

Sample Student
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Essay #4

“Solitude” and Deconstruction

Solitude, alone in one’s own thought lacking any interaction, compassion, or love – most would equate solitude with negative emotions. But, the truth is that being “in solitude” means nothing at all. Rainer Maria Rilke makes this esoteric truth evident in *The Book of Images*, a collection of poems written in the early twentieth century. In one particular poem called “Solitude,” Rilke describes solitude by comparing it with rain and time schemes. Divided into two stanzas and a closing line, the first stanza introduces the absence of humans and the presence of environmental company with rain, the sky, and plains. The second stanza establishes the existence of other people, but the emptiness of the surrounding community. The concluding line ends the poem by recalling the idea of nature with the image of water and a river. At first glance, a reader might make assumptions about the tone of the poem being melancholy or sad, or the overall purpose of the poem as one that’s meant to illustrate the somber feeling of being utterly alone with one’s thoughts. A deconstructionist stance, however, would reveal that the poem really illustrates nothing at all, or nothing that’s stable and unified, anyway. At first blush, “Solitude” might appear to unify opposing themes of nature and community, but after analyzing the complex language in the poem it becomes evident that the very thing that brings the disparate and opposing elements of the poem together – the difficult metaphorical language – is also the very thing that forces the entire poem to fall apart and lose all meaning in the end.

According to Steven Lynn in *Texts and Contexts*, Structuralism and Deconstruction are literary approaches in which the reader carries out two very distinct readings of a text (108). The first reading relies on structuralist principals to understand a text, to interpret a text as a coherent and cohesive piece of meaningful writing. To do so, a reader might also rely on semiotics, a linguistic study of sign systems and language rules that enable us to make meaning out of words (109). Through textual analysis using standard rhetorical devices applied to the text, the reader can draw conclusions about how a poem is constructed and what it means. Binary pairs that seem

Comment: Thematic introduction to the discussion, author, book, poem.

Note that here she is trying to focus our attention while at the same time giving us all the basic information we need as ignorant readers who have no familiarity with Rilke at all

Comment: Brief summary of the poem.

Note that her summary work doesn’t do a detailed reading of each line but rather just gives us a good solid overview of the poem as a whole, touching on specific images and structure and tone – the poetic language devices that she feels define this poem

Comment: Thesis statement. Note that it takes her a few sentences to lay this out for us – that’s just fine.

Note also that she’s taking pains to point out two things in her thesis: both how the poem seems to “make” itself AND how it “unmakes” itself, at the same time, within the very same poem

to structure the poem might be examined, and any apparent privileging of one term over another would be noted. Metaphors, imagery, beat pattern and rhyme, character and setting, voice and point of view would all be discussed in this context of binary oppositions, word relationships, and unified meanings in an effort to “understand” the poem as the poet originally meant it to be understood.

After isolating the apparent meaning of a work using structuralist techniques of analysis, deconstruction then attacks those same conclusions, not by *changing* the meaning of the work, but by *multiplying* it. Using the same analytical tools as a structuralist would, the deconstructionist seeks to argue that any meaning previously uncovered is/are just temporary *misreadings* of it. To a deconstructionist, meanings and counter-meanings can be found at every possible juncture in the poem, thereby fracturing the unified wholeness of the text by opening up seemingly endless opposing meanings and interpretations. In order to “open up” a text, a deconstructionist may explain the “arbitrariness” of meanings attached to words: that meaning is not based in truth but instead based on subjective guesswork and misreadings, and therefore, meanings are never fixed or affixed to words in any stable way. This process peels open the poem like an onion, and once it’s acknowledged that meaning is never fixed then words become slippery, containing many possible readings within them and opening up a wide scope of possibilities for play and meaning making and unmaking.

Also important to a Deconstruction analysis is the concept of dispersal. Simply reversing the meaning is not the object of this theory, but rather to scatter its meaning, creating the dispersal of its meaning (141). Lastly, perhaps one of the most important concepts for Deconstruction is one coined by the theory’s most important figure, Jacques Derrida. Derrida coined the word “*différance*” to combine the meanings of two words: *différence*, how one thing differs from another, and *déferral*, language is always open (141). Together, these words form a concept or practice that allows Deconstructionists to further open up the possibilities that can be found in a piece of writing. To perform Deconstruction one must complete two readings, one using Structuralism in which the reader pulls together the piece of work using a cohesive theme, and the other using Deconstruction in which the reader pulls down the meaning just introduced by offering multiple other meanings.

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Comment: This student has divided her Deconstruction summary into two paragraphs – in this section she only explains the *analysis* or “structuralist” or *construction* part of the process

Note that she used Lynn’s work in *Texts and Contexts* to help explain the process to us

Comment: This paragraph constitutes the second half of her Deconstruction summary, in which she explains the deconstructive half of the process

Comment: This paragraph is additional explanation and summary of Deconstruction

(She probably doesn’t need to include this paragraph, as she’s already done a very complete job of laying out the theory in the two paragraphs above)

The next two pages of this student's analysis constitute her close analysis of the poem itself. Note how she discusses many of the literary and poetic elements I've included in my lessons on both how to read literature and how to read Rilke's poems. She has drawn these terms from, among other sources, the documents I have made available on the website to help you interpret Rilke's work using the standard tools of literary analysis: **How to Read a Poem** and **Rilke Notes**, as well as the **Essay 4 assignment description**.

Rilke's "Solitude" is brought together into one cohesive piece of writing by the solemn tone. Various literary devices can be used to show this. Multiple binary oppositions can be isolated here as well: together-alone, morning-evening, but the most important of these oppositions is that between nature and community. Rilke explains the sensation of feeling alone by contrasting the company of people with the company of the surrounding natural occurrences in the environment. The first stanza introduces the companionship and connection between an individual and his/her environment.

Solitude is like a rain.

It rises from the sea toward evening;

from plains, which are distant and remote,

it goes to the sky, which always has it.

And only then it falls from the sky on the city. (lines 1-5)

Here Rilke uses a simile to compare solitude to rain (1). By describing the process of evaporation and the falling of rain, he is really explaining the inevitability of rain's analogue, or defining feature: solitude. As Rilke reveals how this feeling of solitude is inevitable and inescapable, the reader gets a sense of solemnity, of being unable to break free from the feelings one must endure at one point or another during his/her lifetime. The punctuation in the first stanza helps us to understand the solemn tone too. After each line there is a comma or period; lines in this stanza are cut short instead of enjambling one into the next. This controlled, flowing procession of words lets us experience the slowing down of life, a common trait of depression and isolation in the world, amidst nature, amongst people.

Comment: Here she's making sure to include the short stanza that she discusses – this is a very smart strategy on her part since she's working so closely with just a few lines of poetry in this essay, it is wise to show some of that poetry to us so that we can more easily see what she's talking about

Note the since this cited excerpt is more than 4 lines of poetry, she had to turn it into a **block quote**: tabbed in *twice*, no quotation marks, and the citation notes the line numbers, not the pages

The second stanza lets us experience the possibility of redemptive, restorative human interaction and then crushes our spirits by allowing it to be within our grasp, yet still too far off to reach. By describing the society surrounding him, Rilke puts a negative timbre to his perspective. Here is the stanza:

It rains down in the in-between hours,
when all the crooked streets turn toward morning,
and when the bodies, which found nothing,
leave each other feeling sad and disappointed;
and when the people, who hate each other,
have to sleep together in one bed:

then solitude flows with the rivers... (6-12)

He describes how bodies “found nothing,” people “leave each other feeling sad and disappointed” and how people “who hate each other, / have to sleep together in *one* bed” (8-11). Rilke is letting on how human interaction can lead to disappointment, giving the reader mixed messages about the possibility of ever having or making any human connection at all. Again, the punctuation lets us know a little more about the tone of the poem. As in the first stanza, much punctuation is used (at every end of a line) allowing the reader to slowly experience the piercing words with a lot of pauses and rests after each breath or line. We are allowed to meditate on Rilke’s and our own aloneness in the firmament. And then by retrieving or reviving the element of nature in the last line, Rilke is reminding us of the everlasting existence of nature’s company, the one thing we can always depend on in a society filled with predictably disappointing fellow humans. The poem is closed with a series of ellipses, giving a sense of everlasting solitude as there is everlasting evaporation, rain, and flowing of rivers back into nature, freedom, possibility, inevitability....

