

# Opening up the Text

## *Deconstructive Criticism*

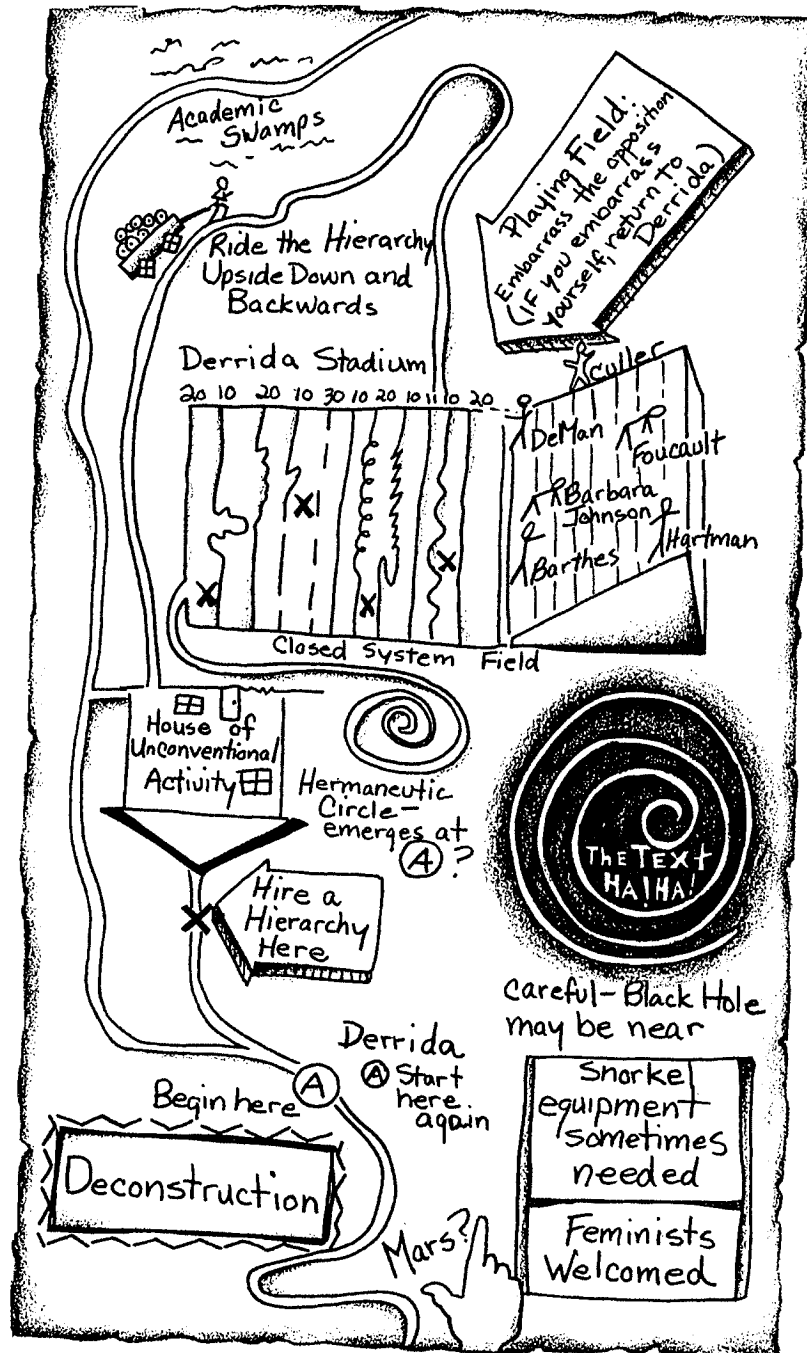
*Imagine being the first to say,  
with confidence: uncertainty.*

—Michael Blumenthal

### THE PURPOSE OF DECONSTRUCTION

Not so long ago, “deconstruct” and “deconstruction” were used only in what was perceived as radical criticism (or in attacks on such criticism). Now the terms and ideas of deconstruction have passed into the general critical vocabulary and pervade fields as diverse as architecture and theology, appearing in both specialized journals and in *Time* and *Newsweek*. During the impeachment of President Clinton, Representative James Rogan said, “Ms. Lewinsky doesn’t bother attempting to match the President’s linguistic deconstructions of the English language.” Woody Allen’s 1997 film was called *Deconstructing Harry*. *Esquire* magazine in its January 2000 issue introduced a feature on sport coats this way: “Not since Jacques Derrida has deconstruction been so trendy.” The *USA Today* of May 5, 2000, ran a television feature titled “Deconstructing Friday Nights on ABC.” The term “deconstruction” is all over our cultural landscape. But any effort to explain what deconstruction is and why its ideas have been so appealing immediately runs into two problems.

First, “deconstruction” has been used in so many different ways and contexts that it is hard to say what it means. As Gregory Jay puts it, “deconstruction has now become an indeterminate nominative” (xi): a name without a reference. Second, if the assumptions of



deconstruction are correct, it always was an uncertain term: for deconstruction's assumption that all terms are unstable must apply to itself. Few efforts would appear to be more ironic, perhaps even comical, than attempting to define and explain a philosophical position that assumes the inevitability of error and misreading, the impossibility of explaining and defining in any stable way.

There are, however, at least three reasons to attempt to explain deconstruction anyway:

1. The alternative to explaining what in the final analysis cannot be explained is silence. We explain deconstruction, and we practice it, even though something is always left undone, unstated, unclear, unthought of. Another explanation can supplement this one, and then another one can supplement it. Such is the case with any term.
2. Deconstruction makes no effort to suppress its own irony or absurdity; instead, deconstructive critics have generally indulged a playfulness that from the perspective of traditional criticism seems at times unprofessional; in the merciless punning of some of the most prominent deconstructive critics, it has seemed occasionally almost juvenile. (I am thinking for instance of Paul de Man's comparison of Archie Bunker [the television character] to "a de-bunker of the *arche* [or origin], an archie De-Bunker such as Nietzsche or Jacques Derrida"[9].)
3. Deconstruction can be learned by students, and it often stimulates a wonderfully imaginative playfulness and scrutiny. In fact, rather than being an esoteric, foreign, abstract, discouraging approach, deconstruction for most students, in my experience, makes tremendous sense: it articulates precisely what they have in fact already assumed in a vague way.

So, here we go. If the room starts spinning, or you find yourself getting dizzy, take a deep breath; or put the book on the floor so you can read with your head between your legs. Seriously, the next little stretch is a bit theoretical and even strange, but you'll see several illustrations later on. Just hang in there, and it will get clearer.

