

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture - 19
Poststructuralism: Jacques Derrida

Hello and welcome back to another lecture in this series on Literary Theory. Now as you will remember in our previous lecture we were discussing the writings of Roland Barthe and we were discussing Roland Barthe as a kind of figure who bridges structuralism with the post structuralist ideas of people like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

Who as I mentioned were among the brightest intellectuals associated with the anti authoritarian movements of the 1960. And in this lecture we will take up for discussion the theoretical concepts proposed by Derrida before moving on to Foucault in our next lecture. So, to begin with Derrida he was born in 1930 and he died in 2004 and he was born in Algeria.

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Jacques Derrida
(1930 - 2004)



Source: Wikipedia

But he did his higher studies in Paris, now it is important that you note the place of birth here which is Algeria and then again when we later discuss Louis Althusser for instance another major French intellectual. We will again see that Louis Althusser is born in Algeria and Algeria as you know was a French colony.

So, when we do a post colonial theory, then you will understand that there is a very interesting metropolis periphery dynamics going on here. Where some of the major French intellectuals coming not from France itself, but being born in Algeria the periphery of the French empire and then gradually moving to Paris and becoming major figures of the French intellectual world so that in itself is very interesting.

Anyway as I said Derrida was born in Algeria, but he came to Paris where he did his higher studies and as a student there he had as his peers figures like Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser also Derrida who is today primarily known for his concept of deconstruction. Became a global phenomenon in 1966 the year when he delivered a very important lecture in John Hopkins University in America.

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*“Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse
of Humanities” (1966)*

Of Grammatology (1967)

Titled structure sign and play in the discourse of humanities or human sciences, subsequently his seminal text titled of grammatology was published in the year 1967 and this cemented his reputation as one of the foremost thinkers of the 20th century.

Now, Derrida's career is marked by a mind boggling eclecticism really because, we find Derrida writing extensively on the works of people as different as Plato Husserl Heidegger Marx Saussure Austen Emmanuel Levinas Roland Barthe. Also I mentioned one text that Derrida wrote on Barthe and this list of people that Derrida engaged with this list of intellectuals can really go on and on it is a very long list. But apart from this Derrida's eclecticism and the variety in Derrida's work is also characterized by the

profusion of very innovative ideas that he came up with during his career. Which involved ideas like deconstruction for instance metaphysics of presence difference trace Pharmakon fallow go centrism and so on and so forth.

But though all of this is very exciting it is precisely this eclecticism and this wide variety which poses a problem when we try and learn Derrida within the short span of a single lecture and this problem is further compounded in a course on literary theory. Because most of Derridas ideas are rooted within the context of western philosophy and therefore it is difficult to seamlessly modify and translate these concepts and make them tools of literary theory.

In any case my effort to discuss Derrida would not be an attempt to understand his ideas in any exhaustive or very comprehensive manner in the context of western philosophy which is it is original context. Rather my effort would be to explore how Derridas concepts transformed the field of structuralist literary theory with which we are now familiar and which continued to exert influence till 1960, if not even later.

So, Derridas intervention completely changed this field of structuralist literary criticism and what we are going to do is we are going to study this change. So, to start with let us again look at the meaning making process of a text. Now as we just discussed the concept of an author standing outside the text and get guiding the meaning of the text, remains a widespread idea we discussed this when we were doing structuralism and this also appears to be the most common sensical way of approaching a text, especially by a non specialist who looks at it from outside the discipline of literary theory in literary studies.

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The concept of an author standing outside the text and yet guiding the meaning of the text is a widespread idea. Derrida describes such concept of an external source of meaning making as a “**transcendental signified**”.

Now, Derrida describes such a concept of an external source of meaning making as a transcendental signified. So, according to him such an idea of a transcendental signified or external authority establishing the meaning of the text be it an author or be it god himself, because god is also often attributed in various cases to be the real author of certain texts.

So, these transcendental signifieds create an illusion that language structure has a center which fixes the meaning of all its constituent parts. Now if we follow Saussure's argument as Derrida does till a certain point, we will know that meaning is generated from within the language structure or the langue that underlines the specific paroles of a text.

In other words meaning cannot be poured into a text or fixed in a text by an outside entity like an author for instance, this leads Derrida to conceive of language as a structure without any transcendent center and according to Derrida this idea of a central less structure sets in motion and indefinite play of meaning this is what Derrida describes through the term difference.

