

Deconstruction – theory essay sample



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Structuralism dominated the French intellectual life for most of the 20th century, until a man by the name of Jacques Derrida brought about a radical notion of deconstruction. Deconstruction is also referred to as post-structuralism. Deconstruction argues that the real world is a vast social construct and that knowledge can only come from dissecting the ideals that society has engraved in one's mind. It also assumes that there is no reality; it is all a chain of manifestations that are put together by social constructs into what society agrees to call reality.

Deconstruction maps how motifs and characters are defined by binary oppositions, and how the oppositions are hierarchical. Deconstruction revolutionized the latter part of the century by introducing the concept of difference. Derrida explains, difference is, "a simultaneous movement of temporal deferment and spatial difference, both ongoing processes that constitute being" (p 258). The traditional idea of truth for structuralism was presence, substance, and identity. Derrida believes otherwise. His philosophy was reverse from the Structuralist point of view.

The idea of difference poses a threat to tradition because if things are created by difference, the idea of signification no longer holds. Metaphysics says that ideas exist apart from signs and that presence exists prior to signification. As a result of this argument, traditional philosophy was put into question because something else made them possible. Henry Louis Gates' article on "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" outlined the indigenous theory of African American literature.

His article explores the relationship between the African and African-American vernacular traditions and black literature. He concentrates on textual analysis. The concept of interpretation lies in the notion of difference, which occurs firstly, with the word signifying. The word and its meaning, hence, become arbitrary. In black discourse, it does not take the meaning that Saussure gives it. Gates uses Abrahams definition of signifying as “ technique of argument or persuasion; a language of implication; to imply, goad, beg, boast by indirect verbal gesture means. (p 989)

The Monkey becomes the metaphor in narrative poems about the “ signifying monkey” in African American literature. Though the characters changes in the various poems, the form stays the same. Gates states, “ In the narrative poems, the Signifying Monkey invariably repeats to his friend, the Lion, some insult purportedly generated by theory mutual friend, the Elephant. The Lion, indignant and outraged, demands an apology of the Elephant, who refuses and then trounces the Lion” (p 990). The Lion focuses on content and not form. He takes the Monkey’s words literally and ends up paying for his mistake.

The lion and the monkey speak different languages. Gates explains, “ The monkey speaks figuratively, and in symbolic code; the lion interprets or reads literally and suffers the consequence of his folly, which is the reversal of his status as King of the Jungle” (p 991). Gates’ essay uses several narrative poems that have been repeated and critiqued. Gates states, “ My theory of interpretation, arrived at from within the black cultural matrix, is a theory of formal revisionism, it is tropological, it is often characterized by

pastiche, and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures and their differences" (p 987).

Pastiche is an imitation of a previous work or a stylistic imitation of an earlier work. Gates uses the work of Ishmael Reed as a pastiche to African American narrative tradition. This book relates to what Bakhtin calls double-voiced discourse because of the integration of Wright and Ellison. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed critiques realism and modernism in writing not only figuratively, but literally as well. Reed criticizes the African American ideals of the transcendent black signified that is acknowledged in Western thought. Gates explains, " For Reed, it is the signifier that both shapes and defines any discrete signified.

And it is the signifiers of the Afro- American tradition with whom Reed is concerned" (p 998). Gates further explains, " *Mumbo Jumbo* is both a book about texts and a book of texts, a composite narrative composed of subtexts, pretexts, post-texts, and narratives within narratives" (p 998). The very difference is in the language. Gates states, " The signifying begins with the book's title. *Mumbo Jumbo* is the received and ethnocentric Western designation for both the rituals of black religions and all the black languages themselves" (p 999). The literal meaning is confusing language.

The question is, confusing language for whom? What one society interprets as something, another culture translates as something else. Gates argues, " Reed's cover serves as an overture to the critique of dualism and binary oppositions that serves a major thrust to the text *Mumbo jumbo* itself" (p 1000). Gates uses academic discourse to explain the African American

tradition. He does this to illustrate that African American is just as significant and difficult, as any other linguistic practice. He uses what is called high theory, which is more philosophical and intellectual.

He seeks to deconstruct the cultural biases that were associated with black tradition. Gates' breaks away the hierarchy of race and cultural bias in relating the Signifying Monkey to mythology. For this reason, he traces the roots back to mythological times and compares them to gods. Gates states, "The versions of Esu are all messengers of the gods: he who interprets the will of god to people, he who carries the desires of people to the gods" (p 988). Esu is the equivalent of the Signifying Monkey in African American culture. In doing this, the Monkey is able to signify language and modify meanings.

Gates explains, "the Signifying Monkey - he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language - is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus itself, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act" (p 988). He is able to play with language in the sense that he can rouse conflict with those who have more power than he.

Deconstruction revolutionized the latter part of the century with its radical ideas and challenges of tradition.

Henry Gates' essay of *The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique on the Sign and the Signifying Monkey* accomplished the same idea about African American tradition. The views of dominant culture and subordinated culture were joined into one by this essay. Gates states, "He [Monkey] represents the dominant rhetorical form of Black literature, which consists of tradition of

writers who 'trope' on their antecedents" (987). In explaining the Signifying Monkey, Gates shatters the existing hierarchies, which create binary oppositions, and does away with cultural domination.