The most important figure for deconstruction is without question Jacques Derrida, a Frenchman who has relentlessly and astonishingly exposed the uncertainties of using language. Derrida starts from the recognition that the signifier (the word) and the signified (its reference) are not a unified entity, but rather an arbitrary and constantly shifting relationship. A dictionary seems to stabilize a lan-

guage, but what we actually find in a dictionary is the postponement or deferment of meaning: words have multiple definitions, and these definitions require us to seek the meaning of other words, which are themselves defined in the same way.

Even if it were possible to construct instantaneously a dictionary that would be perfectly up-to-date, we would still find ambiguity, multiplicity, and slippage pervading the language. The reason is nicely captured in Derrida's most famous statement, which is translated as "There is nothing outside the text," and as "There is no outside to the text." (In itself, this uncertainty regarding translation tells us something important about language.) Meaning cannot get outside of language, to reality. Therefore, words always refer to other words. Different languages divide up reality differently because the relationship between words and things is arbitrary; it's made up. And it can therefore be unmade.

Deconstruction reveals the arbitrariness of language most strikingly by exposing the contradictions in a discourse, thereby showing how a text undermines itself. As Barbara Johnson puts it, deconstruction proceeds by "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself" (5). Or, as Jonathan Culler says, "To deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies." (*Deconstruction* 86). This exposure of a text's self-contradictions is possible, deconstruction assumes, because words cannot stabilize meaning: if we choose to say one thing, we are leaving out another thing. And there is always a gap, a space in the text, that the reader cannot ultimately fill in.

Deconstruction is therefore particularly valuable because of its power to open up a text that we may have seen as limited or closed. Popularly, "to deconstruct" seems to be used to mean "to dismantle" or "to destroy," as if "deconstruction" were a fancier form of "destruction." But for most informed critics, deconstruction is not so much a way to obliterate the meaning of a text, as it is a way to multiply meaning infinitely. Deconstruction thus encourages us to resist a complacent acceptance of anything, and to question our positions and statements in a particularly rigorous way, even reading texts against themselves.

For instance, let's take a very simple text, one appearing beside an elevator: "Seeing Eye Dogs Only." A deconstructive reading of this text might point out that although it appears to extend assistance to the visually impaired, it literally should force them to walk up the stairs, for the sign literally appears to say, "This elevator is reserved for seeing eye dogs. No other animals or persons can ride it." Or we

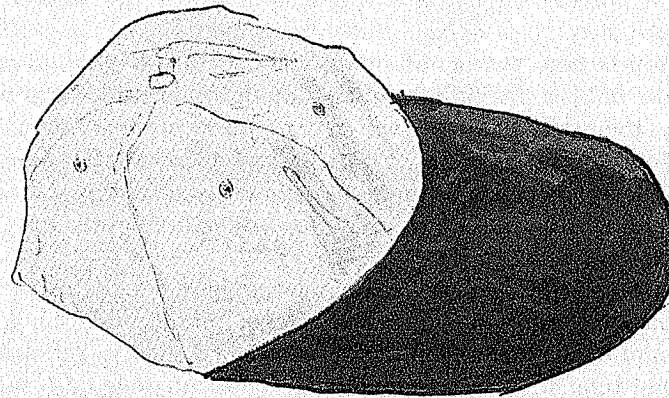
might argue that the text shifts attention and power to a certain kind of dog, while ignoring the owners of the dogs. Here's a text ostensibly put up to help blind persons, and it actually ignores them. A blind person with a seeing eye monkey, presumably, must not ride. Plus, blind persons obviously cannot read the sign, which suggests that some other intention does motivate it. Perhaps the sign is intended to make sure that someone who is fully sighted and has a retired seeing eye dog as a pet, can take such a dog on the elevator? Isn't that what it says? What *is* the point of this sign? Does it subvert its own purpose?

Although such undoing of a text may seem at first glance a bit silly, it actually has enormous practical value. Imagining all the things a text *might* be saying, including even the opposite of what it may appear to say, will help us to become more creative and careful readers and writers. Some colleagues of mine recently wrote a policy statement that told students "You will fail your Freshman English course if you miss more than three scheduled tutoring sessions." One student read this statement as a prediction rather than a rule, and he elected to skip all his tutoring sessions in order to prove the prediction wrong. As he told me later, appealing his failing grade, "I knew I was smart enough to pass the course without any help, and I resented them telling me I couldn't do it."

But a deconstructive stance not only may help us anticipate some of the ways that even simple texts can be misread, it may also help us see what is being excluded or suppressed in a text. For instance, the J. Peterman Company advertises a reproduction of "Hemingway's Cap." The point of the advertisement is, of course, that Ernest Hemingway picked out a tough, distinctive, very masculine hat to wear, and now you can have the same. The ad conveys this message by telling us that Hemingway probably bought the cap "on the road to Ketchum," which is where Hemingway's Idaho ranch was located, the scene of hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities; that he found it "among the beef jerky wrapped in cellophane," which also helps create a rustic, macho atmosphere (isn't beef jerky primarily eaten by guys in a duck blind or deer stand—or wishing they were?); that the bill is longer than average, longer in fact than the advertiser has ever seen, and "impervious" to rainstorms; that the cap is the color of "scalding espresso"—a drink for tough men who need a tough cap; that there's an elastic band "to keep this treasure from blowing off your head and into the trees"; and much else. Thus, the advertisement celebrates masculine toughness, durability, endurance, sensibility, using these values to sell the product.

But a deconstructive stance encourages an acute alertness to rhetorical strategies and even the assumptions these strategies

## Hemingway's Cap.



He probably bought his in a gas station on the road to Ketchum, next to the cash register, among the beef jerky wrapped in cellophane. Or maybe in a tackle shop in Key West.

I had to go to some trouble to have this one made for you and me but it had to be done. The long bill, longer than I, at least, ever saw before, makes sense.

The visor: deerskin; soft and glareless and unaffected by repeated rain squalls. The color: same as strong scalding espresso, lemon peel on the side, somewhere in the mountains in the north of Italy.

Ten-ounce cotton-duck crown. 6 brass grommets for ventilation. Elastic at back to keep this treasure from blowing off your head and into the trees.

Sizes: M, L, XL.

