What you get… is what you see?
A new focus on the teaching of Literature

Abstract
Deconstructing in order to construct is the way to foster critical thinking. The implementation of the principles of “centers” and “plurality of interpretations” as seen by Jacques Derrida casts a new light on how to approach literary works in the Literature class. We best learn what we construct, and what is personal construction if not the putting together of the scattered pieces of a puzzle? (Applicable to upper – intermediate students and trainees).

Summary
Our objective is to prove that the practical application of two principles of Jacques Derrida’s Deconstructionism theory is a resourceful way to promote critical thinking and the understanding of literary works. When students are motivated to build up their own work from what they have already studied they have the possibility of creating a new personal interpretation which they will never forget.

In order to get to this, we will start by showing chunks from the film “Dead Poets’ Society”, which will let the audience know that there are different angles from which to see life. Secondly, and to strengthen this idea, we will hand out pictures with optical illusions and a guide with questions that can be answered in more than one way for the different groups to debate about. The following task is the reading of the lyrics of Elton John’s “The Last Song” with a letter format. This activity consists in asking the audience the many interpretations the written piece may have. What lies beneath the task is to prove that the written word format may sometimes result in misleading interpretations. Next, we will introduce Derrida’s theory focusing on the aspects we are going to deal with: “Centring and Decentring” and “Plurality of Interpretations”. We will then invite them to listen to the song,
discover where originally the text came from and debate about it. We will then show how to put Derrida’s theory into practice in Literature. The following are the leading questions our students worked with:

- What is your picture of the 20th century man? Taking into account all the authors you have read, construct his image. Justify.
- Mrs. Dalloway in images: Re-tell the story by means of pictures. Include a quotation below each.
- Where does “Wuthering Heights” center? Re-tell the story taking into account the center you have chosen (discrimination, death, hate, the place, etc.).
- Select songs that represent 20th century man as seen by the authors you have studied.

So as to close the workshop, we will show chunks from “Patch Adams”. To conclude, we will play the song “What you get is what you see”, by Tina Turner. While the song is being played, we will hand out Salvador Dalí’s picture “Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach” (Circa, 1938) as a souvenir.

**Theoretical Framework**
We have come a long way since those days when all that was said about literary works had a sole interpretation: the teacher’s. It was the teacher’s voice on authors and works what students acknowledged as trustworthy; therefore, “her” interpretation came, in turn, to equal “the acceptable”. Far were we from savoring Literature as alive inside us all.

Literature is like a revolving door which opens up different ways for different people. Because of this, it would be naive to think there is only one possible way to approach interpretations. Furthermore, any author loses authorship on his work the very moment someone reads it, because the picture of the characters or setting one visualizes differs greatly from reader to reader. “In this view meaning is seen as residing in the reader, and readers are regarded as active constructors of meaning who bring to the text their personal knowledge, feelings, beliefs and histories that affect their responses and interpretations, thus creating the potential for more than one “correct” interpretation” (Thomson, 2000).

A simple question as “What is this book about?” could bring about many different answers and if we turn the answer into “Where does this story center?” or “what is the central element in this story?”, the replies could be even more shockingly different. The truth is that each reader would privilege a centrality that is central to his own personal history, and here is where Derrida has his greatest say.

…There is never an encounter with meaning as such, simply a ceaseless play of differences between those terms which in any given culture there is a tendency to assume a hierarchy of differences to imply preferences. Thus in dominant Western traditions it is common and conventional to privilege “white before black, …” Deconstructive thinkers do not simply invert these hierarchies but reopen the play of differences… to
resist the lure of merely binary thinking recognizing the plurality.
(Pope, R. 1998)

“Poststructuralism is best known for the analytical techniques of deconstruction. This involves breaking down a text into its constituent differences and identifying its notional center, then exploring the procedures whereby certain centers are preferred or privileged. A characteristic deconstructive move is to invert differences and to point to what is marginalized or absent thereby setting up alternative centers or challenging the notion of centers altogether. Poststructuralism and deconstructors in particular are especially fascinated by absences, gaps and silences and are keen on offering radical inversions of the relations between foreground and background.” (Pope, 1995).

