Presently reader-oriented criticism is not as popular as it was in the 960s or '70s. Although its theoretical assumptions and critical theorists—ouise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and orman Holland—still influence literary criticism and in all probability will ntinue to do so for decades, many reader-oriented critics now emphasize ow certain groups read, asking such questions as these: Do African-mericans read differently from Caucasians? How do women read? How do ien read? How do gays or lesbians read? In other words, different schools f literary criticism such as feminism, gender studies, and queer theory have mbraced the principles of reader-oriented criticism, once again turning the ttention of theorists and critics to the reading process and the reader.

5

MODERNITY/POSTMODERNISM STRUCTURALISM/ POSTSTRUCTURALISM: DECONSTRUCTION

Everyone, left to his [or her] own devices, forms an idea about what goes on in language which is very far from the truth.

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Lectures on General Linguistics*

We are all mediators, translators.

Jacques Derrida, Interview

MODERNITY

Modernity is that which is ephemeral, fugitive, contingent upon the occasion; it is half of art, whose other half is eternal and unchangeable.

Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life"

For many historians and literary theorists alike, the Enlightenment (or the Age of Reason in the eighteenth century) is synonymous with **modernity** (from the Latin word *modo*, meaning "just now"). That its roots predate this time period is unquestioned, with a few scholars even dating its beginnings to 1492, coincident with Columbus's journeys to the Americas, and its overall spirit lasting until the middle of the twentieth century. At the center of this view of the world lie two prominent features: a belief that reason is humankind's best guide to life, and that science, above all other human endeavors, can lead humanity to a new promised land. Philosophically, modernity rests on the foundations laid by René Descartes (1596–1650), a French philosopher, scientist, and mathematician. Ultimately, declares Descartes, the only thing one cannot doubt is one's own existence. Certainty and knowledge begin with the self. "I think; therefore, I am" thus becomes the only solid foundation on which

knowledge and a theory of knowledge can be built. For Descartes, the rational essence freed from superstition, from human passions, and from one's oftentimes irrational imagination will allow humankind to discover truth about the physical world.

Whereas Descartes' teachings elevated to new heights of the individual's rational essence and humankind's ability to reason, the scientific writings and discoveries of both Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727) allowed science to be likewise coronated. Thanks to Bacon, the scientific method has become part of everyone's elementary and high school education. It is through experimentation, conducting experiments, making inductive generalizations, and verifying the results that one can discover truths about the physical world. And thanks to Newton, the physical world is no longer a mystery, but a mechanism that operates according to a system of laws that can be understood by any thinking, rational human being who is willing to apply the principles of the scientific method to the physical universe.

Armed with an unparalleled confidence in humankind's capacity to reason—the ability to inquire and to grasp necessary conditions essential for seeking out such undoubtable truths as provided by mathematics—and the assurance that science can lead the way to a complete understanding of the physical world, the Enlightenment (i.e., modern) scholar was imbued with a spirit of progress. Anything the enlightened mind set as its goal, so these scholars believed, was attainable. Through reason and science, all poverty, all ignorance, and all injustice would be finally banished.

Of all Enlightenment thinkers, Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) may best exemplify the characteristics of modernity. Gleaned from self-portraits contained in his autobiography (first published in France in 1791, titled *Memories De La Vie Privee*, with the English translation appearing in 1793, titled *The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin*), Franklin is the archetypal modern philosopher-scientist. Self-assured, Franklin declares that he "pulled himself up by his own bootstraps," overcoming poverty and ignorance through education to become America's first internationally known and respected scientist-philosopher-diplomat. Believing in the power and strength of the individual mind, he delighted in the natural world and decided early in life to know and explore all possible aspects of his universe. In this process, he abandoned superstitions and myths, placing his trust in science to lead him to truths about his world. Through observations, experiments, and conclusions drawn upon the data discovered by using the scientific method, Franklin believed he could obtain and know the necessary truths for guiding him through life.

Similar to Descartes, Franklin does not abandon religion and replace it with science. Holding to the tenets of deism, he rejects miracles, myths, and much of what he called religious superstitions. What he does not reject is a belief in the existence of God. He asserts, however, that God leaves it to

humanity, to each individual, to become the master of his or her own fate. According to Franklin, individuals must find salvation within themselves. By using one's God-given talent for reason and joining these rational abilities to the principles of science, each person, declares Franklin, can experience and enjoy human progress.

For Franklin and other enlightened minds, truth is to be discovered scientifically, not through the unruly and passionate imagination or through one's feelings or intuition. Indeed, what is to be known and discovered via the scientific method is reality: the physical world. All people, declares Franklin, must know this world objectively and must learn how to investigate it to discover its truths.

Self-assured, self-conscious, and self-made, Franklin concludes that all people possess an essential nature. It is humanity's moral duty to investigate this nature contained within ourselves and also to investigate our environment through rational thinking and the methods of science so we can learn and share the truths of the universe. By devoting ourselves to science and to the magnificent results that will necessarily follow, Franklin proclaims that human progress is inevitable and will usher in a new golden age.

Franklin and modernity's spirit of progress permeated humankind's beliefs well into the twentieth century. For several centuries, modernity's chief tenets—that reality can be known and investigated and that humanity possesses an essential nature characterized by rational thought—became the central ideas upon which many philosophers, scientists, educators, and writers constructed their worldviews. Briefly put, modernity's core characteristics are as follows:

- The concept of the self is a conscious, rational, knowable entity.
- Reality can be studied, analyzed, and known.
- Objective, rational truth can be discovered through science.
- The methodology of science can and does lead to ascertaining truth.
- The yardstick for measuring truth is reason.
- Truth is demonstrable.
- Progress and optimism are the natural results of valuing science and rationality.
- Language is referential, representing the perceivable world.

In particular, writers and literary theoreticians—New Critics, structuralists, and others—believed that texts possessed some kind of objective existence and could, therefore, be studied and analyzed, with appropriate conclusions to follow from such analyses. Whether a text's actual value and meaning were intrinsic or extrinsic was debatable; nevertheless, an aesthetic text's meaning could be discovered and articulated. Such a basic assumption concerning a text's meaning was soon to be challenged by principles espoused by what has been dubbed postmodernism.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM OR POSTMODERNISM

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives.

Jean-François Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition"

What is truth? How can truth be discovered? What is reality? Is there an objective reality on which we can all agree? If so, how can we best investigate this reality so all humanity can understand the world in which we live and prosper from such knowledge? Until the late 1960s (with a few notable exceptions), the worldview espoused by modernity and symbolized by Benjamin Franklin provided acceptable and workable answers to these questions. For Franklin and other modern thinkers, the primary form of discourse is like a map. The map itself is a representation of reality as known, discovered, and detailed by humanity. By looking at a map, a traveler who holds these assumptions can see a delineated view of the world and obtain an accurate picture of reality itself: the mountains, the rivers, the plains, the cities, the deserts, and the forests. By placing his or her trust in this representation of reality, the traveler can then plot a journey, feeling confident in the accuracy of the map and its depictions. For the modern mind, objective reality as pictured on the map was knowable and discoverable by any intelligent person who wished to do so.

With the inception of deconstruction as authored and portrayed in Jacques Derrida's poststructural view of the world in the mid-1960s, however, modernity's understanding of reality is challenged and turned on its head by **postmodernism,** meaning "after modernity" or "just after now," from its Latin root meaning "just now." For Derrida and other postmodernists, there is no such thing as "objective reality." For these thinkers, all definitions and depictions of truth are subjective, simply creations of human minds. Truth itself is relative, depending on the nature and variety of cultural and social influences in one's life. Because these poststructuralist thinkers assert that many truths exist, not *the* truth, they declare that modernity's concept of one objective reality must be disavowed and replaced by many different concepts, each a valid and reliable interpretation and construction of reality.

Postmodern thinkers reject modernity's representation of discourse (the map) and replace it with a collage. Unlike the fixed, objective nature of a map, a collage's meaning is always in flux, always changing. Whereas the viewer of a map relies on and obtains meaning and direction from the map itself, the viewer of a collage actually participates in the production of meaning. Unlike a map, which allows one interpretation of reality, a collage permits many possible meanings: the viewer (or "reader") can simply juxtapose a variety of combinations of images, thereby constantly changing the meaning of the collage. Each viewer, then, creates his or her own subjective picture of reality.

To say postmodernism popped onto the American literary scene with the coming of Derrida to America in 1966 would, of course, be inaccurate. Although historians disagree about who actually coined the term, there is general agreement that the word first appeared in the 1930s. Its seeds, however, had already germinated far earlier in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). As Zarathustra, the protagonist of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883), proclaims the death of God, simultaneously the death knell begins to sound for the demise of objective reality and ultimate truth. World Wars I and II, a decline in the influence of Christianity and individualism, and the appearance of a new group of theologians led by Thomas Altizer, who in the 1950s echoed Nietzsche's words that God is dead, all contributed to the obsolescence of objective reality and of the autonomous scholar who seeks to discover ultimate reality.

Beginning in the 1960s and continuing to the present, the voices of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), the French cultural historian Michel Foucault (1926–1984), the aesthetician Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), and the ardent American pragmatist Richard Rorty (1931–2007) declare unequivocally the death of objective truth. These leading articulators of postmodernism assert that modernity failed because it searched for an external point of reference—God, reason, and science, among others—on which to build a philosophy. For these postmodern thinkers, there is no such point of reference because there is no ultimate truth or inherently unifying element in the universe and, thus, no ultimate reality.

According to postmodernism, all that is left is difference. We must acknowledge, they say, that each person shapes his or her own concepts of reality. Reality, then, becomes a human construction shaped by each individual's dominant social group. There exists no center, nor one all-encompassing objective reality, but as many realities as there are people. Each person's interpretation of reality will necessarily be different. No individual or group can claim it alone understands or possesses absolute truth. Tolerance of each other's points of view, therefore, becomes the postmodern maxim.