Price: \$33. (He probably got change from a five when he bought the original.)



depend upon. Although the cap appears to promote and depend upon a masculine toughness, deconstruction tells us that it also unavoidably promotes and depends upon masculine insecurity. Why would anyone want the longest bill anyone ever saw? For the same reason one might want the fastest car anyone ever saw. Or the biggest ranch. Made of "deerskin," this longest bill becomes a symbol of its owner's power and potency. It may be too much to claim that the bill is a phallic substitute, although it is pretty clear what part of their skin many men would consider most "dear." Certainly, Hemingway was fascinated by potency and its lack: in *The Sun Also Rises*, for instance, Jake Barnes has been emasculated by a wartime injury and loses Brett, Lady Ashley, to a young bullfighter and then to another aristocrat.

Likewise, the idea that Hemingway may have bought his cap "on the road to Ketchum" conjures up scenes of hunting and fishing. But Ketchum is also where Hemingway committed suicide. Seriously ill for some time, he put a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Denied the sort of active, impervious masculinity embodied in the cap, Hemingway apparently could not face a compromised life.

How the cap relates to this weakness or insecurity is most startlingly seen in an especially revealing (or especially unfortunate) phrase, referring to the "elastic at back to keep this treasure from blowing off your head." In asserting that the cap is a "treasure," the ad unavoidably raises the danger—the inevitability really—of losing it. This sentence is meant to reassure potential owners, but it also points out how only the elastic (which must age and wear out) stands between the owner and loss of his manly treasure. The advertisement thus helps to foster an insecurity that the cap covers over; but in such a value system, depending on potency and toughness, the danger of something "blowing off your head" is very real, as Hemingway's case reveals.

Is such a mischievous, even outrageous, allusion intended in "blowing off your head"? Although I've had students who insist that the phrase is a wickedly clever joke, that the ad's author must have been aware of the implications of "blowing off your head" in the context of Hemingway, the issue is really undecidable, and from a deconstructive point of view irrelevant because other conflicting and contradictory meanings are always available to the attentive, creative reader. There will always be a trace of "don't buy this hat" left in any urging to "buy this hat." (I own two by the way.)

Let's turn now to some other examples and to the practical matter of how deconstruction works on more complex texts, which often even more readily lend themselves to opening up.

## HOW TO DO DECONSTRUCTION

In an essay designed to question and criticize, Lawrence Lipking shows how deconstruction would deal with W. B. Yeats's famous poem "Sailing to Byzantium." Since deconstruction turns a text against itself, multiplying its meanings, it seems only appropriate that Lipking's attack on deconstruction should provide a convenient illustration of deconstruction's value.

Here is Yeats's Poem.

### Sailing to Byzantium\* (1927)

*William Butler Yeats*

#### I

That is no country for old men.\* The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
—Those dying generations—at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long 5  
Whatever is begotten, born and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unaging intellect.

#### II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless 10  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come 15  
To the holy city of Byzantium.

#### III

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,

\* *Byzantium*: Old name for the modern city of Istanbul, capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, ancient artistic and intellectual center. Yeats uses Byzantium as a symbol for "artificial" (and therefore deathless) art and beauty, as opposed to the beauty of the natural world, which is bound to time and death.

\**That . . . men*: Ireland, part of the time-bound world.

Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,\*  
 And be the singing-masters of my soul. 20  
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
 And fastened to a dying animal  
 It knows not what it is; and gather me  
 Into the artifice of eternity.

## IV

Once out of nature I shall never take 25  
 My bodily form from any natural thing,  
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
 Of hammered gold and gold enameling  
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;\*  
 Or set upon a golden bough\* to sing 30  
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Deconstruction requires a norm or a convention to work against. If we don't assume a text is logically coherent, then exposing its incoherence and self-difference is hardly remarkable. In a way, then, a deconstructive reading is like an extension of a New Critical reading: setting aside authorial intention and the reader's response, one first identifies the unity that appears to be present in the text and then divides and dispels it.

A classic New Critical reading of Yeats's poem is offered by Cleanth Brooks in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947). As we would expect, Brooks finds in the poem certain tensions or oppositions, which include for instance "nature versus art." By this opposition, Brooks means (among other things) that the first two stanzas talk about "fish, flesh, or fowl" and about aging—aspects of nature. The second two stanzas talk about "gold mosaic," "artifice," "hammered gold"—works of art.

Brooks discusses other oppositions:

becoming	vs.	being
sensual	vs.	intellectual
here	vs.	Byzantium
aging	vs.	timelessness

\**perne in a gyre*: Bobbin making a spiral pattern.

\**such . . . awake*: "I have read somewhere that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang" (Yeats's note).

\**golden bough*: In Greek legend, Aeneas had to pluck a golden bough from a tree in order to descend into Hades. As soon as the bough was plucked, another grew in its place.

To unify these oppositions, Brooks focuses on the speaker's "prayer," which begins in the third stanza and asks the "sages" to "come from the holy fire"; and he makes the word "artifice" the crux of the poem:

The word "artifice" fits the prayer at one level after another: the fact that he is to be taken *out of nature*; that his body is to be an artifice hammered out of gold; that it will not age but will have the finality of a work of art. (188)

Yeats seems, Brooks says, to favor the second elements in the list above. "Artifice," however, complicates matters:

But "artifice" unquestionably carries an ironic qualification too. The prayer, for all its passion, is a modest one. He does not ask that he be gathered into eternity—it will be enough if he is gathered into the "artifice of eternity." The qualification does not turn the prayer into mockery, but it is all-important: it limits as well as defines the power of the sages to whom the poet appeals. (189)

This move, as I pointed out in the chapter on New Criticism, is typical, as Brooks finds an ironic center that unifies the poem. Here is Brooks's thesis, as it is stated early in the essay, responding to the question of "which world" Yeats commits himself to:

To which world is Yeats committed? Which does he choose?

The question is idle—as idle as the question which the earnest schoolmarm puts to the little girl reading for the first time "L'Allegro—Il Penseroso": which does Milton *really* prefer, mirth or melancholy. . . .

Yeats chooses both and neither. (187)

More directly, Brooks articulates his position this way near the end of his essay:

The irony [of the poem] is directed, it seems to me, not at our yearning to transcend the world of nature, but at the human situation itself in which supernatural and natural are intermixed—the human situation which is inevitably caught between the claims of both natural and supernatural. The golden bird whose bodily form the speaker will take in Byzantium will be withdrawn from the flux of the world of becoming. But so withdrawn, it will sing of the world of becoming—"Of what is past, or passing, or to come." (189–90)

This “intermixture” that Brooks finds is the force unifying for him the poem’s complex oppositions, thereby making possible the poem’s greatness.

