

Literary Theory and Literary Criticism
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Lecture - 16

Part A

Post Structuralism

Hello and welcome to today's module on Literary Theory and Literary Criticism. In today's lecture in this part today's lecture, we will be looking at Post Structuralism. So, what is post structuralism? Post structuralism can perhaps be seen as a response to structuralism. Structuralism itself is an intellectual movement that developed in Europe from the early to the mid 20th century. It argued that the human culture may be understood by means of a structure.

The structure differs from concrete reality and from abstract ideas as well and this structure is something that is modeled on language; that is on structural linguistics. Post structuralist authors all present different critics of structuralism, but a very common theme would perhaps be the rejection of the idea that structures are self-sufficient and this is something that is borrowed from structuralism itself.

Post structuralism also presents an interrogation of the binary oppositions that constitute these very structures. Writers whose work are often are characterized as post structural include names such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva, etcetera. Although, many of these theorists, who have been called post structuralist have outright, rejected the label. A major theme of post structuralism is the idea of instability in the human sciences.

Now, this instability is seen as something that emerges from the complexity of humans themselves. And also the impossibility of fully escaping structures in order that, we might study them and thus, we get the label post structuralism. Post structuralism is not a school, but rather a group of approaches that are informed by some common understandings.

Now, not all of these common ground understandings will be shared by every practitioner of post structuralism. Post structuralism is thus not really a theory, but a set of theoretical positions, which all have at their core, a self reflexive discourse, which is aware of the tentativeness, the slipperiness, the ambiguity and the complex interrelations of texts and meanings.

There may be some sharp differences about, what post structuralism includes. For instance, it may or may not be seen as having a very strong ideological component depending upon who makes this assumption. Let us take a brief look at the history of post structuralism itself. Post structuralism emerged in France during the 1960's as a movement critiquing structuralism.

According to J. G. Merquior, a love hate relationship with structuralism developed amongst many leading French thinkers in the 1960's. Now, we describe this as a kind of love hate relationship, because structuralism, post structuralism can be seen as something that borrows from structuralism or even something that resists some of the assumptions of structuralism. Thus, the love hate relationship.

The period was marked by this, the period, the 60's was marked by political anxiety as students and workers alike rebelled against the state in May, 1968 in France. This revolt nearly caused the downfall of the French government. At the same time, the support of the French communist party for the oppressive policies of the Urged While Soviet Union, USSR contributed to a popular disillusionment with the orthodox Marxism.

As a result, there was an increased interest in alternative radical philosophies, philosophies such as Feminism, Western Marxism, Anarchism, Phenomenology and Nihilism. All of these disparate prospective, they are critical of dominant western philosophy and culture. Post structuralism offered a means of justifying these criticisms by exposing the underlying assumptions of many western norms.

Two key figures in the early post structuralist movement were perhaps Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthe. In a 1966 lecture, titled structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences, Jacques Derrida presented a thesis on an apparent rupture in the intellectual life of the times. Derrida integrated this event this rupture as a decentering of the formal intellectual space.

Now, although Roland Barthe was originally a structuralist, during the 1960's, he increasingly favoured post structuralist views. In 1967, we should remember that, Derrida's own lecture was given in 1966. In 1967, Barthe published *The Death of the Author* in which he announced a very significant metaphorical event. This event was *The Death of the Author* as an authentic source of meaning for a given text.

Barthe argued that any literary text has multiple meanings and that the author was not the prime source of the works semantic content. *The Death of the Author* thus Barthe pointed out was the birth of the reader and this is the source of the proliferation of meanings of any text. As we already mentioned, post structuralism was consequent on a structuralism. So, in order to understand post structuralism better, we need to understand some core principles of structuralism itself.

Structuralism is not concerned so much with what things mean, but rather how they mean. It is a science designed to show that, all elements of human culture including literature are understandable as parts of a system of science. This science of science is called semiotics or alternatively even Semiology. The goal of structuralist practices is therefore to discover the codes, the structures and processes involved in the production of meaning itself.

