



# The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction

*Jonathan Culler*

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## **The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction** Jonathan Culler

The primary task of literary theory, Jonathan Culler asserts in the new edition of his classic in this field, is not to illuminate individual literary works but to explain the system of literary signification--the rules and conventions that determine a reader's understanding of a text and that make literary communication possible. In this wide-ranging book, he investigates the possibilities of a semiotics of literature. A new preface places The Pursuit of Signs in the context of major developments in the study of literature since publication of the original Cornell edition in 1981.

## **The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction Details**

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## From Reader Review The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction for online ebook

### Trevor says

I had never heard of this book before, or its author. Now, that might not sound terribly surprising, but I have been reading quite a lot about semiotics lately. Anyway, I was at Readings and they had 'Routledge Classics' on a three-for-two sale and this was one of them on the table.

This utterly changed (and very much for the better) with Chapter Three, Semiotics as a Theory of Reading. What he does here with Blake's London is really lovely – and worth reading all on its own if you only have the wind for a dozen or so pages. This isn't about giving a 'new interpretation' to a poem that has been extensively interpreted before – rather, what he does is look at a number of contradictory interpretations of the poem – particularly in how they resolve (in opposite ways) some of the mirrorings that occur in the poem – the soldier and palace walls, the chimney sweep and church walls, the harlot and the marriage hearse, and he complicates the interpretations so as to help show why a remarkably simple poem has no reading that is really all that 'simple'.

For instance, most people read the stanza with the chimney sweep and the blackening churches being appalled as a criticism of the Church – which, I admit, I've always read just as that. But this is a reading that is hard to justify from the actual text itself. Which, I'm not going to pretend, I was quite taken aback by. You really do need to read more stuff into the poem than is explicitly there to make that reading. Like I said, that has always been my reading, and it is likely to remain my reading of that stanza, but I'm much less confident in my reading now than I was. And that is a really good thing, I think.

The ten or so pages from about page 75 where London is quoted in full are really worth reading – just wonderful.

The other chapter of this that blew me away was Chapter 10. Look, I've read lots and lots about metaphor over the years. It's just one of those things that keeps coming up in my reading. Borges's lectures on Poetics, *Metaphors We Live By*, a lovely book about Poetry and Metaphor – so, I wasn't expecting to be surprised here. But this was particularly interesting and super clever. It starts by asking where are there so many conferences and books today on metaphor, but also points out that the idea of there being, say, a conference on synecdoche or simile seems odd to the point of being a joke. Why is that? What's so special about metaphors?

The thing is that metaphors are like an advertisement years ago for a board game called Othello (a moment to learn, a lifetime to master). And part of the problem is that metaphors aren't as easy to spot as we like to imagine or have been taught to expect. For instance, at high school when we were introduced to them by some jaded English teacher we were probably taught their meaning in opposition to similes. If you say 'like', it's a simile; if you don't, it's a metaphor. He is like a lion, simile – he is a lion, metaphor. Simplicity itself. The problem is that metaphors have a habit of stopping being obvious. Did you know, for instance, that 'develop' is from Middle English and from Old French and means to unfold – sort of the opposite of envelop. And this original meaning sort of remains in its current meaning – to develop is a kind of unfolding in the sense we expect what is developing to 'already be there' in a sense. Metaphors 'die', as Orwell liked to say, but it is becoming increasingly likely that virtually everything we say, particularly all our 'nouns', were probably once 'metaphors' that have now died. That we no longer see as metaphors.

The bit I liked the most was him quoting Donald Davidson at the end of the chapter about a geometrical proof being like a mousetrap. Now, he doesn't explain how the two things are alike, and that is the point. We

immediately go looking for the ways in which the two things will be alike and disregard the ways they aren't at all alike. Ideas like 'surprise' and 'simplicity' seem like promising lines of attack in linking the two things that are appearing in a metaphorical connection – whereas cheese or decomposing rodents are probably less promising. And this reminded me of that lovely line from Get Smart where Max says that life is like a cumquat and someone questions him about this comparison, to which he responds by asking in a nearly outraged and surprised tone, "Life isn't like a cumquat?" It is almost as if we are programmed to need to find similes and metaphors and to find out how they 'work' (which bits 'work' and which bits we can ignore) and that we will go to enormous lengths to make sure that they do work – as if making the metaphor work is our task, rather than something that should be left for the metaphor to do for us.