Because postmodern philosophy is constantly being shaped, reshaped, defined, redefined, and articulated by its adherents, no single voice can adequately represent it or serve as an archetypal spokesperson, as Franklin does for modernity. By synthesizing the beliefs of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and Rorty, however, we can hypothesize what this representative postmodern thinker would possibly espouse:

> I believe, like my forebears before me, that we, as a race of people, will see progress, but only if we all cooperate. The age of the lone scholar, working diligently in the laboratory, is over. Cooperation among scholars from all fields is vital. Gone are the days of individualism. Gone are the days of conquest. Now is the time for tolerance, understanding, and collaboration.
>
> Because our knowledge always was and always will be incomplete, we must focus on a new concept: holism. We must realize that we all need each

other, including all our various perspectives on the nature of reality. We must also recognize that our rationality, our thinking processes, is only one of many avenues that can lead to an understanding of our world. Our emotions, our feelings, and our intuition can also provide us with valid interpretations and guidelines for living.

And we have finally come to realize that no such thing as objective reality exists; there is no ultimate truth because truth is perspectival, depending upon the community and social group in which we live. Since many truths exist, we must learn to accept each other's ideas concerning truth, and we must learn to live side by side, in a pluralistic society, learning from each other while celebrating our differences.

We must stop trying to discover the undiscoverable—absolute truth—and openly acknowledge that what may be right for one person may not be right for another. Acceptance, not criticism; open-mindedness, not closed-mindedness; tolerance, not bigotry; and love, not hatred, must become the guiding principles of our lives. When we stop condemning ourselves and others for "not having, possessing, or knowing truth," then and only then will we be able to spend more time interpreting our lives and giving them meaning, as together we work and play.

When such principles are applied to literary interpretation, the postmodernist realizes that no such thing as *the* meaning—or, especially, the *correct* meaning—of an aesthetic text exists. Like looking at a collage, meaning develops as a reader interacts with a text because meaning does not reside within the text itself. And since each reader's view of truth is perspectival, the interpretation of a text that emerges when a reader interacts with a text will necessarily be different from every other reader's interpretation. For each text, then, there exists an almost infinite number of interpretations, or at least as many interpretations as there are readers.

Overall, postmodernism's core characteristics can be stated as follows:

- A skepticism or rejection of grand metanarratives to explain reality
- The concept of the self as ever-changing
- No objective reality, but many subjective interpretations
- Truth as subjective and perspectival, dependent on cultural, social, and personal influences
- No "one correct" concept of ultimate reality
- No metatheory to explain texts or reality
- No "one correct" interpretation of a text.

MODERNITY TO MODERNISM

Rooted in the philosophy and ideals of the Enlightenment, modernity with its accompanying philosophical, political, scientific, and ethical ideas provides much of the basis for intellectual thought from the 1700s to the midpoint

of the twentieth century. World War I, however, marks a dramatic shift, especially in the arts. Growing out of the devastation of the war, the arts began to reflect society's new concerns, emphasizing decay, loss, and disillusionment. The term modernism is given to this aesthetic movement dated from 1914 to 1945 that questioned the ideals of British Victorianism and reflected both the material and the psychological devastation of two world wars. Writers such as W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, and many others began to question some of modernity's core beliefs, such as the objective status of reality and the fixed nature of aesthetic forms. Employing unconventional stylistic techniques such as stream of consciousness and multiple-narrated stories, artists and writers began to emphasize the subjective, highlighting how "seeing" or "reading" actually occurs rather than investigating the actual object being seen or read. Characterized by a transnational focus, literary artists blurred the established distinctions among the various genres, rejecting previously established aesthetic theories, choosing to highlight unconscious or subconscious elements in their works by employing the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Decentering the individual and introducing ambiguity and fragmentation, modernism began to see life as a collage rather than a map.

Partly in answer to the growing skepticism and the rising sense of meaningless of both life and art, a new way of examining reality and language arose in France in the 1950s, structuralism, a term coined in 1929 by the Russian Formalist Roman Jakobson. Structuralism asserts an overall unity and significance to every form of communication and social behavior.

Grounded in **structural linguistics** (the science of language), structuralism uses the techniques, methodologies, and vocabulary of linguistics, offering a scientific view of how we achieve meaning not only in literary works but also in every cultural act.

To understand structuralism, we must trace its historical roots to the linguistic writings and theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss professor and linguist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is his scientific investigations of language and language theory that provide the basis for structuralism's unique approach to literary analysis.

STRUCTURALISM: ITS HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Pre-Saussurean Linguistics

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, **philology,** not linguistics, was the science of language. Its practitioners, known as **philologists,** described, compared, and analyzed the languages of the world

to discover similarities and relationships. Their approach to language study was **diachronic**—that is, they traced language change throughout long expanses of time, discovering, for example, how a particular phenomenon, such as a word or sound, in one language had changed **etymologically** or **phonologically** over several centuries and whether a similar change could be noted in other languages. Using a cause-and-effect relationship as the basis for their research, the philologists' main emphasis was the historical development of languages.

Such an emphasis reflected the nineteenth-century philologists' theoretical assumptions concerning the nature of language. Language, they believed, mirrored the structure of the world it imitated and, therefore, had no structure of its own. Known as the **mimetic theory** of language, this linguistic hypothesis asserts that words (either spoken or written) are symbols for things in the world, each word having its own **referent**—the object, concept, or idea that is represented and/or symbolized by that word. According to this theory, the symbol (a word) equals a thing:

Symbol (word) = Thing

Saussure's Linguistic Revolution

In the first decade of the 1900s, a Swiss philologist and teacher, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), began questioning these long-held ideas and, by so doing, triggered a reformation in language study. Through his research and innovative theories, Saussure changed the direction and subject matter of linguistic studies. His *Course in General Linguistics*, a compilation of his 1906–1911 lecture notes published posthumously by his students in 1916, is one of the most influential works of modern linguistics and forms the basis for structuralist literary theory and practical criticism. Through the efforts of this pioneer of modern linguistics, nineteenth-century philology evolved into the more multifaceted science of twentieth-century linguistics.

Saussure began his linguistic revolution by affirming the validity and necessity of the diachronic approach to language study used by such nineteenth-century philologists as the Grimm brothers and Karl Verner. Using this diachronic approach, these linguists discovered the principles governing consonantal pronunciation changes that occurred in Indo-European languages (the language group to which English belongs) over many centuries. While not abandoning a diachronic examination of language, Saussure introduced the **synchronic** approach, a method that focuses on any given language at one particular time—a single moment—and that emphasizes the whole state of a particular language at that time. Attention is on how the language and its parts function, not on tracing the historical development of a single element, as would occur in a diachronic analysis. By highlighting the activity of the language system and how it operates rather than its evolution, Saussure drew attention to the nature and composition of language and its constituent parts. For example, along with examining the phonological antecedents of the English sound *b*, as in the word *boy* (a diachronic analysis), Saussure opened a new avenue of investigation, asking how the *b* sound is related to other sounds in use at the same time by speakers of Modern English (a synchronic analysis). This new concern necessitated a rethinking of language theory and a reevaluation of the aims of language research, and it finally resulted in Saussure's articulating the basic principles of modern linguistics.

Unlike many of his contemporary linguists, Saussure rejected the mimetic theory of language structure. In its place, he asserted that language is primarily determined by its own internally structured and highly systematized rules. These rules govern all aspects of a language, including the sounds its speakers will identify as meaningful, the grouping of various combinations of these sounds into words, and the process whereby these words may be arranged to produce meaningful communication within a given language.

The Structure of Language

According to Saussure, all languages are governed by their own internal rules that do not mirror or imitate the structure of the world. Emphasizing the systematized nature of language, Saussure asserts that all languages are composed of basic units called **emes.** The task of a linguist is to identify these units (sometimes called *paradigms* or *models*) and/or to identify their relationships among symbols—like the letters of the alphabet, for example—in a given language. This task becomes especially difficult when the emes in the linguist's native language and those in an unfamiliar language under investigation differ. According to Saussure, the basic building block or unit of language is the **phoneme**—the smallest meaningful (significant) sound in a language. The number of phonemes differs from language to language, with the least number of total phonemes for any one language being around eleven (Rotokas, a language spoken by approximately four thousand people in Bougainville, an island east of New Guinea) and the most being 112, found in several tonal languages. American English, for example, consists of approximately forty-three to forty-five phonemes, depending on the specific dialect of American English being spoken. Although native speakers of American English are capable of producing phonemes found in other languages, it is these forty-five distinct sounds that serve as the building blocks of American English. For example, the first sound heard in the word *pin* is the /p/ phoneme, the second /I/, and the last /n/. A phoneme is identified in writing by enclosing the **grapheme**—the written symbol that represents the phoneme's sound—in virgules or diagonal lines.

Although each phoneme makes a distinct sound that is meaningful and recognizable to speakers of a particular language, in actuality a phoneme is composed of a family of nearly identical speech sounds called **allophones.** For instance, in the word *pit*, the first phoneme is /p/, and in the word *spin*, the second phoneme is also /p/. Although the /p/ appears in both words, its pronunciation is slightly different. To validate this statement, simply hold the palm of your hand about two inches from your mouth and pronounce the word *pit* followed immediately by the word *spin*. You will quickly note the difference. These slightly different pronunciations of the same phoneme are simply two different allophones of the phoneme /p/.

Telling the difference among sounds, knowing when any alternation in the pronunciation of a phoneme changes the meaning of a group of phonemes (i.e., a word), or knowing when a simple variation in a phoneme's pronunciation is linguistically insignificant (an allophone) can, at times, be difficult. For example, in English the letter *t* represents the sound /t/, but is there one distinct pronunciation for this sound whenever and wherever it appears in an English word? Is the *t* in the word *tip*, for instance, pronounced the same as the *t* in *stop*? Obviously not—the first *t* is **aspirated,** or pronounced with a greater force of air, more than the *t* in *stop*. In either word, however, a speaker of English could still identify the /t/ as a phoneme or a distinct sound. If we replace the *t* in *tip* with a *d*, we now have *dip*, the difference between the two words being the sounds /t/ and /d/. Upon further analysis, we find that these sounds are pronounced in the same location in the mouth but with one difference: whereas /d/ is **voiced** or pronounced with the vocal cords vibrating, /t/ is **unvoiced,** with the vocal cords remaining basically still. This difference between the sounds /t/ and /d/ allows us to say that /t/ and /d/ are phonemes or distinct sounds in English. Whether the eme is a sound or a minimal unit of grammar such as the adding of an *s* in English to form most plurals or any other distinct category of a language, Saussure's basic premise operates: within each eme, distinctions depend on differences.

How phonemes and allophones arrange themselves to produce meaningful speech in any language is not arbitrary but is governed by a prescribed set of rules developed through time by the speakers of a language. For example, in Modern American English (1755 to the present), no English word can end with the two phonemes /m/ and /b/. In Middle English (1100–1500), these phonemes could combine to form the two terminal sounds of a word, resulting, for example, in the word *lamb*, where the /m/ and /b/ were both pronounced. Over time, the rules of spoken English have changed so that when *lamb* appears in Modern English, /b/ has lost its phonemic value. The study of the rules governing the meaningful units of sound in a linguistic system is called **phonology,** and the study of the production of these sounds is known as **phonetics.**

In addition to phonemes, another major building block of language is the **morpheme,** the smallest part of a word that has lexical or grammatical significance. **Lexical** refers to the base or root meaning of a word, whereas

grammatical refers to those elements of language that express relationships among words or groups of words, such as the **inflections** {-ed}, {-s}, and {-ing} that carry tense, number, gender, and so on. (Note that in print, morphemes are placed in braces.) Similar to the phoneme, the number of lexical and grammatical morphemes varies from language to language. In American English, the number of lexical morphemes far outdistances the relative handful of grammatical morphemes (ten or so). For instance, in the word *reaper*, {reap} is a lexical morpheme, meaning "to ripple flax" and {-er} is a grammatical morpheme, meaning "one who." All words must have a lexical morpheme (hence their great number), but not every word need have a grammatical morpheme. How the various lexical and grammatical morphemes combine to form words is highly rule-governed and is known in modern linguistics as the study of **morphology.**

Another major building block in the structure of language is the actual arrangement of words in a sentence, a language's **syntax.** Just as the placement of phonemes and morphemes in individual words is a rule-governed activity, so is the arrangement of words in a sentence. For example, although native speakers of English would understand the sentence "John threw the ball into the air," such speakers would have difficulty ascertaining the meaning of "Threw air the into ball the John." Why? Native speakers of English have mastered which strings of morphemes are permitted by syntactic rules and which are not. Those that do not conform to these rules do not form English sentences and are called **ungrammatical.** Those that do conform to the established syntactic structures are called **sentences** or **grammatical sentences.** In most English sentences, for example, the subject ("John") precedes the verb ("threw"), followed by the complement ("the ball into the air"). Although this structure can at times be modified, such changes must follow tightly prescribed rules of syntax if a speaker of English is to be understood.

Having established the basic building blocks of a sentence—phonemes, morphemes, words, and syntax—language also provides us with one additional body of rules to govern the various interpretations or shades of meaning such combinations of words can evoke: **semantics.** Unlike morphemes (the meanings of which can be found in any good dictionary) and unlike the word stock of a language—its **lexicon**—the **semantic features** (the properties of words that show facets of meaning) are not so easily defined. Consider, for example, the following sentences:

"Giuseppe is a nut."

"I found a letter on South Washington Street."

"Get a grip, Rusty."

To understand each of these sentences, a speaker or reader needs to understand the semantic features that govern an English sentence because each of the above sentences has several possible interpretations. In the first sentence, the speaker must grasp the concept of **metaphor;** in the second, lexical

ambiguity; and in the third, idiomatic structures. Unless these semantic features are consciously or unconsciously known and understood by the reader or listener, problems of interpretation may arise. As with the other building blocks of language, an understanding of semantics is necessary for clear communication in any language.

Langue and Parole

By age five or six, native speakers of English or any other language have consciously and unconsciously mastered their language's complex system of rules or its **grammar**—their language's phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics—which enables them to participate in language communication. In effect, these young native speakers have mastered their language's **descriptive grammar**—that is, the actual use of a language by its speakers without reference to established norms of correctness or "good" or "bad" usage. They have not, however, mastered such advanced elements as all the semantic features of their language, nor have they mastered its **prescriptive grammar:** the prescribed rules of English usage often invented, propagated, and enforced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century purists who believed that there were certain constructions that all educated people should know and employ, such as using the nominative form of a pronoun after an intransitive linking verb as in the sentence "It is I." What these five- or six-year-old native speakers of a language have learned Saussure dubs langue, the structure of the language that is mastered and shared by all its speakers.

Although langue emphasizes the social aspect of language and an understanding of the overall language system, Saussure calls an individual's actual speech utterances **parole**—that is, linguistic features such as loudness or softness that are overlaid on language's structure, its langue. For example, two speakers can utter the same sentence, such as "I see a rat." One speaker shouts the words while another whispers them. Both utterances are examples of parole and how individuals personalize language. Speakers can generate countless examples of individual utterances (parole), but these will all be governed by the language's system, its langue. It is the task of the linguist, Saussure believes, to infer a language's langue from the analysis of many instances of parole. In other words, for Saussure, the proper study of linguistics is the system (langue), not the individual utterances of its speakers (parole).

Saussure's Redefinition of a Word

Having established that languages are systems that operate according to verifiable rules and that they need to be investigated both diachronically and

synchronically, Saussure then reexamined philology's definition of a word. Rejecting the long-held belief that a word is a symbol that equals a thing (its referent), Saussure proposed that words are **signs** made up of two parts: the **signifier** (a written or spoken mark) and a **signified** (a concept):

$$\text{Sign} = \frac{\text{Signifier}}{\text{Signified}}$$

For example, when we hear the sound *ball*, the sound is the signifier and the concept of a ball that comes to our minds is the signified. Like the two sides of a sheet of paper, the linguistic sign is the union of these two elements. As oxygen combines with hydrogen to form water, Saussure says, so the signifier joins with the signified to form a sign that has properties unlike those of its parts. Accordingly for Saussure, a word represents a sign, not a referent in the objective world. Unlike previous generations of philologists who believed that we perceive things (word = thing) and then translate them into units or meaning, Saussure revolutionizes linguistics by asserting that we perceive signs.

Furthermore, the linguistic sign, declares Saussure, is arbitrary: the relationship between the signifier *(ball)* and the signified (the concept of *ball*) is a matter of convention. The speakers of a language have simply agreed that the written or spoken sounds or marks represented by *ball* will equal the concept *ball*. With few exceptions, proclaims Saussure, there is no natural link between the signifier and the signified, nor is there any natural relationship between the linguistic sign and what it represents.

If, as Saussure maintains, there is no natural link between the linguistic sign and the reality it represents, how do we know the difference between one sign and another? In other words, how does language create meaning? We know what a sign means, says Saussure, because it differs from all other signs. By comparing and contrasting one sign with other signs, we learn to distinguish each individual sign. Individual signs, then, can have meaning (or signify) only within their own langue.

For Saussure, meaning is therefore relational and a matter of difference. Within the system of sound markers that comprise our language, we know *ball*, for instance, because we differentiate it from *hall*, *tail*, and *pipe*. Likewise, we know the concept "bug" because it differs from the concepts "truck," "grass," and "kite." As Saussure declares, "In language there are only differences."

Because signs are arbitrary, conventional, and differential, Saussure concludes that the proper study of language is not an examination of isolated entities, but the system of relationships among them. He asserts, for example, that individual words cannot have meaning by themselves. Because language is a system of rules governing sounds, words, and other components, individual words obtain their meanings only within that system. To know language and how it functions, Saussure declares, we must study the system

(langue), not individual utterances (parole) that operate according to the rules of langue.

For Saussure, language is the primary sign system whereby we structure our world. Language's structure, he believes, is not unlike that of any other sign system of social behavior, such as fashion, table manners, and sports. Like language, all such expressions of social behavior generate meaning through a system of signs. Saussure proposed a new science called **semiology** to study how we create meaning through these signs in all our social behavioral systems. Since language was the chief and most characteristic of all these systems, Saussure declared, it was to be the main branch of semiology. The investigation of all other sign systems would be patterned after language because like language's signs, the meanings of all signs are arbitrary, conventional, and differential.

Although semiology never became the important new science Saussure envisioned, a similar science was being proposed in America almost simultaneously by philosopher and teacher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Called **semiotics**, this science borrowed linguistic methods used by Saussure and applied them to all meaningful cultural phenomena. Meaning in society, this science of signs declares, can be systematically studied, both in studying how this meaning occurs and in understanding the structures that allow it to operate. Distinguishing among the various kinds of signs, semiotics continues to develop today as a particular field of study. Because it uses structuralist methods borrowed from Saussure, semiotics and structuralism are terms often used interchangeably, although the former denotes a distinct field of study, and the latter is more an approach and method of analysis.

ASSUMPTIONS OF STRUCTURALISM

Borrowing the linguistic vocabulary, theory, and methods from Saussure and to a smaller degree from Peirce, structuralists—their studies being variously called structuralism, semiotics, **stylistics**, and narratology to name a few—believe that codes, signs, and rules govern all human social and cultural practices, including communication. Whether that communication is the language of fashion, sports, education, friendships, or literature, each is a systematized combination of codes (signs) governed by rules. Structuralists want to discover these codes, which they believe give meaning to all our social and cultural customs and behavior. Hence, they declare that the proper study of meaning—and, therefore, reality—is an investigation of the system behind these practices, not the individual practices themselves. Their aim is to discover how all the parts fit together and function.

Structuralists find meaning in the relationship among the various components of a system. When applied to literature, this principle becomes

revolutionary. For structuralists, the proper study of literature now involves an inquiry into the conditions surrounding the act of interpretation itself (how literature conveys meaning), not an in-depth investigation of an individual work. Since an individual work can express only those values and beliefs of the system of which it is a part, structuralists emphasize the system (langue) whereby texts relate to each other, not an examination of an isolated text (parole). They believe that a study of the system of rules that govern literary interpretation becomes the critic's primary task.

