

## A POSTSTRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS OF MILTON'S SONNET 19: SEMANTIC, SEMIOTIC, AND SYNTACTICAL APPROACHES

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**Abstract.** Theories of literary criticism may approach a text from different, often conflicting, perspectives. This study set out to determine whether and, if so, to what extent, the perspective of poststructuralism, a successor literary theory to structuralism, may inform our understanding of the text of John Milton's Sonnet 19, "When I consider how my light is spent," sometimes referred to as "On His Blindness." The study examined by close reading the semantic, semiotic, and syntactical tools of Milton's language to make that determination. While those tools may be useful in the examination of any particular text, and of any genre, they were found to be especially appropriate to the analysis of an English poem, given the narrator's freedom from the traditional constraints of the language, including the order of words and phrases, their common meaning, and the symbols embedded in a poetic narrative. What are the recognizable signs in the sonnet, and did Milton intentionally leave those signs as a kind of "trail of breadcrumbs" for us to follow, or are they revealed only by the application of some modern theory of literary criticism? Poststructuralism offers a frame within which that freedom may be most readily realized, and it proved useful in attaining semantic, semiotic, and syntactical insights into Sonnet 19 beyond those commonly found in the literature. There is not just one meaning in the sonnet, not just *the* meaning intended by the author. Poststructuralist analysis suggests that there are as many meanings as there are readers of the poem.

**Keywords:** Milton, poststructuralism, semantics, semiotics, Sonnet 19, structuralism, syntax

### Introduction

If a theory of literary criticism is to remain valid, it must pass the test of time—not the test of the present time, for the works of the day are in flux and cannot credibly be held down for close examination, and not the test of the future, for there is no way to know what the works, much less the genres, will be until they appear on the scene. No, the theory must be shown to hold when it is applied to the works of the past, for those works, and those genres, are laid before us readily available for testing. Such is the case of two relatively modern theories of literary criticism: structuralism and its adversary, poststructuralism. The two arose in the twentieth century and remain in contention in the twenty-first century. The aim of this study is not so much to be dispositive with respect to which is more useful in the probing of literary texts but rather to be an invitation, to invite the community of Milton scholars to take a deeper dive into

the works of the blind bard, and especially the shorter poems. In that dive beneath the surface of Milton's poems, we take the opportunity to explore the syntax, the semantics, the semiotics, and tangentially the pragmatics and stylistics, of those enduring works.

To conduct a credible examination of the elements of poetry, one must be precise in one's definitions. Along with his friend William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge co-founded the British Romantic Movement, which would come to include among others, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and George Gordon Lord Byron. Coleridge gives us perhaps the most satisfying definition of syntax and semantics in poetry: "I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose=words in their best order;—poetry=the best words in the best order" (Coleridge, 2005). Given that John Milton's poetry is still studied around the world some 350 years after they were first penned, one might agree that they represent "the best words in the best order."

Among other questions, this study asked how and why did Milton change the traditional meanings of words within his Sonnet 19? Corollary to the primary research question is one involving syntax, which "is directly related to diction as a way of determining how a sentence does and should sound" (Baldwin, 2021). Understanding that language is subjective, we look for not just one but a number of deeper meanings in Milton's semantics, and we look even more deeply into his signs and symbols, his semiotics. Exploring these depths, we look for indications of structuralism and poststructuralism as defined and discussed below.

The casual reader may be excused for confusing a *syntactical* analysis for a *semantic* analysis. The latter has to do with direct meaning (Williams, 1983), while from the former we infer meaning and emphasis from the order of the words and phrases in the text. For example, "The dog has fleas" may be semantically analyzed as meaning that there are fleas on the dog, whereas "Fleas has the dog," while appearing to be simply a beginner's grammatical error of number agreement, could instead be a syntactical choice, perhaps made by a poet reaching for a rhyme for "dog" (bog, cog, flog, grog, hog).

A further approach to a deeper, more satisfying understanding of the fourteen lines that comprise Sonnet 19 lies in its signs and symbols, the proper domain of *semiotics*. Even the casual reader can hardly avoid the epiphanous symbol of "light" in the very first line and repeated in line 7. Neither can one ignore the anthropomorphized "Patience" introduced in line 8, nor her admonition that completes the poem.

The current study may be criticized for taking a "mechanical" approach, one perhaps more suited to an engineering problem than a topic in the humanities in general and poetry in particular. A response to such criticism might be, "It's about time." There is no apology for taking a rigorous look at the sonnet if that approach yields insights that otherwise might remain hidden.

***Brief Definitions*** (Adapted from Britannica, 2022, and various other sources). Halliday (1975) writes, "Adult language comprises three interrelated systems, phonological, lexicogrammatical (vocabulary, morphology, syntax), and semantic" (p. 239). We deal with some of these below.

***Literary Deconstruction*** is a poststructuralist approach to literary criticism "involving the close reading of texts in order to demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings rather than being a unified, logical whole" (Mambrol, 2016a). Jacques Derrida (1970) is considered the founder of the deconstructionist school.

***Poststructuralism*** is a literary theory that responds to structuralism and holds that language does not deliver to the reader any objective truth or ultimate reality outside the text. Language is a structure or code whose parts derive their meaning from their contrast with one

another and not from any connection with an outside world. (Post-structuralism is the movement; poststructuralism is the theory and its elements.)

*Pragmatics* is the study of the use of natural language in communication; more generally, the study of relations between languages and their users. What did the author *imply* and what does the reader *infer* in a text? Or, in the light of poststructuralist analysis, what did the author imply and what do the readers infer in a text?

*Semantics* studies the meaning of words and phrases in language. Some scholars position semantics within the more inclusive domain of semiotics. Any given text may have a variety of meanings, depending either internally on the text itself or on the individual reader of that text. This latter view is most certainly at the core of the interpretation of a poem. *Semanticity* implies that all forms have a meaning or a function.

*Semiotics* studies signs and sign-using behavior. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was one of the founders of the science as the study of the life of signs within society (Culler, 1986). Saussure (1998) originally called the theory *semiology*, from the Greek for “signs.” How is a sign linked with a meaning?

*Sign*, using Saussure’s theory of the structure of language, consists of some reality, for example, an actual tree, called the *signified*, and that by which we communicate the reality, for example, the word “tree,” called the *signifier* (Culler, 1986; Karwa, 2022). A sign consists of a signified reality and one or more signifiers that point in the direction of a signified. Some specialists in the philosophy of linguistics actually believe that there is no such thing as a signified, only an infinite number of signifiers. A sign pairs a form with a meaning.