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Derrida describes the term '**différance**' by fusing together the sense of two French words, one meaning "to differ" and the other meaning "to defer".

Which he created by fusing together the sense of 2 French words, one meaning to differ and the other meaning to defer. Now since this might sound slightly complicated we will try and proceed very slowly here. So, to repeat myself according to Saussure a signifier gains its meaning through its relation of difference with other signifiers say there is a signifier a and within a language structure if we were to study it is meaning applying Saussure's theory.

We will then have to explore its oppositional relationship with another signifier, let us say that this is signifier b, But what is important to note here is the signifier b in itself is again not an entity with a fixed meaning, it too derives its meaning from the difference that it shares with let us say signifier c which in turn is related in opposition to say signifier d which again gives way to signifier e f g and so on ad infinitum.

Therefore the meaning of a signifier which is born out of difference is eternally deferred or eternally delayed within a language structure and all we do is we keep moving across a chain of signifiers or constituent elements of a language structure. So now, that this is clear and I hope that this should be clear by now because, this is actually a reiteration of what we have already done in our previous lectures on structuralism. So, if this is clear I do not think we will have any problem understanding Derrida's explanation of how difference works and I am quoting from Derrida here, the book that I am quoting from is titled *Positions*, this is what Derrida writes.

The play of differances supposes in effect synthesis 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 this course no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each element being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system, this interweaving this textile is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system is anywhere ever simply present or absent there are only everywhere differances and traces of traces.

So, this passage is basically again a reiteration of the structuralist notion, that the constituent part of a structure is not simply a self contained element within itself. But rather it derives its identity from other elements through a relationship of difference. But the notion of traces that Derrida introduces here takes the argument beyond the ambit of structuralism, so let us try and understand what the concept of traces mean here.

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Because each element gains its identity with reference to other elements within a structure, it carries a spectral or a ghost-like presence of all of those other elements which help define its identity. This ghost-like presence is what Derrida calls **traces**.

Now, in itself it is actually a very simple notion what Derrida is saying here is that because, each element gains its identity with reference to other elements within a structure. It carries a spectral or a ghost like presence of all of those other elements which help define its identity. This ghost like presence is what Derrida calls traces; so for instance since every signifier is basically constituted of the difference it shares with

other signifiers. It is informed through and through by traces of these other signifiers, this is why Derrida says in that quote there are only everywhere differences and traces of traces.

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In the structuralist scheme of things, meaning was not eternally deferred because signifiers were made sense of by arranging them in binary opposites like man/woman, light/dark, reason/madness and so on.

So, how does all of this make Derrida a post structuralist well in the structuralist scheme of things meaning was not eternally deferred because, signifiers were made sense of by arranging them in binary opposites like for instance man woman or a light dark or reason madness and so on. The first term if you notice carefully in each of these binaries that I just mentioned represent what Derrida calls presence and the second term in each of these binaries represent a corruption or distortion or lack of this presence.

So, if light represents the presence darkness simply represents it is lack, if reason represents a presence then madness represents it is corruption. If you think back at our discussion of Levi Strauss's analysis of the Oedipus myth then you will remember that there 2 we had encountered 2 sets of binaries, one dealing with sexual reproduction within the family and the other with autochthony and there in each of the binaries the first term represented the assertion of a presence. Whereas the second term represented it is denial or it is absence or lack.

Now, in this scheme of things the terms representing presence are treated as self contained element, which signifies an immutable identity. It is only the second term

which represents an identity made of negative traces of the first term and this prioritization of presence is what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence.

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“metaphysics of presence”

Now what Derrida argues here is that though Saussure came up with the radical idea, that meaning is not made of positive identities, but only of differences and negative relations he did not carry it through. Thus in the kind of structuralism that we find inaugurated by Saussure, we will find the notion of certain terms signifying different forms of presences are treated as immutable and self contained.

For Derrida on the other hand there is no such presence signified by any element within a structure or more specifically by a signifier within a language system, this is because within a structure which is guided strictly by the rule of difference there can be no positive presence. And as we have already mentioned that any presence from outside the structure cannot influence the meaning making process within it. Therefore, according to Derrida all signifiers are made of differences and on a deep inspection reveals that they are constituted not of any positive presence, but only of shadowy traces of other signifiers.