Such a belief presupposes that the structure of literature is similar to the structure of language. Like language, say the structuralists, literature is a self-enclosed system of rules that is composed of language. Literature, like language, needs no outside referent except its own rule-governed, but socially constrained, system. Before structuralism, literary theorists discussed the literary conventions—that is, the various genres or types of literature, such as the novel, the short story, or poetry. Each genre, it was believed, had its own conventions or acknowledged and acceptable way of reflecting and interpreting life. For example, in poetry, a poet could write in nonsentences, using symbols and other forms of figurative language to state a theme or to make a point. For these prestructuralist theorists, the proper study of literature was an examination of these conventions and of how either individual texts used applicable conventions to make meaning or how readers used these same conventions to interpret the text. Structuralists, however, seek out the system of codes that they believe conveys a text's meaning. For them, how a text conveys meaning rather than what meaning is conveyed is at the center of their interpretive methodology—that is, how a symbol or a metaphor, for example, imparts meaning is of special interest. For instance, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," most readers assume that the darkness of the forest equates with evil and that images of light represent safety. Of particular interest to the structuralist is *how* (not *that*) darkness comes to represent evil. A structuralist would ask why darkness more frequently than not represents evil in any text and what sign system or code is operating that allows readers to interpret darkness as evil intertextually or in all or most texts they read. To structuralists, how a symbol or any other literary device functions is of chief importance, not how literary devices imitate reality or express feelings.

In addition to emphasizing the system of literature and not individual texts, structuralism claims it demystifies literature. By explaining literature as a system of signs encased in a cultural frame that allows that system to operate, say the structuralists, a literary work can no longer be considered a mystical or magical relationship between the author and the reader; a place where author and reader share emotions, ideas, and truth. A scientific and an objective analysis of how readers interpret texts, not a transcendental, intuitive, or transactional response to any one text, leads to meaning. Similarly, an author's intentions can no longer be equated to the text's overall meaning

because meaning is determined by the system that governs the writer, not an individual author's personal quirks. And no longer can the text be autonomous, an object whose meaning is contained solely within itself. All texts, declare structuralists, are part of the shared system of meaning that is intertextual, not text specific. In other words, all texts refer readers to other texts. Meaning, claim the structuralists, can be expressed only through this shared system of relations, not in an author's stated intentions or the reader's private or public experiences.

Declaring both isolated text and author to be of little importance, structuralism attempts to strip literature of its magical powers or so-called hidden meanings that can be discovered by only a small, elite group of highly trained specialists. Meaning can be found, it declares, by analyzing the system of rules that comprise literature itself.

METHODOLOGIES OF STRUCTURALISM

Like other approaches to textual analysis, structuralism follows neither one methodological strategy nor one set of ideological assumptions. Although most structuralists use many of Saussure's ideas in formulating their theoretical assumptions and foundations for their literary theories, how these assumptions are employed when applied to textual analysis varies greatly. A brief examination of five structuralists or subgroups will help highlight structuralism's varied approaches to textual analysis.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

One of the first scholar-researchers to implement Saussure's principles of linguistics to narrative discourse in the 1950s and 1960s was the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009). Attracted to the rich symbols in myths, Lévi-Strauss spent years studying myths from around the world. Myth, he assumed, possessed a structure like language. Accordingly, each individual myth was an example of parole. What he wanted to discover was myth's langue, its overall structure that allows individual examples (parole) to function and have meaning. In his work "The Structural Study of Myths" (1955), Lévi-Strauss presents his structural analysis of why myths from different cultures worldwide seem similar. All myths' similarities reside, he asserts, at the level of structure.

After reading countless myths, Lévi-Strauss identified recurrent themes running through all of them. Such themes transcended culture and time, speaking directly to the minds and hearts of all people. These basic structures, which he called **mythemes**, are similar to the primary building blocks

of language, the phonemes. Like phonemes, mythemes find meaning in and through their relationships within the mythic structure. And like phonemes, such relationships often involve oppositions. For example, the /b/ and /p/ phonemes are similar in that they are pronounced by using the lips to suddenly stop a stream of air. They differ or oppose one another in only one aspect: whether the air passing through the windpipe does or does not vibrate (voiced and unvoiced, respectively) the vocal cords. During actual speech, vibrating vocal cords produce /b/, and nonvibrating, /p/. Similarly, a mytheme finds its meaning through opposition. Hating or loving one's parents, falling in love with someone who does or who does not love you, and cherishing or abandoning one's children all exemplify the dual or opposing nature of mythemes. The rules that govern how these mythemes may be combined constitute myth's structure or grammar. The meaning of any individual myth, then, depends on the interaction and order of the mythemes within the story. Out of this structural pattern develops the myth's meaning.

When applied to a specific literary work, the intertextuality of myth becomes evident. For example, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the title character overestimates the value and support of children when he trusts Regan and Goneril, his two eldest daughters, to take care of him in his old age. He also underestimates the value and support of children when he banishes his youngest and most-loved daughter, Cordelia. Like the binary opposition that occurs between the /b/ and /p/ phonemes, the binary opposition of underestimating versus overestimating love automatically occurs when reading *King Lear* because such mythemes have occurred in countless other texts and immediately ignite emotions within the reader.

Like our unconscious mastery of our language's langue, we also master myth's structure. Our ability to grasp this structure, says Lévi-Strauss, is innate. Like language, myths are simply another way we classify and organize our world.

Roland Barthes

Researching and writing in response to Lévi-Strauss was his contemporary, the eminent French structuralist Roland Barthes (1915–1980). Barthes' contribution to structuralist theory is best summed up in the title of his most famous text, *S/Z* (1970). In Honoré Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes noted that the first *s* is pronounced as the *s* in *snake*, and the second as the *z* in *zoo*. Both phonemes, /s/ and /z/, respectively, are a **minimal pair**—that is, both are produced by using the same articulatory organs and in the same place in the mouth, the difference being that /s/ is unvoiced (no vibration of vocal cords) and /z/ is voiced (vibration of vocal cords when air is blowing through the breath channel). Like all minimal pairs—/p/and /b/, /t/ and /d/, and /k/ and /g/, for example—this pair operates in what Barthes

calls **binary opposition.** Even within a phoneme, binary opposition exists, for a phoneme is, as Saussure reminded us, a class of nearly identical sounds called allophones, which differ **phonetically**—that is, by slightly changing the pronunciation but not altering the recognizable phoneme. Borrowing and further developing Saussure's work, Barthes declares that all language is its own self-enclosed system based on binary operations (i.e., difference).

Barthes then applies his assumption that meaning develops through difference to all social contexts, including fashions, familial relations, dining, and literature, to name a few. When applied to literature, an individual text is simply a message—an example of parole—that must be interpreted by using the appropriate codes or signs or binary operations that form the basis of the entire system, the langue. Only through recognizing the codes or binary operations within the text, says Barthes, can the message encoded within the text be explained. For example, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" most readers intuitively know that young Goodman Brown will come face-to-face with evil when he enters the forest. Why? Because one code or binary operation that we all seemingly know is that light implies good and dark evil. Brown thus enters the dark forest and leaves the light of his home, only to find the "false light" of evil emanating from the artificial light—the fires that light the baptismal service of those being baptized into Satan's legions. By finding other binary oppositions within the text and showing how these oppositions interrelate, the structuralist can then decode Hawthorne's text and explain its meaning.

Such a process abandons or dismisses the importance of the author, any historical or literary period, or particular textual elements or genres. Rather than discovering any element of truth within a text, this methodology shows the process of decoding a text in relationship to the codes provided by the structure of language itself.

Vladimir Propp and Narratology

Expanding Lévi-Strauss's linguistic model of myths, a group of structuralists called **narratologists** began another kind of structuralism: **structuralist narratology,** the science of narrative. Like Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, these structuralists illustrate how a story's meaning develops from its overall structure, its langue, rather than from each individual story's isolated theme. Narratology's overriding concern is the narrative structure of a text. What is the interrelationship of a narrative's constituent parts, ask narratologists, and how are these parts constructed to shape the narrative itself? What are the "rules" that govern the formation of plot? Of point of view? Of narrator? Of audience?

Like other critics, narratologists amend and borrow ideas from other reading strategies to help shape their ideas. Narratology borrows elements from both the French structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss and from Russian Formalist critics such as Vladimir Propp (1895–1970). In his influential text *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), Propp investigates Russian fairy tales to decode their langue. According to his analysis, all folk or fairy tales are based on thirty-one fixed elements, or what Propp calls **narrative functions** or **narratemes,** that occur in a given sequence. Each function identifies predictable patterns that central characters, such as the hero, the villain, or the helper, enact to further the plot of the story. Any story may use any number of these elements, such as "accepting the call to adventure," "recognizing the hero," and "the punishing of the villain," among others, but each element occurs in its logical and proper sequence. Other critics, notably Paul Vehvilainen, have simplified Propp's thirty-one functions into a five-point system that, like Propp's, always occur in the same order:

1. A *lack* of something exists.
2. This lack forces the hero to go on a *quest* to eliminate this lack.
3. On the quest, the hero encounters a *magical helper.*
4. The hero is subjected to one or more *tests.*
5. After having passed the test(s), the hero receives a *reward.*

Like Propp's thirty-one narratemes, these simplified five basic functions can be applied to most fairy tales.

Applying Propp's narratological principles to specific literary works is both fun and simple. For example, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," Goodman Brown, the protagonist, is given a task to do: meet someone in the forest after dark. Upon entering the forest, Brown soon encounters the villain, who attempts to take Brown deeper and deeper into the heart of the forest. Various helpers appear to propel the plot forward, until the protagonist's or hero's task is completed, at which time Goodman Brown seemingly frees himself from the clutches of evil.

Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette

Another narratologist, the Franco-Bulgarian theorist and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov (1939–), declares that all stories are composed of grammatical units. For Todorov, the syntax of narrative—how the various grammatical elements of a story combine—is essential. By applying a rather intricate grammatical model to narrative—dividing the text into semantic, syntactic, and verbal aspects—Todorov believes he can discover the narrative's langue and establish a grammar of narrative. He begins by asserting

that the grammatical clause, and in turn, the subject and verb, is the basic interpretive unit of each sentence and can be linguistically analyzed and further dissected into a variety of grammatical categories to show how all narratives are structured. An individual text (parole) interests Todorov as a means to describe the overall properties of literature in general (langue).

Other narratologists such as the French theorist Gérard Genette (1930–) have also developed methods of analyzing a story's structure to uncover its meaning, each building upon the former work of another narratologist (and in some cases Russian Formalists) and adding an additional element or two. Genette is responsible for reintroducing a host of rhetorical terms into literary theory and criticism. For example, he believes that tropes, or figures of speech, require a reader's special attention. Genette's five-part work *Figures I–V* (a series written from 1967 to 2002) and particularly his text *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1979) has strongly influenced structuralism's vocabulary and methodology in both America and France.

Although these narratologists provide us with various approaches to texts, all furnish us with a **metalanguage**—words used to describe language—so we can understand *how* a text means, not *what* it means.

Jonathan Culler

By the mid-1970s, Jonathan Culler (1944–), professor of English and comparative literature at Cornell University, became the voice of structuralism in America and took structuralism in yet another direction. In his work *Structuralist Poetic: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (1975), Culler declares that abstract linguistic models used by narratologists tend to focus on parole, spending too much time analyzing individual stories, poems, and novels. What is needed, he believes, is a return to an investigation of langue, Saussure's main premise.

According to Culler, readers, when given a chance, somehow will make sense out of the most bizarre texts because readers possess what Culler calls **literary competence**. Through experiences with texts, Culler asserts, readers have internalized a set of rules that govern their acts of interpretation. Instead of analyzing individual interpretations of a work, we must spend our time, Culler insists, on analyzing the act of interpretation itself. We must shift the focus from the text to the reader. How, asks Culler, does interpretation take place in the first place? What system underlies the very act of reading that allows any other system to operate?

Unlike other structuralists, Culler presents a theory of reading. What, he asks, is the internalized system of literary competence readers use to interpret a work? In other words, how do they read? What system guides them through the process of interpreting the work, of making sense of the spoken or printed word?

Culler maintains that every reader holds to three underlying assumptions when reading and interpreting texts:

1. A text will be unified.
2. A text will be thematically significant.
3. A text's significance can take the form of reflection.

Accordingly, Culler then seeks to establish the system, the langue, that undergirds the reading process. By focusing on the act of interpretation itself to discover literature's langue, Culler believes he is returning structuralism to its Saussurean roots.

A Model of Interpretation

Although structuralist theories abound, a core of structuralists believes that the primary signifying system is best found as a series of binary oppositions that the reader organizes, values, and uses to interpret the text. Each binary operation can be pictured as a fraction, the top half (the numerator) being what is more valued than its related bottom half (the denominator). Accordingly, in the binary operation light/dark, the reader has learned to value light over dark, and in the binary operation good/evil the reader has similarly learned to value good over evil. How the reader maps out and organizes the various binary operations and their interrelationships found within the text but already existing in the mind of the reader determines for that particular reader the text's interpretation.

No matter what its methodology, structuralism emphasizes form and structure, not the actual content of a text. Although individual texts must be analyzed, structuralists are more interested in the rule-governed system that underlies texts rather than the texts themselves. *How* texts mean—not *what* texts mean—is their chief interest.

FROM STRUCTURALISM TO POSTSTRUCTURALISM: DECONSTRUCTION

Throughout much of the 1950s and 1960s, structuralism dominated European and American literary theory and criticism. While the application of structuralist principles varies from one theoretician to another, all believe that language is the primary means of **signification** (i.e., how we achieve meaning through linguistic signs and other symbols) and that language comprises its own rule-governed system to achieve such meaning. Although language is the primary sign system, it is not the only one. Fashions, sports,

ining, and other activities all have their own language or codes whereby ıe participants know what is to be expected of them in a particular situa- on. When dining at an elegant restaurant, for example, connoisseurs of fine ining know that it is inappropriate to drink from the finger bowl. Similarly, ɔotball fans know that during a game it is indeed both appropriate and cus- ɔmary for them to shout and scream to support their team.

From a structuralist perspective, such expectations highlight that all ocial and cultural practices are governed by rules or codes. Wishing to liscover these rules, structuralists declare that the proper study of reality and ıeaning is the system behind such individual practices, not the individual ɔractices themselves. Like attending a football game or dining at a fine res- aurant, the act of reading is also a cultural and a social practice that contains ts own codes. Meaning in a text resides in these codes that the reader has nastered before he or she even picks up an actual text. For the structuralist, he proper study of literature is an inquiry into the conditions surrounding he act of interpretation itself, not an investigation of an individual text.

In the mid-1960s, this structuralist assumption that meaning can be dis- ɔovered through an examination of a text's structural codes was challenged ɔy the maxim of **undecidability:** a text has many meanings and, therefore, ıo definitive interpretation. Rather than providing answers about the mean- ng of texts or a methodology for discovering how a text means, a new ap- ɔroach to reading, **deconstruction theory,** asks a different set of questions, ɛndeavoring to show that what a text claims it says and what it actually says ıre discernibly different. By casting doubt on most previously held theories, leconstruction declares that a text has an almost infinite number of possible nterpretations. Furthermore, declare some deconstructionists, the interpre- ations themselves are just as creative and may be as important as the text or exts being interpreted.

With the advent of deconstruction and its challenge to structuralism and ɔther established theories, a paradigmatic shift occurs in literary theory and ɛriticism. Before deconstruction, literary critics—New Critics, some reader- ɔriented theorists, structuralists, and others—found meaning *within* the liter- ary text or the codes of the various sign systems within the world of the text and the reader. The most innovative of these theorists, the structuralists, pro- vided new and exciting ways of discovering meaning, but nonetheless, these theorists maintained that meaning could be found. Underlying all the prede- ɔonstructionist suppositions about the world is a set of philosophical, ethical, and scientific assumptions we dub modernity that provided the bases for the beliefs held by Western culture for about three hundred years. With the emer- gence of deconstruction, these long-held beliefs were challenged by **poststructuralism,** a new basis for understanding and guiding humanity (its name denoting that it historically comes after or *post* structuralism). Often, historians, anthropologists, literary theorists, and other scholars use the term *postmodernism* synonymously with *deconstruction* and *poststructuralism,* although the term *postmodernism* was coined in the 1930s and has broader historical implications outside the realm of literary theory than do the terms *poststructuralism* or *deconstruction.*

DECONSTRUCTION: ITS HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Deconstruction: Its Beginnings

The term *deconstruction* first emerged on the American literary stage in 1966 when Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), a French philosopher and teacher, read his paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" at a Johns Hopkins University symposium. (Derrida both borrows and amends the meaning of this word from a work titled *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1927), written by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.) In "Structure, Sign, and Play," (what many scholars believe to be the inaugural essay for deconstruction theory) Derrida questions and disputes the metaphysical assumptions held to be true by Western philosophy since the time of Plato, and inaugurates what many critics believe to be the most intricate and challenging method of textual analysis yet to appear.

Derrida himself would not want deconstruction construed as a critical theory, a school of criticism, a mode or method of literary criticism, or a philosophy. Nowhere in Derrida's writings does he state the encompassing tenets of his critical approach, nor does he ever present a codified body of deconstructive theory or a practical methodology. Although he develops his views and ideas throughout his canon, Derrida believes that he cannot develop a formalized statement of his "rules for reading, interpretation, and writing." Unlike a unified treatise, Derrida claims that his approach to reading and literary analysis is more a "strategic device" than a methodology, more a strategy or approach to literature than a school or theory of criticism. Such theories of criticism, he believes, must identify with a body of knowledge that adherents decree to be true or to contain truth. It is this assertion—that truth or a core of metaphysical ideals actually exists and can be believed, articulated, and supported—that Derrida wishes to dispute and "deconstruct." His device is deconstruction, a term Derrida defines as "a position one has with regard to something."

Because deconstruction uses previously formulated theories from other schools of criticism, coins many words for its newly established ideas, and challenges beliefs long held in Western culture, many students, teachers, and critics avoid studying its ideas, fearing the supposed complexity of its analytic apparatus. By organizing deconstruction and its assumptions into three workable areas of study rather than plunging directly into some of its complex terminology, we can begin to grasp this approach to textual analysis.

First, we will briefly examine what Derrida borrows and then amends from structuralism, the starting point for his deconstructive strategy. Next we will investigate the proposed radical changes Derrida makes in Western philosophy and metaphysics. Such changes, Derrida readily admits, turn Western metaphysics on its head. Finally, we must master the new terminology, coupled with the new philosophical assumptions and their corresponding methodological approaches to textual analysis, of deconstruction to understand and use this approach to interpreting a text.

Derrida's Starting Place: Structuralism

Derrida begins formulating his strategy of reading by critiquing Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. Derrida accepts Saussure's primary belief that language is a system of rules and that these rules govern every aspect of language. In addition, Derrida affirms Saussure's assumption that the **linguistic sign** (Saussure's linguistic replacement for the word *word*) is both arbitrary and conventional. For example, most languages have different words for the same concept. The English word *man*, for instance, is *homme* in French. And in English we know that the meaning of the word *pit* exists not because it possesses some innate acoustic quality, but because it differs from *hit*, *wit*, and *lit*. In other words, the linguistic sign is composed of two parts: the signifier, the spoken or written constituent such as the sound /t/ and the orthographic (written) symbol *t*, and the signified, the concept signaled by the signifier. It is this relationship between the signifier (e.g., the word *dog*) and the signified (the concept or the reality behind the word *dog*) that Saussure maintains is arbitrary and conventional. The linguistic sign is thus defined by differences that distinguish it from other signs, not by any innate properties.

