

This is your second to last essay, hooray! This one needs to be **6 pages (minimum)** in order to accommodate what will essentially be two separate readings (or more!) of the same poem. To match the assignment I've written a really long description of it below (it's my one last chance to tell you how Deconstruction works). But I hope it helps.

The paper structure should go like this: **1)** Intro paragraph with poem summary and essay thesis; **2)** detailed explanation of Deconstruction—approximately 1 page; **3)** close reading of a Rilke poem of your choice—2 pages; **4)** deconstruction of that same poem—2 pages; **5)** brief conclusion paragraph. I've outlined these steps for you below.

1. Write an introductory paragraph in which you *briefly* introduce and summarize the poem and then put forth your thesis argument about it. You needn't mention Deconstruction in this opening paragraph if you don't want to. Just introduce the poem and then present your argument. The thesis will need to point out *two* things: how the poem simultaneously does and undoes something, in its very language or structure.

For an example of this, let's look at Stephen Lynn's sample thesis in the third paragraph of his essay deconstructing a poem by Amy Clampitt:

"But a careful examination of the implied links between manatees and humans reveals that the similarities are actually questionable. Ultimately it is unclear whether the poem's comparison helps us understand the nature of the either humans or manatees—or just compounds the mystery" (133).

Look closely: his thesis is in two sentences. That's fine. The first sentence sets up the problem for us (by focusing on one particular **binary opposition** [manatees-humans] that he believes structures the overall meaning of the whole poem) by pointing out that although the poem would have us believe there are important links between manatees and humans, in fact there aren't—or at least not as many or as clearly as the poem wants us to believe. Then, in the next sentence, he just goes a step further and makes his initial thesis more clear from a deconstructive point-of-view: here he implies that, ultimately, the separation between manatees and humans—a separation never truly acknowledged by the poem itself but still undeniably there—is in fact so vast that these differences totally undermine or call into question the similarities between them that *are* suggested by the poem. In fact, Lynn seems to suggest that these differences are so obvious and important that they really prevent us from understanding either manatees or humans any better at all. This runs counter to the purpose of the poem since the poem, after all, seems to be trying to establish a connection between us and manatees as a way of shining new light on us humans. You should notice here that Lynn is overturning the privileged term—humans—by arguing that the manatees actually teach us nothing about ourselves. This conclusion of Lynn's about how the poem actually covers up/hides/forgets to talk about its own differences and ambiguities is *the deconstructive step* because it rips apart the "fabric" of the poem, it pulls apart the tenuous meaning it, the poem (and the poet), would have us believe.

2. The second paragraph should lay out a detailed description of Deconstruction—what it is and how it differs from other kinds of critical theory you’ve already learned, what Structuralism is and how it lays the groundwork for Deconstruction, what it seeks to do, and how exactly it does it. Make sure in this explanation that you refer to and explain the following terms: *arbitrariness*, *binary opposition*, *différance*, *dispersal*, *privilege* as well. Use Rilke’s poetry to help explain certain key concepts or terms—that may help you get through this paragraph.

Now, deconstruction of any literary text becomes a two-step process: *construction* and then *deconstruction*. So...

3. *Construct* the text first. Show us how the poem appears to resolve its oppositions and ambiguities. This simply means figuring out what a poem means and how that meaning happens, how it’s built into the language of the poem. This is the same kind of critical examination that New Critics go through: a close reading of the text, line by line, start to finish, with analysis and discussion of certain important elements that you see and that contribute to the overall meaning or “rhetorical impact” of the poem. So now you’re looking at things like metaphor, symbol and other imagery in the poem, or you’re noticing certain narrative choices made by the poet like setting and time period, or you’re analyzing the “voice” of the poem by looking at things like character and point-of-view, or you’re noting certain patterns in the language like rhyme, meter, repetition, length of line or stanza, punctuation, stanza breaks, shifts in focus, etc. The goal here is always to make sense of the poem, to say what you think it means and to use evidence from the poem to support your claims. Treat this part of your analysis like a New Critical reading of the poem, and use the “How to Read a Poem” handout from the course website as well as the “Rilke Notes” handout, also on the website, to help focus your analysis of the poem and to supply you with specific terminology to discuss the poem. Also on the website under the Rilke media tab is a link to an external web page with analysis of Rilke’s famous poem “The Panther”—look at this in order to get an idea of how to begin interpreting a poem too. Your analysis should take at least 2 pages.
4. Now *deconstruct* the poem. Now that the poem has become meaningful to you, think about how you might begin reversing that process of coming to an understanding that you just completed. Show us how the resolution of the poem falls apart upon closer examination. Misread or “unread” the poem, do a counter-reading to the interpretation of the poem you just completed. Unravel the meaning by looking at the same features you noted in constructing the poem, and challenge their meaning and function in the life of the poem. Identify a pattern of binary opposition and then expose how the hierarchy of meaning (the eventual favoring of one term over the other term in that binary set) is arbitrary. Explain how it can be uncovered and reversed with just a little work. This is the *deconstructive step*. Try answering some of the questions below as you work:
 - What sets of “binary meaning” [closed sets of related but opposing terms] seem to run through and “structure” the work? Which terms seem ultimately favored or privileged—what feeling or image or sense does the poem seem to push forth over another? Why? Is this favoring a bit arbitrary, perhaps? Couldn’t we make the poem favor the alternate term, or maybe even another term that isn’t there but is still definitely implied in the language of the poem?

- How does the poem suggest certain meanings but forget or “elide” [erase and leave out] certain others? Why do you think it does that? What kinds of important meanings are always getting deferred or postponed by the words in the poem, by the intention of the poet as far as you can discern it, or by *you* when you read the thing? Are you imposing a meaning on the poem that isn’t actually there? Why?
 - What does the poem really mean? Can you be sure that any of your conclusions about the poem are right? Really? What about all those different translations of Rilke’s “The Panther” I pointed out to you (and posted links to under the “Rilke media” tab on the website)? Don’t those multiple translations suggest that “truth” is only a rough translation, an approximation of misheard or inadequately understood speech? Don’t they suggest that language, hence “meaning,” is maybe more contextual and subjective and temporary and subject to misreading? Don’t they suggest that “real and true meaning” as it existed inside Rilke’s head when he composed the poem, disappeared once it hit the page because he, as any of us are, was only ever able to use words to *suggest* what he really knew about his world? Don’t the conflicted, open, variable and multiple meanings of the poem call the whole thing into question ultimately so as to make the whole thing indecipherable, unreadable, even incomprehensible?
5. Finally, give us a brief conclusion in which you repeat your original reading of the poem and then your revised readings again, and your ultimate conclusion that maybe, just maybe, the meaning isn’t there, never was there, won’t ever be there, whatever, and why that is. That’s it.

And remember:

- Be specific in your argumentation: Develop a sound thesis argument in your first paragraph that revolves around a single point you wish to make about the selection
- Develop your body paragraphs according to the model you have already learned: state a topic point, introduce and insert textual support, analyze this textual material, link your discussion back to the main point of your paragraph and to your thesis
- Write only in the 3rd person (he, she, it, the text, the author, etc.) and use the present tense
- Do a Works Cited page for this assignment, and be sure to follow all other standard rules of textual citation and attribution in the body of your essay

Good luck! As idiotic as it may sound, please try to have some fun with the deconstructive step in this analysis—deconstruction is all about fun and play with language, about overturning and turning inside out “obvious” or “apparent” meanings of things.