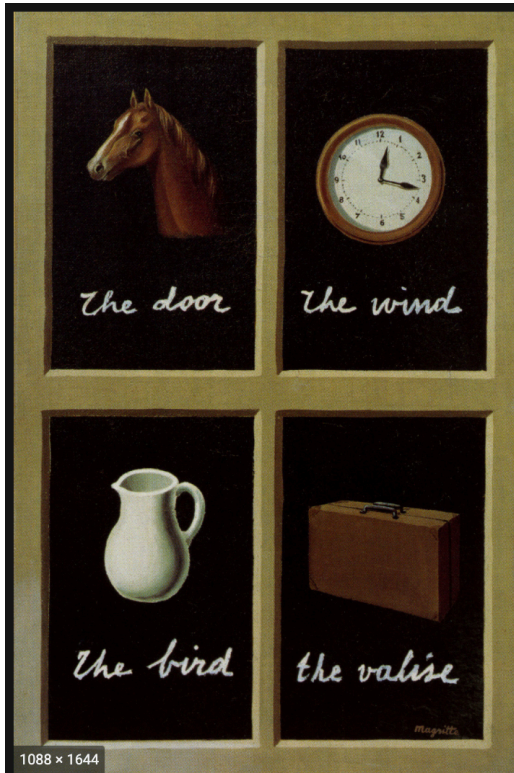


AP English Literature and Composition  
Post-Structuralism



Post-Structuralism is an umbrella term for several theories of literary and cultural criticism. It has its roots in the 1950s and begins with ideas from such thinkers as Ferdinand de Saussure, who in initiating structuralism, posits that language is a closed system and is arbitrary. It is the difference between ideas that gives them meaning: 'cat' is 'cat' because it is not 'bat,' etc.

Post-structuralist epistemologies reject the closedness of language (because it is cultural), and deconstruction, pioneered as a theory by Jacques Derrida and deployed as a tool for literary critique by Paul de Man and others, allows for the interrogation of accepted binary oppositions. This questioning can be a refreshing shift from the tendency to pretend that certain ideas are universal, when they are probably best seen as embedded in the time and worldview of the thinker. Post-structuralist theories, though, tend to stress the absence of an outside objective Truth, though, in a way that we recognize as problematic.

Contrary to many misreadings (and these misreadings have been harmfully influential), post-structuralism does not land in a place of airy relativism or a meaningless world of nihilism. Instead, post-structuralists tend to couch tentative, provisional truths. When we are talking about interpretations of literature, these provisional readings may suffice, even though post-structuralism is anti-foundationalist and does not posit a Transcendental Signifier. If we are looking for reasons that politics has become religion in the larger, secular world, this shift bears some responsibility.

These theories are problematic, and/but they are pervasive. In using post-structuralist theories to talk about literature, though, we are able to find fresh approaches. Remember, with the dominance of New Criticism, readers are looking only at the text itself and how it is made. Post-structuralism makes it possible to look at both the text itself and the conditions that give rise to it, without reversion to a sentimental Victorian biographical approach. At its best, post-structuralism allows us to discuss ethics in literature; at its worst, we find ourselves enmeshed in identity politics, as the binary oppositions we find in the text begin to line up with particular groups of people.

Thus, post-structuralism gives rise to ethical ideas about human rights, including theories about social class, sex, and so on. Being able to look outside the text itself is refreshing; seeing the text in a context is a good counterpoint to looking at how the text is made as a work of art. Taken too far or applied as a single lens to politics, though, the ideas of post-structuralism can be responsible for the anti-humanizing identity politics that now rage. Real deconstruction and associated theories draw attention to the falseness of binary oppositions rather than the overturning of the oppositions, but these more subtle ideas are not pervasive in the culture now.