

# Derrida, Deconstruction and Literary Interpretation

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One of the major forces in contemporary literary criticism and theory is Jacques Derrida, whose meticulous critique on structuralism and the tradition of Western philosophy has inaugurated a wide range of influential critical activities generally known as deconstruction. This critical approach is multifaceted: it "has been variously presented as a philosophical position, a political and intellectual strategy, and a mode of reading" (Culler On Deconstruction, 85). As for literature, it has overwhelmingly shaped the course of literary studies and has diverted the development of the literary theory. The very language of literary criticism has also been largely affected by deconstructive concepts. Key terms and phrases of deconstruction such as "logocentrism," "differance," "supplement," "misinterpretation," and "reversal of hierarchies," have enriched the vocabulary of literary discussions.

According to Robert Con Davis and Roland Schleifer, deconstruction is a strategy of reading and deconstructive reading starts from "a philosophical hierarchy in which two opposed terms are presented as the 'superior' general case and the 'inferior' special case"(207). These opposed terms are too numerous to list but the most common dichotomies will definitely include good/evil, day/night, male/female, active/passive, and nature/culture. However, not all of them are "natural" oppositions; some might be considered "cultural," others "biological," and still others "thematic" (Green and Lebihan 69); namely, binary positions are not universal but culturally variable. Different cultures might assign various attributes to each term of the polarities and some dichotomies might belong to a certain culture only. For example, Yin and Yang are exclusively Eastern concepts, while Apollonian and Dionysian distinctions in literary representations originate from Greek mythology.

Derrida and his followers discover that these pairs, however "reasonable" they may appear, are not simply oppositions; they are hierarchies. In each pair, one term is

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viewed as being superior and also the general case while the other is regarded as inferior and therefore the specific case. For instance, the term "man" can be used to signify "human," but "woman" can only refer to the special case of a female human being. Moreover, the superior term in each hierarchy dominates the inferior one, serving as the yardstick against which the inferior term is defined and gains its identity. We know what "evil" is because it is not "good" in itself. When it is "dark," there is no "light." Therefore, these secondary terms are described by virtue of the absence of certain qualities that characterize the privileged terms. As feminists have pointed out, "woman" is often defined as an insufficient man lacking certain male features, especially the penis (Selden Practising Theory, 56). Consequently, the two ends of the polarity are by no means equal terms. Rather, one is privileged and the other suppressed. The former is given great priority over the latter. In other words, the one establishes its authority at the expense of the other.

Deconstructionists take great interest in the operation of binary oppositions and proceed to question the inherent logic on which these oppositions are based. By examining the interaction of the two opposites within each hierarchy, they can trace the distribution of power between these two extremes. Derrida claims that

In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. (Position 41)

To overturn the violent hierarchy, Derrida first exposes how the privileged term depends upon the suppressed one in the process of accumulating its own meaning. He detects that truth, social norms as well as standards gain their identity and authority by gestures of exclusion via differentiation. In philosophy, to define what is true, there should be a second beginning, paradoxically, prior to the first. It is an act of opposition and

differentiation that expels those which are conventionally considered inferior, secondary, derived, contaminated, and added on into an outside that then allows an inside to be established (Rivkin and Ryan 340). Only when what belongs to the outside is discriminated and excluded can those superior and original terms secure their position on the inside or at the center. If it is so, then the poststructuralists will proceed to ask the following questions:

Isn't what it begins by declaring secondary and additional already at work in its foundation, at its point of origin? Isn't difference more original than identity? And doesn't this mean that all the values established by that initial differentiation or setting in opposition are questionable? Is substitution really outside and below authenticity if authenticity comes into being through an act of substitution? (Rivkin and Ryan 340)

Consequently, there is no such thing as "a prior truth" that is entirely self-sufficient, without needing an opposed term from the outside to define against.

Since the privileged term cannot come into being without the presupposition of the presence of its antithesis in the hierarchy, and since difference should always exist prior to the establishment of identity and authority, we can conclude that the boundary that demarcates the inside from the outside is actually ready to collapse. "Perhaps what is outside is also somehow inside," as Terry Eagleton notes, "what is alien also intimate. . . the absolute frontier between the two realms . . . may always be transgressed, has always been transgressed already, and is much less absolute than it appears" (Literary Theory 133). Thus, by laying bare the logic of binarism and displacing the very basis of Western philosophy, Derrida succeeds in interrogating accepted values, destabilizing hierarchies, and undermining the absolute truth as well as power systems.

