Derrida and Deconstruction

In the most general sense, Jacques Derrida’s notion of deconstruction questions the very structural foundations of Western thought by showing how such privileges particular terms, ideas, and concepts over others at the expense of meaning and truth. The sort of metaphysical notions that are analyzed through deconstruction are characterized, in essence, by the assumption that there are ultimate sources of meaning which are encoded throughout existence. Deconstruction tends to argue that every privileged term, idea, or concept depends upon a suppressed term for its meaning. Language, then, is considered to be an arbitrary and relative construct in the view of a deconstructionist. According to Derrida, languages—and texts, moreover—never contain full and precise meanings that can be fully realized. For a deconstructionist, a text is not itself quite a structure per se, but instead a chain of signs and symbols which serve to generate meaning, but none of those signs or symbols occupy a set and unchanging position or meaning within language. Deconstruction tends to contend that the textual world is ultimately unknowable through the textual act of philosophy, for language itself is not obedient and set. Deconstructionists claim, furthermore, that one’s individuality is itself a product of the linguistic structures—structures which exist before we do—which establish and assert our identities.

Deconstruction is, indeed, a very difficult concept for one to wrap his or her mind around. In fact, many textbooks and dictionaries of philosophy define the term and its meaning(s) in radically different manners. Perhaps, the best example of a deconstructive textual act can be found through a consideration of the various conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Since the time Kennedy was killed, various groups of scholars, journalists, and historians have questioned the official ruling that Lee Harvey Oswald acted as the lone murderer of Kennedy and assert that there was a conspiracy behind the assassination. These conspiracy theorists, however, offer a wide range of different assertions and interpretations of the evidence provided about Kennedy’s assassination. Virtually all of these theories conflict with each other and focus upon the different ways in which the evidence at hand can be logically interpreted, in turn revealing the conflicting meanings that exist behind the language of the countless reports and pieces of evidence that have been assembled over the last several decades. These conspiracy theorists operate, essentially, as deconstructionists by drawing our attention to the plethora of often contradictory ways in which particular assertions/statements/facts/arguments takes from the assassination investigation can be understood and interpreted, in turn, highlighting the futility and impossibility of realizing any sort of inherent truth.

Application in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*
A play as linguistically and creatively rich as *Hamlet* is ripe for a deconstructive reading. In fact, it can be argued that given the thousands of different theoretical approaches that *Hamlet* has been given, that the play itself is virtually self-deconstructive. A deconstructionist might focus on what seems to be a very slight or minor element of the play to demonstrate its innate contradictions and layers on meanings in order to offer further insight into *Hamlet*'s meanings, intentions, and creative context. For example, a deconstructionist might point to an apparent contradiction within the play: in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare suggests that Hamlet is a college student (which might place him in his late teens or early 20s) and also 30 years-old. Many critics have contended that this seeming discrepancy represents a mistake on Shakespeare’s part. A deconstructionist would probe this issue in-depth and point out a number of possible ways to interpret this seeming discrepancy, and argue, perhaps that Shakespeare never states that Hamlet is a college-age student (he might be a professor, a visiting student, a graduate student, or a minister) and that Hamlet himself never identifies himself as being 30. Or, what we conceptualize today as being the typical age for a college student might have been different in Elizabethan England, or in the world in which *Hamlet* takes place, Shakespeare might have been suggesting that Hamlet ages in a metaphorical sense over the course of the play. This discrepancy in age might represent a trace of an earlier version of the play in which Hamlet was imagined by Shakespeare as being younger than he was in the later version. The number “30” was a code word used by King James VI (who might have been an influence on Shakespeare’s characterization of Hamlet), so Shakespeare might have chosen 30 as Hamlet’s age in order to allude to King James VI, and so on. Deconstructive interpretations are rarely definitive, instead they seek to always problematize a text’s meaning and suggest the depths to which a text operates.

**Study Questions:**

1. How, as a theoretical practice, does deconstruction operate?

2. Why is deconstruction a valuable method for interpreting a literary text?

3. How, in Derrida’s view, do languages operate? What are the limitations of a language?