Literary Criticism – Topic 4 – Deconstruction: *There is no Art…*

Begin this group work by reading aloud and discussing the following introduction.

Deconstruction is the most abstract and difficult of all the schools of literary criticism that we have looked at so far this week. Its main focus is on the relationship between the signifier (words) and the signified (meaning). In other words, if you are walking down the street and someone asks you the way to Downtown, without further inquiry, how do you know if you have encountered a lost tourist or if you are being interrogated? The meaning of the words "Do you know the way downtown" fall apart upon close examination.

I encountered another good example on TV a couple of years ago. On the show *Everybody Loves Raymond*, the title character's parents were having an argument about how and when to split their english muffins. A notice on the muffins' package said, "Fork-Split Muffins." Raymond's mother said this meant the muffins were split by forks at the factory and they could now be easily pried apart by hand; on the other hand, Raymond's father said that *fork split* muffins meant that the muffins were designed to be split by a fork once taken out at home. From just the text on the muffin wrapper either interpretation is valid, and the meaning of "fork-split muffins" falls apart. In other words, the text on the muffin wrapper deconstructs. Ah, the *aporia*!

Texts, such as plays by Shakespeare, also have similar problems in interpretation when looked at under the magnifying glass. Think back to Duncan's (from *Macbeth*) lines about there being "no art" to discern what a man is thinking – did he mean it is easy or impossible: it (the text) deconstructs (to be reconstructed by the actor through the use of subtext).

One more (hopefully clarifying example): In her song "Someone Like You" by Adele – she writes that "Nevermind, I'll find someone like you…" Does she mean – "Don't worry, I'll find someone like you are (were) or does she mean "nevermind the impossible idea of ever finding someone like you?" Before you begin the group work proper, make sure that everyone in your group has at least a nominal "handle" on what Deconstructionism means. I'm not sure I completely understand it – so don't worry too much. In a related note (pun definitely intended): One music critic wrote that Adele, while writing that song, purposefully included in the music a appoggiatura (a note that is dissonant and resolves into a main note) on the word "You." And, that's why we get (according to the critic) so choked up when we hear the song. However, when asked Adele said that she never thought about it and if it's there – it wasn't on purpose (ah – Author Intentionality)…

Group Work (to be answered in each person's journal – but discussed as a group)

1. How do the other four schools (New Historicism, only briefly) of literary criticism that we've looked at compare and contrast with that of Deconstructionism? Be very specific – this will take some time. Get out all your older handouts, your Deconstructionism handouts and look for specific points of comparison or departure (you may want to split your group into 2 – each subgroup taking two schools of criticism). Find one quote from each (school of literary criticism) in formulating your answer.

2. Look at your handout on Deconstruction once more. Does this theory imply that textual interpretation is open to anyone's opinion? Find a quote that refutes this idea (hint: rather than just off the cuff opinion what does this criticism require?) Do any of the theories we have looked at imply just mere opinion? Some students have commented that this is "just one person's opinion," but is it? What is the difference between opinion and analysis? What is needed in analysis, but not in opinion?

3. Examine the following extended quote from M.H. Abrams (quoting J. Hills Miller) on Deconstruction and have each member of your group comment on its meaning and its implication for all of the analysis, discussions, readings, teaching and learning that we do in this class.

> 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 a logical, 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, annihilate 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.

4a. Can you find any examples in *Twelfth Night's* plot[1] that *deconstruct* (see your handout) upon closer examination? You can use the examples given in your reading (from "Calling Out the Law" as a starting point but you need original examples) Do not spend more than 5 minutes on this, but instead establish what you would need to look for and finish this as solo work #1.

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[1] Usually we talk about words, phrases ("there is no art in looking at a man's face"), and language as deconstructing – see question 7.

4b. Remember when Feste, while talking to Viola, said that he lived "by the church." She thought he meant was Godly – however… Explain this exchange as Deconstruction.

4c. Closely examine these lines of Feste from Twelfth Night: "That that is, is," so I, being Master Parson, am Master Parson; for what is "that" but "that" and "is" but "is"? How does Feste deconstruct the language? Be specific.

5. **BIG QUESTION**: How is the Dragon or Grendel (choose one and tell me why) a Deconstructionist? Do you remember the abyss that the dragon said men walk over on their spider web theories (if you are finishing this at home or are lucky to have a member with the book – get it out). How is that abyss like the textual *aporia* described by the Deconstructionists? Be very specific in your answer – use at least one quote from your readings.

6. If you look at page 102 of your handout (from "Calling Out the Law") by Goldberg – you should find the word or textual aporia upon which he sees traditional interpretations of *Twelfth Night* fall apart on? What is that word – what is its significance – how does a deeper understanding of that word and all of its (sometimes contradictory) meanings give a greater understanding of the play itself and the relationships that end it.

7. Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" may have a textual aporia which unravels the interpreted meaning of the text upon close examination. But in another – perhaps more clear sense – the plot (or "moral") of the story deconstructs as well. As a reader (ah – reader-centered criticism), we expect the oppressors (the British) to be in charge of the situation, to benefit from their subjugation of the Burmese people. How does this idea deconstruct. Be thoughtful and specific.



8. If the simplest definition of deconstructionism is "a piece of writing does not have just one meaning and that the meaning depends on the reader" – and we have extended this to ideas (see 7 above), consider Banksy's drawing shown on the right. Continuing with this concept of deconstructing ideas –consider the picture to the right: The picture is part of a bigger mural at a Syrian refugee camp in Calais, France. There has been a large public backlash (in this country and in Europe to the refugee crisis). What do you believe the picture of Steve Jobs holding his iconic Mac and a bundle of clothes depicts? Deconstructs? It may help to know that Jobs's biological father was himself a Syrian immigrant fleeing a tyrannical regime.

<u>Solo Work</u> (after reading Marxism summary sheet) – there aren't many of these and on the second day, if you finish, please move on to your next reading – or finish the Group Work from yesterday.

1a. Of all the literary schools of criticism that we have looked at – which one holds the most interest for you? Why? (try to be specific).

1b. Do you believe that any of these schools "empower" the average reader. When reading Literary Criticism it almost always requires a close reading (and three or four attempts to read the same paragraph). But when you understand the concept are there any of these 5 schools that you believe will add depth to a reading that you will do on your own – why or why not?

2. What makes a work of literature "great" or a masterpiece? Why do we still read Shakespeare, or read/listen to the speeches of Lincoln and Martin Luther King? Is it their meaning? Their *story*? Be honest – and thoughtful here (as always – don't tell me what you think that I want to hear – just show me that you *are thinking)*.

<u>Project (not a question) for Tomorrow</u> **(labeled as Topic 5 –** *Stephen Booth – Project for Today***)**

Topic 5 – the day after Marxism (get started now!) - Find your favorite passage from *Macbeth* or *Twelfth Night* (limit it to 15 lines or fewer). Divide a new journal page in 2 (fold it in half long-ways). Next, copy out that passage verbatim on the left-hand side. On the right hand side paraphrase the passage in your own words. Reexamine solo work question #1 from Day 2 (also reread the appropriate quote from McDonald's article). Now under the original and paraphrase write an analysis of what you see as being lost from the text in the transfer to the paraphrase. Be specific, citing at least 3 specific textual differences or losses.