Structuralism claims that human culture itself is fundamentally a language, which is to say that it is a complex system of signifieds and signifiers. We know that signifieds are concepts, for example, the idea of a cat, we understand a cat to be a small furry 4 legged animal; that is sometimes kept as a household pet. So, this idea of the cat would be the signified.

Whereas, the phonetic utterance c a t can be is the signifier. Now, signifiers can be of many kinds, signifiers can be verbal as in the example that we just like at or it can even be a literature or it may even be non verbal as in the case of a face painting or fashion or tattooing, etcetera. What quickly became apparent with this understanding is that, science and words do not have meaning in and of themselves.

But, they generate meaning only in relation to other science and entire systems and thus, we have the arrival of a post structuralism. This is to say to go back to our previous example; we do not have a fundamental understanding of what a cat is. This is because the word and the concept are not intrinsically linked, which is to say that, I would

probably understand what a cat is, by understanding how it is different from a rat or a bat, how it is not a rat or a bat.

So, post structuralism basically both contest and sub words structuralism and formalist principles. While, structuralist were convinced that systematic knowledge is possible, post structuralist claim to know only the impossibility of this knowledge. They counter the possibility of knowing a text systematically and they do it by revealing the grammar behind a text form and meaning. This is based on an understanding that all signifieds are also signifiers and thus it becomes impossible to fully know a text and with that, we come to deconstruction.

The post structuralist is chiefly engaged in the task of deconstructing a text or a particular or accepted reading of the text. This very process is called deconstruction. Deconstruction can be roughly defined as perhaps applied post structuralism. Deconstruction is often referred to as reading against the grain or reading the text against itself as Terry Eagleton tells us.

Another way of describing this would be to say that, deconstructive readings uncover the unconscious rather than the conscious dimensions of the text. All other things that an ordinary reading of the text would go slower or fails recognize are brought to the fore front through the practice of deconstruction. For example, let us look at a practical way of deconstructing the novel *Huckleberry Finn*.

Now, this novel is sometimes thought to be, more often thought to be a very important work on human rights. This is because through huckleberry Finn's eyes, we see the devastation of slavery. And yet towards the end of the novel, we understand that though Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer realize that Jim is, Jim, who is their friend, who is black that Jim is no longer a slave and free. They continued to pretend that, he is a slave; we see that, he is locked up and degraded in multiple ways.

Thus, what we see here is that, the novel may not really be a celebration of human rights, but it is very opposite. Thus, the novel is taken apart and it is inconsistencies are displayed to us. We would also be perhaps deploying a deconstructive reading, if we were to make the argument that a film like *Brokeback Mountain*, which was celebrated and widely touted to be a very a revolutionary gay film about gay cowboys.

If we were to say that such a film is not a gay film that would be adapting a very deconstructive reading of the novel. It would require us to watch intricately the various aspects that function or inform the film and see, how it does not really contribute much to gain us or gay agency. It might be seen as something that goes back to the epistemology of the closet, both these would be practical ways of deconstructively reading a text.

Thus, this practice of reading has been called oppositional reading, which is to say, reading the text with the aim of unmasking, the internal contradictions or inconsistencies within the text. This aim is to show the disunity, which underlies its apparent unity. We should note here that the aim of new criticism by contrast had been precisely the opposite of this practice, which is to show the unity of the work, beneath the apparent disunity.

And while deconstruction aims to show the disunity of any text, this disunity is understood to be a product of language, the very nature of language itself. Deconstructive criticism posits an undecidability of meaning for all text, the text reveals contradictory discourses and gaps within itself. This is because; language itself is unstable and arbitrary. The critic does not undermine the text; the text already is capable of dismantling itself. Its own rhetoric subverts or undermines, it is ostensible or surface level meaning.

Jacques Derrida opposed what he called the metaphysics of presence, which is the claim in literature or philosophy that we can find some full rich meaning outside of or prior to language itself. This decentering of text reveals incompatibilities rhetorical contradictions and undecidability within text, which means that, what this lends to deconstruction is often an element of playfulness.