*Structuralism* holds that a language is a self-contained relational structure. Meaning is socially constructed, that each element in a group can be understood only by its relation to other elements in the system as part of a larger structure, thus the name (Saussure, 1998). Poststructuralism will follow and take issue with these premises. While structuralists believe that a text contains a central or true meaning, poststructuralists reject that view and hold that there are an infinite number of meanings in any given text. Structuralists believe that the real source of meaning and truth are in deep structures. Poststructuralists believe there is no single source of meaning and truth, that there are multiple—perhaps infinite—sources of meaning and truth.

*Stylistics* is the study of the devices in languages (such as rhetorical figures and syntactical patterns) that are considered to produce an expressive or literary style. Chatman wrote in 1967 that stylistics “is not a precisely defined concept” (p. 29). Chatman emphasizes “style as *manner*, as distinguished from *matter*. The manner is *how* an author expresses an idea, while matter is the substance of *what* the author proposes to address. Chatman points out “Milton’s penchant for the modifying participial construction...And he prefers the past participle” (p. 30) as a means, a style, of detachment appropriate to “the grave decorum of the epic,” which is *Paradise Lost*.

*Syntax* is the way in which words are put together to form phrases, clauses, or sentences. In the English language, it is primarily word order that indicates relationships among components, and their meaning. In other languages, word order may differ from that of English, and in English poetry, word order may be altered for effect. Poets may use word order, subject-verb agreement, and different sentences to express their ideas. “Syntax is directly related to diction as a way of determining how a sentence does and should sound” (Baldwin, 2021). Chomsky (1956) writes, “Syntax is the study of the principles by which sentences are constructed in particular languages” (p. 11).

Given the sometimes mysterious and often opaque jargon of literary criticism, the reader may easily fall into the deep realms of the philosophy of linguistics. This study was well aware of the risks of navigating between the Scylla of the French Enlightenment and the Charybdis of later criticism. The current study chooses to focus instead on the application of such theories as may be

relevant to the examination of the sonnet and to use those theories in an appropriate manner to discover both what Milton intended and what meanings the readers may find. It is a preliminary hypothesis of the study that the two are not the same. From the more broadly taught, and perhaps more readily comprehended perspective, it is a premise that the text belongs to the reader, so there are as many meanings as there are readers.

### *Poststructuralism*

Armstrong and Tennenhouse (1993) place Milton in the long stream of literary history: "Of all our major English authors, John Milton is the only one who has one foot firmly planted in the English Renaissance and the other just as firmly planted in our own modern, middle-class brand of humanism" (p. 53). One may find floating in that long stream a number of generalizations about language, some of which are objectively true and others simply myths. Myth 1 of 21 language myths, according to Peter Trudgill, is "The meanings of words should not be allowed to vary or change" (Bauer, 1998, p. 1). But, of course, we are all well aware that meanings vary across time and space, and meaning changes within a culture. Even punctuation changes meaning (Truss, 2004). As this study set out to discover whether and, if so, to what extent, Milton's Sonnet 19 might be better understood using a poststructuralist lens, an expanded definition of that lens is required, along with a further treatment of its predecessor theory, *structuralism*, with which it may be compared and contrasted. The term itself implies that this literary theory is a response to structuralism. Implied in the term is the suggestion that structuralism as a useful and generalizable approach to a text or image has been weighed and found wanting.

What is not evident in the name of the succeeding theory is whether its adherents (including, among others, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan (Marta, 1987), and Paul-Michel Foucault (Culler, 2011, pp 13 and 139) are simply tweaking the theory of structuralism a bit to clarify its claims or might be willing to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Structuralism in its current form may be attributed to Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who saw the world in terms of the *signifier* and the *signified* in a coherent system of universal truth. "Structuralism attempts to set up a grid or control on any situation or field of study in the effort to make it intelligible, on the assumption that its elements are naturally arranged in a system, however elusive" (Ames, 1973, p. 89). Poetry would certainly seem to fit the "elusive" category.

Ames (1973, p. 91), notes that "The challenge of structuralism to traditional academic literary criticism has been eloquently put by Roland Barthes, who is generally regarded as head of the school known as *La Nouvelle Critique*." Barthes then takes the next step in his search for meaning in language. Barthes and Duisit (1975) respond to the structuralist view with the nascent poststructuralist perspective, noting that, "There are countless forms of narrative in the world" (p. 237). Imposing some kind of structure on all of these forms would be awkward, at a minimum, certainly problematic, or simply impossible. Therefore, the structuralist school must fail. Barthes (1966) had written of poetry as being one of those narratives that escape the structuralist view. "Literature for Barthes," according to Ames (p. 93), "would seem to be an open-ended sign language. Neither the author, the content, nor the literal character of the language is of primary interest, but rather the Eurydice that literature can not turn back to or even name."

To a certain degree, poststructuralism walks in the shadow of traditional Western philosophy, which "has distinguished 'reality' from 'appearance,' *things* themselves from *representations* of them and *thought* from *signs* that express it" (Culler, 2011, p. 9). That shadow includes notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "Languages are made to be spoken; writing serves only as a supplement to speech" (p. 9). Poststructuralists will go on to explore the nature of Rousseau's

“supplements.” Poststructuralists also assert “that the idea of the original is created by the copies, and that the original is always deferred never to be grasped” (p. 12). One may, for example, wish to get to the “true meaning,” the reality, of a word by consulting a dictionary, but what one finds is more words describing but never reaching the “reality.” As opposed to the structuralist, the poststructuralist will argue that the reason is that there is no center of meaning, no “true meaning.” In terms illustrated in Figure 1, all one can find in the dictionary is more “signifiers,” and one can never definitively find the “signified.”

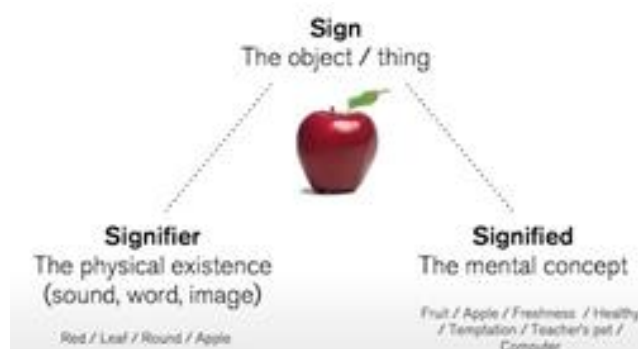
Patron (2011) refers to Barthes as a co-founder of “postclassical narratology” (p. 1). In her retrospective paper, Ionescu (2019) traces the origins of postclassical narratology back to the 1940s, “a period when the first ‘pre-structuralist theories of narrative’ appeared” (p. 5), but she acknowledges that, “Narratology was born in France, at the intersection of structuralist semiotics and poetics, through the works of Roland Barthes” and others (p. 6). In his 1957 *Mythologies*, Barthes (2012) writes of “the myth of the transparency and the universality of language” (p. 49). It is to Roland Barthes, then, that we may express our appreciation for what would become a new and more useful theory of literary criticism, that of poststructuralism. In what might be considered a seminal article, Jacques Derrida wrote in 1970 (in what some critics describe as impenetrable terms):

...the concept of structure and even the word “structure” itself are as old as the *episteme* [a principled system of understanding]—that is to say, as old as western science and western philosophy—and that their roots thrust deep into the soil of ordinary language, into whose deepest recesses the *episteme* plunges to gather them together once more, making them part of itself in a metaphorical displacement...And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself. (Derrida, 1970, p. 1)

But that, of course, is precisely what Derrida (1970) writes in his essay, that there is no center: “...the center...closes off the freeplay it opens up and makes possible...The center is not the center” (p. 1). He concludes with the sardonic “as yet unnameable which is proclaiming itself...the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity” (p. 13). A spectre is haunting literary criticism!