A deconstructive reading observes the text’s oppositions, as Brooks has done, and it notices how the text appears to resolve its oppositions. But it goes further and shows how this resolution falls apart. Brooks claims that Yeats chooses both art and nature. But is that really true? In the final stanza, the speaker says, “Once out of nature I shall never take/My bodily form from any natural thing.” If he escapes nature and becomes a golden work of art, then he has certainly chosen one member of the opposition. Brooks tries to cover this problem by saying the bird, outside of nature and time, will sing of the world of becoming—“Of what is past, or passing, or to come.” But surely singing of something is not the same thing as being in it. Yeats *does choose*—art over nature, being over becoming, the intellectual over the sensual.

Or does he? The final step of deconstruction (after finding oppositions, noticing their resolution, and questioning that resolution) is to call the reversal into question, placing the text in uncertainty. Lipking, employing a deconstructive stance, repeatedly shows how the poem fails to resolve its meaning. He asks, for instance, why should soul “louder sing/For every tatter in its mortal dress”? Is it singing to distract itself or us from the tatters of its mortal dress? Then the singing is opposed to the tatters, as the soul sings in spite of physical ailments. Or is it singing in celebration of these tatters, because the body’s deterioration brings the soul closer to separation from the body? Lipking ponders these alternatives and concludes that “the line does not make sense, if by sense we understand a single unequivocal meaning or even the Aristotelian logic that asserts that nothing can be itself and not itself at the same time. Language goes its own way” (431).

Likewise, Lipking raises the question of whether, in the third stanza, there is a singing school. If “Nor is there singing school” means there isn’t one, then how come the speaker wants some singing masters in the next verse? Perhaps the speaker says there is no singing school *unless* it consists of studying monuments of the soul’s magnificence. But such activity hardly sounds like a singing school, and it seems unlikely that such soul singing is learned in an academic way. In the final analysis, Lipking suggests that the poem, through a deconstructive lens anyway, is confusing.

Similarly, Lipking asks if the artifice of eternity is “something permanent (an eternal artifice) or something evanescent (an illusion without any substance)” (432). He confesses he can’t decide.

He also points even to the uncertain syntax of the opening “That” (which, Lipking points out, “Yeats himself said was the worst syntax he ever wrote”). In sum Lipking finds that “the elementary polarities that seem to provide its [the poem’s] frame—the dialectic of ‘that country’ and Byzantium, of young and old, of time and timelessness, of body and soul, above all of nature and art—do not hold up under a careful reading” (432). Thus, “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies” only appears to parallel “what is past, or passing, or to come.” The word “lives” would parallel “born” better than “passing”; and “begotten” does not clearly relate to “past.” Even the word “dies” is not entirely satisfactory because the birds’ “song” is one that lives on from generation to generation.

These points may seem rather minor to you. But there is one internal contradiction, as Lipking amusingly says, “so important and obvious that it is noticed by a great many students, and even some critics”:

When the speaker claims that “Once out of nature I shall never take/My bodily form from any natural thing,” he seems to ignore the blatant fact that every bodily form must be taken from nature, whether the form of a bird or simply the golden form embodied by an artist. (432–33)

In a famous letter, Sturge Moore did write to Yeats that “a goldsmith’s bird is as much nature as a man’s body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies” (qtd. Lipking 433). In fact, art seems already to be present in the world of nature that is described so artfully in the first verse. “That” country and Byzantium, Lipking says, “are equally unreal; they acquire significance only by being contrasted with each other” (433). “That” country never appears in the poem; it is always absent. Nor does the poet arrive at Byzantium, as Lipking reminds us: he is only “sailing to” it. And the problem, deconstruction tells us, is that we “swim in a sea of language” (435), where enduring “presence” is impossible: we never arrive where we’re going, linguistically. Instead, we find only oppositions and differences that defer meaning.

In making this case, Lipking is depending on, I would argue, the following assumptions:

1. Meaning is made by binary oppositions, *but* one item is unavoidably favored (or “privileged”) over the other.
2. This hierarchy is arbitrary and can be exposed and reversed.

3. Further, the text's oppositions and hierarchy can be called into question because texts contain within themselves unavoidable contradictions, gaps, spaces, and absences that defeat closure and determinate meaning. All reading is misreading.

These assumptions lead Lipking to the following strategies:

1. Identify the oppositions in the text.
2. Determine which member appears to be favored and look for evidence that contradicts that favoring.
3. Expose the text's indeterminacy.

In its effects, deconstruction is quite comparable to other developments in twentieth-century thought. In mathematics, Kurt Gödel has shown how any mathematical system will contain at least one crucial axiom that cannot be proved within the system itself. There is always, in any interpretation, a loose end, an assumption that cannot be proven, a statement that is called into question by some other statement. Similarly, in physics, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle stipulates the indeterminacy of certain fundamental variables, like the position and momentum of a particle.

Still, we must remember that Lipking explains deconstruction only to attack it. He and some other critics find deconstruction disturbing and even dangerous, but many others find it invigorating. The most damning charge against deconstruction is that it allows a text to mean anything at all—or, as Lipking sees it, ultimately nothing. But deconstruction's supporters, both in Europe and America (which have somewhat different conceptions of the matter), believe that texts *always already* were unavoidably open to interpretation. Deconstruction, in this case, really changes nothing except our awareness of the complexity and "otherness" of our discourse. A text (of any sort) means ultimately whatever the entity with the most power says it means, unless of course other readers continue to read it otherwise.

We turn now to a closer look at the process of writing deconstructive criticism, leaving Yeats's golden bird for one of another metal.

## THE WRITING PROCESS: A SAMPLE ESSAY

Here's a poem by Amy Clampitt, published on April 12, 1993, in *The New Yorker*.

### Discovery (1993)

*Amy Clampitt*

The week the latest rocket went up, a pod (if that's the word) of manatees, come upriver to Blue Spring, where it's always warm, could be seen	1    5
lolling, jacketed, elephantine, on the weedy borderline between drowsing and waking, breathing and drowning.	   10
As they came up for air, one by one, they seemed numb, torpid, quite incurious. No imagining these sirenians dangerously singing. Or	   15
gazing up yearningly: so much for the Little Mermaid. True, the long-lashed little ones could have been trademarked "Cute" by the likes of Walt Disney.	   20
His world's over that way,  suitably for a peninsula where the cozy mythologies we've swindled ourselves with, on taking things easy, might even come true: sun-kissed nakedness	   25
on the beach, year-round, guilt-free hibiscus and oranges, fountains welling up through the limestone, the rumor of Ponce de León, having found the one he was looking for,	   30
living at ease in, some say Boca Raton, others Cádiz. A last bedtime placebo? Still, we keep looking up. That clear morning, just warm enough for a liftoff,	   35
the fabulous itself could be seen unwieldily, jacket by jacket, in the act of shedding, as a snake does its husk, or	   

a celebrant his vestments: 40  
 the fiery, the arrowy tip of it,  
 of the actual going invisible,  
 trailing its vaporous, ribboning  
 frond as from a kelp bed,  
 the umbilical roar of it 45  
 stumbling behind, while up in  
 the belly of it, out of their  
 element, jacketed, lolling  
 and treading, the discoverers  
 soar, clumsy in space suits. 50

What are we anyhow, we warmth-  
 hungry, breast-seeking animals?  
 At Blue Spring, a day or so later,  
 one of the manatees, edging  
 toward discovery, nudged a canoe, 55  
 and from across the wet, warm,  
 dimly imaginable tightrope,  
 let itself be touched.

