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# Analysis Of Deconstruction Through Jacques Derrida And Roland Barthes

## Introduction

The advent of critical theory in the post war period, which comprised a series of waves that included various complex disciplines like linguistics, literary criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, structuralism, post structuralism, etc. proved hostile to the liberal humanist consensus which reigned the realm of criticism between the 1930s and 1950s. Among the overarching discourses, the most controversial were the two intellectual movements Structuralism and Post-structuralism that originated in France in the 1950s and the impact of which created a crisis in English Studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Language and philosophy were the two major concerns of these two approaches, rather than history or author.

## Structuralism

Structuralism appeared in academia for the first time in the nineteenth century and then reappeared in the second half of the twentieth century when it grew to become one of the most popular approaches in academic fields concerned with the analysis of language, culture, and society. The work of Ferdinand de Saussure concerning linguistics is generally considered to be a starting point of twentieth century structuralism. Structuralism in a broader sense, is a way of perceiving the world in terms of structures. First seen in the work of the anthropologist Claude-Levi- Strauss and the literary critic Roland Barthes, the essence of structuralism is the belief that “things cannot be understood in isolation, they have to be seen in the context of larger structures they are part of”. The structures in question here are those imposed by our way of perceiving the world and organizing experience, rather than objective entities already existing in the external world. It follows from this that meaning or significance isn't a kind of core or essence inside things: rather, meaning is always outside. Meaning is always an attribute of things by the human mind, not contained within them. In the Structuralist approach to literature there is a constant movement away from the interpretation of the individual literary work and a parallel drive towards understanding the larger, abstract structures which contain them.

## Post-Structuralism

Post-structuralism, which is related very closely to postmodernism, emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, predominantly in France. It emerged as a response to structuralism. Post-

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structuralism connotes going beyond the structuralism of theories that imply a rigid inner logic to relationships that describe any aspect of social reality and studied the underlying structures inherent in cultural products, and utilized analytical concepts from linguistics, psychology, anthropology and other fields to understand. The theoretical movement was predominantly concerned with the breakdown of systems, frameworks, and definitions. Post structuralism holds that to understand an object, it is necessary to study both the object itself and the systems of knowledge which were coordinated to produce the object. The two figures most closely associated with this emergence are Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Other important thinkers associated with this theory are Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler.

## Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida was the founder of “deconstruction,” i.e., a way of criticizing not only both literary and philosophical texts but also political institutions. In 1967 Derrida had his “annus mirabilis,” as he published three books at once: *Writing and Difference*, *Voice and Phenomenon*, and *Of Grammatology*. In all three, Derrida uses the word “deconstruction” in passing to describe his project. The word caught on immediately and came to define Derrida’s thought. It comes to be associated with a form of writing and thinking that is illogical and imprecise. His style is frequently more literary than philosophical and therefore more evocative than argumentative.

### “Structure sign and play in the Discourse of Human Sciences”

“Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” or *La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines* was a lecture presented at Johns Hopkins University on 21 October 1966 by philosopher Jacques Derrida. Although presented at a conference intended to popularize structuralism, the lecture is widely cited as the starting point for post-structuralism in the United States. It inaugurates what is called post-structuralism even though it is not an outright rejection of structuralism. This essay goes beyond what is structuralism. Along with Derrida's longer text *Of Grammatology*, it is also programmatic for the process of deconstruction. This essay was first published in English in 1970 and showcases the extent of limits of structuralism, which provides the structures but fails to examine the concept of structure itself.

### The Event, Center and Free Play

'Structure, sign, and play' discusses how philosophy and social science understand 'structures' abstractly. In this essay Derrida deals with structuralism, which is a type of analysis that

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understands individual elements of language and culture as embedded in larger structures.

Derrida sees in modern times a particular intellectual 'event' which constitutes a radical break from past ways of thought, loosely associating this break with the philosophy of three of his greatest influencers Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Sigmund Freud. Derrida depicts Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger as ultimately trapped within a destructive spiral of denunciation. Nietzsche questioned the power of representation and concepts to really convey truth; Freud challenged the idea that mind was limited to consciousness; and Heidegger criticized the idea of 'being as presence'. Derrida argues that these theoretical moves share a common form.

