity that could be discovered through direct experience of the senses encountered serious challenges in fields as diverse as physics, linguistics, anthropology, and psychology. In philosophy, for example, thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) began to question the existence of objective truth. Nietzsche even announced the death of God. Believing that traditional values had lost their influence over people, he called for the creation of new values that could replace them. He foresaw a “superman” who was strong and independent, freed from all values except those he deemed to be valid. Using different terminology, spokespersons from other areas of study echoed his denial of an ultimate reality that is static, unified, and absolute, to be replaced by an understanding of the world as relativistic, dynamic, and open. In 1905, for example, Albert Einstein published a paper that would change scientists’ understanding of time, space, and reality. His ideas about the velocity of light challenged the assumption that there is such a thing as time that all clocks measure. In other words, the concept of absolute time was replaced with time as relevant to motion. Such thinking represented a fundamental shift in the way we see ourselves and our world. Later it would lead to questions about the nature of human behavior, belief, and morality. “**Is everything relative?**" the twentieth century would ask.

The study of language was not immune from such probing. For two hundred years, language had been viewed as a transparent medium through which reality could be set down and shaped into an aesthetic form. Finding meaning, which was assumed to be present, required finding the words that corresponded to objects perceived. Literature was taken to be mimetic, reflecting and presenting truths about life and the human condition. Because texts depicted life in a powerful way, they were thought to have a life of their own that could be discovered and analyzed. Enter the critic, whose job was to reveal their value and meaning. For example, the formalists (the New Critics, as distinguished from the Russian formalists), who carried the nineteenth-century empirical worldview into the twentieth century, saw a poem as a self-sufficient object possessing unity and form, operating within its own rules to resolve ambiguities, ironies, and paradoxes (see chapter 3). They sought to determine not what the poem means but how it means. There was no doubt that with the application of intellectual analysis, an understanding of form would lead to meaning.
Although an occasional doubter complained about the cold, unemotional nature of the close readings of the formalists, there was no uncertainty about the presence of ultimate meaning.

The power of the formalists, and their nineteenth-century heritage, began to break down in literary criticism with the appearance of the phenomenological critics, who rejected the formalists' inability (or unwillingness) to question how readers know a literary work, as exemplified by their refusal to investigate the author's intentions. The phenomenologists, who believe that meaning resides not in physical objects but in human consciousness as the object is registered in it, emphasize the reader in making literature (see chapter 7). Instead of a single best reading of a text, they accept the possibility of many readings, because a text cannot exist separate from the individual mind that perceives it. It cannot be explained as something unto itself; instead, it can be explained as an effect on a reader, and that effect will be different for each reader because of the experiences each brings to the reading. In addition, readers are called upon to supply missing material, to fill in textual gaps. They will do so using their own experience with literature and life, thereby creating even more difference in interpretations. In other words, as in other fields, it is no longer a given in literature that truth is static, absolute, and unified. Now it is deemed to be relative, dynamic, and open.

From the early part of the twentieth century came another set of ideas that was to have a significant impact on how people understand the world. Called structuralism, it is, in its broadest sense, a science that seeks to understand how systems work. Those who practice it are not so much interested in the operations (or aesthetics or meaning) of a single entity as they are in trying to describe the underlying (and not necessarily visible) principles by which it exists. Assuming that individual characteristics that can be noted on the surface are rooted in some general organization, structuralists collect observable information about an item or practice in order to discover the laws that govern it. For example, a structuralist studying urban American architecture of the twentieth century will be interested in the characteristics of a single building only insofar as they provide data that help define the bigger category of architectural objects to which that building belongs. A structural anthropologist may examine the customs and rituals of a single group of people in some remote part of the world not simply to understand them in particular but to discover underlying similarities between their society and others. Because behaviors that on the surface appear to be vastly different from each other may nonetheless have commonalities that link the human beings that practice them, observations of concrete local phenomena allow the researcher to support assumptions about human society that cross cultural boundaries. Claude Lévy-Strauss, for example, found the mythologies of various cultures often to be only different versions of the same narrative. Their basic similarities of structure, which he called mythemes, he judged to be reflective of human concerns that are not culturally bound. In short, structuralists are looking not for structures in a physical sense but for patterns that underlie human behavior, experience, and creation.

A critical question has to do with the source of the structures themselves. Traditionally it has been assumed that they resided in the physical world. Human beings found meaning in what they perceived outside themselves. However, the structuralists argue from a different direction. According to them, structure comes from the human mind as it works to make sense of its world. Any given experience, they say, is so full of information that it would be overwhelming if there were no way of ordering it. The mind's defense is to sort and classify, make rules of process—that is, create a structure. It is such conceptual systems that make it possible for individuals to distinguish one type of object from another or to differentiate among members of the same category. This fairly radical idea placed meaning in the mind of human beings, not in external, objective reality. It is a short step from there to the idea that language, not sense experience or modes of consciousness, shapes who we are, what we think, what we understand reality to be.

When the structuralist approach was applied to language, it caused a significant departure from the traditional methods of study practiced by nineteenth-century philologists, who had examined language diachronically, that is, by tracing how words evolved in meaning or sound over time. The philologists compared the changes they found with those that had occurred in other languages and looked for causes. Their work assumed that language was mimetic, not a system with its own governing rules but one that reflected the world. A word, to them, was a symbol that was equal to the object or concept it represented. In contrast, French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, today generally regarded as the father of modern linguistics, began to use a synchronic approach, looking at a language at one particular time in search of the principles that govern its functions, principles of which its users might not even be consciously aware. His studies led him to reject the idea that language is simply a tool to be used to represent a preexistent reality. That is, he did not accept the idea that it is mimetic or transparent. Instead, he argued that language is a system that has its own rules of operations. He called those general rules langue and referred to the applications that members of a particular speech community make of them in their iterations as parole. In other words, langue, sometimes referred to as a grammar, is the system within which individual verbalizations have meaning, and parole refers to the individual verbalizations. The rules of langue, which the individual speaker absorbs as a member of a culture, are manifested in parole. In his efforts to identify and explain how all this works, Saussure swept away the nineteenth-century correspondence model between words and things and gave us language that is connected only conventionally and arbitrarily to the world outside it.