### Preparing to Write

What does this poem describe? What does it most clearly and obviously say? Do any oppositions or tensions seem to be involved?

It might be helpful to sketch out an initial response to the poem, to show you as fully as possible how a deconstructive essay might be developed. So, I'm going to divide the poem into pieces and try to say what went through my mind as I tried to make sense of it. I'd encourage you to write your own notes before you look through mine.

#### Discovery

The week the latest rocket  
 went up, (1-2)

Is the speaker referring to a fictional rocket or a real one? Perhaps the speaker is referring to NASA's space shuttles (they aren't rockets, of course, but they're launched by rockets). Everyone knows one of the shuttles is called "Discovery"; does the title refer to it?

a pod (if that's the word)  
 of manatees, come upriver  
 to Blue Spring, where it's  
 always warm, could be seen

lolling, jacketed, elephantine,  
 on the weedy borderline  
 between drowsing and waking,  
 breathing and drowning. (2-9)

Well, perhaps the poem isn't about the space shuttle or "the latest rocket." Maybe that's just the time frame. I saw manatees when I lived in Florida, and "elephantine" is right—they do seem like armless and legless elephants floating in the water. And they don't seem to swim: "lolling" is a good word for what they do. The idea that they are "between drowsing and waking" also seems just right. But how are they between "breathing and drowning"? And how are they "jacketed"? What does that mean?

As they came up for air,  
 one by one, they seemed numb,  
 torpid, quite incurious. (10-12)

These lines remind me that manatees are mammals, and so they don't breathe under water. They have to come "up for air"—which explains, I guess, the idea that they're between "breathing and drowning": if they don't come up, they'll drown; so they live most of their time in a state between breathing and drowning. I still don't know why they're said to be "jacketed." Perhaps Clampitt is inviting us to see their skin, which looks sort of loose and baggy, as a kind of jacket.

No  
 imagining these sirenians  
 dangerously singing. Or  
 gazing up yearningly: so much  
 for the Little Mermaid. True,  
 the long-lashed little ones  
 could have been trademarked  
 "Cute" by the likes of Walt Disney. (12-19)

A number of things at this point are puzzling: for instance, why are the manatees called "sirenians"? What is a sirenian, in other words, and why might one imagine them "dangerously singing"? And what's the connection to the Little Mermaid?

Whenever something is puzzling, I usually try doing some research. In this case, a quick look in *The Columbia Encyclopedia* is revealing: the entry for "manatee" refers us to "sirenian," which is the name of a biological order, "Sirenia." (The only other living sirenian, or sea cow, is called a



dugong.) Right above “sirenian,” we find “Siren,” the name for sea nymphs in Greek mythology who sang so beautifully that sailors would crash into the rocks around their island. So, the manatees, although they’re sirenians, aren’t like the Sirens. So that’s one puzzle solved.

The entry also reports the speculation that manatees, “which nurse on the water’s surface, are the source of the mermaid legends.” Clampitt’s speaker finds the manatees so “numb, torpid, quite incurious” that it’s impossible to imagine them as Sirens or mermaids. Contrasting them to the Little Mermaid is of course particularly comical given the huge bulk of these floating blobs. They are, according to the entry, “sluggish, largely nocturnal bottom feeders,” weighing perhaps five hundred pounds and eating as much as a hundred pounds of vegetation a day. Even so, we must note that the “long-lashed little ones” are “Cute” enough for Disney. So another puzzle is solved.

The entry also may help clear up another question: manatees, we read, have gray skin that is “completely hairless” (except for bristles around the mouth). The skin has folds and wrinkles in it: so maybe that is why it appears to be a jacket to the speaker.

His world’s over that way,  
suitably for a peninsula where  
the cozy mythologies we’ve  
swindled ourselves with, on  
taking things easy, might even  
come true: sun-kissed nakedness  
on the beach, year-round, guilt-free  
hibiscus and oranges, fountains  
welling up through the limestone,  
the rumor of Ponce de León, having  
found the one he was looking for,

living at ease in, some say  
Boca Raton, others Cádiz. A last  
bedtime placebo? (20–33)

This section makes clear that the speaker is indeed in Florida at the Kennedy Space Center, where the shuttle launches, near Orlando and Disneyworld “over that way.” We dream, the speaker says, of “taking things easy” in Florida, living in

paradise forever like a successful Ponce de León. Such dreaming doesn’t do anything, but it may make us feel better anyway, like a “placebo.”

Still, we keep  
looking up. (33–34)

What does it mean to say “Still, we keep looking up”? Perhaps it means that our dreams of contentment (“sun-kissed nakedness on the beach”) aren’t entirely satisfying: we still keep looking up, waiting for some discovery—or, in this case, for Discovery. We all want to see something.

That clear morning,  
just warm enough for a liftoff,  
the fabulous itself could be seen  
unwieldily, jacket by jacket,  
in the act of shedding, as  
a snake does its husk, or  
a celebrant his vestments:  
  
the fiery, the arrowy tip of it,  
of the actual going invisible, (34–42)

These lines strike me as a wonderful way of describing a launch: the shuttle disappearing as it rises is “the actual going invisible.” The shuttle’s voyage becomes “the fabulous itself” in the act of “shedding”—being reborn or transformed like the snake or the celebrant. If you’ve seen a launch, even on television, you know that the shuttle does seem to move “unwieldily,” rotating slowly as it goes up, lumbering so it seems, at least at first, toward the heavens.

trailing its vaporous, ribboning  
frond as from a kelp bed,  
the umbilical roar of it  
stumbling behind, while up in  
the belly of it, out of their  
element, jacketed, lolling  
and treading, the discoverers  
soar, clumsy in space suits. (43–50)

The comparison of the booster rocket’s vapor trail to a “ribboning frond as from a kelp bed” is very strange, isn’t it? What’s the point of such an odd description? It takes us, obviously, to the manatees, who eat such fronds in kelp beds. It

begins to link, it seems to me, the astronauts to the manatees. The connection becomes stronger as Clampitt uses “jacketed” and “lolling” to describe the human “discoverers,” the same words used to describe the manatees.