Let us look at some other key assumptions of deconstruction, what used to be the centurion difference in structuralism becomes derridean defrance in post structuralism. Now, defrance is a French word, it is a French coinage, which is basically an amalgam of the words differ and defer. So, it implies something that requires, that needs to be understood as different, but also something that has to be perpetually deferred, something that is very elusive and not available to status and meaning.

Now, linguistic difference creates the effect of a decidable definite meaning. However, in language meaning is actually deferred from one interpretation to another in an endless play or movement. So, which is to give you an often quoted example, if I were to define what a village is, I might define a village as a small town. However, that does not tell me anything about the village; it has just transferred my understanding of what a village should be by juxtaposing it with that of a town.

So, in order to understand a village, I am forced to confront the illusiveness of a meaning that takes me now to understanding a town. Thus, meaning is perpetually deferred and there is an endless play or movement. The structures of a binary opposition that are essential to a logocentric language are actually hierarchies and they are not defined simply by differences alone, but by privileging one term at the expense of another.

A simple look at binaries such as beautiful or beautiful and ugly, white and black, man and women, etcetera will tell us this analogy. Deconstruction demonstrates not only that such hierarchies can be inverted or reversed, but also that the whole opposition can be undermined or even collapsed. Since, the first term in these binaries are defined by excluding the second, it requires the second for its own meaning, one cannot be taught without the other.

Deconstructive critics distinguish between the text that tries to close off the endless play of signification and push forward a very specific interpretation. Such a text is called a readerly text and the text that opens itself to many different meanings becomes a writerly text. One that puts the writers; that is a text that puts one in the writers or the producers possession, encouraging the creation of one's own play of meanings.

A post structuralist critic must be able to use a variety of perspectives to create a multifaceted interpretation of a text. Even, if these interpretations conflict with one another. There is particularly important to analyze, how the meanings of a text shift in relationship shift in relation to certain variables usually involving the position or the identity of the reader himself or herself.

For example, these can be positions like the readers class his race or even his or her sexual identity. Without a central fixation on the idea of the author, post structuralist examine other sources for meaning such sources may include readers, cultural norms, other literatures and so on. These alternative sources are never really authoritative though

and even they like the idea of the author promise no consistency. We will now take a final look at the position of language and decentering in post structuralist thought.

Post structuralist theory can be tied to a move against modernism or enlightenment ideas, such as those offered by philosophers like Immanuel Kant, Rene Descartes, John Locke, etcetera. It is also a move against western religious beliefs, such as Neo-Platonism or Catholicism. An early pioneer of this kind of resistance was the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his essay on truth and lies in an extra moral sense, which came out in 1873.

Nietzsche rejects even the very basis of our knowledge making of our knowledge making language as any form of a reliable system of communication. Essentially, post structuralism holds that, we cannot trust in the formula that a sign is composed of a signifier plus a signified. There is a breakdown of certainty between the sign and signifier which leaves language systems hopelessly inadequate for relaying meaning. So, that we are as the reader famously points out in an eternal free play or instability.

Decentering is an approach that concerns itself with the ways and places where systems frameworks, definitions and all certainties break breaks down. Post structuralism maintains that frameworks and systems, for example, the structuralist systems that we have are merely fictions constructs that cannot be trusted to develop meaning or to establish or give order.

With decentering, the very act of seeking order or a singular truth, a truth with the capital T, becomes upset, because we understand that there exists no singular universal unified truth. Post structuralism holds that, there are many truths that frameworks that frameworks must bleed and that structures must become unstable or decentered. Moreover, post structuralism is also concerned with power structures or hegemony's and how these elements contribute to and maintain structures to enforce semblance of hierarchy.

Therefore, post structuralist theory carries implications far beyond literary criticism itself. And with that, we conclude today's module, in the next module, the next module will be taken by Dr Aysha, see you.