One of the concepts important to Saussure's explanation of the language system is that of signs, which he describes as composed of two parts: a written or sound construction, known as the signifier, and its meaning, called the signified. The spoken or written form of hat, for example, is a signifier. The concept that flashes into your mind when you hear or read it is the signified. With the introduction of these terms, and the theory underlying them, Saussure transformed the sense of what a word is. He made it no longer possible to speak of a word as a symbol that represents a thing
outside it, as it had conventionally been known. Because a signifier does not refer to some object in the world but to a concept in the mind, it is language, not the world external to us, that mediates our reality. We see only what it allows us to see both outside and inside ourselves. It structures our experience. Consider, for example, how speakers of different languages tend to have differing views of the world. They see the world through different structures.

The connection between the signifier and signified has several important characteristics. First of all, it is not a natural relationship but an arbitrary one. The signifier hat has no inherent link with the physical object you wear on your head. It could just as easily have been called a rose or a bed. Then how do a signifier and a signified become tied together? The relationship comes about through convention, an agreement on the part of speakers that the two are associated. Finally, we know one sign from another not because of meanings they inherently carry but because of the differences among them. The signifier hat is distinguishable from hat, for example, because they have different initial letters. Language, then, is arbitrary, conventional, and based on difference.

The concept of difference has additional ramifications that become important in deconstruction theory. This concept appears most clearly as opposites, which structuralists and others refer to as binary oppositions. They are contrasting concepts such as male/female, right/left, day/night, each of which makes it possible for us to understand the other more fully. We are able to understand black because we understand white, noise because we know silence.

Although structuralism has taken varied forms in different countries, the most influential theorists have been the French followers of Saussure. His ideas, and theirs, have been adopted and adapted by many disciplines besides linguistics. After all, wherever there is social behavior, there is likely to be a sign system, not necessarily one involving words. Saussure, in fact, proposed the development of a science called semiology that would investigate meaning through signs observable in cultural phenomena. Because language is the primary signifying system, it would be the chief focus of study, and research into other systems would follow the model used in studying it. At the same time in this country Charles Sanders Pierce was developing semiotics, which applied structuralist principles to the study of sign systems and the way meaning is derived from them. The point is the same: to treat all forms of social behavior as signifying systems that are defined by the structure of their interrelationships. The process provides anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and others with a way to go beneath external facts in order to examine the nature of the human experience. It has proved to be valuable in studying phenomena as disparate as Barbie dolls and the mythologies of little-known cultures.

Deconstruction, a product of the late 1960s, took structuralist ideas about the nature of the sign, the importance of difference and binary oppositions, and the role of language in mediating experience and extended them, sometimes in ways that contradicted the theories of the structuralists. It both built on and broke with structuralism, making deconstruction one of several poststructuralist theories that find their commonality in the idea that although some structuralist principles can be used to form a new understanding of reality, their interpretations of texts are too static and unchanging. They produce readings that posit fixed meanings. In contrast, the poststructuralists view texts as fluid, dynamic entities that are given new life with repeated readings and through interactions with other texts, thereby providing an ongoing plurality of meanings. Where the structuralists had provided a broadly applicable new method of arriving at meaning through an analysis of underlying codes and rules, deconstruction declared meaning to be essentially undecidable. What a text means and how it means, they said, cannot be determined because it is not possible to systematically find the grammar of a text. Instead, one can find many meanings in a single text, all of them possible and all of them replaceable by others. Instead of looking for structure, then, deconstruction looks for those places where texts contradict, and thereby deconstruct, themselves. Instead of showing how the conventions of a text work, it shows how they fail. The result is that a literary work can no longer have one unifying meaning that an authority (critic or author) can enunciate. Instead, meaning is accepted to be the outgrowth of various signifying systems within the text that may even produce contradictory meanings.

In the 1970s, deconstruction became a major influence on literary criticism in large part because of the strong influence of its originator and name, the philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose major precursors were Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, known for their probing of such key concepts as knowledge, truth, and identity. In the United States, deconstruction became closely associated with Yale University because some of its better-known advocates were on the faculty there. In fact, in people's minds deconstruction remains closely associated with (and is sometimes referred to as) the Yale school of criticism.

The impact of deconstruction has not been welcomed by all readers, some of whom object that it robs literature of its significance, trivializes texts as simple wordplay, and presents itself in unintelligible jargon. Humanists see it as a wedge between literature and life, even as a practice that shuts out ordinary readers unwilling to engage in the complex theorizing that deconstruction requires. In response, its defenders point out that it gives us a way to read more critically and honestly than previous systems have allowed us to do. It also provides means of discovering premises and ideologies that lurk unacknowledged in the language we use.

PRACTICING DECONSTRUCTION

Working from the assumption that language is inherently ambiguous, not the clear, efficient communicator that we would like to think it is, deconstruction recognizes that any human utterance has a multitude of possibilities for meaning. The simplest statement may be heard in a wide variety of ways, giving it a tendency to undermine itself by refuting what it appears to be saying. It contradicts itself as it moves from one meaning to another. How does this happen?

In deconstructive terms, Saussure's sign, the combination of a signifier and a signified that refers to a mental concept, is not a stable, unchanging entity. Using his
predecessor's theory that language is a system based on differences, Derrida goes a step further to point out that any given signifier may point to several different signifieds. For example, a statement as uncomplicated as "The cherries are in the bowl" says more than the six words denote. The signifier "cherries" will evoke in our consciousness, and that of our listener/reader, a host of associations—other fruit, a still life, desserts, trees in bloom, allergies, obviously more than cherries in a bowl. Each of the signifieds (other fruit, a still life, and so on) in turn becomes a signifier because it leads to other associations, other signifieds. In short, a signifier has no single signified, or mental concept, as the structuralists assumed but leads instead to a chain of other signifiers.