"Deconstruction" as seen by Jacques Derrida is construction and destruction in itself. There is a key point to this idea: all systems or structures have a CENTER, the point of origin, the thing that created the system in the first place, a point from which everything comes, and to which everything refers or returns.

We would go a bit further into saying that the notion of centers does not turn the marginal central but gives the readers the choice to consider what is central and thus reconstruct a system of hierarchies anew that will much have to do with the personal values they privilege in their real life. Moreover, this notion opens the way to research, for the readers will have to back up their standing. This “permission” they get from the teacher to voice their own interpretation aims at letting them, readers, know that they can think critically and give a better shape to the analysis that they very humbly based on personal intuition at first. They then learn that assumptions or subjective experiences are but just a starting point and as such, are in continual state of change. So if they add research to experiences, they can come up with an interpretation they will value for it will be THEIRS.
The hypotheses underlying our reflections are:

- Finding a center in the story is a source of pleasure. Literature is an aesthetic activity.
- The reader becomes the author of his own interpretation.
- He learns to debate about his point of view and in turn to admit different points of views which are his classmates’.
- Plurality of interpretations equals richness and open-mindedness.
- Being able to voice and sustain a personal interpretation fosters critical thinking.
- Decentring that contributes to further centring aims at rebuilding.

**Activities**

The following activity attempts to show how a simple text may be interpreted differently; furthermore it gives insight on the fact that systems play an important role in the construction of interpretations. Let’s take the case of the following picture (pic. 1).
To everybody's surprise, the symbol can be interpreted as both the number “13” or the letter “B”. And here we go back to our previous question: What can you see in the middle of the picture? It is here where the students' own life experiences and personal history trigger the interpretation of the text. The symbol does not mean anything in itself nor by itself if we consider it as an isolated element, but it does have meaning in itself when the readers fill this symbol with their own personal life experience, their own personal history.

Optical illusions are the simplest example we can give to show how the understanding and interpreting of a given text does not depend on what the author wants readers to understand but on how the readers relate it to their personal history, thus this theory of interpretation can be applied to literary works.

Here is another activity which shows the practical application of our hypothesis: “THE WORK PROPOSES, MAN DISPOSES” (Barthes)
On “The Canterbury Tales”

1) Write 3 (three) questions you would ask yourself about the tale. (Each student is to read a tale).
2) Choose one of the questions and turn it into an assertion.
3) Where does your story center?
4) Which are the concepts, philosophical ideas, social aspects that oppose your assertion?
5) How would you back up number 3? (Take number 4 into account)
6) Can you find other opposing views to your assertion in the tale itself?
7) Can you relate your assertions to any other stories you have read before? If so, which ones?
8) Can you relate your opposing arguments to any other stories you have read before? Which ones?
9) Which are, in your opinion, the four pillars The Middle ages rest on? Why? Take into account all you have studied in “Language and Culture”.
10) Which is the connection that there exits between number 9 and your tale?

Centers become the basis of students’ assertions (thesis statements). The aim of these questions is to promote critical thinking, for the students are to write a persuasive essay on The Canterbury Tales.

On “Wuthering Heights”
Poststructuralism is post in that it both extends and, to some extent, explodes the premises of Structuralism. A structuralist approach would tend to treat a sign system as a complete, finished, knowable whole with a notional center; a poststructuralist approach would tend to treat a sign system as an incomplete, unfinished and unknowable fragment with many potential centers or no center at all. Poststructuralism concentrates on the holes in systems, and it is probably best known for the analytical technique of deconstruction. (Pope, R. 1998)

If we were to teach “Wuthering Heights” at upper-intermediate level, we would focus on polarities, centers and silences. According to this selection, some of the questions we would put forward would be “Where, in your opinion, does the story center? (love? discrimination? power? death?)”, “How much does attitude or the choice of it influence our course in life?”, “Does the book, as a whole, suggest that being a self-disciplined, reasonable, loving, unselfish person is better than being wild, wayward, passionate, like Catherine?”, “If this were to be taken as a work whose core lies on oppositions, what contrasts do you think you are able to account for?”.