The event concerns the 'decentring' of our intellectual universe. Prior to this event the existence of a norm or centre in all things was taken for granted: thus 'man', was the measure of all other things in the universe. White Western norms of dress, behaviour, architecture, intellectual outlook, and so on, provided a firm centre against which deviations, aberrations, variations could be detected and identified as 'Other' and marginal.

In the twentieth century, however, these centres were destroyed or eroded; sometimes this was caused by historical events - such as the way the First World War destroyed the illusion of steady material progress, or the way the Holocaust destroyed the notion of Europe as the source and centre of human civilisation; sometimes it happened because of scientific discoveries - such as the way the notion of relativity destroyed the ideas of time and space as fixed and central absolutes; and sometimes, finally, it was caused by intellectual or artistic revolutions - such as the way modernism in the arts in the first thirty years of the century rejected such central absolutes as harmony in music, chronological sequence in narrative, and the representation of the visual world in art. In the resulting universe there are no absolutes or fixed points, so that the universe we live in is 'decentred' or inherently relativistic. Instead of movement or deviation from a known centre, all we have is 'free play'.

## Deconstruction

"Deconstruction" is the most famous of Derrida's terms. He seems to have appropriated the term from Heidegger's use of "Destruktion" in *Being and Time*. Derrida has provided many definitions of deconstruction. One of it defines it to be a criticism of Platonism, which is defined by the belief that existence is structured in terms of oppositions (separate substances or forms) and that the oppositions are hierarchical, with one side of the opposition being more valuable than the other. The first phase of deconstruction attacks this belief by reversing the Platonistic hierarchies: the hierarchies between the invisible or intelligible and the visible or sensible; between essence and appearance; between the soul and body; between living memory and rote memory; between mnēmōnē and hypomnēsis; between voice and writing; finally, between

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good and evil.

## Differance

Differance is a term crucial to the theory of deconstruction. It refers to the process of the fabrication of difference and deferral. Derrida questions what one means by understanding. For e.g. to find the meaning of a word, one would look up the dictionary, and while looking up the dictionary, the person sees another word or group of words. Thus the meaning of one word is another word or a group of words. Further, the meaning of this word/ group of words is defined by another word/ group of words. Hence, no final meaning is reached. Here Derrida challenges the Saussurean idea that meaning is in the mind. The meaning of signifier is not signified but another signifier which leads to another signifier. Meaning is a chain of signifiers that never stops. Hence, meaning is always postponed, the ultimate meaning is never reached. The meaning is deferred. Another sense is the word difference. According to Derrida, black is black because it is not white or orange. It is understood when it is contrasted with something that is not black. Thus the term “differance” implies a force that makes differentiation possible. Throughout the western philosophy it is assumed that the meaning is grasped. That is what is called a transcendental signified which is outside or beyond language which can be grasped. The whole assumption of transcendental signified is what Derrida denotes as the symptom of metaphysics of presence.

## Roland Barthes

Roland Gerard Barthes was an influential French philosopher and literary critic, who explored social theory, anthropology and semiotics, the science of symbols, and studied their impact on society. His work left an impression on the intellectual movements of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. While Barthes found structuralism to be a useful tool and believed that discourse of literature could be formalized, he did not believe it could become a strict scientific endeavour. In the late 1960s, radical movements were taking place in literary criticism. The post-structuralist movement and the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida were testing the bounds of the structuralist theory that Barthes' work exemplified. It was then Barthes' wrote the crucial essay “The Death of the Author” in 1967 which became the 'hinge' round which Barthes turns from structuralism to post-structuralism.

### “Death of the Author”

Following Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, Roland Barthes announced the death of the author in his brief essay “The Death of the Author” which is a rhetorical way of asserting the independence of the literary text and its immunity to the possibility of being unified or limited by

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any notion of what the author might have intended, or 'crafted' into the work.

Barthes' essential argument is that the author has no sovereignty over his own words, images, sounds or any of his creations and it belongs to the reader who interprets them. According to Barthes, when a reader encounters a literary text, s/he need not ask themselves what the author intended in his words but what the words themselves actually say. Text employ symbols which are deciphered by readers, and since function of the text is to be read, the author and process of writing is irrelevant.

'The death of the author' means that meaning is not something retrieved or discovered or having been there all the while, but rather something spontaneously generated in the process of reading a text, which is an active rather than passive action. The essay is thus an attack on traditional literary criticism that focused too much on trying to retrace the author's intentions and original meaning in mind. The essay makes a declaration of radical textual independence: the work is not determined by intention, or context. Rather, the text is free by its very nature of all such restraints. Hence, as Barthes says in the essay, the corollary of the death of the author is the birth of the reader.

