

ACTIVITY 13

Deconstruction

Deconstruction is, by far, the most difficult critical lens for people to understand. It is an intellectually sophisticated theory that confuses many very smart people, but we think so much of you, that we know you can understand it. It is a post-modern theory, and like most postmodernism, it questions many of the basic assumptions that have guided us in the past. In the traditional study of literature, those basic assumptions include:

- Language is stable and has meaning we can all agree on.
- The author is in control of the text s/he writes.
- Works of literature have an internal consistency.
- Works of literature have an external relevance.
- You can take the author's or poet's word for what s/he writes.
- There is a set of interpretive tools that you can reliably use to interpret a literary text.

Deconstruction calls all of these assumptions into question. It asks you to read resistantly, to not take a work of literature at its face value, and to question the assumptions, both literary and philosophical, that the work or the author asks you to make. It is this kind of resistance that you folks are so good at. And it is that resistance, that ability to look beyond what seems to be intended, that will be a useful skill in the "real world." It helps us to become careful and skeptical consumers of culture, not passive recipients of "great works."

Deconstructionist critics ask us to probe beyond the surface or recognizable constructs of a finished story or text. By "construct," we mean something that has been constructed by mental synthesis. That is, constructs are created when we combine things we know through our senses or from our experiences. They do not exist naturally; they are products of our intervention into the order of the universe. When we re-examine and challenge the constructs employed by the literary writer, we "deconstruct." The term does NOT simply mean to take it apart. It means we need to look thoughtfully beyond the surface of the text—"to peel away like an onion the layers of constructed meanings." It doesn't mean the same thing as analyzing. In the traditional sense, when we *analyze* a piece, we put it back the way it was and appreciate it more. When we *deconstruct* a piece of literature, we realize that there is something wrong or incomplete or dishonest or unintended with how it was put together in the first place.

Here is one good explanation of deconstruction:

"Having been written by a human being with unresolved conflicts and contradictory emotions, a story may disguise rather than reveal the underlying anxieties or perplexities of the author. Below the surface, unresolved tensions or contradictions may account for the true dynamics of the story. The story may have one message for the ordinary unsophisticated reader and another for the reader who responds to its subtext, its subsurface ironies. Readers who deconstruct a text will be 'resistant' readers. They will not be taken in by what a story says on the surface but will try to penetrate the disguises of the text. . . . They may engage in radical rereading of familiar classics" (Guth & Rico, 1996, p. 366).

Here is another useful definition:

"Deconstruction is a strategy for revealing the underlayers of meaning in a text that were suppressed or assumed in order for it to take its actual form. . . . Texts are never simply unitary but include resources that run counter to their assertions and/or their authors' intentions" (Appignanesi & Garratt, 1999, p. 80).

We're going to play with deconstruction today in three steps: first with some common metaphors, then with a traditional poem, and then with some texts you've read for this class.

1. Unpacking Metaphors

Let's take some metaphors and see if there is anything false or unintended about their meaning. Under each, please write the obvious surface meaning, and an unintended meaning that may lie beneath the surface.

Love is a rose.

intended

unintended

You are the sunshine of my life.

intended

unintended

The test was a bear.

intended

unintended

2. Deconstructing a Text

Let's read the following poem, one that's often subject to traditional analysis:

Death Be Not Proud

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,
For those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

—John Donne

What is the poem supposed to say? How would you approach it for, say, the AP exam? What traditional tools of analysis might you employ to unpack the meaning of the text?

Where does the poem break down? How might it work against the author's intentions? Write down some specific places where the text falls apart.

3. Reconsidering a Reading

Now, think of a poem, short story, or novel you've read that cannot be taken at face value, that may reveal, because of internal inconsistencies or unintended conflict and the failure of language to really communicate what we mean (even in the hands of gifted writers), a mixed message or an unintended meaning. On

your own or with a partner, please complete the following sentences about the text. We will ask you to detach this page from the handout and turn it in.

Name(s):

Text:

When I *deconstruct* this text, here's what happens. I think the main idea the author/poet was trying to construct was:

But this construct really doesn't work. The idea falls apart. The language and construction of the text aren't able to convey what the author meant to convey. There are places in the text where it just doesn't work. For example:

So, in the end, even though the author meant the work to say

it really said

(Optional) I'd also like to say that: