Preparing to read and write using the lens of Deconstruction:
Deconstruction is an extension of and a response to New Criticism. Like New Criticism, its focus is on the close reading/explication and analysis of the text itself and its meaning, excluding external (extraneous) factors, such as the author’s intent, contextual information, or the reader’s response. Unlike New Criticism, however, it argues against the unity or certainty of meaning of a text, instead looking at how the text works against itself, calling its own meaning into question, offering instead multiple provisional meanings.

One way to get started is to do what Derrida called a “double reading,” to go through the text and do a traditional New Critical reading of the text, identifying one possible meaning the Deconstruction will subsequently call into question and the literary devices that are responsible for communicating that meaning. The same key terms/concepts used in New Criticism are also used in Deconstruction (and so are listed on the following pages as well along with some questions to consider when reading/writing about a text using a Deconstructionist lens). In addition, Deconstruction looks specifically for binary oppositions, closely related terms, like male/female, day/night, light/dark, good/evil, nature/civilization, etc., in which one term (the first one named) seems to be “privileged” over or more highly valued than the other. However, rather than merely trying to prove the text values or privileges the one, the deconstructionist critic seeks to show how this value is not sustained but shown and then reversed, calling the value or hierarchy and even the opposition into question, thereby arguing that the seemingly contradictory values/terms are instead interconnected or interdependent (in a “both . . . and” rather than an “either . . . or” relationship). Note: Contrasts are not the same as contradictions. A text (story or play) may present two or more contrasting views, but if they belong to different perspectives/characters, and the text seems to side with only one, it is not a contradiction but instead simply a contrast.

In addition, Deconstruction argues that language is inherently ambiguous and thus is responsible for calling the meaning of a text into question. For example, though most readers typically accept the phrase “Time flies like an arrow” (an extension of the cliché “time flies”) to mean time moves at a fast pace, a deconstructionist critic would point out that it, in fact, can be shown to have multiple meanings when “questioned” and examined closely. Some of them are (taken from the OWL Purdue website):
- Time (noun) flies (verb) like an arrow (adverb clause) = Time passes quickly.
- Time (verb) flies (object) like an arrow (adverb clause) = Get out your stopwatch and time the speed of flies as you would time an arrow’s flight.
- Time flies (noun) like (verb) an arrow (object) = Time flies are fond of arrows (or at least of one particular arrow).

In our close reading of texts, we will look for where these linguistic ambiguities appear naturally rather than trying to impose them. For example in the line “O, my love is like a red, red rose” from Robert Burns’ poem “A Red, Red Rose,” we might ask whether the word “love” refers to the speaker’s loved one or his own feeling of love or both. As we continue reading the line, we might notice the binary oppositions between the fragile/soft (feminine) rose and the implied resilient/sharp (masculine) thorn the rose brings to mind. In each opposition, which characteristic is he saying is true of his love? Which does the poem seem to value/privilege: fragility/softness/feminine love or resilience/sharpness/masculine love? Or are the opposing characteristics/values interconnected? Does love depend on both? Obviously, the poem continues beyond this first line as would our deconstruction of it, but this discovery gives us a pattern or motif to build on.
Final note:
Applying Deconstruction in a literary analysis essay may seem inherently contradictory given Deconstruction’s insistence on the lack of unity or certainty of meaning of a text and the literary analysis essay’s equally emphatic insistence on a coherent argument of its own as well as one identified in the text or texts it’s analyzing. The claim of a deconstructive essay will argue the (unified) significance or purpose of the binary opposition, ambiguity, inherent contradiction, or uncertainty of meaning it identifies in a text while the body of the essay will explore and analyze the particular oppositions or contradictions, etc., as well as prove their significance or purpose (your claim).

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of Deconstruction and how to apply it to your literary analysis:

Key Terms/Concepts:

Most terms are defined in the “Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms” at the end of Reading and Writing about Literature by Janet E. Gardner and/or in the body of the book itself (see the index at the end of the book). Those that *aren’t defined are defined below, and some that +are defined are given more explanation.

1. *Binary means having two alternatives. According to Deconstruction, language is based on oppositions; words only have meaning in opposition to other words. Thus “hot” only has meaning because we can contrast it with “cold”; “man” takes on meaning in opposition to “woman” or “boy” or “nature,” etc. Deconstruction further argues that one alternative is always suppressed, falsely simplifying reality.
2. +Binary oppositions are paired opposites in which the term that is named first is the dominant (valued/privileged) concept, making the dichotomy an evaluative hierarchy. However, this hierarchy is always unstable as the terms (and their relative value) can be inverted.
3. Diction: abstract and concrete language, denotation, connotation
   a. *Etymology: the history of a word. Detailed information on the history of words can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) which can be useful in determining a word’s specific meaning or meanings at the time it was used.
4. Allusion
5. Literal language
6. Figurative language
7. +Imagery/image conveys sensory experience in essence by creating that sensation or object in the reader’s imagination (often sight but also sound, smell, taste, touch, motion. Images can be literal or figurative. See below.)
8. *A literal image depicts what it names: a chair, grass, a weeping willow.
9. *A figurative image suggests the essence of a thing by comparing it to the sight, sound, etc., of something else. Figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes, are generally images though not always.
10. Figure of speech: metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, symbol, synesthesia, allegory, hyperbole, understatement, paradox, oxymoron.
11. *Mimesis means imitation (mimicry) or representation (see Imitation in the glossary), in this case, literature imitating or representing life. Texts reflect or represent—in their form, structure, imagery, etc.—the real, natural, and/or human experience they depict, enabling or compelling readers to share that experience. Often, the reader’s experience of the text or response to it is made to mimic the characters’.
12. Sound: alliteration, cacophony, euphony, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia
13. *Motifs are the repeated or recurrent patterns—words, phrases, images, objects, sounds, scenes, structures, concepts, themes, etc.,—that unify the text and work together to communicate its meaning, effect, and/or purpose.

14. *Ambiguity in literature is found in words, statements, or situations, etc., that have more than one possible meaning. These possibilities make the text more complex and interesting and more meaningful, and are analyzed to reveal their effect and purpose.

15. Irony: dramatic, situational, verbal

16. *Unity is the oneness or coherence of a text—short story, poem, novel, play—seen in the way its parts or elements work together to create a sense of it as an organic whole.

17. Point of View

18. Narrator

19. Character

20. Protagonist

21. Antagonist

22. Voice

23. Speaker

24. Tone

25. Structure/Form

26. *Pace/Pacing is the speed at which a text moves due to its form and content, often determined by the length, and its variety or monotony, of a line or sentence, stanza or paragraph, and section, chapter, or scene, and in prose the use of description or exposition versus dialogue, and in drama the length of characters’ lines in a scene, etc., including silences and actions, etc. Syntax (sentence structure) and sentence types as well as rhythm/sound and diction also have an impact on pacing.

27. *Plot: climax, denouement. Short stories according to Alice Adams, typically follow ABDCE structure: action, background, development (movement of the plot forward, physically or psychologically), climax (or turning points), ending. Not all stories follow this order though most have all of these elements. Similarly, while plot in drama traditionally includes prologue or exposition, rising action, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe or denouement, not all plays follow this order or include all steps discretely, and modern plays may conform more to the ABDCE structure, again with some steps rearranged or merged.

28. Conflict

29. Flashback

30. Foreshadowing

31. Juxtaposition

32. Description

33. Exposition

34. Dialogue

35. Setting
MAKING A DECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS

To understand the discussion that follows, you will need to read “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” a poem by Robert Frost, found on page 285.

Whereas a traditional critical reading attempts to establish a meaning for a text, a deconstructive reading involves asking questions in an effort to show that what the text claims to be saying is different from what the text is really saying (which, of course, is acknowledged to be provisional). It tries to undermine the work’s implied claim of having coherence, unity, and meaning and to show that it does not represent the truth of its subject. In fact, no final statement about its meaning can be made, for each reading is provisional, just one in a series of interpretations that decenter each other in ongoing play. In the absence of a transcendent signifier, a text cannot be said to be tied to some center that existed before and outside it, and meaning can have no place to conclude, nothing in which to be subsumed.