The seemingly simple explanation of sign = signifier + signified can be complicated in some other ways as well. A person can speak ironically, for instance, saying one thing but meaning another. For example, imagine that you say to someone who has just run a stop sign and hit your car while driving over the speed limit, "How could you have run into me? You said you were driving so carefully." Although you would seem to be sympathetic to the other driver, you are actually accusing him of being irresponsible behind the wheel. Tone of voice can be meaningful here too. It can, by exaggeration, indicate irony, that the opposite of what is said is what is meant. It may also indicate a specially intended meaning behind a statement. By changing the vocal emphasis to different words, you change the meaning. For example, try reading the second sentence aloud stressing the first use of the word you: "You say you were driving so carefully." What does the statement imply? It suggests that the person who caused the accident is being defensive but is alone in claiming innocence. Now emphasize the second you and see how the meaning shifts. "You say you were driving so carefully" implies that the other driver has accused you of some improper driving practice. And so precise meaning slips away, suggesting many meanings, not a single, fixed, clearly identifiable one as the structuralists' principles defined.

Saussure argued that language refers not to objective reality but to mental concepts. In deconstructive terms, it does not even refer to mental concepts but only to itself. It consists of the ongoing play of signifiers that never come to rest. Our thinking, then, is always in flux, always subject to changing signifiers that move from one to another. We may wish for stability, but we are caught in language, which refuses to stay fixed. Such play does produce illusory effects of meanings, but the seeming significations are the results of a trace, which consists of what remains from the play of signifiers. Because we recognize a word by its differences from other words, it continues to have traces of those that it is not. A word (which is present) signals what is absent. This ongoing play Derrida calls différence, a deliberately ambiguous coined term combining the French words for "to defer" and "to differ," suggesting that meaning is always postponed, leaving in its place only the differences between signifiers. (Interestingly, in spoken French différence cannot be distinguished from différence, making its meaning even more uncertain.) Diffrance asserts that knowledge comes from dissimilarity and absence, making it dynamic and contextual. When these ideas are applied to a text, the concept of différence makes it impossible to think about that work in isolation. The meaning of any given text will be derived from its interrelatedness with other texts, in an ongoing process that gives it a series of possible meanings and readings.

Many people are made uncomfortable by the absence of a stable meaning. When they realize the extended consequences of such a proposition, they are likely to be even more disquieted, for if meaning is derived from what is not there—absence—and it is in the end undecidable, then there is no such thing as objective truth. As Derrida explains it, there is no transcendental signified, no ultimate reality or end to all the references from one sign to another, no unifying element to all things. Human beings resist an existence that lacks the certainty of unchanging meaning, a fixed center, because, as Derrida points out, humankind, at least in the Western world, is logocentric; that is, human beings want to believe that there is a centering principle in which all belief and actions are grounded and that certain metaphysical ideas are to be favored over others. They want to believe that there is a presence behind language and text. Throughout history such a center has been given many names: truth, God, Platonic Form, or essence. The salient characteristic, regardless of the name, is that each is stable and ongoing. Each provides an absolute from which all knowledge proceeds.

Actually, this type of thinking goes back to Aristotle, who declared that something cannot have a property and not have it, leading to the dualistic thinking characteristic of Western civilization. Such reasoning is most apparent in the tendency of Western metaphysics to see the world in terms of pairs of opposed centers of meaning, or binary oppositions. As on other occasions, Derrida borrows the idea from the structuralists, then elaborates on it by noting that in every such pair one member is privileged, or favored, over the other. For example, in the binary oppositions of male/female, good/evil, or truth/lies, the first in each pair is traditionally held by society to be superior. The privileged member defines itself by what it is not, its less valued partner. Not only do such oppositions exist among abstractions, but they also underlie all human acts. The ideology of a situation or a text can be determined by locating the binary oppositions in it and noting which are the privileged members.

Poststructuralists test binary oppositions to determine if they are indeed opposed, to challenge traditional assumptions and beliefs about what should be (and is) privileged, to question where they overlap and on what occasions they share their existence. The poststructuralists, including those who read from a deconstructive perspective, point out that oppositions are sometimes not so contrasting as they are thought to be. Perhaps something can be present and absent at the same time. Perhaps, they suggest, looking at the world, as a series of opposed centers of meaning—such as right/wrong, good/evil, love/hate—oversimplifies its nature. Such thinking does not take into account the complexity of the way things are, leading to distortions of the truth. It requires that we suspend notice of contradictions in our effort to maintain the conventionally accepted arrangement of absolutes. Deconstruction resists such simplification by reversing the oppositions, thereby displacing meaning and offering another set of possibilities of meaning that arise from the new relations of difference.
One binary opposition of particular importance to Derrida is that of speech/writing. He objects to the practice of making speech the privileged member, a convention he calls phonocentrism, because it implies that the presence of a speaker makes communication more direct and accurate. Written words, which are merely copies of speech, are traditionally deemed to be inferior because they are less directly connected to the source. Speech is evidence of the presence of the speaker, but writing, which serves when the speaker is not there, points to absence. The binary emerging from this situation is presence/absence, with the former, declared through speaking, the privileged term. This is an essentially logocentric position because it puts the human being in the center, announcing her presence through language. It asserts presence (being) through speaking.

If there is no transcendental signified, no objective truth, such binaries are not fixed and static. They are fluid, open to change. They can, says Derrida, be reversed. Any center can be decentered, thereby providing a new set of values and beliefs. At the very least, such a reversal makes it possible to see any given situation from a new perspective. A bigger assertion is that, by reversing the oppositions—displacing accepted meaning and reinscribing new values—one is able to get outside logocentric thought. Not only does Derrida reverse the speech/writing binary to see the terms in a new way, but he actually argues that writing must come before speech. That is, he reasons that speech is a form of writing. The two share certain features, as they are both signifying systems. When we interpret oral signs, we must do so by recognizing a pure form of the signifier, one that can be repeated (and recognized) again and again despite differences of pronunciation. But being capable of repetition is a characteristic of writing, whereas speech vanishes into the air. Because the repeatable signifier gives speech a characteristic of writing, Derrida says it is a special kind of writing.

Complicating the situation is that binary oppositions may overlap each other. They are not necessarily discrete entities. There are too many contradictions and associations involved with language to be able to separate them entirely. At the same time that they reinforce presence, they also remind us of what is missing, thereby complementing each other. Derrida refers to the unstable relationship of binary oppositions as supplementation, suggesting that each of the two terms adds something to the other and takes the place of the other. In his hands, for example, writing not only adds something to speech but also substitutes for it, though the substitution is never exact. It is never precisely what it completes. Supplementation exists in all aspects of human life and behavior.