In what ways are the astronauts like the manatees? Clampitt suggests that the astronauts are also in a sense “out of their element.” They are “treading,” not in water, but as if they were. And they appear, like the manatees, to be “clumsy in space suits.”

What are we anyhow, we warmth-  
hungry, breast-seeking animals?  
At Blue Spring, a day or so later,  
one of the manatees, edging  
toward discovery, nudged a canoe,  
and from across the wet, warm,  
dimly imaginable tightrope,  
let itself be touched. (51–58)

If we had any doubts about what the oppositions are in this poem, and how they’re brought together, this final section makes these matters very clear, doesn’t it? When Clampitt asks “What are we anyhow, we warmth- / hungry, breast-seeking animals?”, who is the “we” here? At the beginning of the poem, it is the manatees who “come upriver” to where “it’s / always warm,” and it seems clear that the “warmth-hungry” we includes both human “discoverers” as well as manatees (who breast-feed their young on the surface, we recall).

With the final scene of the manatee “edging toward discovery,” Clampitt most strikingly unites manatees and humans. The manatees are also “looking up,” reaching out. They may seem clumsy, numb, quite incurious, but the astronauts, as they float around “out of their element,” also seem clumsy, lolling. Clampitt uses “jacketed” to describe both human and manatee (although I still find this word a bit confusing). In letting itself be touched, the manatee is aligned with humanity, becoming really a courageous discoverer, like the crew of Discovery.

But what is the “wet, warm, / dimly imaginable tightrope” that the manatee reaches “across”? It must be, I suppose, the water, or the surface of the water, and Clampitt’s point would seem to be that the manatee, while appearing to be clumsy, is actually pulling off quite a feat. Inhabiting the water, living between breathing and drowning,

is like walking a tightrope. Likewise, the astronauts on Discovery may seem clumsy “jacketed” in their suits, but they are in reality “the fabulous itself.”

At this point I think I understand the poem fairly well. That is, I understand how the poem’s two topics are related. Manatees lolling about in the warm water, human beings shooting themselves into space: what could be more different? And yet Amy Clampitt brings the two together.

Or does she?

### Shaping

Is it possible to turn this reading of the poem around, to tease out another, conflicting meaning? To begin to deconstruct this poem, let’s think a bit about the oppositions that seem to be brought together. The worlds of manatees and humans appear to be far apart—as different as “that country” and Byzantium in Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium.” The manatees seem dramatically unlike discoverers: “numb, / torpid, quite incurious.” Manatees are even unlike the partly human, the mermaids and sirens. In Yeats’s poem, as we just saw, Cleanth Brooks’s *New Critical* reading finds that the golden bird unifies the poem, combining the worlds of nature and art. Likewise, in Clampitt’s poem a number of images seem to unify the opposing worlds, as the human discoverers come to seem like the manatees, “lolling,” “treading,” “jacketed.” The closing image of one manatee “edging / toward discovery” most directly shows us how the manatee shares the human urge to “keep / looking up” and to reach out and explore. We are both, manatee and human, “warmth- / hungry, breast-seeking animals.” Whereas Yeats’s poem unifies art and nature, Clampitt’s poem brings together the realms of animal and human. So it seems.

But if the poem appears most obviously to say that manatees and astronauts are similar or linked (out of their elements, awkward, seeking discovery), is it possible to suggest that the poem also undermines this unifying theme? What is being overlooked or suppressed in Clampitt’s unifying move? Here are some notes toward a deconstructive reading.

< > Apparent unity: the manatee is said to be “edging toward discovery,” like the Discovery astronauts it seems.

> < Reversal: But who really is the discoverer in this situation? The manatee passively “let itself be touched” after it “nudged” the canoe. Although we may think at first that the

manatee is “edging toward [its own] discovery,” the more reasonable inference is that the manatee is “edging toward discovery” by the canoe-goers. Does the manatee discover anything? Not that we know. There’s really no evidence that the manatee has moved beyond being “numb, / torpid, quite incurious.”

< > Apparent unity: “we” are “warmth- / hungry, breast-seeking animals.”

> < Reversal: This assertion connects the manatees to us only in a superficial way. More carefully considered, this description actually distances the manatees from “the discoverers” in their “space suits”: the astronauts surely aren’t seeking warmth or breasts in space. There is something else that drives humanity to explore, to “keep looking up,” and that intellectual curiosity is not shared, so far as we can tell, by the manatees.

< > Apparent unity: “jacketed” is used to describe both manatees and astronauts.

> < Reversal: The meaning of “jacketed” as it applies to manatees is never made clear. I can think of two senses in which the astronauts are “jacketed.” They’re actually wearing jackets; and they’re enclosed, in the sense of this definition of “jacket”: “a metal casing, as the steel covering around the barrel of a gun or the core of a bullet.” I don’t see how the manatees are “jacketed” in either of these senses. Applied to both manatees and astronauts, the term really emphasizes the gap between the two when we examine it closely.

< > Apparent unity: The poem says “the fabulous itself could be seen / unwieldily, jacket by jacket, / in the act of shedding, as / a snake does its husk, or / a celebrant his vestments”: the reference to a snake and a celebrant again seems to link animal and human activities, subtly implying that the “jacketed” manatees and humans are discovering “the fabulous itself.”

> < Reversal: But aren’t these two images actually pulling in different directions? A snake shedding its skin is not performing a voluntary, self-conscious act. The celebrant, however, makes the fabulous visible by shedding “his vestments”—a voluntary, self-conscious act. In removing his religious, ceremonial garments, the celebrant reveals somehow, Clampitt says, the mystery and the wonder he has participated in: the fabulous itself. At least, that’s how I read these difficult lines.

I would have thought that the fabulous would be glimpsed in the celebrant putting on his vestments, and that the act of removing them would reveal the mundane and ordinary world. But Clampitt has imagined the liftoff as an act of shedding, and

so images of “shedding” become images of discovery. The gap in meaning results from the difference between a reptile engaging in an automatic, biological function and a conscious human disengaging from a spiritual event.

< > Apparent unity: The notion that the astronauts are “out of their / element” may seem to reflect the manatees’ situation, living in water but breathing air.