**Figure 1**

*Saussure’s Structure Illustrated*



Note. Karwa, 2022.

Poststructuralism doubts the existence of a concrete reality, of the fixed real world advocated by those who adhere to the structuralist view. Poststructuralists believe that universal truth is unknowable, that there is ambiguity in the world, that meanings shift with the creator of a text and the consumer of the text, the latter being the central notion of reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1982; Buckley & Bracher, 1986). This notion has been termed “the radical instability

of meaning” (Popke, 2003, p. 300). The emphasis of poststructuralism is on “the indeterminate and polysemic nature of semiotic codes and the arbitrary and constructed nature of the foundations of knowledge” (Mambrol, 2016a), far from the emphases of the structuralists.

Just as Saussure disrupted the traditional literary theory with his structuralist approach, Derrida disrupted the prevailing structuralism, and just as with structuralism, poststructuralism has had its critics, some quite severe (Bennington, 2022). Its association with Derrida’s deconstruction of the Western political tradition, even at times snuggled close to “the two most famous intellectual spokesmen for Nazism,” Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt (McCormick, 2001, pp. 396-397). A stinging 1992 letter to *The Times* opposing the award of an honorary doctorate to Derrida by the University of Cambridge charged that “his works employ a written style that defies comprehension” (Smith, et al., 2016). The letter, signed by more than a dozen noted philosophers, concludes, “Academic status based on what seems to us to be little more than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship is not, we submit, sufficient grounds for the awarding of an honorary degree in a distinguished university.” In the event, Cambridge did award the honorary doctorate to Derrida, and Smith, some 24 years later, apologized for the letter (Smith, et al., 2016).

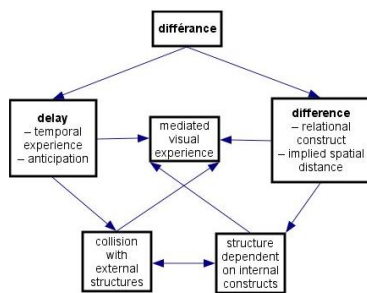
The assertion that “Deconstruction is the literary theory wing of poststructuralism” does not allay the concerns that poststructuralism is associated with an anti-foundationalist intellectual movement originating in France in the 1960s (McCormick, 2001, p. 419). On the other hand, a contrary view holds that poststructuralism offers an alternative to a prevailing “material domain of discriminatory social practices...based on the problematic categories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, or sexuality” (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012, p. 213).

In the course of this investigation, paths opened into a variety of disciplines, including, among others, generative linguistics and its revision, cognitive linguistics (Geeraerts & Cuyckens, 2010). George Lakoff, notable for his *Metaphors We Live By*, along with fellow linguist Mark Johnson, traveled the route from generative to cognitive linguistics by way of a deep dive into metaphor (2003). The former bears a striking resemblance to Saussure’s structuralism, while the latter seems closely allied to poststructuralism. Where generative linguistics “generates” language, cognitive linguistics asks about what is going on in the mind, a question of no interest to generative linguists and which is of great interest to Jacques Derrida. On the other hand, it is relevant to this study to have found that even the generative linguist Noam Chomsky (1956) concluded that “the notion of grammaticalness cannot be identified with meaningfulness” (p. 106).

Figure 2, below, is a graphic illustration of Jacques Derrida’s Notion of “Différance.” Derrida coined the word “différance” from two words to note that there are different meanings in a text and that meanings are infinitely deferred. It combines the notion of “difference” and “deferral.” By “difference,” Derrida maintains that the number of different understandings of a word, phrase, or nonverbal rendering, is infinite. The meaning is not fixed. It changes as the environment within which it is used changes. It changes as the reader changes. It is also a commonplace to believe that a text means something different to a reader from one reading to the next. One can read a book as a high school student, again as a college student, and again years later, and the meaning changes each time. By “deferral,” Derrida suggests that the truth of a text is dynamic, and its discernment must be inevitably—and perpetually—deferred. What is in the text is what can be inferred, and inferences change and are unlimited by any set of objective criteria. It is well to remember that poststructuralism is both a reaction to structuralism and a set of ideas that directly contradict those of structuralism, which holds that there is a “true” meaning in the text and that truth can emerge if subjected to a careful analysis.

Figure 2

*Jacques Derrida's Notion of "Différance"*



Note. Watkin (2017a, b)

### Methods

One school of thought is that a study in the area of the humanities in general and of poetry in particular should concern itself solely with the text with no regard as to the author's life and times; that is, the work should "stand on its own." A premise of this study, by contrast, is that the analyst must examine meaning in context. Hence, the introduction of this study to poststructuralism with its broad approach to meaning. We gain context in Milton's poetry by comparing and contrasting his poems, whether they may be the epic works *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, or *Samson Agonistes*, or the shorter *Lycidas*, *L'Allegro*, or *Il Penseroso*. For this study, we chose arguably the most famous of his shorter poems, "When I consider how my light is spent," sometimes referred to as "On His Blindness," or as it appears in his collection, "Sonnet 19." And for this work, it would be grossly negligent to ignore the author's loss of his sight or his Puritan faith.

At the time of his writing the sonnet, Milton would have been well past his "half my days." Beer (2008, p. 253) notes that "Milton was at least forty when he wrote the poem. probably nearer fifty, but perhaps he hoped that people really did think he was ten years younger, halfway to his threescore years and ten. Or perhaps he considered the lifespan of his own father, who lived into his mid-eighties." In any event, the narrator's lament in the octet, the first eight lines of the poem, make it clear that his "light," the metaphor for sight, had gone out. In this part of the sonnet, there appears to be no doubt. As to the rest of the fourteen lines, there are certainly different ways to understand the meaning of the text, and the search for those ways is the driving force of this study. In particular, the study concerned itself with the meaning of the sestet in general and the admonition of "Patience" in particular.

**The Traditional Method.** The traditional method of research in English philology involves an extensive survey of published articles and books. It provides a broad view of the topic, as well as perspectives from scholars with varying methods and conclusions. There is an abundance of material available to the researcher, much of it cost-free (for example, the Milton Room of Dartmouth College), both of the works by Milton and the critical commentary about Milton, his works, and his life and times.