A number of people have tried to summarize the process of deconstructing a text. Derrida himself explained it by saying that “the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses.” As Sharon Crowley describes the process in Teacher’s Introduction to Deconstruction, it tries to “tease larger systemic motifs out of gaps, aberrations, or inconsistencies in a given text.” It tries to find blind spots that a writer has absorbed from cultural systems. She adds that “deconstruction amounts to reading texts in order to rewrite them,” just as Derrida tried “to reread Western history to give voice to that which has been systematically silenced.” (Paul de Man has perhaps had the
most to say about "blind spots." In Blindness and Insight, he goes so far as to assert that critics achieve insight through their "peculiar blindness." He finds that they say something besides what they mean.

Barbara Johnson's frequently quoted definition of deconstruction says that it occurs by "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself." Jonathan Culler says that "to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies." A more detailed comment comes from J. Hillis Miller:

Deconstruction as a mode of interpretation works by a careful and circumpect entering of each textual labyrinth. . . . The deconstructive critic seeks to find, by this process of retracing, the element in the system studied which is alogical, 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, annihilates 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.

Such definitions are helpful, but how does the deconstructive critic go about "unraveling" the text or finding a writer's blind spots or a text's "gaps, aberrations, or inconsistencies"? The process is actually somewhat similar to the one used in formalism. That is, the reader engages in a very close reading of the text, noting the presence and operation of all its elements. However, the ends of the two approaches are radically different. Whereas formalism seeks to demonstrate that a work has essential unity despite the paradoxes and irony that create its inner tension, that it expresses a realizable truth, deconstruction seeks to show that a text has no organic unity or basis for presenting meanings, only a series of conflicting significations.

One way to begin is to follow Derrida's own process, which he called "double reading." That is, you first go through a text in a traditional manner, pointing out where it seems to have determinate meanings. The first step in deconstructing Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," for example, might be to make a commentary on the narrator's desire for peace, the highly controlled form, or the cumulative effect of the images of night, winter, and sleep. On second reading, however, you would question what is accepted in the poem as natural or self-evident, looking to find places where the attitudes or assumptions identified on first reading are contradicted or undermined. When incompatible meanings are brought to light, the text deconstructs itself. These incompatible meanings undermine the grounds on which the text is based, and meaning becomes indeterminate. The text is not unitary and unified in the manner that logocentrism promises. Recognizing that a text has multiple interpretations, the reader expects to interpret it over and over again. No single reading is irrevocable; it can always be displaced by a subsequent one. Thus interpretation becomes a creative act as important as the text undergoing interpretation. The pleasure lies in the discovery of new ways of seeing the work. Of course, because the reader must express those discoveries in logocentric language, the interpretation will deconstruct itself as well.

How do you find alternative meanings, especially if you are accustomed to assuming that there is an inherent meaning to be found, that it will be recognizable to other readers, and that the picture it gives of the world will be consonant with the way the world really is? How do you find contradictory or incompatible meanings if you are used to finding the meaning of a text or passage?

You can begin by locating the binary oppositions in the text, identifying the member that is privileged and the one that is not. All key terms and characters are defined by their oppositions, and the deconstructive reader will show how the pairs are mutually dependent but also unstable. In "Stopping by Woods," for example, a number of hierarchical oppositions are quickly noted: silence/sound, nature/civilization, isolation/community, dark/light, stillness/activity, unconscious/conscious, and, by implication, death/life and dreams/reality. A careful look at them will give you a way of entering the poem deconstructively. For example, try to answer the following questions about the hierarchical oppositions, and then compare your answers with the commentary that follows each.

- What values and ideas do the hierarchies reflect? Your answer will define some of the preconceptions that influence the way the text is conventionally read.

If you accept the first of each paired term to be the privileged one, you will read the poem as a statement about the value of experiencing peace, oneness with nature, acceptance of self. There is beauty in the moment and a sense of connection with primal forces.

- What do you find when you reverse the binary oppositions? What fresh perspectives on the poem emerge? Because the hierarchy is arbitrary and illusory, it can be turned upside down to provide a new view of the values and beliefs that underpin it. The new, unconventional relationships may radically change your perception of the terms or of the text.

The interesting aspect of the oppositions in this poem is that the "privileged" terms throughout most of it are reversed at the end when the traveler chooses to continue his journey. For the first three stanzas, silence is favored over sound, nature over civilization, isolation over community, and so on. When, however, the persona rejects the loneliness of the dark, deep woods and chooses to honor promises that lie outside them, he acknowledges that he lives in a world that expects him to renounce self-indulgent dreams and carry out his obligations. He is part of a society that honors community, activity, consciousness, and reality.