The various ideas traditionally subscribed to by Western civilization are based on the assumption that conscious, integrated selves are at the center of human activity. Derrida calls that belief the metaphysics of presence. These ideas include our logocentrism (ties to words), phonocentrism (ties to words produced as sounds), and our acceptance of a transcendental signified (ultimate source of all knowledge). In short, they are beliefs about language and being that have been influential since Plato, but Derrida challenges them as flawed and erroneous because meaning is, in the end, undecidable. He defines the metaphysics of presence as "a set of themes whose character was the sign of a whole set of long-standing constraints" and adds, "These constraints were practiced at the price of contradictions, of denials, of dogmatic degrees. I proposed to analyze the non-closed and fissured system of these constraints under the name of logocentrism in the form that it takes in Western philosophy." By deconstructing these constraints, he is trying to open new ways of thinking and knowing. In terms of texts, he is giving readers a new way to read.

Making a Deconstructive Analysis

To understand the discussion that follows, you will need to read "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem by Robert Frost, found on page 256.

Whereas a traditional critical reading attempts to establish a meaning for a text, a deconstructive reading involves asking questions in an effort to show that what the text claims to be saying and what it is really saying are different. It tries to undermine the work's implied claim of having coherence, unity, and meaning and to show that it does not represent the truth of its subject. In fact, no final statement about its meaning can be made, for each reading is provisional, just one in a series of interpretations that decenter each other in ongoing play. In the absence of a transcendental signified, a text cannot be said to be tied to some center that existed before and outside it, and meaning can have no place to conclude, nothing in which to be subsumed.

A number of people have tried to summarize the process of deconstructing a text. Derrida himself explains it by saying that "the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses." As Sharon Crowley describes the process, it tries to "tease larger systemic motifs out of gaps, aberrations, or inconsistencies in a given text." It tries to find blind spots that a writer has absorbed from cultural systems. She adds that "deconstruction amounts to reading texts in order to rewrite them," as Derrida tries "to reread Western history to give voice to that which has been systematically silenced." (Paul de Man has perhaps had the most to say about "blind spots." In Blindness and Insight, he goes so far as to assert that critics achieve insight through their "peculiar blindness." He finds that they say something besides what they meant.)

Barbara Johnson's frequently quoted definition of deconstruction says that it occurs by "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself." Jonathan Culler says that "to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies." A more detailed comment comes from J. Hillis Miller:

Deconstruction as a mode of interpretation works by a careful and circumspect entering of each textual labyrinth... . . . The deconstructive critic seeks to find, by this process of retracing, the element in the system studied which is alogical, the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building. The deconstruction, rather, annihilates the ground on
which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated the ground, knowingly or unknowingly. Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself.

The process is actually in some ways similar to the one used in formalism. That is, the reader engages in a close reading, a very close reading of the text, noting the presence and operation of all its elements. However, the end is radically different in the two approaches. Where formalism seeks to demonstrate that a work has essential unity despite the paradoxes and irony that create its inner tension, that it expresses a realizable truth, deconstruction seeks to show that a text has no organic unity or basis for presenting meanings, only a series of conflicting significations.

One way to begin is to follow Derrida's own process, which he calls "double reading." That is, you first go through a text in a traditional manner, pointing out where it seems to have determinate meanings. The first step in deconstructing Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," for example, might be to make a commentary on the narrator's desire for peace, the highly controlled form, or the cumulative effect of the images of night, winter, and sleep. On second reading, however, you would look for alternative meanings and use them to negate any specific one. Discovery of contradictory or incompatible meanings results in the deconstruction of a text. They undermine the grounds on which it is based, and meaning becomes indeterminate. The text is not unitary and unified in the manner that logocentrism promises. Recognizing that a text has multiple interpretations, the reader expects to interpret it over and over again. No single reading is irrevocable; it can always be displaced by a subsequent one. Thus interpretation becomes a creative act as important as the text undergoing interpretation. The pleasure lies in the discovery of new ways of seeing the work. Of course, because the reader must express those discoveries in logocentric language, the interpretation will deconstruct itself as well.

How do you find alternative meanings, especially if you are accustomed to assuming that there is an inherent meaning to be found, that it will be recognizable to other readers, and that the picture it gives of the world will be consonant with the way it really is? How do you find contradictory or incompatible meanings if you are used to finding the meaning of a text or passage?

You can begin by locating the binary oppositions in the text, identifying the member that is privileged and the one that is not. In "Stopping by Woods," for example, a number of hierarchical oppositions are quickly noted: silence/sound, nature/civilization, isolation/community, dark/light, stillness/activity, unconscious/conscious, and, by implication, death/life and dreams/reality. Looking at them carefully will give you a way of entering the poem deconstructively. For example, try to answer the following questions about them, and then compare your answers with the commentary that follows each one.

What values and ideas do the hierarchies reflect? Your answers to the question will define some of the preconceptions that influence the way the text is conventionally read.

If you accept the first of each of the paired terms to be the privileged one, you will read the poem as a statement about the value of experiencing peace, oneness with nature, and acceptance of self. There is beauty in the moment, a sense of connection with primeval forces.

What do you find when you reverse the binary oppositions? What fresh perspectives on the poem emerge? Because the hierarchy is arbitrary and illusory, it can be turned upside down to provide a new view of the values and beliefs that underlie it. The new, unconventional relationships may radically change your perception of the terms or of the text.

The interesting aspect of the oppositions in this poem is that the terms that are privileged throughout most of it are reversed at the end when the traveler chooses to continue his journey. For the first three stanzas, silence is favored over sound, nature over civilization, isolation over community, and so on. When, however, the persona rejects the loveliness of the dark, deep woods and chooses to honor promises that lie outside them, he acknowledges that he lives in a world that expects him to renounce self-indulgent dreams and carry out his obligations. He is part of a society that honors community, activity, consciousness, and reality.

