

# An Introduction to Literary Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts and the world around them. Some lenses will be more appropriate for particular works than others at times and it is your job to discern when to use a particular lens. The following theories are just that, *theories*. Approach them as you would a scientist, without any emotional attachment to any particular one. You do not have to believe or agree with a theory to understand and correctly apply it. Your goal is to understand the literary theories below.

## Deconstruction Criticism

### ✓ Deconstruction Criticism Explained

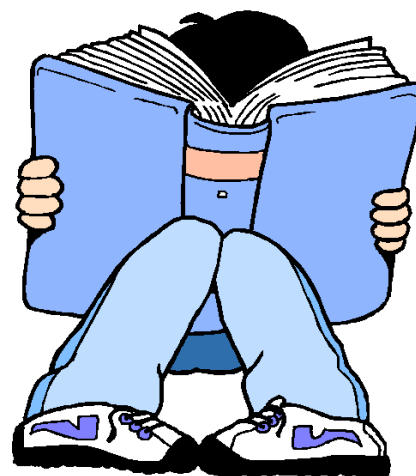
- Deconstruction is a way of uncovering the questions behind the answers of a text or tradition.
- Deconstructive reading can be applied to any text. It is a theory of reading, not a theory of literature.
- Meaning is made by opposing ideals, but one is unavoidably favored over the other
- This hierarchy is random, can be exposed and reversed.
- These oppositions or hierarchy can be called into questions because texts themselves have unavoidable contradictions, gaps, and spaces. All reading is misreading.

### ✓ Deconstruction Criticism Assumptions

- That literature is an institution, brought into being by legal, social and political processes
- That literature is that which at the same time speaks the heart of the individual and which shows how the individual is made possible only by otherness, exteriority, institution, law, structures and meanings outside oneself;
- That literature is both (simultaneously) a singular, unrepeatable event and a generalizable experience, and demonstrates the tension/ antithesis between these -- as something which is original is also of necessity not original, or it could not have been thought.

### ✓ Example of Deconstruction

- "In The Lord of the Flies William Golding warns that the lack of organized will bring about primitive behavior and can cause a breakdown of civilization. A deconstructionist may look at this and counter that it is assuming that an orderly civilization is what people strive to achieve. Perhaps in a society in which only the strong survive creates stronger, more independent people. Perhaps a society that nurtures and bands together only promotes unnecessary reliance on others rather than on one's self. Golding would have no message, if the reader wasn't first and foremost afraid of living



without governed protection, so therefore what is deemed evil plays off of an existing societal assumption."



✓ **Strategies for Deconstructive Criticism**

- There is no outside of the text; everything that we can *know* is text, that is, is constructed of signs in relationship. This claim does not mean that there is nothing outside of language: the claim refers to the realm of human knowledge, not to the realm of concrete existence (elusive as that might be). Deconstruction does *not* deny the existence of an independent, physical world.
- The asymmetrical opposition or value-laden hierarchy (e.g. host and parasite, logo centrism and nihilism) in which one term is promoted at the expense of the other. The second term can be shown to constitute or signal the condition for the first, and the hierarchy up-turned (this is not a simple reversal, as the reversal is then in the condition of reversibility, and so forth).
- Points of condensation, where a single term brings together different lines of argument or sets of values (and hostilities to hosts hosting the Host).
- The text will be examined for ways in which it suggests a difference from itself, interpretations which undermine the apparently primary interpretation.
- Figures of self-reference, when a text applies to something else a description, figure or image which can be read as a self-description, an image of its own operations. This opens up an examination of the stability and cogency of the text itself. An example of self-reference is in the vines and parasites in place of the erased (, i.e. under erasure) antique and learned imagery of Shelley's "Epipsychidion" in Miller's "The Critic as Host," the natural images themselves an image for and replacement for (every image of is also a replacement for) the tracing of writing, which is itself the writing that constitutes the poem; the images of the poem themselves attempt to naturalize what cannot be naturalized, writing itself, in a recuperation in which the act of naturalizing reveals itself as an ancient strategy of meaning, so the imagery is an image of itself.
- Conflicting readings of texts can be seen as reenactments of conflicts within a text, so that readings can be read as partializing moves simplifying the complex interplay of potential meaning within the text.
- Attention to the marginal, and that which supplements -- as with hierarchized oppositions, the margin in fact encompasses or enables the rest, so that a marginalized figure, idea, etc. can be re-read as the 'center', or controlling element; similarly the supplement re-centers and re-orientates that which it supplements, as the fact of supplementing reveals the inadequacy, the partiality/incompleteness of the supplemented item.