

## Deconstruction - Jacques Derrida

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**Deconstruction** - a literary theory that asks the reader to dissect their assumptions as they read a text, thereby revealing assumptions within the text that were never noticed before.

It's a firm belief of mine that no matter how complex an idea, you can explain it if you pick your examples carefully. Jacques Derrida taxes this belief to the limit, but I thought it would be entertaining to try, particularly after reading Jeffrey Eugenides' novel, *The Marriage Plot*, which draws in its early sections on the literary theory that was a big feature of university courses in the eighties. Being reminded of theory and also of the way that it's fallen into disrepute these days as a sort of laughable super-refinement of thinking, I felt I ought to point out at the very least how close to lived reality theory was. Derrida's philosophy founded the practice of deconstruction, a way of reading that did tend, I quite accept, to be presented with a lot of textual voodoo. But deconstruction is something that people do frequently, energetically and willingly, even if they don't know that they're doing it.

Think back to the last argument you had in a relationship. When a couple fights, they are practising deconstruction like the best of them. There's a French phrase for the inevitable imbalance in relationships - *il y a toujours un qui baise et un qui tend la joue* - which means there's always one person doing the kissing and the other offering their cheek. Well, similarly in rows, there is one person deconstructing while the other presents the text, usually in a defensive, stonewalling kind of way. The upset person, the reader in this instance, tackles the text they've been given with a manic pernickety attention, picking away at the words or phrases used, pouncing on sly little omissions, tying the other's words up in knots with the full intention of proving that their discourse is flawed through and through, that they mean the opposite of what they say, or that at the very least, there is no coherent and credible position beneath the surface offering. Just about anything is open for attack - the way the other person is standing, the shifty look they're giving, the nervous jangling of loose change in pocket. It's all ripe for deconstruction. There's only one way this can end: with one person's argument in tatters, as far as the other person is concerned. And that, my friends, is theory in practice.

The reason we can do this at all is down to the odd way that language is both rigid and flexible at the same time. Derrida talked about 'difference' a lot, and the way that language is founded on it. What this means is that, if you had half a sentence, you couldn't necessarily finish it. You might well speculate on what would come next, but unless you had the back end of it, you couldn't know what it means. This is because every word we add to a sentence will subtly alter the meaning of those that precede it. You can scale this up to a book, and think of the way that if you were missing the final two pages of a book, you still might not be sure how it ends. Anything could happen in those last two pages to change the meaning of what came before. So, from thinking about this, Derrida concluded that language was an endless signifying chain - unless there is a definitive end point, you can never be sure what a text means. Words are relative; meaning is a feature of that relativity. No matter how hard we try to say something plainly and simply, someone can always come along and mistake our meaning, or at least, believe sincerely that we said something different to what we thought we did. That's because words have this inner fullness and flexibility - they are always ready to be bent in all sorts of different directions, to carry all sorts of meanings, so there is always a sort of bubbling undercurrent of excess in the language we use, and we can't get rid of it.

One of Derrida's ways of talking about this is the idea of the 'trace'. Let's go back to our arguing couple and suppose that, horror of horror, the 'other woman' has been invoked in the row. Two simple little words, 'other' and 'woman', no big deal. But to speak of the 'other woman' is to conjure a ghost up in the room. She is not there, and the very fact of referencing her makes it plain she's absent (and of course she might not exist at all). But the words contain the trace of her, the imagined projection of a living, breathing person reduced here to a ghostly shadow. What makes the concept so vibrant and tingly, in fact, is this odd status of absent-presence, and Derrida suggests that all words have this capacity of evocation. But at the same time, for the angry partner who speaks them, they have taken on a life of their own and become The Other Woman, a concept bristling with all sorts of fears and fantasies, other mixed up traces drawn from literature and personal history and the ceaseless work of the imagination. So you see how the same principle keeps asserting itself: language is so full, so busy, so mixed up, and it tends to negate the reality behind it in favour of its own sprawling associations. It's no wonder that we can always find enough in language for it to betray itself.

'Betray' is an apposite term here. Deconstruction and psychoanalysis are very similar in spirit. Both believe that there is an inevitable underside to what gets said where other, hidden meanings lurk. But those meanings are not necessarily random. Have you ever experienced how hard it is to write a letter when you feel guilty about something, and to prevent that guilt from seeping into the wording? In our arguing couple, the partner who offers the text for deconstruction will probably be trying very hard to give nothing away, to put together a simple story and stick to it. But the chances are that he or she will be betrayed, somewhere along the line, by an awkward turn of phrase or a slip of the tongue. Or it may be a gesture or a look that does the damage – *il n'y a pas de hors texte*, Derrida also famously said: there is nothing outside or beyond the text. Gestures and looks are part of a language too, also based on relativity. We read them in just the same way we read words. And in this kind of circumstance, when we feel sure that someone is not saying what they mean, and we believe they mean more than they say, we can read 'against the grain', or take their language apart, deconstruct it, to find enough evidence of an alternative story underneath.

So you see? Derrida and deconstruction are easy. We all do it naturally anyway. All you do is transplant the processes of argument from two people in a kitchen to an author and a reader over the pages of a book. Where of course it's much more fun as the author can't answer you back or stomp off in a huff, and very little is at stake (although the real deconstructionists would drum me out of town for such sacrilege). Never fear theory; it can be your friend.

(taken from: Tales from the Reading Room, Victoria Best: <https://litlove.wordpress.com/about/>)