Although in this case the poet himself has provided a reversal, the reader still must ask what has been changed by it. What else is affected? What would be different, for example, if the traveler opted for nature, darkness, and dreams? What if the forces that attracted him so powerfully throughout most of the experience remained the privileged ones? What would be different if isolation were deemed to be more attractive than community? What if it were preferable to be alone, outside the company of friends and family? Then the woods would belong to nobody, or at least the narrator would not acknowledge their claim, and there would be no self-consciousness about being observed. Conformity to social norms and pressures (signaled by the horse) would cease to exist. The world would be marked by an absence of stress and the presence of peace. The narrator would be liberated from drudgery, labor, the burdens of responsibility that are implied by the penultimate line. Structure and regimentation would disappear, and in their place would be spontaneity and natural reactions. And perhaps most important, one would feel a sense of unity with nature. To be alone is for the moment appealing, posing as a provisional center of meaning.

Do you find any contradictions in the privileged members? That is, do the terms silence, isolation, stillness, and unconscious seem consonant? Or are they incompatible?

The privileged terms initially seem to fit easily into a single scene, but on closer analysis some inconsistencies emerge. There are contradictions in the poem that go unacknowledged. For example, the traveler enjoys the pleasures of isolation but ultimately opts for community. He savors the beauty of nature but chooses civilization. When he continues his journey, isolation and nature are decentered by community and civilization. In the end, contradictory hierarchies (isolation/community and community/isolation, nature/civilization and civilization/nature) are privileged by the protagonist even though they are incompatible. The opposed conditions cannot exist together, though that is never overtly acknowledged in the poem. Their incongruity underscores the fragmented, conflicted nature of the
traveler himself. It also asserts the lack of fixed, unchanging meaning in poems or in life itself.

What else do the terms make you think of? What other hierarchies do they lead to? Such associations will suggest alternative readings, new terms that can decenter the ones currently controlling the interpretation.

Earlier it was noted that stillness, silence, isolation, and the rest seem by extension to suggest the unconscious and death. By establishing unconscious/conscious and death/life as major oppositions, the old reading about promises and duties is decentered and replaced with an interpretation having to do with renunciation of vitality and presence, a quite different set of concerns. In this way the chain of signifiers rolls over and over, moving from one provisional meaning to another.

How do the binary terms supplement each other? How does each help the reader to understand its opposing term? How do they reinforce both presence and absence?

At the end of Frost's poem, when the narrator exchanges the peace of aloneness (isolation) for reengagement with the world, then nature and civilization, and countryside and village, are not opposites, but experiences in the being of the narrator that decenter and supplement each other. He is attracted by the solace of the winter scene in the woods, but he chooses the world of obligations and work. He is not, of course, a unified being but a fragmented one who speaks from the unconscious and returns at the end to the conscious world. He exists in dream and reality.

Another deconstructive approach is to take what has heretofore seemed marginal and make it central. Elements customarily considered to be of minor interest can become the focus of interest, with binary oppositions and possible reversals of their own. The comment that ordinarily receives little attention is brought to the center to see what new understandings surface, or a minor character may be scrutinized as critical to what happens in the plot. For example, in “Stopping by Woods” a close look at the horse is revealing. Seemingly of slight importance to what happens in the poem or what it may mean, the horse turns out to be surprisingly significant. Described in this poem as “little” (“My little horse must think it queer / To stop without a farm­house near”), he turns out to play a large role. He “gives his harness bells a shake,” thereby reminding the narrator of responsibility, duty, and social judgments. He interrupts the silence with sound, supplanting the peacefulness of the moment with a call to activity and conformity, replacing absence with presence. The horse becomes, in a sense, the voice of the conscious and civilized world, which in itself is a commentary on that world. Nevertheless, the traveler exchanges his dreams for reality. The horse’s bells, sounds that are not even language, displace isolation as a center of meaning and thereby change the direction of the poem. The animal’s impact would come the focus of interest, with binary oppositions and possible reversals of their own. The comment that ordinarily receives little attention is brought to the center to decenter each new center, to cast doubt on previous theories, never coming to rest on any one meaning but generating an infinite number of possible interpretations.

In sum, the narrator of “Stopping by Woods” is seen to be a logocentric being who looks for a center where there is none. Finding only momentary meaning, he moves on to seek a center in work and community. He yearns for peace but displaces it with obligations, because although unity is desirable, it is absent, only fleetingly available in the moment in the woods.

Finally, the deconstructive reader will place all structures in question, because an ultimate meaning is always deferred, and ambiguity remains. The purpose is to decenter each new center, to cast doubt on previous theories, never coming to rest on any one meaning but generating an infinite number of possible interpretations. The meaning of the protagonist’s experience in “Stopping by Woods,” for example, cannot in the long run be determined. The repetition of the last line resists interpretation.

The repetition of such inconsistencies and trying to account for it, a different interpretation becomes possible. The reader of this poem wonders, for instance, about the distance between the terms used to describe the woods. They are said to be “lovely, dark, and deep.” The first descriptive word connotes aesthetic pleasure, the next two a sense of threat or mystery. The solace that the narrator imputes to the woods is threatened. It is, finally, not there, or at least is there only momentarily. The woods have no permanent, stable, consistent self.

Looking at a binary opposition—such as presence/absence, for example, reversed by Derrida so that absence is favored—often helps a reader to deconstruct a text. In “Stopping by Woods,” it is significant that the narrator’s words come unspoken from the inner self. They appear to exist only in thought. Phono-centric views would give them a privileged position because they are closest to the man. They represent him, stand in for him, displace him. The inner words ultimately appear in writing, however, displacing speech (which in this case is unvoiced), which displaced unspoken thought, which initially displaced the man. The presence of being is far removed. The words of the persona are supplements (additions to and substitutions for) him. Further, the bells of the horse metaphorically make the horse a spokesperson for the community, thereby displacing its center. Sound has replaced speech. Animal has replaced people. Absence is thereby privileged over presence.

On subsequent readings, new levels of meaning will emerge with the inversion of other binary oppositions. Some will appear only after others have been explored. You may find yourself moving back and forth between different interpretations or successively displacing one with another. In either case, the unending play of difference prevents you from arriving at any decidable meaning, or any set of multiple meanings, for anything you say or write. Instead, there is an unending process, with every new reading holding the possibility of a new interpretation. Acceptance of shifting meanings challenges the previously held views of the reader, offering her
freedom from the constraints of traditional assumptions and ideologies so that new ways of seeing are made possible.