## Deconstruction of Texts

The aim of deconstruction is to show that a text is not a complete whole, but that it contains several incompatible and ambiguous meanings. A text therefore has more than one interpretation and hence no single, axiomatic truth. This concept of what is deconstruction leads to its characteristics that form its unique structural or "deconstructural" nature. A deconstructive reading involves critiquing and questioning about the hypocrisies of text showing that what the text claims to be saying and what it is really saying are quite different.

A deconstructionist is a reader, a decipherer, an examiner and a critic. As a reader, he/she sees in text certain relationship in the sequence, a language that the author has utilized without having unequivocally aware of it. As a decipherer or interpreter, the reader is to deconstruct, recreate, rebuild and reconstruct the content of the text. As an examiner, the reader re-reads the content to examine every entry seriously and completes a regulated examination to recognize the inside inconsistency, discontinuities and irregularities. As a critic, the reader re-reads the text against itself to draw out the unconscious of the text.

An example can be taken from the famous novel Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte. The language of the novel can be deemed unstable once the meanings are deconstructed. For instance, let's take the example of Edward Rochester's discourse about finding a caretaker for Bertha Mason. Rochester says, "I had some trouble in finding an attendant for her, as it was necessary to select one on whose fidelity dependence could be placed."

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The traditional meaning that will be made out of these words will be that Rochester faced some difficulty in finding a caretaker for Bertha Mason –his wife, and it was necessary that the caretaker should be faithful, one who could be trusted upon.

But when we look keenly at the words, we get many other meanings which are contradictory, and are either scapegoated for the sake of dominant one or are ignored. Because these words could also mean that it was difficult for Rochester to find a corrupt attendant for his wife –Bertha, who could be paid to get involved in Rochester’s nefarious plan of locking Bertha in the attic room by proving her mad and violent and thus justifying her confinement. Rochester found Grace Poole fit for this task as all she wanted was money. So, Grace Poole joined Rochester in his wicked plans of proving Bertha Mason as violent and mad, and justified her confinement in the attic. We get Grace Poole’s character from Rochester’s narrative.

Similarly, an example for binary oppositions can be drawn from Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the feminist and anti-colonial response to Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre*. One of the binary opposition to be examined in the novella *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the narrative techniques used to advance the plot in contrast to its narrators.

The narrative techniques employed in the novella other than the narrators, include letters and gossip. Letters are the easiest means of long distance communication in that period of time. Antoinette’s husband is central to these letters, as he both writes letters of his own and receives letters that have been written to him. The first instant of Antoinette’s husband composing a letter is only done so in his mind. The letter was supposed to be addressed to his father. Shortly afterward however, the reader is made privy to its contents.

“...Dear Father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her... I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son. I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet...”.

The second letter, the formal one, that he actually writes, “Dear Father., we have arrived in Jamaica after an uncomfortable few days. This little estate in the Windward Islands is part of the family property and Antoinette is much attached to it... All is well and has gone according to your plans and wishes. I dealt of course with Richard Mason... He seemed to become attached to me and trusted me completely. This place is very beautiful but my illness has left me too exhausted to appreciate it fully. I will write again in a few days’ time.”

These contrasts in thoughts and reality depicted in the novella reveal to the reader the true feelings of Antoinette’s husband towards his father, feelings that would never be made known

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to the characters or even the reader if not having his hand forced.

In pitting the narrative techniques against the narrators, it is clear that privileges are awarded to the narrative techniques employed as they allow for the reader to see an alternative side or personality of the characters that the characters fail to reveal in the presence of the other characters in the novella.

## Conclusion

Deconstruction aims to disturb in order to discover. Deconstruction can serve to open up literary texts to a degree that other modes of criticism cannot. One of the main ideas behind deconstruction is that a text does not have an absolute, intrinsic meaning behind it. Rather, deconstructionists claim that every text has some measure of 'slippage' within it that can reveal the ways in which the texts violates its own rules and ideas, in turn revealing a range of possible contradictions. In this respect, as a mode of criticism, deconstruction can reveal a variety of subconscious and unconscious ideas behind a text, in turn suggesting a variety of different possible interpretations. Thus by deconstructing a text, the reader learns to read beyond a text's straightforward content and uncover new meanings and truths.

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