> < Reversal: But the implicit comparison doesn’t hold up because the astronauts really are out of their element, totally unsuited to live in space without the creation of an artificial environment. Manatees, on the other hand, live on the border between air and water: that is their element. Birds fly in the air and build nests in trees and other places. We wouldn’t say they’re “out of their element” in either situation. Again, we see how the poem’s effort to unify animal and human comes apart. Manatees are different: they can’t live out of their element; we can, at least for certain periods.

At this point, I’m looking at the phrase “cozy mythologies we’ve / swindled ourselves with,” mythologies that “might even / come true” in Florida, Clampitt says, in the land of Walt Disney. And I’m thinking that the poem itself offers a “cozy mythology” about manatees and humans, suppressing the essential differences. From living in Florida for three years, I remember that a great deal of attention is paid to the manatees—they’re endangered, and they’re uniquely huge and strange. The state offers a manatee tag for automobiles, and the funds raised go to a “Save the Manatee” campaign. The main threat to manatees in Florida today seems to be from motorboats: as the manatees float up to the surface, boaters fail to see them and run over them, inflicting severe injuries with the propellers. A manatee hospital has even been set up to treat injured manatees, and boat speeds have been restricted in some areas. We are trying to live *with* the manatees; many tourists every year get in the water and swim with them. One could argue that we are forgetting our differences, assuming that manatees are in some crucial way like ourselves, when really perhaps we should leave them alone, banning boats and recreation in the waters they inhabit. At any rate, this reading of Clampitt’s poem opens up uncertainties in our understanding of them.

### Drafting

At this point I think I have enough ideas to draft an essay. Where should I start? First, I need to set up the task, letting the reader know what I’m trying to do: namely, I’m trying to show how the

poem appears to link human and manatee, but really doesn't. I want to start fast, diving right in; and since the ending most dramatically unifies manatee and human, with the two actually touching with the final word, I'm going to try starting with the ending of the poem. The word "discovery" occurs in the final lines, and since it's the title, I need to pay attention to it. The final image occurs in response to a question, it seems, and so it makes sense to move next to the question itself. Then I'll present the other evidence I've generated: "jacketed," "out of their element," and the snake/celebrant problem. That's my tentative plan as I start writing, very much aware that I may change my mind.

Here's the essay that resulted after a draft and a little polishing.

### Humanity and Manatee: Amy Clampitt's "Discovery"

The conclusion of Amy Clampitt's "Discovery" follows a profoundly challenging question: "What are we anyhow, we warmth- / hungry, breast-seeking animals?" Right before this question, the poem refers to astronauts, "discoverers" who are "clumsy in space suits," so it seems reasonable to assume that "we" refers to human beings. But rather than trying to say explicitly what "we" are anyhow, answering a question about human nature that has occupied philosophies and religions for centuries, the poem offers instead a little story about a manatee:

At Blue Spring, a day or so  
later,  
one of the manatees, edging  
toward discovery, nudged a canoe,  
and from across the wet, warm,  
dimly imaginable tightrope,  
let itself be touched.

While this story might seem at first an evasion of the question, the poem repeatedly links manatees and humans, giving them the same qualities, using the same words to describe them both. Thus, this story implicitly answers the question about human nature by pointing

*This paragraph introduces the issue: why is the poem partly about manatees and partly about humans? The conclusion is crucial, asserting indirectly their unity.*

once more to manatees: we are more like them, and they are more like us, than we might have thought. Like the manatee, we are "edging toward discovery," reaching out to other beings.

But a careful examination of the implied links between manatees and humans reveals that the similarities are actually questionable. Ultimately, as this paper will show, it is unclear whether the poem's comparison helps us understand the nature of either humans or manatees—or just compounds the mystery.

Let us begin with the strongest unifying agent of manatee and human, the phrase "edging toward discovery." The word "discovery" links the manatee's action to the poem's title and to the space shuttle Discovery. The poem does not say that Discovery in particular is being launched at the time the manatees "come upriver," but "the latest rocket" clearly is one of the shuttles. And the description of the astronauts, "jacketed, lolling and treading," "clumsy in space suits," seems designed to remind us of the manatees, who are described in the first section in the same terms—"lolling, jacketed" and "numb, / torpid" (which certainly suggests clumsiness).

But in what sense is the manatee "edging toward discovery"? Although the same words are used to describe astronaut and manatee, the similarity of their roles in the act of discovery seems uncertain. Whereas the astronauts self-consciously and actively venture out into space, the manatee passively "let itself be touched." Such a surrender may seem essentially different from the behavior of the human "discoverers," either in the shuttle or the canoe. One could argue, of course, that the manatee is discovering how it feels to be touched by human beings. But the astronauts do not rocket into space to deliver themselves to the touch or observation of other beings; and the people in the canoe are not said to be allowing the manatee to see what their hands feel like. There's no solid evidence

*This paragraph directly presents the thesis: the linking is problematic.*

*The strongest evidence for unity, "edging toward discovery," is introduced here.*

*The manatee is not a discoverer, but an object of discovery.*

that the manatee discovers anything or moves beyond being “numb, / torpid, quite incurious.” So, “edging / toward discovery” only seems initially to unite manatee and human; upon reflection, it may exhibit their differences, or at the least call their likeness into doubt.

*The question itself applies better to the manatee.*

The question itself—“What are we anyhow, we warmth- / hungry, breast-seeking animals?”—may seem to refer to both manatees and humans. The poem begins by noting how the manatees have “come upriver” to Blue Spring seeking warmth; and as mammals, the manatees do breast feed their young. But this deep question also puts a gap between manatee and human, because the astronauts surely aren’t seeking warmth or breasts in space. There is something else that drives humanity to explore, to “keep / looking up,” and that intellectual, self-conscious curiosity is not shared, so far as we can tell, by the manatees. Although “we” may be “warmth- / hungry” and “breast-seeking,” the suggestion that these are essential qualities limits and narrows what it means to be human.

*“Jacket” applies better to humans.*

Likewise, “jacket” or “jacketed” appears four times in the poem and would seem to be an important term connecting manatee and human, unifying the poem’s two subjects. The term is applied to both manatees, who are “lolling, jacketed, elephantine,” and to the astronauts, who are “jacketed, lolling / and treading.” But again the link is problematic. The astronauts are “jacketed,” it would seem, because they have on jackets, and because they are encased in metal—“jacketed” in the sense of “a metal casing, as the steel covering around the barrel of a gun or the core of a bullet,” as Webster’s puts it. Are the manatees “jacketed” in either of these senses? The other two occurrences refer to “the fabulous itself” being revealed “jacket by jacket,” which seems simply to mean “layer by layer,” or “casing by casing.” Thus, although the repeated use of the term may seem to bridge the poem and its subjects, it really does not in any clear or direct

way. The connection is superficial, and it gives way to a gap: manatees do not really come in jackets in any literal sense; humans do.