This notion of every signifier dissolving into traces of it is difference with other signifiers has had a profound impact on how Derrida approaches the meaning making process of a text. For Derrida the signifiers within a text does not yield any sharp or

specific meaning, but rather leads the reader to what he calls an Aporia. And Aporia is a Greek term which means impasse or a lack of resolution.

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Aporia is a Greek term which means impasse or a lack of resolution. So a Derridean reading of a text typically opens up an impasse in terms of meaning and within the context of literary criticism this particular way of approaching a text is what is identified as **deconstruction**.

So, a Derridean reading of a text typically opens up an impasse in terms of meaning and within the context of literary criticism this particular way of approaching a text is what is identified as deconstruction. But you may think at this point that literary criticism should be all about decoding meaning and therefore, to adopt a reading strategy which you know ends up in an impasse or meaninglessness makes absolutely no sense at all.

My answer to you at this point would be that the Aporia that deconstruction opens up is not exactly a dead zone of meaninglessness, on the contrary the impasse leads us to a deeper appreciation of the complex relationship that both underlines as well as undermines the meaning making process. Let me try and explain this to you with the help of an example which will also clarify the concept of deconstruction as a reading strategy.

Now, the example that I want to explore here is the man woman binary, now if we were to approach this binary from the structuralist perspective then we will get a binary that is sorted into an opposition between presence and absence. The man will represent the presence and the woman will represent the absence or the site of lack, more specifically the mark of the presence that a man would be seen as bearing is his protruding genital which is lacked by a woman.

Now here, it is important to note that within the patriarchal society a man's genital or phallus is of tremendous symbolic significance and therefore as we shall see when we do psychoanalytic criticism the structure of a patriarchal society can be described as a phallogocentric structure.

But, coming back to the man woman binary; the presence of the phallus makes man the immutable term in the equation in the binary and this term acts as the origin that generates the identity of the second term that is the woman. So, man defines woman through negation, woman is a distorted man from this perspective, woman is a distorted man or unknown man. In fact, this positing of man as the origin and then deriving woman from this concept of man as it is negation is perfectly illustrated in the biblical myth of Adam and Eve. Where Eve the first woman is both born out of the first man Adam and is at the same time radically different from him.

So, the term woman is not self contained and neither is it an immutable signifier, but rather on inspection it gives way to the trace of another signifier, which is the signifier man and it is the signifier man which constructs the signifier woman differentially which gives the signifier woman its meaning. However in the process of sexual procreation man is always invariably born of a woman and this allows us to think of the notion of origin and presence within the man woman equation differently, that is to say that one can argue that the presence is actually marked by the woman's womb which is also the source of origin.

In this argument the concept of the man therefore both originates from woman and represents the lack of presence that the woman signifies. In other words man signifies the non woman, now what deconstruction tells us to do is not to reject one interpretation of the man woman binary and pick the other, rather it tells us to place these 2 opposite ways in which one can generate meaning from the man woman equation one over the other and this leads us to the following points.

The first point is that since both the terms man and woman can be constructed as terms denoting presence, we need to be skeptical about the notion of this presence as immutable or as natural. Because there is nothing natural about the notion of presence here otherwise there could not have been 2 contradictory ways of thinking about the presence.

We therefore, need to move away from interpreting the binary in terms of presence versus absence, the second point that we have here is that in place of a presence versus absence binary. What we encounter in the man woman equation is what Derrida would call differance, which means each of the term is haunted by the spectral absence of the other term. So, whenever we try to scrutinize either the term man or the term woman they dissolve into traces of other terms which define them through differance.

Now, this play and this is the third point, this play of differance results in a deferral of meaning, as neither the term man nor the term woman possess a definitive identity. Rather we are regularly and incessantly pointed towards the absent other, this is how we arrived at the deconstructive impasse or Aporia. So, now that we have become familiar with how the process of deconstruction operates, let us read from Derrida a little and though he is usually held to be a difficult philosopher. I think we have now reached a stage where we will not have any problem in understanding at least the general drift of his argument.

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Derrida explains that "the general strategy of deconstruction" firstly involves a realization that when we are confronted with the structuralist binaries in the form of man/woman or light/dark or reason/madness, "we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-a-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other [...], or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment."

(Positions)

So, in the book positions from which I quoted earlier Derrida explains that the general strategy of deconstruction firstly involves a realization that when we are confronted with the structuralist binaries in the form of man woman or light dark or reason madness we are not dealing with peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*. But rather with a violent

hierarchy, one of the 2 terms governs the other or has the upper hand, to deconstruct the opposition first of all is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment.