Believing that our knowledge of the world is shaped by the language that represents it, Saussure is insistent about the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. In establishing this principle, he undermines the long-held belief that there is some natural link between the word and the thing it represents—that is, the word's referent. Saussure asserts that it is only *after* a signifier and the signified are linked that some kind of relationship exists between these two linguistic elements, although the relationship itself is both arbitrary and conventionalized. Ultimately, for Saussure meaning in language resides in a systematized combination of sounds that rely chiefly on the differences among these signs, not on any innate properties within the signs themselves. It is this concept that meaning in language is determined by the differences among the language signs that Derrida borrows from Saussure as a key building block in the formulation of deconstruction.

Derrida's Interpretation of Saussure's Sign

Derridean deconstruction begins with and emphatically affirms Saussure's decree that language is a system based on differences. Derrida agrees with Saussure that we can know the meaning of signifiers through and because of their relationships and their differences among themselves. Unlike Saussure, Derrida also applies this reasoning to the signified. Like the signifier, the signified can also be known only through its relationships and its differences among other signifieds. Furthermore, declares Derrida, the signified cannot orient or make permanent the meaning of the signifier, for the relationship between the signifier and the signified is both arbitrary and conventional. Accordingly, signifieds often function as signifiers. For example, in the sentence *I filled the glass with milk*, the spoken or written word *glass* is a signifier; its signified is the concept of a *container* that can be filled. However, in the sentence *The container was filled with glass*, the spoken or written word *container*, a signified in the previous sentence, is now a signifier, its signified being the concept of an object that can be filled.

ASSUMPTIONS OF DECONSTRUCTION

Transcendental Signified

Believing that signification is both arbitrary and conventional, Derrida now begins his process of turning Western philosophy on its head. He boldly asserts that the entire history of Western metaphysics from Plato to the present is founded on a classic, fundamental error. This great error is Western philosophy's searching for what Derrida calls a **transcendental signified**, an external point of reference upon which one may build a concept or philosophy. Once found, this transcendental signified would provide ultimate meaning since it would be the origin of origins, reflecting itself and, as Derrida says, providing a "reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign." It would, in essence, guarantee to those who believe in it that they do exist and have meaning. For example, if we posit that *I* or *self* is a transcendental signified, then the concept of *self* becomes the unifying principle upon which I structure my world. Objects, concepts, ideas, or even people take on meaning in my world only if I filter them through my unifying, ultimate signified: *self*.

Unlike other signifieds, the transcendental signified would have to be understood without comparing it to other signifieds or signifiers. In other words, its meaning would originate directly with itself, not differentially or relationally as does the meaning of all other signifieds or signifiers. Thus, a transcendental signified functions as or provides the *center* of meaning,

allowing those who believe in one or more of them to structure their ideas of reality around such centers of truth. By definition, a center of meaning could not subject itself to structural analysis because by so doing it would lose its place as a transcendental signified to another center. For example, if I declare the concept *self* to be my transcendental signified, then learn that my mind or self is composed of the id, the ego, and the superego; I could no longer hold the *self* or *I* to be my transcendental signified. In the process of discovering the three parts of my conscious and unconscious mind, I have both structurally analyzed and "decentered" *self*, thus negating it as a transcendental signified.

Logocentrism

According to Derrida, Western metaphysics has invented a variety of terms that can function as centers: *God, reason, origin, being, essence, truth, humanity, beginning, end,* and *self,* to name a few. Each can operate as a concept that is self-sufficient and self-originating and can serve as a transcendental signified. Derrida names this Western proclivity for desiring a center **logocentrism:** the belief that there is an ultimate reality or center of truth that can serve as the basis for all our thoughts and actions.

Derrida readily admits that we can never totally free ourselves from our logocentric habit of thinking and our inherited concept of the universe. To decenter any transcendental signified is to be caught up automatically in the terminology that allows that centering concept to operate. For example, if the concept *self* functions as my center and I then discover my unconscious self, I automatically place in motion what Derrida calls a "binary opposition" (two opposing concepts): the *self* and the *unconscious self.* By decentering and questioning the *self,* I cause the *unconscious self* to become the new center. By questioning the old center, I establish a new one.

Such logocentric thinking, declares Derrida, has its origin in Aristotle's principle of noncontradiction: A thing cannot both have a property and not have a property. Thanks to Aristotle, maintains Derrida, Western metaphysics has developed an "either-or" mentality or logic that inevitably leads to dualistic thinking and to the centering and decentering of transcendental signifieds. The process of logocentric thinking, asserts Derrida, is natural but problematic for Western readers.

Binary Oppositions

Since the establishing of one center of unity automatically means that another is decentered, Derrida concludes that Western metaphysics is based on a system of binary operations or conceptual oppositions (also called binary oppositions). For each center, an opposing center (e.g., God/humankind, for example) exists. In addition, Western philosophy decrees that in each of these binary operations or opposing centers, one concept is superior and defines itself by its opposite or inferior center. We know *truth,* for instance, because we know *deception;* we know *good* because we know *bad.* Derrida objects to the creation of these hierarchal binaries as the basis for Western metaphysics.

Phonocentrism

Derrida believes that establishing such conceptually based binary oppositions as the basis for believing what is really real (one's worldview) is problematic at best. Instead, he wishes to dismantle or deconstruct the structure such binary oppositions have created. Derrida asserts that the binary oppositions on which Western metaphysics has been constructed since the time of Plato are structured so one element will always be **privileged** (be in a superior position) and the other **unprivileged** (in an inferior position). In this way of thinking, the first or top elements of the pairs in the following list of binary oppositions are privileged: man/woman, human/animal, soul/body, good/bad. Key for Derrida is his assertion that Western thought has long privileged speech over writing. This privileging of speech over writing Derrida calls **phonocentrism.**

In placing speech in the privileged position, phonocentrism treats writing as inferior. We value, says Derrida, a speaker's words more than the speaker's writing because words imply presence. Through the vehicle of spoken words, we supposedly learn directly what a speaker is trying to say. From this point of view, writing becomes a mere copy of speech, an attempt to capture the idea that was once spoken. Whereas speech implies presence, writing signifies absence, thereby placing into action another binary opposition: presence/absence.

Since phonocentrism is based on the assumption that speech conveys the meaning or direct ideas of a speaker better than writing (a mere copy of speech), phonocentrism assumes a logocentric way of thinking, that the self is the center of meaning and can best ascertain ideas directly from other selves through spoken words. Through speaking, the self declares its presence, its significance, and its being or existence.

Metaphysics of Presence

Accordingly, Derrida coins the phrase metaphysics of presence to encompass those ideas such as logocentrism, phonocentrism, the operation of binary oppositions, and other notions that Western thought posits in its conceptions of language and metaphysics. His objective is to demonstrate the shaky and

fragile foundations upon which such beliefs have been established. By deconstructing the basic premises of metaphysics of presence, Derrida believes that he gives us a strategy for reading that opens up a variety of new interpretations heretofore unseen by those who are bound by the restraints of Western thought.

METHODOLOGY

Acknowledging Binary Operations in Western Thought

The first stage in a deconstructive reading is to recognize the existence and the operation of binary oppositions in our thinking. According to Derrida, one of the most "violent hierarchies" derived from Platonic and Aristotelian thought is speech/writing, with speech being privileged. Consequently, speech is awarded presence, and writing is equated with absence. Because writing is the inferior of the two, writing becomes simply the symbols of speech, a secondhand representation of ideas.

Once any of these hierarchies is recognized and acknowledged, Derrida proposes that we can readily reverse its elements. Such a reversal is possible because truth is ever elusive; we can always decenter the center if any is found. By reversing the hierarchy, Derrida does not wish merely to substitute one hierarchy for another and involve himself in a negative mode. When the hierarchy is reversed, says Derrida, we will then be able to examine those values and beliefs that give rise to both the original hierarchy and the newly created one. When Derrida examines each value or belief in the hierarchy, he is putting these elements under a process he calls **erasure**—he is assuming, for the moment, that each of the signifiers is clear and definitive. He does realize that he is involving himself in a reading strategy because each value or belief is, according to Derrida, absent of any definitive meaning. Such an examination will reveal how the meaning of terms arises from the differences between them.

Arche-writing

In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida spends much time explaining why the speech/writing hierarchy can and must be reversed. **Grammatology** is Derrida's term for the science of writing and his investigation of the origin of language itself. In short, he argues for a redefinition of the term *writing* that will allow him to assert that writing is actually a precondition for and prior to speech. According to Derrida's metaphysical reasoning, language then becomes a special kind of writing that he calls **arche-writing** or **archi-écriture.**

Using traditional Western metaphysics that is grounded in phonocentrism, Derrida begins his reversal of the speech/writing hierarchy by noting that both language and writing share common characteristics. Both, for example, involve an encoding or inscription. In writing, this coding is obvious because the written symbols represent various phonemes. In language or speech, a similar encoding exists. As Saussure has already shown, there exists an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified (between the spoken word *cat*, for example, and the concept of cat itself). There is, then, no innate relationship between the spoken word and the concept, object, or idea it represents. Nevertheless, once a signifier and a signified join to form a sign, some kind of relationship then exists between these components of the sign. Accordingly, some kind of inscription or encoding has taken place between the spoken word *cat* (the signifier) and its concept (the signified).

For Derrida, both writing and language are means of signification, and each can be considered a signifying system. Traditional Western metaphysics and Saussurean linguistics equate speech (language) with presence because speech is accompanied by the presence of a living speaker. The presence of a speaker necessarily links sound and sense and leads to understanding—one usually comprehends rather well the spoken word. Writing, on the other hand, assumes the absence of a speaker. Such absence can produce misunderstanding because writing is a depersonalized medium that separates the actual utterance of the speaker and his or her audience. This absence can lead to misunderstanding of the signifying system.