Again, one school of thought maintains that a scholarly examination of any subject, including the subject of English language and literature itself, must include a search for and examination of previously published material relevant to the topic. This study involved the accumulation of dozens of books and articles on Sonnet 19, as well as on literary criticism in general and structuralism and poststructuralism in particular. Indeed, the bulk of the time and

effort spent on the study involved the collection of data and its review. However, while this study makes use of many of these materials involving the life and works of John Milton, and specifically of his Sonnet 19, the method leaves much to be explored, including how the words and phrases are connected. We need to augment the broad view with something deeper; we need a close reading.

**Close Reading.** Because of the limitations of the traditional method of the survey of literature, we chose to use a second method, the more modern method of close reading. Burke (2020) defines close reading as “thoughtful, critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details or patterns in order to develop a deep, precise understanding of the text’s form, craft, meanings, etc.” It is this latter understanding that was the aim of this current research. A process of close reading is described in a sequence of steps at Continental (2016).

Close reading is not just a forensic examination of the words and phrases of a text. There is a growing consensus, especially among those who teach the skills of foreign language acquisition—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—that there is a discipline, a set of guidelines, to be followed in the process of close reading (Continental, 2016). The process takes time. In a short story, every word is important and should be examined closely; if a word may be removed and not damage the story, it should be taken out. In a poem, every syllable is important and should be examined closely. For example, each line of a poem written in iambic pentameter contains ten syllables, and each syllable must carry its own weight. The line must scan, and in the scanning, a close reading will help to discern not only its meaning but its affective impact, as well, whether intended by the author or unintended.

In the process of close reading of Sonnet 19, we would expect to find connections between and among the semantic, semiotic, and syntactical approaches to the analysis of the poem that might lead in the direction of answering the research question, whether and, if so, to what extent the perspective of poststructuralism may inform our understanding of the text of the poem. In order to provide a framework for that expectation, the study created a “comprehensive analysis,” as described below.

**The Comprehensive Analysis.** Figure 3, below, attempts to capture what is “comprehensive” about this study of Milton’s Sonnet 19. At each corner of the triangle is one of the three analytical approaches that combine with the traditional and close reading methods to mine for meaning in the poem. At one corner is semantics, the branch of linguistics and logic directly concerned with the meaning of the text. What does the text say, what do we believe the narrator intends, and what do we infer from the words? Semiotics at the second corner of the triangle is the study of signs and symbols. We often skip over the signs as we read the text, but when they are pointed out to us, we can see them more clearly. Then we ask, what does this sign mean? Why does the narrator use this sign and not another? Is the sign efficient or does it distract from the intended message? The third corner finds syntax, the order of words and phrases, presumably selected to convey those nuances in the English language that may not be part of the grammar of another language, or what might be called “comparative syntax.” The Georgian language, for example, lacks gendered pronouns, and the verb most often comes at the end of the sentence.

The comprehensive analysis is informed by some of the more modern approaches to linguistics such as deconstructionism, cognitive linguistics, and poststructuralism. We perhaps should not refer to these approaches as theories. Geeraerts and Cuyckens (2010) “emphasize that Cognitive Linguistics is not a single theory but rather a cluster of broadly compatible approaches” (p. 3). Cognitive linguistics differs from the structuralism and generative linguistics in that it “sees language as embedded in the overall cognitive capacities of man” (p. 4), that the meaning of a text

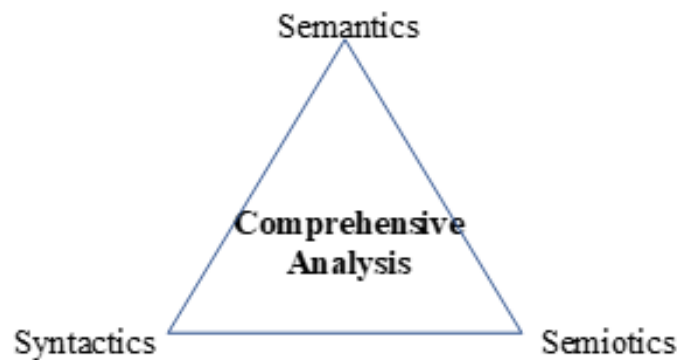


is inextricably linked to its context. In short, “Cognitive Linguistics is the study of language in its cognitive function...in our encounters with the world” (p. 5).

The construction of the model shown in Figure 3 is an effort to bring together for evaluation the tools available to the literary analyst: semantics, semiotics, and syntactics.

**Figure 3**

*An Approach to a Comprehensive Analysis of a Text*



*Note.* This study considered the semantics, semiotics, and syntax of Milton’s Sonnet 19.

### **Results**

This study employed the “comprehensive analysis” described above in Figure 3 and found significant contributions of each of the tools to our further understanding of and appreciation for Milton’s Sonnet 19. The semantics approach opens meanings, both familiar and new, both intended by the author and unintended, depending on the characteristics of the reader. This is consistent with reader-response theory (Buckley & Bracher, 1986). The semiotics approach reveals signs and symbols, including the metaphor of sight as light, the anthropomorphic Patience, and the parable of the talents. And the syntactics responds to the question of Milton’s departure from the traditional subject-verb-object structure of an English sentence for the purposes of Petrarchan rhyme, as well as for effect (state-wait), the last being the essence of Puritan doctrine, Luther’s *sola fide*, salvation by faith alone.

The method of close reading and comprehensive analysis also resulted in support for the view that poststructuralism is a useful framework for understanding a poetic narrative more deeply than previous theories have allowed. Typical interpretations of poetry attempt to discern “the meaning” intended by the author. Poststructuralism suggests that there is no such thing as “the meaning.”

A broad search of the literature suggests that, while there are similarities between structuralism and poststructuralism as applied to poetry, there are strong differences, some of which are noted above. Donato (1967) noted that structuralism “has ardent defenders and dedicated enemies” (p. 549), so we would expect to find among the latter group those who are equally ardent defenders of poststructuralism. As in other forms of human communication, we can see how this antagonism plays out in poetry. Those who see in nature a fixed real world, i.e., the structuralists, demand a uniformity of perception that is anathema to others, i.e., the poststructuralists.

It would be misleading to attribute to Milton a fixed real world based on his strong religious faith, although such a view is understandable. Milton was multilingual, fluent in Hebrew,

Greek, Latin, and Italian, as well as other languages, so he was well aware of how different cultures expressed the world around them. Further, he wrote in a variety of genres—prose, epic and lyric poetry, drama—so he well understood the variety of realities of the “malleability of human existence” (UQC, 2022). One can well attribute to Milton the more nuanced understanding of the world around him than perhaps some scholars have thought or that the tightly focused Sonnet 19 might suggest.