This question of breaking into the text is poststructural, since we are privileging differences. Our objective is to get into possible holes, gaps, silences the story has so as to bridge the gap between the complexity of the work and its consequent understanding. Filling in the holes would give way to different and unique re-creations of the work. It is through that which is different that we can find the match to our critical thoughts and the novel. The poststructuralist approach rethinks binary oppositions and tries to open up into alternative more general centers. This leads the readers to deconstruct the text so as to construct their unique personal understanding of the work, “breaking down a text into its constituent differences and identifying its notional centers, then exploring the procedures whereby certain of those are preferred or ‘privileged’ ” (Pope, 1995)
Bearing the poststructuralist approach in mind, textual intervention techniques become genuine alternatives in literature teaching practice. The activity we would design would be to identify three groups of polarities in the novel; the students would have to find extra material (songs, poems, and images and relate these to the polarities they would focus on). This work would consist in presenting a folder with the images and poems and an oral presentation in which they would have to explain the reason that lies behind their selection. By means of this activity, students would be able to create their own opinion of the novel because they would look for evidence within and outside the text. From within, they would take the information they need for the oral presentation, that is, the necessary elements that back up their interpretation. From the outside, they would take elements connected with their present experience, which would help them to solve the complexity of the novel and reach its final understanding. “The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and interests or preoccupations of the reader” (Rosenblatt, 1978).

1) Students will have to describe Heathcliff’s 3-year absence and decide what the reason for his new state (so changed!) is, giving details about it. This will lead to many different versions of what might have happened to him (plurality of interpretations). In this way, students will be extending the text “during” the events it represents. They will also have to develop a conversation between Heathcliff and Catherine’s souls when they are finally reunited in the after-life. Students will again be extending the text, but after the story has finished. By doing this, they will be writing a part of the story Emily Bronte never wrote, thus giving the book some personal continuity on the basis of their own interpretation.
2) Before reading the novel, students will be presented with the song “Wuthering Heights”, by Kate Bush. (which can also be used as a listening comprehension activity before moving into the analysis of the lyrics per se). To trigger discussion, students will have to explain what they understand from the song. (Who’s telling the story?, Who are the people involved?, What is the prevailing feeling?, What is the relationship between these people?, Where is Cathy? (Back up your answer with evidence from the text), What picture do you frame in your mind through the song?) (As the lyrics might be a bit difficult to understand, students will be provided with a copy to read along).

3) Students will be shown different scenes from the movie “Wuthering Heights” (1939, starring Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon, produced by Samuel Goldwyn, directed by William Wyler) before reading the book. They will have to predict and imagine what happened before the scene given and what will follow. After reading the story, they will compare versions and discuss which one/s they like best.

Our final conclusion is that when students are encourager to build up their own truth, authorship become theirs and they find the real value of Literature: appropriacy and growth. Literature is the door through which our thoughts find a way into the very essence that makes us human, into the very purpose of life: to grow in spirit and transcend: “Life is a powerful play and while it goes on, YOU may contribute a verse”. (Adapted from the film “Dead Poets’ Society”, 1987). What would YOUR verse be?

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1. BOOKS


2. **FILMS**


3. **AUDIO RECORDING**

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(3124 words)

'Tis too high
Come to the edge
We might fall
Come to the edge
So they came to the edge
And he pushed them
And they flew.

Apollinaire
There will be some debate for sure, as the group with picture 3 will say that the symbol in the middle of the picture is undoubtedly the letter “B”. And of course they are right… as well. Their system, the one provided by the author, leads them to interpret the symbol as the letter “B”.

Finally, both groups are exposed to the whole picture (pic.4).
To everybody’s surprise, the symbol can be interpreted as both the number “13” or the letter “B”. And here we go back to our previous question: What can you see in the middle of the picture? It is here where the students’ own life experiences and personal history trigger the interpretation of the text. The symbol does not mean anything in itself nor by itself if we consider it as an isolated element, but it does have meaning in itself when the readers fill this symbol with their own personal life experience, their own personal history.

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