Heart of Darkness Deconstruction

Links

[• Dr. Kristi Siegel’s Introduction to Modern Literary Theory (scroll down)](http://www.kristisiegel.com/theory.htm)

[• University of Toronto Literary Theory Glossary: Deconstruction](http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/glossary/Deconstruction.html)

• [Stanford University Deconstruction: What Is It?](http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/derrida/deconstruction.html)

•[Michael Delahoyde Deconstruction](http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/decon.html)

•[Wikipedia Deconstruction (For basic info only. Do not use as a cited source)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deconstruction)

Deconstruction involves the close reading of texts in order to demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings, rather than being a unified, logical whole. As J. Hillis Miller, the preeminent American deconstructor, has explained in an essay entitled "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" (1976), "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air."

Deconstruction was both created and has been profoundly influenced by the French philosopher on language Jacques Derrida. Derrida, who coined the term deconstruction, argues that in Western culture, people tend to think and express their thoughts in terms of binary oppositions. Something is white but not black, masculine and therefore not feminine, a cause rather than an effect. Other common and mutually exclusive pairs include beginning/end, conscious/unconscious, presence/absence, and speech/writing. Derrida suggests these oppositions are hierarchies in miniature, containing one term that Western culture views as positive or superior and another considered negative or inferior, even if only slightly so. Through deconstruction, Derrida aims to erase the boundary between binary oppositions—and to do so in such a way that the hierarchy implied by the oppositions is thrown into question.

Example from Full Essay

The meanings of the stories of most seamen, says the narrator, are inside the narration like the kernel of a cracked nut. I take it the narrator means the meanings of such stories are easily expressed, detachable from the stories and open to paraphrase in other terms, as when one draws an obvious moral: “Crime doesn’t pay,” or “Honesty is the best policy,” or “The truth will out,” or “Love conquers all.” The figure of the cracked nut suggests that the story itself, its characters and narrative details,are the inedible shell which must be removed and discarded so the meaning of the story may be assimilated. This relation of the story to its meaning is a particular version of the relation of container to thing contained. . .The meaning is adjacent to the story, contained with it as nut within shell, but the meaning has no intrinsic similarity or kinship to the story. . .The one happens to touch the other, as shell surrounds nut, as bottle its liquid contents.

It is far otherwise with Marlow’s stories. Their meaning -- like the meaning of a parable -- is outside, not in. It envelopes the tale rather than being enveloped by it. The relation of container and thing contained is reversed. The meaning now contains the tale. Moreover, perhaps because of that enveloping containment, or perhaps for more obscure reasons, the relation of the tale to its meaning is no longer that of dissimilarity and contingency.

--From “Heart of Darkness Revisited” by J. Hillis Miller

Questions to answer in your Congo Diary:

1. What do deconstructionists believe about meaning in a text?

2. What is the accepted, or obvious, view of this novel, which might well be “de-constructed”?

3. What are binary oppositions and how are they important to deconstruction?

4. Explain how one term in a binary opposition can be considered privileged.

5. What does a deconstructionist look for when reading a text?

6. As deconstructionist, what might you look for in Heart of Darkness?

7. What do you think are the strengths of this approach? The weaknesses?