In the context of what would come to be called, more than three centuries after Milton wrote his Sonnet 19, a poststructural narrative, we see what Cheek (1965) calls “a remarkable unity to the entire corpus of his poetry” ( p. 125). A close reading of the sonnet unveils the multiple relationships both within the text itself and with other works, including the blinded hero of *Samson Agonistes* (perhaps a Milton avatar?) and Shakespeare’s Sonnet 27:

Looking on darkness which the blind do see:  
 Save that my soul’s imaginary sight  
 Presents thy shadow to my sightless view

Chomsky (1957) might break down the sentences (or lines) in Sonnet 19 into smaller parts. We can see how this might work in each line, starting with the conditional “When I consider” in line 1, the first of the eight-line octet that characterizes the Miltonic, or Petrarchan, sonnet. Indeed, the first word “When” is itself what the grammarians would call a “conditional” (Jones, 2021).

When I consider how my light is spent,	1	a
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,	2	b
And that one talent which is death to hide	3	b
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent	4	a
To serve therewith my Maker, and present	5	a
My true account, lest He returning chide;	6	b
“Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?”	7	b
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent	8	a
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need	9	c
Either man’s work or His own gifts. Who best	10	d
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state	11	e
Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed,	12	c
And post o’er land and ocean without rest;	13	d
They also serve who only stand and wait.”	14	e

Milton was, of course, well aware that Shakespeare had earlier begun his Sonnet 15: “When I consider everything that grows.” While it may be a slight diversion from the present question, the study must “consider” why Milton uses the same opening two-and-a-half iambic feet to open his “When I consider how my light is spent.” Poets are traditionally loathed to borrow phrases from other poets. In this case, the borrowing seems appropriate, as Shakespeare will go on to speak of stars, sight, and light. Coincidence? That would be an insult to Milton. Rather, Milton aligns his consideration of the passing of time with Shakespeare’s similar concern for the “fair youth” to whom he speaks.

Continuing a close reading of Milton’s line 1, we find in the last two feet, “my light is spent,” the first of two instances of the metaphor “light” as the signifier, and “sight” as the signified. The second instance of the same metaphor is found in line 7, “light denied.” The meaning of the metaphor in its context is unmistakable. The narrator is blind. Line 1 also tells us that the narrator has more work to do after “considering.”

The last three feet of Line 2 contain a well-turned phrase of syntactical artistry: “in this dark world and wide.” Traditional English construction would be, of course, “in this dark and wide world,” but one strains to think of a “best word” that rhymes with “world” or the completion of the line that scans. If line 1 is convincingly “best words in best order,” one must certainly agree that line 2, “Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,” also meets the “Coleridge test.” But why? One answer might be the exquisite use of semantics, semiotics, and syntax immaculately tailored to fit a poetic form.

The study examined all fourteen lines of the sonnet in a similar manner with similar results. It is no accident that Sonnet 19 not only survives millennia but is embraced by the blind community around the world. Milton has created what might well be considered the original poem of, by, and for the blind. Whether it is true or not that Homer was blind, there is no doubt when it comes to Milton. The sonnet survives not only among the blind, but of all people everywhere. Milton is described “as ‘blind bard,’ an ambivalent figure of alterity, bodily impairment held in tension with creative exaltation” (Duran, 2013. p. 142).

Milton’s use of enjambment in lines 4-5, 5-6, 8-9, 10-11, and 11-12, represents a technique of poetics that is at once practical and at the same time engaging. It serves the practical purpose of ending the line of iambic pentameter but allowing the thought to continue, as in: “more bent/To serve,” with “bent” rhyming with “spent.”

We might note, perhaps for further analysis, the importance of the rhyming pattern. Such analysis might probe the intent of Milton in his selection of the “best words” at the ends of the lines. On the other hand, it is hardly necessary to study the meter: it is the common iambic pattern first heard in English in the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer and brought to most pupils and students in the plays and sonnets of William Shakespeare. The slight diversion in this analysis is intended only to introduce, compare, and contrast the syntax of Sonnet 19, expanded below, with other elements of literary criticism.

### ***Syntax and the English Sentence***

Syntax is concerned with the order of components into patterns that convey meaning. Such patterns typically include sentences and the parts of speech of which sentences are composed, including phrases, clauses, and other combinations of words.

A traditional English sentence consists of a subject and a predicate, with the latter including a verb, and an object in that order: subject+verb+object. A simple example in English is *I love you*. The subject is “I,” the verb is “love,” and the object is “you.” Similarly, the sentence in German is *Ich liebe dich*. This is not always true in other languages. For example, in Latin, what comes at the end of a sentence is what the speaker wants most to emphasize. The motto of the United States, using traditional English syntax, would be “One out of many,” but *e pluribus unum* emphasizes the “One” and its purpose, unity.

Poets often manipulate syntax, changing conventional word order, to highlight particular words. In order to emphasize the person who is the object, the English may say, “It is *you* I love.” Then there is the intentional syntactical twist such as Yoda in *Star Wars*. (“Truly wonderful the mind of a child is.” And, “Always in motion is the future.”)

We may consider this to be a Petrarchan sonnet. Traditional Petrarchan sonnets can be divided into an octave (an eight-line unit rhymed abba abba), and a sestet (a six-line unit rhymed cde). That rhyming scheme is clearly seen in Milton’s Sonnet 19. And, of course, each line is in iambic pentameter.

“No other sonnet by Milton is so widely known and so often quoted as the nineteenth, which begins ‘When I consider how my light is spent’ (Robins, p. 360). Consider how much less

elegant might be a translation of the sonnet lacking Milton's syntactical devices, such as what follows in a modern prose version:

When I think about how I went blind before I reached the mid-point of my life in this big, dark world; when I consider that my greatest talent—which it would kill me to hide—is now useless, even though I want more than ever to use it to serve God, to prove to him that I've made good use of my life, so that he doesn't rebuke me for the way I've spent my life; when I think about all this, I ask, foolishly, "Does God want me to do work that requires sight after denying me that sight?" But my internal sense of patience, in an effort to stop that bad thought, quickly replies: "God doesn't need man's work or his gifts. Whoever best obeys God's commands serves him best. He is like a king. Thousands of people rush around at his bidding, crossing land and sea without rest. And those who simply wait for his commands also serve him." (Litcharts, 2021)

### ***Results of a Poststructuralist Analysis***

The study confirms the use by Milton of three distinctly different semantic, semiotic, and syntactic sets of devices to tell the story of his blindness and his concept of service (q.v. Raupp, 2020). The first is a relatively straightforward metaphor: "light" for sight. Second is the similarly clear conceit of the "parable of the talents" (Matthew 25:14-30). The third discloses itself in the sestet, starting with "God doth not need" and concluding with the last line: "They also serve who only stand and wait," which unveils a deeper meaning, the ultimate meaning to be drawn from the poem, which is *sola fide*, justification by faith alone (Lowrie, 1952).