WRITING A DECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS

It should be noted at the outset that important voices have expressed concern about the appropriateness of viewing deconstruction as a critical approach. Not surprisingly, some critics resist what they see as the relativism found in its philosophical attack on the existence of meaning in literature (and life). Others object less to its deconstructive effects than to what they see as its tendency to trivialize literature and the act of reading, thereby threatening the privileged place they hold in academia. They accuse it of diminishing our capacity to appreciate and interpret literature. And almost everyone complains of its obscure and confusing terminology. David Hirsch’s Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man, for example, raises question about the validity of this approach.

Another kind of objection comes from Jane Tompkins, who argues against the practice of applying deconstructive principles to texts because it means using methods that are basically positivist and empirical and thereby contradictory to deconstruction. She writes, 

The point I want to make here is that you can’t apply post-structuralism to literary texts. Why not? Because to talk about applying post-structuralism to literary texts assumes the following things: (1) that we have freestanding subjects, (2) that we have freestanding objects of investigation, (3) that there are freestanding methods, and (4) that what results when we apply reader to method and method to text is a freestanding interpretation. This series of assumptions revokes everything that Derrida and (4) that what results when we apply reader to method and method to text is a freestanding interpretation. This series of assumptions revokes everything that Derrida is getting at in “Difference,” and that is implicit in Saussure’s theory of language. . . . As we read literary texts, then, “we” are not applying a “method”; we are acting as an extension of the interpretive code, of those systems of difference that constitute us and the objects of our perception simultaneously.

Nevertheless, deconstructive readings can enrich one’s experience with a text by providing an ongoing journey through it, each revealing a new way of thinking about it. Such studies proceed in different ways, but here are some suggestions to help you read from this perspective and write about your observations.

PREWRITING

A reading log can be particularly helpful with the deconstructive approach. As you go through a text for the first time, you can make notes as a formalist would, taking an interest in how meaning grows out of its various stylistic elements. You will identify tensions (in the form of paradox and irony) and be aware of how they are resolved. You will take note of how images, figurative language, and symbols come together to make a unified whole (see chapter 3). During the second reading, you can set aside your willingness to accept that there is an identifiable, stable meaning produced by the diction, imagery, symbols, and the rest and begin to probe unresolved, unexplained, or unmentioned matters. In your reading log you should record the undeveloped concerns that would, if they were explored, interrupt the assumed unity and meaning of the text.

The prewriting stage is also a good time to play with the binary oppositions that you find, first identifying those that initially seem most significant, then inferring the ideology that they present. The next step, as noted above in “Making a Deconstructive Analysis,” is to reverse them, look for contradictions in them, and determine how they supplement each other. It is likely that this process will help you to find, in the terms of J. Hillis Miller, “the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building.”

Another prewriting activity involves examining the figurative language of the text. By making a list of metaphors, for example, you have information that may reveal slippages of the language. Because figures of speech do not mean what they say, there is room for them to misstate what the author intended for them to say. You may find it helpful to put them on paper and, in writing, to play with their possibilities.

Much of the prewriting suggested here involves listing and note making. These strategies will aid analysis, but they will be helpful in the drafting stage only insofar as they provide ideas and information. Consequently, the more material you can generate at this point, the better off you will be when you begin to write.

DRAFTING AND REVISION

The Introduction

Given that deconstructive readings seek to displace previous ones, and sometimes to decenter standard, generally accepted interpretations, one way to open the discussion is to reiterate the conventional reading of a text. In other words, the introduction may simply be a restatement of the usual perception of what a work means or of how it operates, because by explaining how a story is usually read or how a character is normally perceived to be, you have a basis for deconstructing those views. Once you have established what is usually deemed to be so, you are set to state why it is not the only possible reading. Your argument for multiple readings will be the central focus of the body of the discussion that follows, but it is helpful to introduce that idea early on.

The Body

Your purpose in the body of your deconstructive analysis will be to demonstrate the limited perspective of the conventional reading. You may want to show how the ideology that the text tries to support is not supportable, an approach that is popular with Marxist and feminist deconstructive critics. In this case, as you study a particular text,
you will also be deconstructing the larger contexts in which it exists. You will be suggesting, or overtly stating, that the order supported by it is also open to question, perhaps itself fraught with inconsistencies and illusory stability.

On the other hand, you may be more interested in presenting a series of possible readings, one decentering the other in an ongoing process. This approach will take the discussion a step further by showing how meaning is not simply an either-or situation but an unending series of possibilities, leaving meaning ultimately beyond deciding. In either case, you will want to demonstrate how and where the text falls apart because of its own inconsistencies, misstatements, or contradictions.

The thinking you did during the prewriting stage will be valuable here, but remember that all assertions will need to be supported with quotations and examples drawn from the text. The following questions can help you generate the basis of your discussion. If you developed your prewriting stage thoroughly, you will have already covered some of them.

- What is the primary binary opposition in the text?
- What associated binary oppositions do you find?
- Which terms in the oppositions are privileged?
- What elements in the work support the privileged terms?
- What statement of values or belief emerges from the privileged terms?
- What elements in the text contradict the hierarchies as presented?
- Where is the statement of values or belief contradicted by characters, events, or statements in the text?
- Are the privileged terms inconsistent? Do they present conflicting meanings?
- What associations do you have with the terms that complicate their opposition?
- That is, what associations keep you from accepting that the terms are all good or all bad?
- What new possibilities of understanding emerge when you reverse the binary oppositions?
- How does the reversal of oppositions tear down the intended statement of meaning?
- What contradictions of language, image, or event do you notice?
- Are there any significant omissions of information?
- Can you identify any irreconcilable views offered as coherent systems?
- What is left unnoticed or unexplained?
- How would a focus on different binary oppositions lead to a different interpretation?
- Where are the figures of speech so ambiguous that they suggest several (and perhaps contradictory) meanings?
- What usually overlooked minor figures or events can be examined as major ones?
- How does the focus of meaning shift when you make marginal figures central?
- What new vision of the situation presented by the text emerges for you?
- What new complications do you see that the conventional reading would have "smoothed over"?
- Why can you not make a definitive statement about the meaning of the text?

The Conclusion

If you have begun by rehearsing the conventional reading of the text under analysis, an effective way to end your essay is by making a comparison of that understanding and your deconstructive analysis, pointing out why the earlier one is not definitive. If you prefer, you may reiterate the several different ways in which the text can be read, thereby making the point that meaning is always provisional, always ready to give way to other meaning.