Repetition is a recurring device in the poem, in both vocabulary and concepts. The first stanza repeats the word “sky” after its initial appearance in line 4. Rilke states that the sky always has solitude, thus giving it importance, letting the second usage of the word illustrate this significance and conveying the tone of the whole poem by explaining how the solitude is so pervasive and all encompassing that it rains down from the sky just as rain itself does. The

second stanza also relies on repetition with the phrase “and when” in lines 7, 8, and 10. The phrase is always followed by a line expressing the disappointment of society and/or people in it, once again letting the reader experience the solemnity of the moment Rilke tries to cover in this poem.

Besides the recurring linguistic devices noted above, there is also a repeating image-theme: water. The rain pours from the first stanza to the second, and returns to rivers in the last line. As discussed above, the everlasting sense of nature and wildness in this natural space seems meant to reveal to the reader how solitude moves forever on into eternity.

Lastly, this poem is told from a narrator’s presumably first person point of view, with him/her summarizing the natural procedures of rain, human interaction, and flowing rivers. The narrator, although him or herself partaking in the experience of solitude, is observing all of this happening *around* him/her rather than actually reporting what happens *to* him/her, making this one more very Rilkean poem of internal observation and of pondering one’s own reflection in the world, even of memory and an imagined reality that never actually occurred. It’s a poem about sentiments rather than actual events. It is a poem about discovering that one is always and forever alone in the world.

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The section below is finally where she mounts a deconstructive critique. Note that she begins by responding directly to and undermining the arguments she herself just made about what she thinks the poem means. This is a fine way to begin a deconstructive analysis. Then notice how many questions she asks, and how much she plays with words, exaggerating and misreading the poem’s multiple available meanings in order to demonstrate that the poem only suggests other provisional meanings rather than functioning to nail down any one particular set of meaning.

The documents she uses to help her do this deconstruction work include the following: **Essay 4 assignment description, Rilke Notes, How to Read a Poem,** and the **inside front flap of *Texts and Contexts*** (in addition to stepped process that Stephen Lynn outlines on p. 121 in the Deconstruction chapter).

But how do we know the poem means any of this? Couldn’t this binary opposition set up between nature and community very well mean absolutely nothing due to the variability of those terms, the shifting meanings they might take on in different contexts? Can’t they easily be read

in multiple ways, rather than the single, unified way Rilke probably wants us to read them? If we were to assume these words actually meant something coherent that he wants them to mean, couldn't they just as easily mean something other than we initially expect them to mean? Do we *have* to agree with Rilke?

Solitude is like a rain.
It rises from the sea toward evening;
from plains, which are distant and remote,
it goes to the sky, which always has it.
And only then it falls from the sky on the city.

It rains down in the in-between hours,
when all the crooked streets turn toward morning,
and when the bodies, which found nothing,
leave each other feeling sad and disappointed;
and when the people, who hate each other,
have to sleep together in one bed:

then solitude flows with the rivers... (1-12)

Why does rain always have to have negative emotions tied to it? How cliché is that? Rain is a natural part of the cycle of life, supplying our most important sustenance and slaking our unending thirst. It could just as easily be read as relief, hope, jubilation in the face of drought – and these are sentiments that are more easily associated with humans, in a cooperative *community of streets and buildings*, than alone and in nature. Rain needn't always be sad, indicative of solitude and forlornness. And isn't human interaction, the "meaning" that Rilke's rain seems to point to, also a natural part of life, dating back to early evolving *Homo sapiens*? Humans have always had each other, and they've always had emotions, leaving them "feeling sad and disappointed," sure, but this too is just as natural and recurring for our species as rain is to the planet earth. Humans, especially those who are sleeping together as they do so evidently in lines 10 and 11 of Rilke's poem, necessarily form a kind of very important *community*, one frankly more bounded by happiness and ecstasy than by loneliness or desperation if in a bed,