By comparing and contrasting the events of Milton's turbulent life, by using the techniques of poststructuralist analysis, we may reach the conclusion that Sonnet 19 is more than one more poem in an illustrious collection. Rather, the sonnet exposes Milton's deepest religious belief, one that articulates in "best words in best order" his rejection of the Catholic church and its doctrine of salvation by works.

Barthes, in his 1977 paper, "The Death of the Author," makes it clear there are multiple, if not infinite, meanings in a text such as Milton's Sonnet 19 (and perhaps others of Milton's poems and prose): "We now know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (p. 146). Barthes (1975) could not be clearer: "There are countless forms of narrative in the world" (p. 237). With the proper tool, "the analyst can turn his attention once more to the plurality of narrative acts, to their historical, geographical, and cultural diversity" (p. 239). (See also Gass, 1984, and Logie, 2013.)

### ***Patience***

Poets have long written about the virtue of patience. Gerard Manley Hopkins notably called out the concept in his poem, "Patience," in 1885. About God the poet says in line 13, "He is patient." (Glavin, 1978; McDermott, 1997. p. *xvii*), perhaps countering the representation of the virtue in Milton's Sonnet 19 (Bridges, 2018). Milton's reference to "Patience," beginning in line 9 and continuing to the end of the sonnet, calls for analysis. Who or what is "Patience? In Milton's time, and increasingly today (Grundy, 2016), it was common for a baby girl to be baptized with the name of some Christian virtue: Charity, Chastity, Faith, Grace, Hope, Prudence, Verity, or *Patience*. This study, therefore, concludes that the "Patience" of Milton's Sonnet 19 is a person, not a thing. Further, Patience is a female voice, perhaps an angel, but most assuredly heavenly. Or Patience may be the voice of God, as inferred by Reeder (2004). This is the main issue of the

poststructuralist perspective, viz., there is no one central meaning in this text. Female? God? Any other candidates?

Baumgartner (1963) notes that “Many critics find in [the epics] a strain of thought which differs sharply from the aggressive, expanding optimism of Milton’s earlier work” (p. 203). Could this be an evolution brought on by his personal setbacks? “blindness...gout...age...penury...domestic afflictions...political disappointments...abuse...proscription...neglect?” (p. 204). “Blind, widowed, and suffering from painful fits of gout, Milton probably found it difficult to raise his three daughters, Anne, Mary, and Deborah” (Dobranski, 2002, p. 1). The later poems, the epics, “manifest a new and real conviction in the Christian virtue of patience and in its corollaries, dependence on and submission to, the will of God.” The “evolution” may be inferred from the fact that, “In the poems before [Sonnet 19], there are only two references to patience, while in the poems written after this sonnet there are seventeen significant references to patience” (p. 205). But “patience” to Milton “means neither inaction nor stoical indifference” (p. 208). In accordance with Puritan doctrine, salvation is not earned but is a gift from God to all those who will accept it, which means faith in God and mediation through his son. The patient Christian will follow the path.

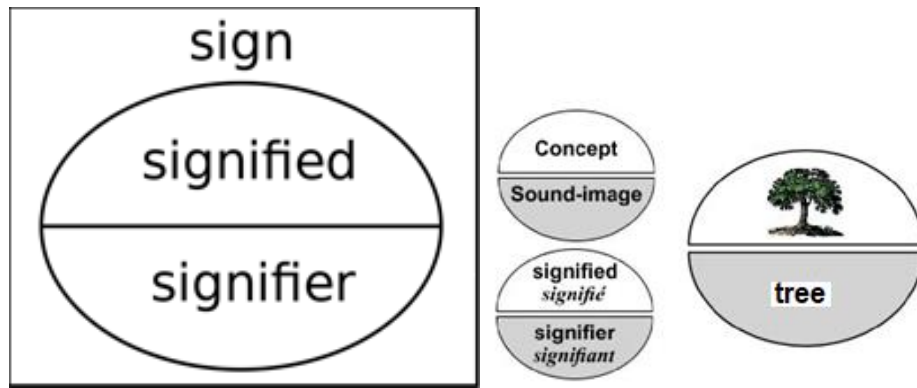
Most assuredly, Milton was well acquainted with the assertion in 1 John 4:16 that “God is love.” Reeder (2004) extends the metaphor to “God is patience.” Indeed, much of Judeo-Christian rhetoric employs the metaphor, while other comments extol the virtue of patience, from Psalm 37:7 “Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him,” to Paul’s letter to the Romans 8:25. “But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.” A quick survey finds the words patience or its derivatives over 100 times in some versions.

A number of scholars have commented that patience is the one virtue that people seem to be able to flout with equanimity. “Unlike generosity or compassion, patience seems to be the kind of virtue people are able to boast about lacking (Bommarito, 2014). “Patience is a virtue I don’t have.” Thomas Aquinas and David Hume acknowledge that patience is a virtue, but they don’t think it’s all that important. “Aquinas defends patience as a virtue, but quickly notes it is not a principal virtue,” and “Hume includes patience among traits that are valuable only for their effect on our conduct” (p. 269). In Sonnet 19, Milton disagrees. It is by Patience that he is rescued from his melancholy and put on the path to salvation. That is no minor trait.

Given that Milton composed the sonnet sometime between 1652 and 1655, by which time he was completely blind, and *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, one may find clues in the latter work as to Milton’s thinking in the sonnet. Adam is instructed in the garden of Eden by a heavenly visitor in the form of the angel Raphael. In Book VIII, Adam encounters God the Father. (See Goodfellow, 1973, and Schiffhorst, 1984.) It is not a reach, then, to conclude that the voice of “Patience” is a voice from heaven, nor is it unrealistic to suppose that it is the Holy Spirit speaking to the sonnet’s narrator. This poststructuralist analysis may be illustrated in Figure 4. A sign is composed of a signified concept and a signifier, such as a word or image. An example might be the concept of a tall leafy plant signified by the word “tree” or a picture of a tree.

#### Figure 4

*Structuralism: Sign, Signifier, and Signified*



John Locke (1632-1704) draws on Plato’s notion of the “ideal,” as shown below. The ideal, in parentheses, is everything that a tree should be before it is named “tree” (δέντρο in Greek). “Locke’s main semantic thesis is that words stand for, or signify, ideas” (Ashworth, 1984, p. 45). Attempting to understand the ideal, we form an image of a tree, which enters the brain and results in a signifier, /tree/ and the spoken word <tree>.