To illustrate this rather abstract and somewhat obscure reversal of hierarchies, Nietzsche's deconstructive argument of causality is often cited as a prototype. The principle of causality is fundamental to human reasoning. We always trace back to a

certain cause to account for an effect because we take it for granted that causes produce effects. Following the logic of the principle of causality, causes have priority over effects. Causes are prior and prerequisite to effects.

However, Nietzsche asserts that the concept of causal structure is in fact a product of chronological reversal. When feeling a pain, man is tempted to look for a cause. If a pin meets this need, it will be associated with this pain and regarded as the cause of it. Man then reverses the perceptual order (from a pain to a pin) to produce a causal sequence (from a pin to a pain). Consequently, the cause assumes the role of the origin, logically and temporally prior, while the effect is derived, secondary, dependent upon the cause. A deconstructive analysis of the principle of causality, however, will focus on the fact that it is the experience of pain that causes man to search for the pin as its cause. Were it not for the effect, there would be no cause. In this sense, the effect causes the production of a cause, rather than the other way round. In so doing, deconstruction undermines the hierarchy of cause/effect and implies that it is the effect rather than the cause that should be treated as the origin, since the former is what causes the cause to play the role of a cause. Jonathan Culler concludes, "If either cause or effect can occupy the position of origin, then origin is no longer originary; it loses its metaphysical privilege. A nonoriginary origin is a 'concept' that cannot be comprehended by the former system and thus disrupts it" (*On Deconstruction* 88). That is to say, by throwing the order and priority implied by the opposition into question, the boundary between the hierarchy will be blurred, and as long as the two poles of any binary pair can exchange properties, "the prioritizing between them is erased" (Beidler 228).

This Nietzschean example also functions as a compelling instance to elucidate Derrida's deconstructive reading procedures: preserving and undoing. To reverse the hierarchy of cause/effect, deconstruction preserves rather than discards or eradicates the principle of causality. Then it proceeds to appeal to the very same principle to manifest that the argument which privileges cause can be used to favor effect. As a consequence, the deconstructive reading undoes and embarrasses the rhetorical operation responsible for the hierarchization.

The deconstructive criticism, in a word, aims to show how a discourse or concept of a text "undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise" (Culler On Deconstruction, 86), that is, by locating the text's moment of transgression of its narrative logic that threatens the breakdown of the entire system.

However, deconstruction, insisting on an undoing/preserving, does not intend to dismantle a hierarchical opposition so as to set up the inferior term in the place of the superior. This would only serve to perpetuate hierarchization and remain within hierarchical and oppositional logic. Deconstruction, therefore, is "not simply to invert the hierarchy, which would only confirm the categories, but to transform the notion of hierarchy itself. . . . [O]verthrowing the hierarchy is only a 'first' (though of course necessary) step" (Atkins 84).

Derrida's deconstruction theory benefits significantly from his reconsideration of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics. To grasp the essence of deconstruction, the first and essential step, accordingly, is to gain a general picture of the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, on which structuralism bases its theoretical foundation. In his epoch-making Course in General Linguistics, Saussure first distinguished *la parole* (actual speech) from *la langue* (the structure or system that makes individual speech possible), insisting that the latter be the object of linguistic studies. Such a distinction between system and individual realization is crucial to the structuralist theory, for it puts a high premium on the set of rules or system that underlies language structure, and this emphasis on the system of any structure is suggestive of the study of any particular human practice in like manner.

Saussure's achievements and contributions lie in his unprecedented analysis of linguistic signs. In his view, a linguistic sign consists of two inseparable parts: the signifier (a sound image or a graphic mark) and the signified (a concept). However, there is no natural bond or inherent connection between the signifier and the signified, the relation between which is an arbitrary one. The fact that in different language systems

different sound images or marks are used to signify the same concept can clearly illustrate the arbitrary relations of linguistic signs.