Although in this case the poet himself has provided a reversal, the reader still must ask what has been changed by it. What else is affected? What would be different, for example, if the traveler opted for nature, darkness, and dreams? What if the forces that attracted him so powerful throughout most of the experience remained the privileged ones? What would be different if isolation were deemed to be more attractive than community? What if it were preferable to be alone, outside the company of friends and family? Then the woods would belong to nobody, or at least the narrator would not acknowledge their claim, and there would be no self-consciousness about being observed.
Conformity to social norms and pressures (signaled by the horse) would cease to exist. The world would be marked by an absence of stress and the presence of peace. The narrator would be liberated from drudgery, labor, the burdens of responsibility, which are implied by the penultimate line. Structure and segmentation would disappear, and in their place would be spontaneity and natural reactions. And perhaps most important, one would feel a sense of unity with nature. To be alone is for the moment appealing, and this overthrown hierarchy offers a new and provisional center of meaning.

Do you find any contradictions in the privileged members? Or are they incompatible?

The privileged terms silence, isolation, stillness, and unconscious initially seem to fit easily into a single scene, but on closer analysis, some inconsistencies emerge. There are contradictions in the poem that go unacknowledged. For example, the traveler enjoys the pleasures of isolation but ultimately opts for community. He savors the beauty of nature but chooses civilization. When he continues his journey, isolation and nature are decanted by community and civilization. In the end, contradictory hierarchies (isolation/community and community/isolation, nature/civilization and civilization/nature) are privileged by the protagonist even though they are incompatible. The opposed conditions cannot exist together, though that is never overtly acknowledged in the poem. Their incompatibility underscores the fragmented, conflicted nature of the traveler himself. It also asserts the lack of fixed, unchanging meaning in poems or in life itself.

What else do the terms make you think of? What other hierarchies do they lead to? Such associations will suggest alternative readings, new terms that can decenter the ones currently controlling the interpretation.

Earlier it was noted that stillness, silence, isolation, and the rest seem, by extension, to suggest the unconscious and death. By establishing unconscious/conscious and dead/life at major oppositions, the old reading about promises and duties is decanted and replaced with an interpretation having to do with renunciation of vitality and presence, a quite different set of concerns. In this way, the chain of signifiers rolls over and over, moving from one provisional meaning to another.

How do the binary terms supplement each other? How does each help the reader understand its opposing term? How do they reinforce both presence and absence?

At the end of Frost's poem, when the narrator exchanges the peace of aloneness (isolation) for reengagement with the world, nature and civilization and countryside and village are not opposites; rather they are experiences in the being of the narrator that decenter and supplement each other. He is attracted by the solace of the winter scene in the woods, but he chooses the world of obligations and work. He is not, of course, a unified being but a fragmented one who speaks from the unconscious and returns at the end to the conscious world. He exists in dream and reality.

Another deconstructive approach is to take what has heretofore seemed marginal and make it central. Elements customarily considered to be of minor interest can become the focus of interest, with binary oppositions and possible reversals of their own. The comment that ordinarily receives little attention is brought to the center to see what new understandings surface, or a minor character may be scrutinized as critical to what happens in the plot. For example, in "Stopping by Woods," a close look at the horse is revealing. Seemingly of slight importance to what happens in the poem or what it may mean, the horse turns out to be surprisingly significant. Described in this poem as "little" ("My little horse must think it queer/To stop without a farmhouse near"), he turns out to play a large role. He "gives his harness bells a shake," thereby reminding the narrator of responsibility, duty, and social judgments. He interrupts the silence with sound, supplanting the peacfulness of the moment with a call to activity and conformity, replacing absence with presence. The horse becomes, in a sense, the voice of the conscious and civilized world, which in itself is a commentary on that world. Nevertheless, the traveler exchanges his dreams for reality. The horse's bells, sounds that are not even language, displace isolation as a center of meaning and thereby change the direction of the poem. The animal's impact would easily go unnoticed, except that the deconstructionist moves him to center stage.