**Figure 5**

*Structuralism: Sign, Signifier, and Signified from a Lockean perspective*



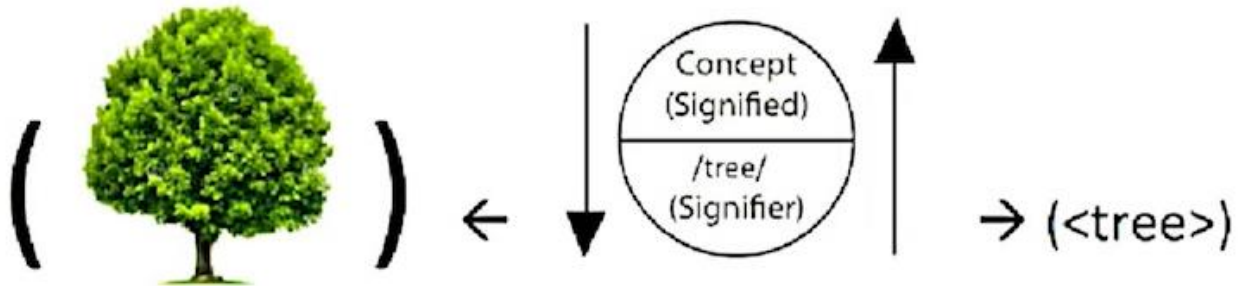
Geoffrey Bennington on Derrida and Deconstruction (Modern Critical Theory Lecture Series)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtLMNcpgYEs>

*Note.* A Lockean view (Ashworth, 1984; Bennington, 2022). The ideal in parentheses may be manifested in a number of images, such as the tree in the center, and the human brain conjures its own image of a tree, and this is then represented in a word that is then spoken. “Words signify ideas” (p. 46).

While John Locke is often credited with bringing the enlightenment to England, he was not the first to “attempt to find a common basis for the theory of linguistic meaning and for the theory of pictorial representation, and also for the theory of meaning and the theory of inference” (Eco, 1986, p. 19). He was preceded in these efforts by the Stoics in ancient Greece and philosophers of the Middle Ages. It was apparent to Locke, as it might have been to others before him, that there must be relationships among the various elements of language in general and of the English language in particular, the language of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

Figure 6

*Sign, Signifier, and Signified from a Saussurean perspective*



When one hears the word “Lincoln” with no context, the mind switches from one meaning to another. As a signifier, “Lincoln,” to a resident of Omaha, Nebraska, might refer to the capital city of the state. To a student in the East Midlands, it might refer to a university of the same name. To a car enthusiast, the word might signify a luxury automobile. And to many, the word might refer to the 16th President of the United States. One might see how the meaning can move from the signifier to the signified and back again, illustrated by the vertical arrows in the diagram.

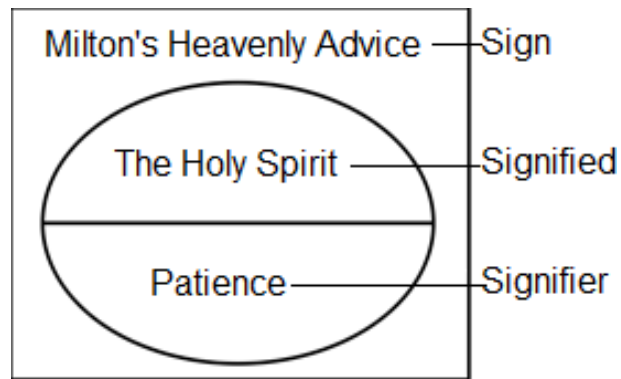
All of the above illustrations are drawn from the theory of *structuralism*. *Poststructuralism* takes issue with the finite characterization of the signified, finding only one signifier after another. If one consults a dictionary, for example, to try to find a signified for the word “tree,” what one finds is more signifiers. Selecting one of the signifiers for a signified, one finds again more signifiers. Nevertheless, the structuralist model may be used, at least, as a foil for a poststructural analysis of a text.

A close reading of the text of Sonnet 19 from a poststructuralist perspective offers the conclusion that the sestet of lines 9 to 14 (actually beginning with the last three iambic feet of line 8) is the heavenly advice that Milton receives after lamenting his blindness and that “Patience” is the signifier of the Holy Spirit. And since the Holy Spirit is one of the three faces of God, it is God who is giving the advice to Milton. That advice, of course, is *sola fide*, justification by faith alone, a fundamental belief of Milton’s Puritan faith. Milton will affirm that understanding in Book VIII of *Paradise Lost*: “But whether thus these things...Leave them to God above, him serve and feare” (lines 159 and 168). Lewalski (2003a, p. 12) writes that the sonnet “voices a bitter complaint against a taskmaster God who seems to demand service from a blind poet, then moves towards resolving that problem by projecting a regal God who needs no service but whose kingdom has place for all.”

The poststructuralist will ask about the meaning of the didactic nature of the teachings of Raphael and of God the Father, both of whom descended from heaven to earth for the lesson to Adam. Surely, one such meaning (among others) must relate to Milton’s tractate “Of Education,” as well as his own Puritan faith in *sola fide*.

**Figure 7**

*Milton's Heavenly Advice as a Sign*

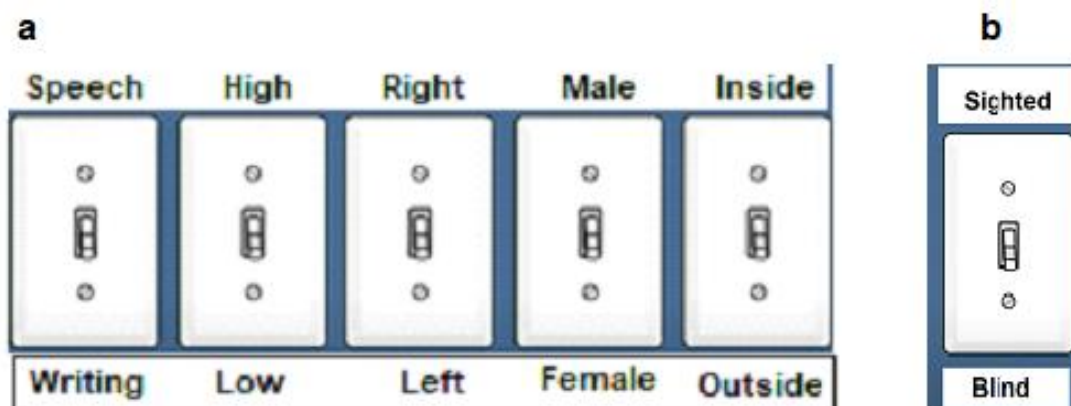


*Note.* An application of the signifier and signified comprising the sign.

Derrida contrasts what appear to be two direct opposites, as shown in Panel *a* in Figure 8. Myers (2017) represents the positions as settings of a light switch, i.e., on or off. The attribute at the top of the light switch (on) is seen as the greater or positive and the lower position (off) as the lesser or negative. Speech is considered preferred as it is spontaneous, face-to-face, and unedited, while writing is inferior because it is filtered, edited, and perhaps even contrived. The other light switches similarly represent opposites. The current study adds one more set representing the sighted as preferred over the blind.