The other aspect, which is no less prominent than the former, of Saussurean notions of signs is that signs are deferential. A sign generates its meaning only as a result of its difference from other signs. That is to say, there is no intrinsic property of any sign. Or, a sign should gain its distinctiveness from differentiation. Take the sign "cat" for example. "Cat" functions to point to a specific signified in language system by virtue of its phonic differences from "bat," "mat" and all the others. Language is in this sense "diacritical, or dependent on a structured economy of differences which allows a relatively small range of linguistic elements to signify a vast repertoire of negotiable meanings" (Norris 25). A sign does not possess meaning in itself. Rather, a sign operates as long as it preserves its difference and makes a distinction within the system.

Besides being arbitrary and deferential, the meaning of a sign is also relational. Both signifiers and signifieds are "purely relational entities, products of a system of differences" (Culler *The Pursuit of Signs*, 40). When a sign is said to correspond to a certain concept, this concept is not purely defined by its positive content but by its relation with the other concepts expressed in negative terms in the system. In language paired opposites of concepts that mutually define each other are abundant. Each end of the polarity designates the absence of the characteristics possessed by the other end.

Consequently, male can be efficiently and effectively defined as "not female" and female "not male." The same is so also true with the binary opposition of day and night. The concept of "day" by definition precludes "night," yet it has to call for the concept of night so as to assert its distinctiveness. Likewise, without the notion of "evil," "good" would merely be an absurd idea, since there were no contrasts or opposites against which the meaning of "good" is constructed. This common phenomenon in linguistic system that manifests the relational aspect of language leads Saussure to assert: "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" (120).<sup>1</sup> The precise meaning of a sign lies in its relations with all the other signs and in being what the others are not.

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<sup>1</sup> Saussure's italics.

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From the aforementioned characteristics of Saussurean linguistic theory, Saussure is considered the forerunner of modern structuralism. For Saussure, "language is a largely unconscious system of hierarchical elements and forces defined always by their differences from and relations to one another within a system" (Leitch 9). And it is the very implication of linguistic system that features structuralism. Robert Scholes even asserts that "both the virtues and the limitations of structuralism stem from its linguistic roots" (13).

Derrida, accepting Saussure's observation that signs are arbitrary, deferential and relational, goes a step further than any other structuralist does to investigate the diacritical nature of meaning and to consider Saussure's epoch-making declaration "in language there are only differences without positive terms" (Saussure 120). Since every sign generates its distinctive meaning by way of difference and every sign is what it is because it is not all the other signs within the system, it follows that meaning is not immediately present in a sign; on the contrary, meaning is always in some sense absent from the sign. Therefore, as Terry Eagleton puts it, "meaning is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers: . . . it is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together" (Literary Theory 128). Moreover, there are no stable distinctions between signifiers and signifieds. To explain the meaning (signified) of a signifier needs more signifiers, whose signifieds might require even more signifiers, as is evidenced by our experience in looking up the meaning of a word in a dictionary. Chances are that a word might have several definitions, all of which are explained by more new words whose meanings require further explanations from the dictionary. A dictionary is supposed to stabilize a language. However, we often witness the deferment and postponement of meaning in a dictionary (Lynn 78). In this circular process, signifiers are always pointing to signifieds and signifieds are necessarily and endlessly being transformed into other signifiers. There is no such thing as a final signified which is not a signifier in itself. Such being the case, meaning is an endless play of signification.

When Derrida expands Saussure's greatest insight of the negative characteristic of

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the sign to the extreme, he claims:

The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element"--phoneme or grapheme--being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. (Positions 26)

As a result, in the production of meaning, how signs operate through the traces within themselves becomes the target of his analysis. In this process of signification, Derrida discovers two fundamental traits: differing and deferring. The former refers to the differential nature of signs, while the latter alludes to the suspension or deferral of the meaning that is to come of a sign which is never fully present, or the systematic play of traces of differences because of the strange 'being' of the sign. As Gayatri C. Spivak explains in the translation of Derrida's Of Grammatology, strange is the nature of a sign that "half of it always 'not there' and the other half always 'not that.' The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent" (xvii). Differentiation of meanings inevitably brings forth deferment. To dramatize these two aspects of the operation of signs, Derrida coins the word *différance*, which embodies two French words meaning "'to differ" and "to defer." The notion of *différance* functions to "designate the impossible origin of difference in differing and of differing in difference" (Culler On Deconstruction, 162); differently put, it is a nonoriginary origin. Difference connects both with "the process of differing, . . . and to the process of deferring, as the definition of one signified necessarily and endlessly refers to other signifieds, and to the whole system of signifieds that constitutes language" (Green and Lebihan 216).