Any "hidden" contradictions and discrepancies between what the text seems to say and what it actually says are important. Such incongruities are often found in what is not said, in gaps of information, silences, tensions, questions, or sometimes figures of speech. The author's intent is of no help in this process because what the author thinks was said may not be the case at all. In fact, by identifying those places where a slip of language occurs—that is, where something is said that was not meant to be said—you have found a point at which a text begins to deconstruct itself. By discovering a pattern of such inconsistencies and trying to account for it, a different interpretation becomes possible. The reader of this poem wonders, for instance, about the distance between the terms used to describe the woods. They are said to be "lovely, dark, and deep." The first descriptive word connotes aesthetic pleasure, the next two a sense of threat or mystery. The solace that the narrator imputes to the woods is threatened. It is, finally, not there, or at least it is there only momentarily. The woods have no permanent, stable, consistent self.

Looking at a binary opposition, such as presence/absence, for example, reversed by Derrida so that absence is favored, often helps a reader deconstruct a text. In "Stopping by Woods," it is significant that the narrator's words come unspoken from the inner self. They appear to exist only in thought. Phonoacentric views would give them a privileged position because they are closest to the man. They represent him, stand in for him, displace him. The inner words ultimately appear in writing, however, displacing speech (which in this case is unvoiced), which displaced unspoken thought, which initially displaced the man. The presence of being is far removed. The words of the persona supplement (act as additions to and substitutions for) him. Further, the bells of the horse metaphorically make the horse a spokesperson for the community, thereby displacing the horse's center. Sound has replaced speech. Animal has replaced people. Absence is thereby privileged over presence.

In sum, the narrator of "Stopping by Woods" is seen to be a logoscentric being who looks for a center where there is none. Finding only momentary meaning, he moves on to seek a center in work and community. He yearns for
peace but displaces it with obligations because although unity is desirable, it is absent, only fleetingly available in the moment in the woods.

Finally, the deconstructive reader will place all structures in question because an ultimate meaning is always deferred, and ambiguity remains. The purpose is to decenter each new center, to cast doubt on previous theories, never coming to rest on any one meaning but generating an infinite number of possible interpretations. The meaning of the protagonist's experience in "Stopping by Woods," for example, cannot be determined in the long run. The repetition of the last line resists interpretation or provides multiple readings because its metaphorical ramifications remain ambiguous, unclear, full of possibilities, none of them final.

On subsequent readings, new levels of meaning will emerge with the inversion of other binary oppositions. Some will appear only after others have been explored. You may find yourself moving back and forth between different interpretations or successively displacing one with another. In either case, the unending play of difference prevents you from arriving at any decisive meaning, or any set of multiple meanings, for anything you say or write. Instead, there is an unending process, with every new reading holding the possibility of a new interpretation. Acceptance of shifting meanings challenges the previously held views of the reader, offering freedom from the constraints of traditional assumptions and ideologies so that new ways of seeing are made possible.

Nevertheless, deconstructive readings can enrich one's experience with a text by providing an ongoing journey through it, with each journey revealing a new way of thinking about the text. Although such studies proceed in different ways, here are some suggestions to help you read from this perspective and to write about your observations.

Prewriting

A reading log can be particularly helpful with the deconstructive approach. As you go through a text for the first time, you can make notes as a formalist would, taking an interest in how meaning grows out of the work's various stylistic elements. You will identify tensions (in the form of paradox and irony) and be aware of how they are resolved. You will take note of how images, figurative language, and symbols come together to make a unified whole (see Chapter 3). During the second reading, you can set aside your willingness to accept that there is an identifiable, stable meaning produced by the diction, imagery, symbols, and the rest and begin to probe unresolved, unexplained, or unmentioned matters. In your reading log, you should record the undeveloped concerns that would, if they were explored, interrupt the assumed unity and meaning of the text.