So, for instance if we look at the example of the man woman binary that we have been discussing, we will have to start by realizing that within a specific socio political context within which this binary operates for instance the context of patriarchy. The 2 terms are not treated as equals, the binary involves what Derrida calls a violent hierarchy, where man has an upper hand over woman deconstruction would start with overturning this hierarchy, but how do we do that?

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Derrida writes that “we must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systemic and in and of itself divided, a double writing, that is, a writing that is in and of itself multiple”.

Derrida writes that and I quote we must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systemic and in and of itself divided a double writing that is a writing that is in and of itself multiple. So, if we go back to our own effort at deconstructing the man woman binary, we can identify this double gesture or double writing in the 2 narratives that we had set forth.

One centered on man as the origin bearing the mark of presence in the form of the phallus and the other centered on woman as the origin bearing the mark of presence in the form of the womb. These narratives have overlapped to form a sort of doubly inscribed text, where the latter women centric layer of writing threatens to overturn or cancel out the meaning of the other layer of writing which is centered on man. Now here Derrida raises an interesting point and I quote from Derrida where he makes this point.

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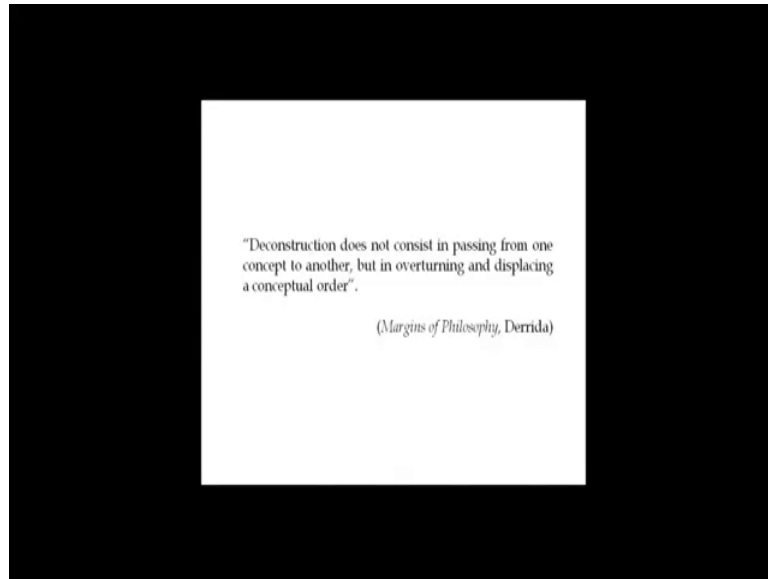
“To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. Therefore, one might proceed too quickly to a *neutralization that in practice* would leave the previous field untouched, leaving one no hold on the previous opposition, thereby preventing any means of *intervening* in the field effectively.”

To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition; therefore, one might proceed too quickly to a neutralization that in practice would leave the previous field untouched leaving one no hold on the previous opposition, thereby preventing any means of intervening in the field effectively.

When Derrida is saying this what he is saying is that it might be possible to just move away from the hierarchical boundary, by saying that both the terms are derivative of one another and are therefore of equal valence. This will neutralize the hierarchy without our needing to overturn the binary first, that is to say the neutralization of the hierarchical man woman binary may be achieved without creating a woman centric elaboration of the binary first.

But, according to Derrida to omit the phase of overturning the binary is to actually leave the hierarchical politics that informs that binary unrecognized, it is only by creating a reverse hierarchy that one can effectively intervene into the power equation underlining the structuring of say the man woman binary. But this reversing of the hierarchy as we will have to remember is only a phase in the strategy of deconstruction as Derrida declares in his book margins of philosophy and I quote.

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Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order overturning and displacing a conceptual order this is very important. This is to say that the strategy of deconstruction is not just the shifting away from a man centric binary to a woman centric binary, the task as mentioned earlier is to proceed through a double gesture and a double writing. Where the man centered understanding of the binary is juxtaposed or overlaid by the woman centered understanding of the binary.

This will result in not just an overturning of the specific binary, but indeed an overturning or displacement of the entire conceptual order which the binary upholds or within which the binary operates. So, for instance in case of our example which is the man woman binary, this will entail an overturning of the entire conceptual order of patriarchy.