All the more reason, Derrida asserts, that we broaden our understanding of writing. Writing, he declares, cannot be reduced to letters or other symbols inscribed on a page. Rather, it is directly related to what Saussure believed to be the basic element of language: difference. We know one phoneme or one word because each is different from another, and we know that there is no innate relationship between a signifier and its signified. The phoneme /b/, for example, could have easily become the symbol for the phoneme /d/, just as the coined word *bodt* could have become the English word *ball*. It is this freeplay or undecidability in any system of communication that Derrida calls writing. The quality of play with the various elements of signification in any system of communication totally eludes a speaker's awareness when using language, for the speaker falsely assumes a position of supposed master of his or her speech.

By equating writing with freeplay or the element of undecidability at the center of all systems of communication, Derrida declares that writing actually governs language, thereby negating the speech/writing hierarchy of Western metaphysics. Writing now becomes privileged and speech unprivileged because speech is a kind of writing called arche-writing.

Derrida then challenges Western philosophy's concept that human consciousness gives birth to language. Without language (or arche-writing),

argues Derrida, there can be no consciousness because consciousness presupposes language. Through arche-writing, we impose human consciousness upon the world.

Supplementation

The relationship between any binary hierarchy is always unstable and problematic. It is not Derrida's purpose simply to reverse all binary oppositions that exist in Western thought. Rather, Derrida wants to show the fragile basis for the establishment of such hierarchies and the possibility of inverting these hierarchies to gain new insights into language and life. Derrida uses the term **supplement** to refer to the unstable relationship between elements in a binary operation. For example, in the speech/writing opposition, writing supplements speech and in actuality takes the place of speech (arche-writing). **Supplementation,** Derrida asserts, exists in all binary oppositions. In the truth/deception hierarchy, for instance, Western thought would assert the supremacy of truth over deception, attributing to deception a mere supplementary role. The logocentric way of thinking asserts the purity of truth over deception. Upon examination, deception more frequently than not contains at least some truth, and who is to say, asks Derrida, when truth has been spoken, achieved, or even conceived? Purity of truth may simply not exist. In all human activity, Derrida concludes, supplementation operates.

Différance

By recognizing that supplementation necessarily occurs in all of Western metaphysics and by inverting the privileged and unprivileged elements, Derrida begins to develop his reading strategy. Once he "turns Western metaphysics on its head," he asserts his answer to logocentrism and other Western elements by coining a new word and concept: **différance.** The word itself is derived from the French word *différer,* meaning "to defer, postpone, or delay," and "to differ, to be different from." Derrida deliberately coins his word to be ambiguous, taking on both meanings simultaneously. And in French, the word is a pun because it exists only in writing. In speech there is no way to tell the difference between the French word *différence* and Derrida's coined word *différance.*

Understanding what Derrida means by différance is one of the basic keys to understanding deconstruction. Basically, *différance* is Derrida's "What if?" question. What if no transcendental signified exists? What if there is no presence in whom we can find ultimate truth? What if all our knowledge does not arise from self-identity? What if there is no essence, being, or inherently unifying element in the universe? What then?

The presence of such a transcendental signified would immediately establish the binary operation presence/absence. Since Western metaphysics holds that presence is supreme or privileged and absence unprivileged, Derrida suggests that we temporarily reverse this hierarchy, making it now absence/presence. With such a reversal, we can no longer posit a transcendental signified. No longer is there an absolute standard or coherent unity from which knowledge proceeds and develops. All human knowledge and all self-identity must now spring from difference, not sameness, from absence, not presence.

When a reversal of this pivotal binary operation occurs, two dramatic results follow: First, human knowledge becomes referential; that is, we can know something only because it differs from some other bit of knowledge, not because we can compare this knowledge to any absolute or coherent unity (a transcendental signified). Human knowledge must now be based on difference. We know something because it differs from something else to which it is related. By the reversal, nothing can be studied or learned in isolation because all knowledge becomes context related. Second, we must also forgo closure—that is, since no transcendental signified exists, all interpretations concerning life, self-identity, and knowledge are possible, probable, and legitimate.

But what is the significance of *différance* when reading texts? If we, like Derrida, assert that *différance* operates in language and also in writing (Derrida sometimes equates *différance* and arche-writing), what are the implications for textual analysis? The most obvious answer is that texts lack presence. As soon as we do away with the transcendental signified and reverse the presence/absence binary operation, texts can no longer have presence. In isolation, texts cannot possess meaning. Because all meaning and knowledge is now based on difference, no text can simply mean one thing. Texts become intertextual. The meaning of a text cannot be ascertained by examining only that particular text; instead, a text's meaning *evolves* from that derived from the interrelatedness of one text to an interrelatedness of many texts. Like language itself, texts are caught in a dynamic, context-related interchange. Never can we state a text's definitive meaning because it has no "one" correct or definitive interpretation. No longer can we declare one interpretation to be right and another wrong because meaning in a text is always illusive, dynamic, and transitory.

The search, then, for the text's "correct" meaning or the author's so-called intentions becomes meaningless. Since meaning is derived from differences in a dynamic, context-related, ongoing process, all texts have multiple meanings or interpretations. If we assert, as does Derrida, that no transcendental signified exists, then there can exist no absolute or pure meaning conveyed supposedly by authorial intent or professorial dictates. Meaning evolves as we, the readers, interact with the text, with both the readers and the text providing social and cultural context.

DECONSTRUCTIVE SUPPOSITIONS FOR TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

A deconstructionist begins textual analysis by assuming that a text has multiple interpretations and that a text allows itself to be reread and thus reinterpreted countless times. Denying the New Critical stance that a text possesses a special ontological status and has one and only one correct interpretation, deconstructionists assert that the great joy of textual analysis resides in discovering new interpretations each time a text is read and reread. Ultimately, a text's meaning is undecidable because each reading or rereading elicits different interpretations.

When beginning the interpretive process, deconstructionists seek to override their own logocentric and inherited ways of viewing a text. Such revolutionary thinking decrees that they find the binary oppositions at work in the text itself. These binary oppositions, they believe, represent established and accepted ideologies that more frequently than not posit the existence of transcendental signifieds. These binary operations, then, restrict meaning because they already assume a fixed interpretation of reality. They assume, for instance, the existence of truth and falsehood, reason and insanity, good and bad. Realizing that these hierarchies presuppose a fixed and a biased way of viewing the world, deconstructionists search for the binary oppositions operating in the text and reverse them. By reversing these hierarchies, deconstructionists wish to challenge the fixed views assumed by such hierarchies and the values associated with such rigid beliefs.

The technique of identifying the binary operations that exist in a text allows deconstructionists to expose the preconceived assumptions upon which most of us base our interpretations. We all, for example, declare some activity, being, or object to be good or bad, valuable or worthless, significant or insignificant. These kinds of values or ideas automatically operate when we write or read any text. In the reversal of hierarchies that form the basis of our interpretations, deconstructionists wish to free us from the constraints of our prejudiced beliefs. Such freedom, they hope, will allow us to see a text from exciting new perspectives that we have never before recognized.

These various perspectives cannot be simultaneously perceived by the reader or even the writer of a text. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," for example, many readers believe that the fifty-year-old character who shepherds Goodman Brown through his night's visit in the forest is Satan and, therefore, necessarily an evil character. Brown's own interpretation of this character seems to support this view. According to deconstructionist ideas, at least two binary operations are at work here: good/evil and God/Satan. But what if we reverse these hierarchies? Then

the spectral figure may not be Satan and may not be evil! Such a new perspective will dramatically change our interpretation of the text.

Deconstructionists say that we cannot simultaneously see both of these perspectives in the story. To discover where the new hierarchy Satan/God or evil/good will lead us in our interpretation, we must suspend our first interpretation. We do not, however, forget it because it is locked in our minds. We simply shift our allegiance to another perspective.

The process of oscillating between interpretations, levels, or perspectives allows us to see the impossibility of ever choosing a correct interpretation because from Derrida's perspective, meaning is an ongoing activity that is always in progress, always based on *différance*. By asking what will happen if we reverse the hierarchies that frame our preconceived ways of thinking, we open ourselves to a never-ending process of interpretation, one that decrees that no hierarchy or binary operation is right and no other is wrong.

Deconstruction: A New Reading Strategy

Deconstructionists do not want to set up a new philosophy, a new literary theory of analysis, or a new school of literary criticism. Instead, they present a new reading strategy, one that allows us to make choices concerning the various levels of interpretation we see operating in a text. All levels, they maintain, have validity. Deconstructionists also believe that their approach to reading frees the reader from ideological allegiances that restrict the comprehension of meaning in a text.

Because meaning, they believe, emerges through interpretation, even the author does not control a text's interpretation. Although writers may have clearly stated intentions concerning their texts, such statements should be given little credence. Like language itself, texts have no outside referents or transcendental signifieds. What an author thinks he or she says or means in a text may be quite different from what is actually written. Deconstructionists, therefore, look for places in the text where the author **misspeaks** or loses control of language and says what was supposedly not meant to be said. These slips of language often occur in questions, figurative language, and strong declarations. For example, suppose we read the following words: "Important Seniors Meeting." Although the author thinks that readers will interpret these words to mean that it is important that all seniors be present at this particular meeting, the author may have misspoken; these words can actually mean that only important seniors should attend this meeting. By examining such slips and the binary operations that govern them, deconstructionists are able to demonstrate the undecidability of a text's meaning.

At first glance, a deconstructionist reading strategy may appear to be linear—that is, having a clearly delineated beginning, middle, and end. If this is so, then to apply this strategy to a text, we must do the following:

- Discover the binary operations that govern a text.
- Comment on the values, concepts, and ideas beyond these operations.
- Reverse these present binary operations.
- Dismantle previously held worldviews.
- Accept the possibility of various perspectives or levels of meaning in a text based on the new binary inversions.
- Allow meaning of the text to be undecidable.

Although all these elements do operate in a deconstructionist reading, they may not operate in this exact sequence. Since we all tend toward logocentrism when reading, we may not notice some logocentric binary operations functioning in the text until we have reversed some other obvious binary oppositions and are interpreting the text on multiple levels. In addition, we must never declare such a reading to be completed or finished because the process of meaning is ongoing, never allowing us to pledge allegiance to any one view.