The prewriting stage is also a good time to play with the binary oppositions that you find, first identifying those that initially seem most significant, then inferring the ideology that they present. You can recognize them by noting where the text makes a clear distinction between two items of the same genus: black/white (colors), men/women (gender), and so on. You can determine which is privileged by asking what the text accepts as normal, natural, worthy of being or doing. The next step, as noted in "Making a Deconstructive Analysis," is to reverse the terms, thereby creating an inversion of the recognizable world, a new world that is parallel to the world you are used to. This, in turn, allows you to look at the work in an unaccustomed manner. You can also look for contradictions in the binary terms by noting how each defines itself against its opposite or determine how they supplement each other by showing how a term that seems complete in itself is actually derived from something else. Even the most unified act or being is dependent on others for its existence, making all things incomplete or fragmented. It is likely that some of the steps in this process will help you find, in the terms of J. Hillis Miller, "the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building." And that is an important point because deconstruction works not simply to reverse binaries but also to deconstruct entire hierarchies by illustrating their inherent instability.

Another prewriting activity involves examining the language of the text. You can begin by looking for paradoxes and contradictions, then move on to
examining the figurative language. By making a list of metaphors, for example, you have information that may reveal slippages of the language. Because figures of speech do not mean what they literally say, there is room for them to misstate what the author intended for them to say. You may find it helpful to put the phrases on paper and then play with their possibilities in writing.

A more global view of the text involves looking for shifts in point of view, time, voice, vocabulary, or tone because such shifts may signal that the narrative or the narrator (speaker) of the work is not unified or stable. What seems to be coherent may actually be fraught with contradictions and conflicts. When these cannot be resolved, the text is said to have reached the point at which it deconstructs itself, a point known as apotheosis.

Much of the prewriting suggested here involves listing and note-making. Although these strategies will aid analysis, they will be helpful in the drafting stage only insofar as they provide ideas and information. Consequently, the more material you can generate at this point, the better off you will be when you begin to write your first draft.

Drafting and Revising

The Introduction  Given that deconstructive readings seek to replace previous ones, and sometimes to decenter standard, generally accepted interpretations, one way to open the discussion is to reiterate the conventional reading of a text. In other words, the introduction may simply be a restatement of the usual perception of what a work means or of how it operates. By explaining how a story is usually read or how a character is normally perceived, you have a basis for deconstructing those views. Once you have established what is usually deemed to be so, you are set to state why it is not the only possible reading. Your argument for multiple readings will be the central focus of the body of the discussion that follows, but it is helpful to introduce that idea early on.

The Body  Your purpose in the body of your deconstructive analysis will be to demonstrate the limited perspective of the conventional reading. You may want to show how the ideology that the text tries to support is not supportable, an approach that is popular with Marxist and feminist deconstructive critics. In this case, as you study a particular text, you will also be deconstructing the larger contexts in which it exists. You will be suggesting, or overtly stating, that the order supported by it is also open to question, perhaps itself fraught with inconsistencies and illusory stability.

On the other hand, you may be more interested in presenting a series of possible readings, one decentering the other in an ongoing process. This approach will take the discussion a step further by showing how meaning is not simply an either-or situation but an unfolding series of possibilities, leaving meaning ultimately beyond deciding. In either case, you will want to demonstrate how and where the text falls apart because of its own inconsistencies, misstatements, or contradictions.

The thinking you did during the prewriting stage will be valuable here, but remember that all assertions need to be supported with quotations and examples drawn from the text. The following questions can help you generate the basis of your discussion. If you developed your prewriting stage thoroughly, you will have already covered some of these questions.

- What is the primary binary opposition in the text?
- What associated binary opposition do you find?
- Which terms in the oppositions are privileged?
- What elements in the work support the privileged terms?
- What statement of values or beliefs emerges from the privileged terms?
- What elements in the text contradict the hierarchies as presented?
- Where is the statement of values or beliefs contradicted by characters, events, or statements in the text?
- Are the privileged terms inconsistent? Do they present conflicting meanings?
- What associations do you have with the terms that complicate their opposition? That is, what associations keep you from accepting that the terms are all good or all bad?
- What new possibilities of understanding emerge when you reverse the binary opposition?
- How does the reversal of oppositions tear down the intended statement of meaning?
- What contradictions of language, image, or event do you notice?
- Are there any significant omissions of information?
- Can you identify any irreconcilable views offered as coherent systems?
- What is left unnoticed or unexplained?
- How would a focus on different binary oppositions lead to a different interpretation?
- Where are the figures of speech so ambiguous that they suggest several (perhaps contradictory) meanings?
- What usually overlooked minor figures or events can be examined as major ones?
- How does the focus of meaning shift when you make marginal figures central?
- What new vision of the situation presented by the text emerges for you?
- What new complications do you see that the conventional reading would have "smoothed over"?
- Why can you not make a definitive statement about the meaning of the text?