As what has been discussed suggests, with the avowal that "in language there are

only differences without positive terms," Saussure, though undoubtedly the progenitor of structuralism, is paradoxically on the verge of constructing poststructuralist theory. However, Saussure maintains his structuralist stance by announcing: "But the statement that every thing in language is negative is true only if the signified and the signifier are considered separately; when we consider the sign in its totality, we have something that is positive in its own class" (120). This is the crucial point where Saussure distinguishes himself from Derrida and the other poststructuralists.

According to Derrida, the preceding passage is indicative of Saussurean obsession with the "metaphysics of presence," which longs for "a truth behind every sign: a moment of original plenitude when form and meaning were simultaneously present to consciousness and not to be distinguished" (Culler *Structuralist Poetics*, 19). Derrida charges Saussure with committing "logocentrism," a "continual drive to privilege presence, to conceive of meaning as positively present within language, the unity of presence and meaning within the word" (Anderson 140). It is a common assumption in Western philosophy that yearns for the transcendental signifier, the signifier that gives meaning to all the others, and for the transcendental signified, the anchoring meaning toward which all signs point. Such a transcendental signified is "meaningful in itself, fully present to itself, requiring no origin and no end other than itself (Moi 106). In Western thought the concept origin--God, Reason, Truth, Law, the Word--is the absolute frame of reference that serves as the foundation or center of our whole system of thought and can be conceived as existing in itself.

This concept of center is "an epistemologically immovable mover, on which structures and hierarchies of belief or understanding have been thought to be based or securely centered" (Davis and Schleifer 206). Logically speaking, it is the origin and anchor of all signs; it must "figure rather as the meaning of meanings, the lynchpin or fulcrum of a whole thought system, the sign around which all others revolve and which all others obediently reflect" (Eagleton *Literary Theory*, 131). But where should we locate this absolute truth or transcendental meaning? It cannot lie in the system, for any meaning within the system is subject to the free play of differences and signification.

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Nor can this center be situated beyond the system, because there is no concept that has self-evident essence in itself and can acquire any meaning without referring to other concepts. In Derrida's phrase, "The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center" ("Structure, Sign and Play" 1117). That is, such a transcendental signified is merely an illusion.

Never can we speak of truth, so to speak,

without signification, without those processes of substitution (of a signifier for a signified) and differentiation (of the signifier from the signified and from other signifiers) and repetition (of the original differentiation in an opposition that situates it as the subordinate and devalued term) and non-identity (of the original truth with itself because its "self" is entirely other than itself, being difference) that are "essential" to the making of meaning in language. (Rivkin and Ryan 341)

Western philosophy, as Derrida notes, has been a "metaphysics of presence." It could be shown that "all names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence." Hence, Derrida urges that it is high time that "there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" ("Structure, Sign and Play" 1118). Only when the transcendental signified or the absolute center is eradicated can the play of signification be expanded infinitely.

However, to lay bare the fallacious foundation on which philosophy relies does not necessarily suggest that man can do without such first principles. In fact, it is an irresistible tendency that we live with certain metaphysical commitments, upon which systems of thought are constructed. For this reason, Derrida's reconsideration of Saussurean linguistics and his observation of the assumptions of Western philosophy are

intended to bring these unexamined axioms into question. Only when these "self-evident" truths are interrogated and tested, can we fully recognize that norms and standards are not absolutes, and that the instituted authority and received wisdom prevail in human knowledge (Bonnycastle 117).

To indicate that any "self-sufficient" signifier can never be fully present and meaningful, Derrida writes the signifier with a cross on it, that is, puts the term *sous rature*, "under erasure." The former signifier "God" would run like this "Gød." Such a gesture pinpoints the fallacious essence of the transcendental signifier while at the same time acknowledges that its existence is a must and should hence remain legible. This idea of "under erasure" characterizes Derridean thought that espouses both undoing and preserving and so distinguishes it from Saussurean (Atkins 17). And this undoing/preserving attitude is most commonly perceived in Derrida's severe attack on binary thinking.