more often than not. Rain doesn't usually "penetrate" the bed's canopy: humanity wards off the raid, we could say. People never "have" to sleep together, but they do. The rain dries up, evaporates over its own people, over its own community. The poem runs dry, it seems – unless we admit that the rain is perhaps meant as code for fertility, for bounty and multiplicity, for play and abandon – all things that occur in bed, presumably. Where is the natural solemnity and loneliness in that?

So this binary opposition, sad nature-happy community (or happy community-sad nature, take your pick), in which a solemn, desolate *nature* seems to be the clearly favored or privileged term in the life of the poem, easily opens up a space for hopeful community or togetherness to be the privileged terms instead, at least temporarily until we can find another meaning to open up the artificial unity the poem tries to construct for us. At the very least though this would seem to undermine any serious effort to nail down the ultimate meaning of the poem then, since a poem clearly cannot be about two opposing things at once and still maintain a modicum of sense and unity and cohesion as the poet would want, presumably. Is this a poem about weather, a poem about sex, a poem about time, a poem about the sky (whatever that means)?

The comfort of being surrounded by other people allows for them to feel safe, but in the poem, the emptiness of the surrounding landscape and even the bed with its sad, hateful people makes the poem feel uncomfortable, reversing the privilege yet again. Happy poem, sad poem? Hopeful poem, desolate poem? The calming images of natural states of being – the "distant and remote plains," the "crooked streets turn[ing] toward morning," the "flowing rivers" – allow the reader to "feel" something that completely opposes the depressing experience postulated elsewhere in the poem. And then, too, the punctuation deployed by Rilke allows for the reading to move by slowly, richly, in pauses and breathes. The poem is almost luxurious in this sense. Doesn't this kind of slow, self-indulgent reading of the poem's lines work against the kind of frenetic disengagement from ourselves that Rilke seems preoccupied with in the poem? Or, again, pauses and punctuation may just as well signal something else – perhaps poetic indecision or authorial confusion? Heavy use of colons, semicolons and commas in the second half of the poem to tend to create a certain amount of confusion regarding the supposed relationships between different words and phrases: the entire second stanza is one torturously long sentence, making it very difficult to parse. The point of view in the poem is a first person speaker-narrator, but who is to say that mere observation allows the speaker to feel the solemnity of the moment, if

in fact there is actually a solemnity even present in this poem? The narrator never says he/she is experiencing solemn or melancholic feelings, therefore we cannot assume it to be true. How do we know this speaker-narrator is speaking the truth at all, if there's no concrete experience or person to tie these abstract sentiments to? Perhaps the whole poem is just a delusion, a "crooked street" fantasy in which only the reader gets soaked in the end. What does this poem mean, exactly? The lines Rilke builds are ones that flow more toward questions and confusion than clarity or finality, rather like a river, really. A real river, not an idealized one.

"Solitude," when studied from a Structuralist standpoint, comes together nicely, conveying a unified message of aloneness and solemnity with its embedded binary opposition of community-nature. But when we re-read it from a Deconstructionist "perspective" (as if such a thing even exists, which it doesn't), these words mean so much that contradicts earlier (mis)readings, and so the poem ultimately means little or nothing to us, at least nothing that is unified and cohesive and stable. The rain soaked lines of this little poem are much too slippery to stand on, ultimately. The metaphorical constructions, the very things that pull the poem together, also allow it to be pulled apart. As solitude flows away with the rivers, so does all meaning.

Works Cited

Lynn, Steven. Texts and Contexts Writing About Literature with Critical Theory (5th Edition). New York: Longman, 2007.

Rilke, Rainer. "Solitude." The Book of Images. Trans. Edward Snow. New York: North Point Press, 1994. 77.

Comment: Note how the entry for Rilke includes the name of the particular poem in quotation marks before the title of the book, and it also includes at the end of the citation the page number of the poem