*More evidence: other gaps.*

In a number of other ways the poem’s two subjects break apart upon analysis. The notion, for instance, that the astronauts are “out of their / element” may seem to reflect also the manatees’ situation, living in water but breathing air. But the astronauts really are out of their element, totally unsuited to live in space without the creation of an artificial environment. Manatees, on the other hand, need to live on the border between air and water: that is their element. Humans do not need to live on the border of space and earth. Or, again, the reference to a snake and a celebrant again seems to link animal and human activities. But aren’t these two images actually pulling in different directions? A snake shedding its skin is not performing a voluntary, self-conscious act. The celebrant, however, makes the fabulous visible by shedding “his vestments”—a voluntary, self-conscious act. In removing his religious, ceremonial garments, the celebrant reveals somehow, Clampitt says, the mystery and the wonder he has participated in: the fabulous itself. For the snake, the fabulous itself would seem to be the instinctual act of shedding. The gap in meaning results from the difference between a reptile engaging in an automatic, biological function and a conscious human disengaging from a spiritual event.

*Conclusion: the unity may be a myth, or is at least uncertain.*

The poem refers to the “cozy mythologies” of paradise and eternal youth that “might even / come true” in Florida. Another myth may be the illusion that manatees and humans are alike in some essential way. The poem asserts that unity, but at the same time it points out the difference, the otherness, of the manatees. We may drive our boats and canoes where they live; we may touch them; but it may be misleading to think we understand them—or even ourselves. The “discovery” may well be the question, what are we anyhow?

## PRACTICING DECONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

I offer here two texts for deconstructive efforts, along with some questions I hope you find helpful.

### Questions

1. What is the most obvious statement the following advertisement attempts to make? What sort of attitudes, feelings, assumptions, does the advertisement attribute to part of its audience? What effect does it strive to create?
2. How might the advertisement tend also to create the attitudes, feelings, assumptions it strives to reduce or remove?

### Cut through the anxiety, the unknown, the hassle...

At USC we offer free Back-To-School workshops that answer all your questions about going back "to hit the books."

If you're 25 years or older, our workshops are designed just for *you*. You'll discover opportunities for adults at USC that make your dreams possible, whether they are finishing that degree you started years ago or going to college for the first time. We'll help you understand admission, advisement and registration procedures. And you'll be surprised by the wide range of subjects and flexible times and locations of our courses.

Join our workshop during USC Showcase '93 on Saturday, April 3, 9:30 - 11:00 a.m. at 900 Assembly Street, room 17.

Call today to reserve your space!

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are a part! .777-9446

University of South Carolina Division of Continuing Education

That is, does the advertisement do contradictory things? How does this conflict influence its effectiveness?

3. Look closely at the details of the advertisement and how they reveal (as deconstruction insists all texts must) what is being excluded or suppressed. For example, what does the imperative to "Cut through the anxiety, the unknown, the hassle" acknowledge? If the slogan next to the phone number were to be spoken, what would it say? How does the pun in this slogan divide and complicate it?

\* \* \*

London (1794)

*William Blake*

I wander thro' each charter'd street  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man, 5  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry; 10  
Every blackning Church appalls  
And the hapless Soldiers sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlots curse 15  
Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

### Questions

1. What is a charter? What would it mean for a street to be "charter'd"? How about a river (the Thames in this poem)?
2. "Charter'd" is repeated in the first two lines. What other words are repeated in the poem? What might be the purpose of such repetition?
3. In *The Pursuit of Signs* Jonathan Culler reviews some of the many interpretations this famous poem has generated, and

he notes that one of two different structures has been perceived to organize the entire poem. The first way of thinking about the poem's structure sees it, as Culler says, as a "synecdochic series, where a list of particulars are interpreted as instances of a general class to which they all belong" (69). What in your opinion might be the "general class" to which the particulars in the poem belong? That is, the chimney sweeper's cry, the hapless soldier's sigh, and the harlot's curse are instances of what? What do they have in common?

4. The second way of thinking about the poem's structure sees it (again following Culler) as an "*aletheic reversal*: first a false or inadequate vision, then its true or adequate counterpart" (69). Where, in your opinion, might the shift from a false vision to a true one occur? How would you describe these two visions? (Hint: where does the poem shift from universal statements—"every," "every"—to more specific ones?)
5. How does the idea of "mind-forg'd manacles" contribute to the structure of the poem? (Your answer to this question may overlap with previous answers.) Is it a particular or a general, a member of a class, or a class?
6. How many examples are offered in the last two verses? What are they examples of? How are they parallel? (You might think in terms of victim—action—institution.) Is there any problem with their parallelism?
 

No critic, Culler says, takes the statement that the chimney sweep's cry appalls the church at face value (*Signs* 70). How does the structure of the other two examples affect the way we think about the chimney sweep? Again, think in parallel terms. Why would critics find it necessary to explain the example of the chimney sweep?
7. What sense can you make of the last verse? What are the difficulties in understanding it?
8. The speaker of the poem marks (or hears) the sweep cry, the soldier sigh, and the harlot curse. This structural parallelism encourages us to assume a parallelism of meaning. What are the problems with determining such a unity? That is, can you argue that in fact the poem does not make sense—at least not any one sense, but rather that it goes in conflicting directions?
9. Are the "mind-forg'd manacles" the product of the Church, the Palace, and Marriage? (Most readers seem to assume so.) Can you turn this inference around and argue otherwise? Could the sweep, the soldier, and the harlot create their own manacles?

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## RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING: DECONSTRUCTION

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- Kent, Thomas. "Deconstruction." In *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*. Ed. Theresa Enos. New York: Garland, 1996. Brief explanations of deconstruction abound (check your milk cartons and newspaper inserts), but this one is exceptionally thorough and insightful.
- Lynn, Steven. *Samuel Johnson After Deconstruction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992. Compares deconstruction to other kinds of skepticism, arguing that Johnson anticipates post-structuralism in some important and surprising ways.
- Tompkins, Jane. "A Short Course in Post-Structuralism." Eds. Charles Moran and Elizabeth Penfield. In *Conversations: Contemporary Critical Theory and the Teaching of Literature*. Eds. Charles Moran and Elizabeth Penfield. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1990. 19–37. Aimed at teachers with little or no understanding of deconstruction; helpful for a general audience.