Such a reading strategy disturbs most readers and critics because it is not a neat, completed package, whereby if we follow step A through to step Z we arrive at *the* reading of the text. Because texts have no external referents, their meanings depend on the close interactions of the text, the reader, and social and cultural elements both within the reader and the text, as does every reading or interpretive process. Denying the organic unity of a text, deconstructionists declare the freeplay of language in a text. Since language itself is reflexive, not mimetic, we can never stop finding meaning in any given text, whether we have read such a text once or a hundred times.

Overall, deconstruction solicits an ongoing relationship between the interpreter (the critic) and the text. By examining the text alone, deconstructionists hope to ask a set of questions that will continually challenge the ideological positions of power and authority that dominate literary criticism. Furthermore, in the process of discovering meaning in a text, deconstructionists declare that criticism of a text is just as valuable as the text being read, thereby inverting the text/criticism hierarchy.

American Deconstructionists

After Derrida's introduction of deconstruction to his American audience in 1966, the philosopher found several sympathetic listeners who soon became loyal adherents and defenders of his new reading strategy: notably, the Romantic scholar Paul de Man (1919–1983) (*Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 1971), the rhetorical deconstructionist Hayden White (1928–) (*Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, 1978), the sometimes terse metaphysical deconstructionist Geoffrey Hartman (1921–) (*Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*, 1980), the strong voice of Barbara Johnson (1947–2009) (*The Critical Difference*, 1980), and the phenomenological critic-turned-deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller (1928–) (*Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*, 1982). These critics assured that deconstruction would have a voice and an established place in American literary theory. Although the voices of other poststructural theories, such as Cultural Poetics and Postcolonialism, are now strongly being heard and advocated, deconstruction's philosophical assumptions and practical reading strategies form the basis of many postmodern literary practices.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

Structuralism

When examining any text through the lens of structuralism, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the tensions, the binary oppositions, highlighted in the text?
- Is each of these tensions minor or major?
- What do you believe is the major or pivotal tension in the work?
- Can you explain the intertextuality of all the discovered binaries?
- Does this work contain any mythemes? If so, what are they, and how do they help you discover the text's structure?

The following questions apply your understanding of structuralism to Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown":

- What are the various binary oppositions or operations? Which of these binaries control the story's structure? What is the chief binary?
- What mythemes are evident in Hawthorne's tale? How do these mythemes show the intertextuality of this particular text with other literary texts you have read?
- How do the various semantic features contained in "Young Goodman Brown" directly relate to the codes, signs, or binary oppositions you find in the text?
- Using "Young Goodman Brown," apply at least three different methods of structuralism to arrive at how this particular text achieves meaning. In the final analysis, is there a difference among the three methodologies in how the text achieves its meaning?
- Choose another sign system—sports, music, classroom etiquette—and explain the codes that generate meaning.

Deconstruction

When examining any text through the lens of deconstruction theory and practice, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the binary operations or oppositions that govern the text?
- What ideas, concepts, and values are being established by these binaries?
- By reversing the elements in each of the binaries, can you challenge the previously held value system posited by the original binary?
- After reversing one or more binaries in a given text, can you dismantle your original interpretation of that text?
- Can you cite three different interpretations for a text of your choosing by flipping a series of three major binaries contained in that text?

The following questions apply your understanding of deconstruction theory to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown.":

- Write a one-page interpretation of Hawthorne's story. After you have completed your interpretation, cite the binary operations that function both within your chosen text and within your thinking to allow you to arrive at your perspective.
- Using "Young Goodman Brown," reverse one of the binary operations and reinterpret the text. When you are finished, reverse two additional binaries and reinterpret the story. What differences exist between the two interpretations?
- Using "Young Goodman Brown" as your text, demonstrate either how Hawthorne misspeaks or where the text involves itself in paradox, sometimes called **aporia.** Be specific. Be able to point to lines, figurative speech, or imaginative language to support your statements.
- Using the text of "Young Goodman Brown," cite at least four dramatically different interpretations, all based on deconstructive readings.

CRITIQUES AND RESPONSES

Structuralism

By the mid-1960s, structuralism became a dominant theory in both the United States and in Europe. Borrowing and blending elements of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, the textual concerns of Russian Formalism, the psychoanalysis of both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the epistemological concerns of Michel Foucault, the Marxist concerns of the French theorist Louis Althusser, and the multiple ideas of the narratologists, structuralism seemingly embraced all disciplines and offered a unifying approach not only to literary theory but also to life itself. Applying its "objective" and "scientific" analyses to texts and culture, it provided a new lens through which to

see the world, a lens that promised to demystify literature and life. Its basic premise—that no element, situation, or text has significance in isolation but must be first integrated and then analyzed by examining the overall structure of which it is a part—asserts that all life, including literary texts, is constructed—that is, based on a series of interrelated systems. It is these systems and the study of them—rather than individual actions or an isolated text—that are ultimately important.

Overall, structuralism is less important today than it was in the 1960s. Other theories that take into account the cultural significance of both people and texts have outpaced structuralism for several reasons. First, structuralism's greatest strength—its study of the systems or codes that shape meaning—is also its greatest weakness. In highlighting the various systems of meaning, structuralism deemphasizes personhood and individual texts. Critics argue that structuralism is thus deterministic (favoring systems over events or an individual) and ahistorical. It does not account for human individuality or for any independent acts, nor does it address the dynamic aspects of cultures. Individual texts, assert structuralism's critics, do matter. The changing faces of culture that are simultaneously reflected in isolated texts are also important. Texts, like people, are at times illogical, breaking from tradition and systems of belief.

With the advent of postmodernism and its emphases on the incredulity of grand metanarratives and the slippery nature of language, structuralism with its logical, objective study of systems, structure, and language began to lose popularity. Although some structuralists—particularly the narratologists—continue to contribute to literary theory and criticism, literary theories grounded in the philosophy and methodology of postmodernism currently receive prime attention.

Deconstruction

Making its appearance on the literary stage in the latter half of the 1960s, deconstruction theory entered the academy at a time when questioning the status quo was both academically and culturally acceptable, becoming as some would argue, the norm. The first word of Derrida's inauguration speech for deconstruction's introduction in America—"Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" presented at Johns Hopkins University in 1966—is *perhaps*, a word that successfully encapsulates the basic idea underlying deconstruction theory. Perhaps, said Derrida, we cannot make either positive or negative definitive statements. Disavowing the existence of a transcendental signified, deconstruction questions Western humanity's proclivity toward logocentrism and its valuing of other elements and ideas encompassed by Derrida's concept of metaphysics of presence. Derrida dared to ask the what-if question: What if no transcendental signified exists? What

if there is no such entity as objective truth? What if, indeed, all is based upon difference and différance? And what if language is arbitrary and differential?

With the emergence of deconstruction theory and postmodernism began a questioning of the grand metanarratives on which humanity had previously structured its existence. All was now open to question. The exact meaning of a text could never be stated because texts have multiple meanings, and language itself is elusive and slippery. Indeed, all writers misspeak, revealing not what they thought they said, but almost what they were afraid to say. And all interpretation is really a form of play, with each participant handling slippery texts whose meanings are often elusive.

Although some critics thought Derrida's philosophy and literary theory would destroy the very foundations upon which Western philosophy rests, deconstruction theory did not do so. It did and still does provide an energetic and rigorous reading of texts, not only by questioning all previous readings but also by questioning the nature of reading itself. Some of its critics, however, point out both deconstruction and postmodernism's seemingly internal inconsistencies. By questioning the validity of grand metanarratives (or positing an incredulity toward such narratives), deconstruction is itself essentially establishing a metanarrative, one based on incredulity and doubt. In questioning the validity and existence of objective truth, it creates its own yardstick by which its own concept of truth can be measured. In advocating its antitheoretical position, it establishes one of its own and involves itself in circular reasoning. And while advocating for intertextuality, it more frequently than not treats texts in isolation.

Overall, deconstruction's vocabulary and methodology have been appropriated by other disciplines and continue to elicit debate among literary theorists and educators alike. Some of its adherents have brought deconstruction's analysis into politics and cultural events and concerns. Although other schools of literary criticism have developed since the publication of Derrida's inaugurating presentation "Structure, Sign, and Play" at Johns Hopkins University, deconstruction theory remains a significant force as it has become embedded in a variety of contemporary literary theories and practices.

See **Readings on Literary Criticism** at the back of the text for the cornerstone essay on postmodernism, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," authored by its leading proponent, Jacques Derrida.

6

PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM

Everywhere I go I find a poet has been there before me.

Attributed to Sigmund Freud

INTRODUCTION

Our dreams fascinate, perplex, and often disturb us. Filled with bizarre twists of fate, wild exploits, and highly sexual images, our dreams can bring us pleasure or terrorize us. Sometimes they cause us to question our feelings, to contemplate our unspoken desires, and even to doubt the nature of reality itself. Do dreams, we wonder, contain any degree of truth? Do they serve any useful function?

The German organic chemist Friedrich August Kekulé answers in the affirmative. For years, Kekulé investigated the molecular structure of benzene. One night he dreamed that he saw a string of atoms shaped like a snake swallowing its tale. Upon awakening, he drew this serpentine figure in his notebook and realized it was the graphic structure of the benzene ring he had been struggling to decipher. When reporting his findings at a scientific meeting in 1890, he stated, "Let us learn to dream, gentlemen, and then we may perhaps find the truth."

Giuseppe Tartini, an Italian violinist of the eighteenth century, similarly discovered the value of dreams. One night he dreamed the devil came to his bedside and offered to help him finish a rather difficult sonata in exchange for his soul. Tartini agreed, whereupon the devil picked up Tartini's violin and completed the unfinished work. On awakening, Tartini jotted down from memory what he had heard in his dream. Titled *The Devil's Trill Sonata*, this piece is Tartini's best-known composition.

Like numerous scientists and composers, many writers have claimed that they, too, have received some of their best ideas from their dreams.