Glossary of Terms Useful in Understanding Deconstruction

**Binary oppositions** Dichotomies that are actually evaluative hierarchies. They underlie human acts and practices.

**Diachronic** A term used to describe an approach to the study of language that traces how and why words have evolved in meaning or sound over time.

**Differance** The term Derrida uses to indicate that meaning is based on differences, is always postponed, and is ultimately undecidable.

**Langue** The term Derrida uses to indicate that meaning is based on differences, is always postponed, and is ultimately undecidable.

**Logocentrism** The belief in an absolute or foundation that grounds the linguistic system and fixes the meaning of a spoken or written utterance.

**Metaphysics of presence** Beliefs including binary oppositions, logocentrism, and phonocentrism that have been the basis of Western philosophy since Plato.

**Modernism** A term used in a limited sense to designate the distinctive concepts and forms of literature and art since World War I (1914–1918) and used in a more general sense since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century to designate concepts and forms characterized by a belief in science and the use of reason to solve the problems of humankind.

**Parole** A specific use of langue.

**Phenomenology** The philosophical perspective that assumes that a thinking subject and the object of which it is aware are inseparable. The Genevan critics, who read a text as the consciousness of an author put into words, are often described as practicing phenomenological criticism.

**Phonocentrism** The belief that speech is privileged over writing.

**Poststructuralism** Theories (including deconstruction, new historicism, and neo-Freudian theory) that are based on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic concepts but at the same time undermine them.

**Sign** The combination of a signifier and a signified.

**Signified** The concept of meaning indicated by a signifier.

**Signifier** A conventional sound utterance or written mark.

**Semiotics** A science proposed by Saussure that would investigate meaning through signs observable in cultural phenomena.

**Structuralism** A science that seeks to understand how systems work. Those who practice it try to describe the underlying (and not necessarily visible) principles by which systems exist.
**Chapter 8: Deconstruction**

**Supplement** The unstable relationship between two binary oppositions that keeps them from being totally separate entities.

**Synchronic** A term used to describe an approach to the study of language that searches for the principles that govern its functions by examining a language at one particular point in time.

**Trace** The illusory effect of meaning that is left in a signifier by other signifiers, that is, what it is not.

**Transcendental signified** A fixed, ultimate center of meaning.

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**Recommended Web Sites**

- [http://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/Faculty/structuralism.html](http://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/Faculty/structuralism.html)
- [http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html)

**Suggested Reading**


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**Model Student Analysis**

**Who Wants a Doughnut without a Hole? Deconstructive Criticism and the Failure of Meaning in Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Shiloh”**

Matt Dube

Many American short stories in the realist mode pursue the same narrative goal. In these stories, the narrator sets out to discover how his life is being ruined and to understand why. Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Shiloh” (1982) is written in the realist mode and can be read as just this sort of domestic mystery. Leroy Moffitt has returned to living at home after years of driving a truck to discover his marriage is in trouble. He attempts to discover why his marriage is falling apart and then begin to repair it. Leroy discovers that his marital troubles began when his child, Randy, died from sudden infant death syndrome. This revelation, represented by the longest flashback in the story, falls somewhere beyond the halfway mark, where meaning in realistic stories is often disclosed. From there, Leroy and his wife, Norma Jean, go for a weekend to the Civil War battleground at Shiloh, and Leroy fights to save his marriage.

The deconstructive interpretive approach is informed by the same search for a central structuring incident, like the death of Randy in “Shiloh.” The deconstructive critic is interested in locating the center of the story to understand how the story structures its own meaning. Traditionally, the deconstructive critic then moves to a study of the margins of the story, to prove that there is not a single central site for meaning. However, there is a separate tradition in deconstructive criticism, one inaugurated by Jacques Derrida in his essay-lecture “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Natural Sciences” (1970). In the essay, Derrida proposes a model whereby he is able to neutralize the center itself. He notes that the incest taboo, represented by Claude Lévy-Strauss as the universal center of all societies, regardless of local differences, is itself a site for mutually destructive contradictions. By invalidating the meaning center of the cultural systems, Derrida opens the cultures, and the study of them by social scientists, to the possibility of locating contingent meaning anywhere at all. “Shiloh” is engaged in a similar deconstructive critique of how the realist mode of American fiction creates meaning.

The flashback to the death of Randy, Leroy and Norma Jean’s baby, is the single longest sustained flashback in the story, following as it does on the heels of Leroy’s encounter with Stevie, his pot dealer. The flashback itself fills a lengthy paragraph, or rather doesn’t fill it, for the memory of Randy is crowded out by the memory of the film that Norma Jean and Leroy were watching when Randy died, *Dr. Strangelove*. The flashback is motivated by and follows up a hint dropped earlier in the story, that Leroy and Norma Jean “had a child who died as an infant, years ago.” That same passage continues to say this made the couple “feel
awkward around one another;” and more ominous still, “Leroy has read that for most people losing a child destroys a marriage.” These concrete, factual comments have a certain authentic quality (despite, or perhaps because of, Leroy’s admission that he can’t place whether he read this somewhere or simply heard it on Donahue) that contrasts sharply with Leroy’s feeling that he and his wife “are waking up out of a dream together.” Mason suggests that it was the awkwardness over the death of their child that led Leroy to begin his life as a trucker. Now that an injury has forced him to abandon that career, he realizes that Randy’s death has changed his relationship with Norma Jean, breaking it into periods before and after the tragedy. Since Randy died and Leroy began driving a big rig, he and his wife had talked little, but now that he is at home full-time, they are talking again. The struggle of the story, and of Leroy in his marriage, is to recuperate from the event of Randy’s death, to exorcize Randy’s spirit from the relationship the child haunts.