Thus, when we apply that deconstructive strategy to the man woman binary we do not simply arrive at a meaning that is different from the one that is conventionally, rather we arrive at an Aporia which represents not exactly meaninglessness. But rather the inability of the conceptual structure to operate and produce a definitive version of meaning, but then the question is how is deconstruction relevant as a strategy of reading literature. So, to exclude the significance that deconstruction might have as a reading strategy let us

look at Shakespeare's Macbeth and we will look at it through this Derridean lens of deconstruction.

Now, as most of you will know the theme of gender identity is very strong in Macbeth and the twin protagonists of the play Macbeth and lady Macbeth operate within a conceptual order, where the understanding of the man woman binary is heavily centered on the term man. Thus right from the first act in the play we see Macbeth as well as Lady Macbeth trying to align, their identities with notions of manliness. Thus Lady Macbeth for instance urges her husband to kill the old king Duncan and ads and I quote from the plane when you durst do it then you are a man.

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“When you durst do it, then you were a man”

(Macbeth, Shakespeare)

Macbeth in his turn asserts his masculinity by accepting to wield the dagger that appears to him in a state of hallucination hovering in front like a phallic symbol. This prioritizing of manliness establishes as Derrida would say a violent hierarchy where the notion of womanhood exists as a suppressed other. And this violence of suppression is evident for instance in the speech by lady Macbeth, where she evokes the dark forces to undo her womanly identity and again I quote these are very famous words from the play uttered by lady Macbeth come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts unsex me here come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall.

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“Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
[...] Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall”

(Macbeth, Shakespeare)

A careful reading of the play however shows that one can read into it and understanding of the gender theme that radically reverses the hierarchy between the terms man and woman. So, for instance one recurring concern in the play is the idea of bearing child versus childlessness. The power that the patriarchal order of Macbeth exercises through phallic symbols of violence like daggers knives and swords is countered by the power of the womb to bear children. Thus Macbeth's masculine power is reduced to nothing in absence of children, as he feels his whole life transformed into what he calls a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

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“[A] tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing”

(Macbeth, Shakespeare)

Indeed Banquo in spite of meeting a gruesome death finally wins over Macbeth because his legacy is carried forward by his son, while Macbeth bears on his head the burden of a fruitless crown and again I quote from the play.

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“Upon my head they placed a fruitless
crown,
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal
hand,
No son of mine succeeding.”

(Macbeth, Shakespeare)

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown and put a barren scepter in my grip, thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand no son of mine succeeding. In this particular reading of the play the womb is seen to triumph over the phallus thereby reversing the hierarchy in the man woman binary. But as Derrida has pointed out this reversing of the hierarchy is only a phase, in the entire strategy of deconstruction this reversal does not end the deconstructive reading of Macbeth because to quote Derrida.

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“Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order”.

Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order. Indeed in the play it is the witches, who comprehensively dismantles the socio political milieu of the patriarchal order and these are precisely the characters who are presented as the incarnations of the double gesture or the double writing.

By which man woman binary are deconstructed and the man centric narrative is overwritten by the woman centric narrative and these incarnate forms of the deconstructive double gestures create an inability to interpret their gender identity from within the conventional conceptual order of patriarchy. And this is borne out for instance by Banquos confusion when he meets them and I quote from the play.

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“you should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so”

(Macbeth, Shakespeare)

You should be women and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so. And so here we encounter that final phase of deconstruction a fruitful Aporia that helps us to go beyond the conventionality of the meaning making process and see through their claims of eternity and universality. However, what we will have to understand here is that this Aporia is not a reduction of meaning into nonsense; the deconstructive Aporia is a highly potent political tool which is used to dislodge and overturn existing conceptual orders and their meaning making processes.

Thus for instance it can be used to dismantle conceptual regimes like patriarchy or racism, where the meaning making process proceeds by creating violent hierarchies of man over woman or of white over black. It is therefore, no wonder that post colonial critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would make use of Derrida to think through colonialism and to dismantle its myths of racial and gender hierarchies.

So, as you can see post structuralism is not a journey into nihilism both in Barthe and now also in Derrida you have witnessed the political potential of post structuralism, it is potential to intervene and to dismantle the legitimacy of violent and coercive concepts, coercive conceptual regimes. This political nature of post structuralism is however most evident in the writings of Michel Foucault and it is to these writings that we will turn in our next lecture.

Thank you.