I really liked this book and it was much more clear than I thought it might prove to be when I picked it up. Semiology, like linguistics, has a pretty bad name for being insanely difficult (which, when you think about it, ought to be about the best definition of irony there is). Really a nice read and very clever.

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### **Des Small says**

Meh.

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### **Peter says**

I had used this as a source on a paper in one of my linguistics classes. It looked interesting at the time, so now that I've had some time I've read it. It's very interesting. The chapter on metaphor and metonymy really caught me. Probably the strongest in the book.

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### **Jeff Keehr says**

One of the books I had to read for the PhD program at Penn State. I found it interesting but not something I ever wanted to reread.

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### **Matt says**

This is another of Culler's clever works of criticism. The chapter on apostrophe should be required reading for anyone interested in poetry, and the chapter on narrative brings new insights into what is often a dull discipline. He often illustrates his literary theory with famous literary works, i.e. Shelley, Proust, Shakespeare but don't be discouraged if you haven't read them. You can follow his explanations even if you haven't read the texts he discusses.

This book is less deconstructive than many of Culler's other works, despite the title. The first several chapters offer careful intellectual histories of New Criticism and literary semiotics. I especially enjoyed how often he pokes holes in Stanley Fish (although Fish's "Affective Stylistics" is recommended without reservation near the end of the book). As with any good book of criticism, I finished with at least 3 more things added to my reading list.

## Ahmad Sharabiani says

The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction, Jonathan Culler  
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## Stephen says

Chapters 1 and 2 most interesting for me. Literary analysis that follows less so. Chapter on metaphor largely a fuff as is the final chapter on graduate school. Still, an important book I hope to come back to.

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## Charlie says

Hrmmmmm.....

Having read a few books and essays on semiotics, my opinion is that it's a hopelessly broad and floppy term: writings on semiotics seem to either be about things and the significance or meaning they have, or the way in which things can mean or signify other things. This encompasses everything from semantics to social perceptions and conditioning. Culler here makes a damn good effort to draw some of this together here but he's also throwing in 'literature' and 'deconstruction' into the mix. The book is mostly semiotics and deconstruction applied to literature, so that narrows the scope a bit but Culler recommends a fairly broad understanding of literature so things still get hazy.

Incedently the best summation of semiotics I have read occurs in - I think - the first chapter of Relevance where they have a fairly good knock down argument against a lot of the more technical writing on semiotics.

This is the first full literature theory book I have ever read and my impression is that there is an irritating tendency for people to try and show off just how much they have read, but this may well be because I have not read the things that these people have read and the references that Culler picks out really are useful anchor points to demonstrate his ideas - I'm not quite convinced.

To be honest I'm not quite sure how to write this review, the book itself is a big jumbled up mess of a lot of sticky dense lumps of ideas, sometimes it seems like there's some great ideas in there, but by the time you untangle all the technical terms defined with examples - examples which are supposed to illustrate oddities of the technical terms themselves - you're often left wondering where your idea went.

Ultimately I think culler has just thrown too much stuff together here and there really is only the vaguest feeling of cohesion, direction or order, some of the ideas are really clever and stimulating but I don't think they really explain or illuminate much at all, I would not recommend this book as a guide so much as an introduction of how to be appropriately confused by semiotics, with a pleasant backdrop of literature if you're that way inclined.

All being said I think this book would be a lot more rewarding for someone who had read more of the literature he refers to, but ultimately I think that semiotics is not so much a dead end but one of those annoying roads that goes in the direction of the destination that you were trying to get to for ages but then slowly veers you round to the road that you started on, only now it's getting late and your still not sure which

road to take, and your all cheesed off because y'know you were sure that that road was going to take you there, I mean why couldn't they have built like a small path just by like taking a slither off someone's garden, I know pedestrian traffic can be annoying, but I'm sure they wouldn't get that many people coming through here, I mean it's like a million miles to the other road, erghhhh.....

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