As much as the introductory sections of the story work to re-create the chronology of Leroy and Norma Jean’s marriage and to posit Randy’s death as the incident that caused the rupture that must be repaired, the flashback itself works to undo this comfortable sense of narrative meaning. In fact, when Randy is reintroduced into the story, it is through a chain of association, with Stevie, Leroy’s dealer and the son of a prominent local doctor. Leroy says that Randy “would be about Stevie’s age now,” a statement that suggests an even closer similarity: that Randy would likely be just as delinquent, as ungrateful, and as brusque as Stevie, just as unlikely to help save Leroy’s failing marriage. When Randy actually dies, Leroy and Norma Jean are watching Dr. Strange love at the drive-in (one half of a double feature, of which they are unable to see the prophetically titled second half, Love, Come Back, which in part is the narrative of “Shiloh”). Dead, Randy moves quickly from being a baby to being “a large doll” offered as “a present” and then “a sack of flour.” Leroy himself can barely remember Randy, though it is easy for him to remember scenes from Dr. Strange love. Randy is pronounced the victim of sudden infant death syndrome, a diagnosis reworded at the end of the flashback paragraph to become “crib death.” This shift in diction mirrors a similar shift taking place with what has happened to Randy. First, a nurse says “It just happened sometimes,” but later Leroy learns that “crib death is caused by a virus.” Randy is completely written over, by his father’s memories of the movie president, played by Peter Sellers, in the War Room; by Stevie, who could have been his classmate or even Randy himself; and by the doctor’s shifting diagnosis. Finally, he is written over by the wording of the text itself. In both flashback and present day scenes, Randy is more often referred to as “the baby” than by his given name.

The story makes another move to displace Randy further from the central location he might hold in Leroy’s catalog of failure and loss, and this final erasure is effected by substitution. Randy comes to be replaced by Shiloh, the Civil War battleground. Clearly, Mason means to riff on another way of reading “civil war,” standing in for the conflict between Leroy and Norma Jean. But in the story, Shiloh itself takes on a significant and different meaning. Leroy’s promise to build Norma Jean a house is synchronically displaced by the promise Norma Jean’s mother, Mabel, made to return to Shiloh. The two frustrated desires merge in a shift that signals the beginning of the end of the story and identifies the trip as the solution to the larger problem of domestic grief. Mabel gives the trip further resonance by referring to it as a second honeymoon, recognizing in it an obvious attempt to fix a failed marriage. Norma Jean is shocked by her mother’s choice of words, but she shouldn’t be, because it comes from the same vocabulary her husband uses, that of daytime TV talk shows like Donahue.

Leroy and Norma Jean’s trip is not a successful one. As the story ends, Norma Jean has announced that she is leaving Leroy. He watches her walk away from him across the site of the battle where “General Grant ... shoved the Southerners back to Corinth, where Mabel and Jet Beasley were married years later;” Leroy’s story circles back geographically, but its narrative line is finally straightforward and unbroken. Mason writes, “Leroy knows he is leaving out a lot,” but in a story that is motivated by synchronic displacement, as this one is, attempts to reconnect the signer and signified necessarily foreground absence.

Bobbie Ann Mason is most often read, and rightly so, as part of an American realist movement that was the dominant mode for American short fiction in the 1980s. In this, she fits neatly beside writers like Raymond Carver and the literary “brat pack” of Jay McInerney, Brett Easton Ellis, and Tama Janowitz. However, the realist mode does not necessarily preclude a deconstructive reading of the story, as I think I have shown here. Realist fiction in fact closely tied to cultural anthropology: both try to re-create a recognizable culture through the deployment of artifacts and rituals. As Derrida showed in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Natural Sciences,” such a system is particularly open to deconstructive techniques. The way Mason deconstructs the extended flashback, which could previously be read as a likely source for meaning in the story, does not mean that her story lacks all meaning or any appeal to the reader. Rather, it changes the stakes of what that story signifies and how we might respond to it.

The successful deconstruction of the central site of meaning, which here is the death of Norma Jean and Leroy’s child, does not toss the story into the realm of unrecoverable metafiction, nor does it lessen the realism of the story. What it does, in fact, is to deepen the pathos of our response to Leroy’s situation. There is nothing to lead us to believe that “reality” as represented in fiction must have meaning; in fact, such meanings often make the stories differ from the reader’s own life experiences. In “Shiloh,” Mason has used a deconstructive critique to neutralize the form of the realist story that imposes the kind of
narrative meaning we rarely find in our lives. In the place of any central meaning, Mason
instead offers the reader many possible alternate sites of meaning, all contingent on the pop
culture in which her characters live. We can choose the contingent meaning of Dr. Strange-
love or Wonder Woman, of Civil War history or Donahue. Mason has set the realist short
story free from its need to structure all the events of its narrative into a univalent scheme
for meaning. For the deconstructive critic, this is a liberation to be celebrated. For Leroy
Moffitt, the loss of central meaning doesn’t change the fact that his wife has walked away; it
simply means that he will never know the reason why.

CULTURAL STUDIES: NEW HISTORICISM

The essential matter of history is not what happened but
what people thought or said about it.
FREDERIC W. MAITLAND, English writer on law

As we noted with feminist and other critical approaches, the more recent the appear-
ance of a particular perspective, the more difficult it is to define. The field of cultural
studies is a prime example of the problem. Emerging in the 1960s, it has yet to settle
into an accepted and agreed-upon set of principles and practices. In it you will recog-
nize many theories that you have already met, ideas drawn from Marxism, feminism,
popular culture, racial and ethnic studies, and more. It is not a single, standardized
approach to literature (or anything else) but a field that binds its adherents together
through some common interests and purposes, although they are addressed in widely
divergent ways.

At present, three types of cultural studies that are getting particular notice are
new historicism, postcolonialism, and American multiculturalism. Although each
has its own distinct focus, they are all concerned with social and cultural forces that
create a community or that threaten it. Those who look at texts from these points of
view are eager to make more voices recognized by a broader circle of readers. In the
long run, their approaches to reading can change the way readers conceive of a cul-
ture. Because cultural studies is still finding its way, this discussion will identify only
a few commonalities that are shared by its different subgroups.

AN OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL STUDIES

Part of the difficulty in defining cultural studies, or even culture for that matter, is
that the terms are so inclusive. If culture refers to the sum of the beliefs, institutions,
arts, and behaviors of a particular people or time, cultural studies can be said to ad-
dress an almost unthinkably broad body of knowledge: language, customs, legal sys-
tem, literature, and more. Sometimes such a study is even interested in the culture of
those who have responded to it. As it usually proceeds, however, a cultural study will