The Conclusion  If you have begun by presenting the conventional reading of the text under analysis, an effective way to end your essay is by comparing that understanding with your deconstructive analysis, pointing out why the earlier one is not definitive. If you prefer, you may reiterate the several different ways in which the text can be read, thereby making the point that meaning is always provisional, always ready to give way to other meaning.
Lisa Esther
Yanover
English 123

Sample Response Paper: Applying Deconstruction to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”
19 Aug. 2014

Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Examined and even reexamined as Deconstruction directs, the story reveals Jackson’s implicit cynicism, but it is unclear whether she’s condemning the human potential for brutality or the mask of civility typically worn to conceal that potential from view. Ultimately, “The Lottery” paints a picture of humans as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as irredeemably savage despite a veneer of politeness that allows them to maintain the self-conception (or self-delusion) of being civilized.

Without a doubt, the ending of the story paints a clear picture of human brutality. The act of stoning is itself violent, a killing that is enacted up close in which the killer sees and is seen by the victim. In addition, the horror and brutality are heightened by the fact that the ritual requires the participation of the entire village, including children and even the family members of the victim, not just in the selection process but in the killing as well. No one, except the victim, is
exempt from this violence, or blameless for it, as the story illustrates early on by having “[t]he children assemble[] first [as a matter] of course” (963), echoed at the end when “someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles” (969). The diminutive phrase “little Davy Hutchinson” is transformed with the addition of “a few pebbles” so that in this context it no longer evokes innocence but culpability, showing us how the community teaches their traditions to the next generation, thus perpetuating those traditions and making sure everyone is equally guilty. The final image of the story is of the village as a mob, descending on Tessie Hutchinson. Notably absent is any sort of metaphor; the villagers are not compared to beasts or monsters. Instead, they are described simply, straight-forwardly as collectively “remember[ing] to use stones” though other parts of the ritual have been forgotten, urging each other on, making choices that reflect individual abilities and tendencies, such as the number and size of stones to use (639), behaviors that are all inescapably human. The savagery, too, then must be recognized and condemned as human.

While the outcome, the stoning of a randomly chosen villager, is horrifyingly cruel, reexamined, the story reveals that an even more significant and insidious cruelty is the matter-of-fact, efficient politeness all the villagers (with the noted exception of Tessie Hutchinson, the chosen victim, only after her selection) wear like a uniform from the beginning to the end of the ritual sacrifice. The opening paragraph with its matter-of-fact description of the village sets this mood:

The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o’clock; ... in this village, where there were only
about three hundred people, the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner. (Jackson 963)

It's a pleasant day; the weather cooperates as do the villagers, who gather at the agreed upon time in the agreed upon place. In subsequent paragraphs, we see them politely, "good humoredly" (Jackson 965) greeting each other, making small talk, waiting patiently, and following procedure as instructed and expected. Even Tessie Hutchinson, who, ironically, comes late, is, nevertheless, on time for the ritual itself and in good humor; Mr. Summers only just before she arrived had "left off talking and turned to the assembled villagers, . . . cheerfully" (965) greeting her upon her arrival. Tessie, in turn, responds light-heartedly with a joke: "Wouldn't have me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?" (965). By the end of the story, the irony and horror of this joke become apparent; Tessie's final act to tidy her house is itself an act of politeness, one which she did readily without protest or questioning, as if knowing she would not return and not wanting to leave her house a mess. This lesser duty is an ironic foreshadowing of the final one she fulfills, albeit unwillingly, by being sacrificed. The story too proceeds in a mannerly way. With Tessie's entrance, the story shifts from long paragraphs of description to dialogue, and the pacing picks up, the ritual moving more and more rapidly and efficiently toward its inevitable horrific conclusion, the story politely adhering to its own imperative, doing what a story must do: introduce, act out, and resolve conflict. "[A]nd then they were upon her" (969), the last line of the story announces, abruptly renouncing the former politeness and proper order of the ritual and the story and implicitly condemning them for having led to this barbarity as if it were the only outcome possible.
Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.