Apart from Derrida's detailed analysis of the deficiency of language system and Western philosophy that inaugurates deconstructive movement, Paul de Man, one of the major Yale critics and American exponents of deconstruction, contributes to the already multifarious strategies of deconstructive reading by interrogating the signification of language, adding the pair of "the certainties of grammar/ the uncertainties of rhetoric" (Davis and Schleifer 207) to the already abundant list of binary oppositions.

Also owing to his hypersensitivity to the instability of language, de Man argues that every text is capable of engendering "two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible" meanings. He initiates this statement by deliberating a common rhetorical question: "What is the difference?" In everyday use, the speaker who utters this sentence generally does not ask for difference but means instead that he does not care what the difference is. Nevertheless, if we really want to ask for the difference, the very same sentence meets this need as well. From this example that contains two equally cogent yet contradictory interpretations de Man theorizes that the same grammatical structure "engenders two different meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning ask for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning" (9).

Such being the case, there might be a time when it is impossible to decipher by the grammatical structure of this sentence which meaning is intended by the speaker. Undecidability or indeterminacy characterizes the linguistic system.

To further evidence the equivocal relation between grammar and rhetoric, de Man proceeds to examine the closing line of Yeat's poem "Among School Children": "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" He observes that the concluding lines of this poem are conventionally accepted as a statement that emphasizes "the potential unity between form and experience, between creator and creation" (11). Traditional reading assumes a unity of the work; therefore, the last line is interpreted as a rhetorical question that asserts the impossibility of telling the dancer from the dance so as to achieve consistent reading that extends from the first line to the last. In a strategic turn, however, de Man, by way of a close reading, claims that the last line might also be read literally rather than figuratively. Moreover, the literal reading can be a more complicated, and thus preferable, approach that undermines the entire interpretative scheme set up by the rhetorical reading. Once we recognize the fact that the dancer and the dance are not the same, de Man suggests, it might be useful, and even imperative to differentiate between the two. In so doing, the literal reading leads to greater complication of theme and statement, which is originally suppressed by the traditional notion of literary unity and form.

From the two examples discussed above, de Man draws the conclusion that celebrates the undecidability of meanings within a text that is analogous to the freeplay of language:

Two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one line, whose grammatical structure is devoid of ambiguity, but whose rhetorical mode turns the mood as well as the mode of the entire poem upside down . . . The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it. Nor can we in any way make a

valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other; none can exist in the other's absence. (12)

In sum, by rigorously and tenaciously concentrating on one single crucial passage or even a sentence of a text to the point of subverting the entire system constructed by the text, de Man maintains that the language system is always on the verge of collapse, for the innermost logic of language is itself contradictory and ambiguous. Just like conventional concept of language, meaning in literature is falsely accepted as something fixed and self-determined. Hence, de Man discards the idea that texts must be read to conform to the presupposed meanings. His skeptical attitude bestows little authority on meaning, questioning the unexamined orthodoxy that is conventionally imposed upon literary works, whereas his rhetorical reading grants great authority to texts, treating literary texts themselves as the origin of literary study and criticism.

The above-mentioned concepts of deconstruction expounded by Derrida and de Man benefit literary studies in that the deconstructionists, by interrogating the uncertainty and indeterminacy of language system, welcome different readings of literary works. Deconstructionists anticipate and celebrate the text's self-deconstruction, a final truth or transcendental meaning denied. Laying bare the narrative logic of a particular text and its implied presuppositions, practitioners of deconstruction endeavor to expose the fact that the text's narrative logic contradicts what it intends to assert. They show us that "a literary text is not necessary saying what it intends to say or even what it appears to say" and that "writing can never be governed by the intention and avowed aims of its authors" (Jefferson and Robey 116). By discerning the falsity of binary oppositions and a chink in the discourse, they effectively demonstrate the possible reversal of the hierarchy (Selden *Practising Theory*, 89). Thus they throw those unexamined axioms and truths into question, "unmask their pretences, destabilize the hierarchies" (Bonnycastle 125) and make possible the text's liberation from oppressive authorities or the author's control over textual meanings. Texts in their interpretations can be used to support both readings of seemingly irreconcilable positions.

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