**Figure 8**

Derrida's Model of Opposites



*Note:* Panel *a* is taken from Myers (2017), *Understanding Derrida, Deconstruction & Of Grammatology*. Panel *b* extends Myers to indicate the Sighted/Blind dichotomy drawn from Milton's Sonnet 19.



Barbara Lewalski (2003b) wrote that Milton's Sonnet 19 "is a masterpiece, fusing emotional intensity and high art" (p. 305). His poetry and prose vary widely in manner and matter and are replete with opposites. In Sonnet 19, opposites appear in nearly every line. I was sighted but now am blind. My world was light but now is dark. Am I my Maker's good servant or bad? I complain but am told to stop kvetching. According to Derrida, my work, my writing, is inferior to speaking. As a tool of literary analysis and critical thinking, Derrida's model of opposites opens windows to reveal some, perhaps many, different meanings. The poststructuralist, nevertheless, will hold that there is not one "true meaning" in any of these words or phrases. A concerning note is that there is not in the model a recognition of the vast gray area in much of the human experience. While right and left are in the on-off mode, such ideas as tall and short are not. Tall in Sweden does not have the same meaning as tall in East Timor; height is a continuous variable.

A poststructuralist analysis of a poem such as Milton's sonnet will "posit an ineluctable tension between what poems do and what they say, the impossibility for a poem, or perhaps any piece of language, to practice what it preaches" (Culler, 2011, p. 80). Reading a poem inevitably will invoke in the reader past experiences, and given that no person has exactly the same set of experiences, what the poem does is different for each reader or listener. A blind person hearing Sonnet 19 will without question have different feelings from that of one who is sighted. A person who professes a belief in a traditional Christian religion will have different feelings from an atheist. A Roman Catholic priest, committed to such ancient beliefs as transubstantiation will take from the sonnet some meaning that will differ from those who reject those beliefs. The poststructuralist will have no problem with the view that different readers (or listeners) will take from a poem, which is highly encoded with references, different meanings. The poststructuralist recognizes "the impossibility of describing a complete or coherent signifying system, since systems are always changing" (Culler, 2011, p. 139).

The octet, before the voice of Patience, may be seen as a lament, and who in similar circumstances would not have similar feelings, but Angelica Duran (2013) offers a different perspective: "The poem...does not articulate grief. Certainly, the octave provides a sense of frustration about being unproductive, but it also forestalls interpretations about the narrator as passive, defeated, or punished" (p. 143). "Upon his Blindness promotes a physically attractive figure of a blind bard who will not go gently into the night" (pp. 149-150). Far from helpless, Milton depicts lack of "light" as inconsequential to the strong relationship between the narrator and God: blindness, like sight, does not signal God's displeasure or pleasure in the individual (p. 152).

Closely allied to poststructuralist analysis, Louise Rosenblatt, considered the founder of reader-response theory, holds to the view that "Reading is a transaction [a term taken from John Dewey], a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances" (1982, p. 268). How the reader will understand the text depends on the reader's "stance" or "mental set," one's "feelings, ideas, and attitudes" (p. 269). Every reader comes to the text with a different set of experiences, and those experiences provide a frame for the text. It takes little effort to acknowledge that different readers will make different connections to the text. What is decidedly more difficult is to predict what those connections will be. Perhaps current research in mapping the brain will reveal some answers. For now, it is enough to know that this is one more approach leading to the multiple meanings of Milton's Sonnet 19. Joseph Conrad, the Polish British novelist, wrote that "the aim of the novelist is 'to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see'" (Rosenblatt, p. 272). One might presume to add that it is also the aim of the poet, the aim of Milton, who "From the time of his youth...liked to think of himself as a laborer in the vineyard of his Lord" (Cheek, 1965, p. 133), following the admonition

of Jesus in John 9:4 (KJV): “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (Fiske, 1974, p. 46).

### Discussion

Language is subjective, and it is in the nature of poetry to be more complex and more subjective than a typical prose text. To pursue the question of poststructuralism as a means of analyzing the poetry of Milton is to plumb more deeply the domain of philosophical linguistics, a journey more appropriately bestowed to future research. Nevertheless, a detailed examination of the evidence using poststructuralist analysis suggests that Milton’s truth is far from obvious. This may be seen in Sonnet 19, where the more easily detected light/sight metaphor and parable conceit tend to distract the reader from the real meaning of the work. A good deal of critical commentary on the sonnet goes to the narrator’s blindness, especially in the octet, the first eight lines, which comprise a complaint both for his lack of sight and its interference with his effort to employ his talent. A close reading of the text, however, leads to an alternative meaning. Given that the sestet, with the voice of “Patience” is a clear affirmation of *sola fide*, the reader is invited to join the Puritan doctrine that salvation, release from the original sin of our “first parents,” derives not from good works but by faith alone, for “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Milton is well aware of the assertion of Jesus, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Milton’s frequent reference to the Bible and other sources for metaphors, while enriching the text, also compound the possible meanings. One cannot fail to recognize the multiple meanings of light, including, but not limited to, physical sight and the inner light that Puritans believe comes unimpeded by bishops and priests to individual persons of faith. In this reading, Milton was not blind, and perhaps his light was not “spent” but was instead burning brightly in his heart and mind.

There are innumerable opportunities for further research into the application of poststructuralist analysis of Milton’s works. *Paradise Lost* itself is such a fertile field, along with the other epic poems, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. The pastoral elegy, *Lycidas*, and the masque, *Comus*, are also candidates for further research into the semantic, semiotic, and syntactical approaches to deeper, richer meanings that may be gleaned from an approach that is free from the traditional “true meaning” of each of those texts. In these works, as well as in other shorter works, there would seem to be an infinite number of interpretations that would make major contributions to the reader’s appreciation for the genius of John Milton.

It would be a shortcoming of this discussion were we to omit the connection the study made between Sonnet 19 and Sonnet 7, “How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,/Stol’n on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!” In order to gain some appreciation for the numberless ways in which “When I consider how my light is spent,” one need only read these two juxtaposed in form and content. Milton creates such metaphors as boggle the mind. But the purpose of the study is not to mine this trove of metaphoric brilliance but much more modestly to ask whether poststructuralism informs our understanding of just one sonnet. Not only do we gain insights about the sonnet under study, but we are led to ask if the same methods may be used to analyze others of Milton’s shorter works, especially the pastoral elegy “Lycidas,” with its classical metaphors.

A concluding note must acknowledge the genuine pleasure of this deep dive into the sonnet which we had thought we knew. It is particularly gratifying to have some validation for interpretations that may have seemed out of the mainstream of Milton scholarship. The study also further added to an appreciation for how much beauty can be packed into fourteen lines. With humility, admiration, and respect, we dedicate this work to the memory of John Milton of Chalfont St Giles.

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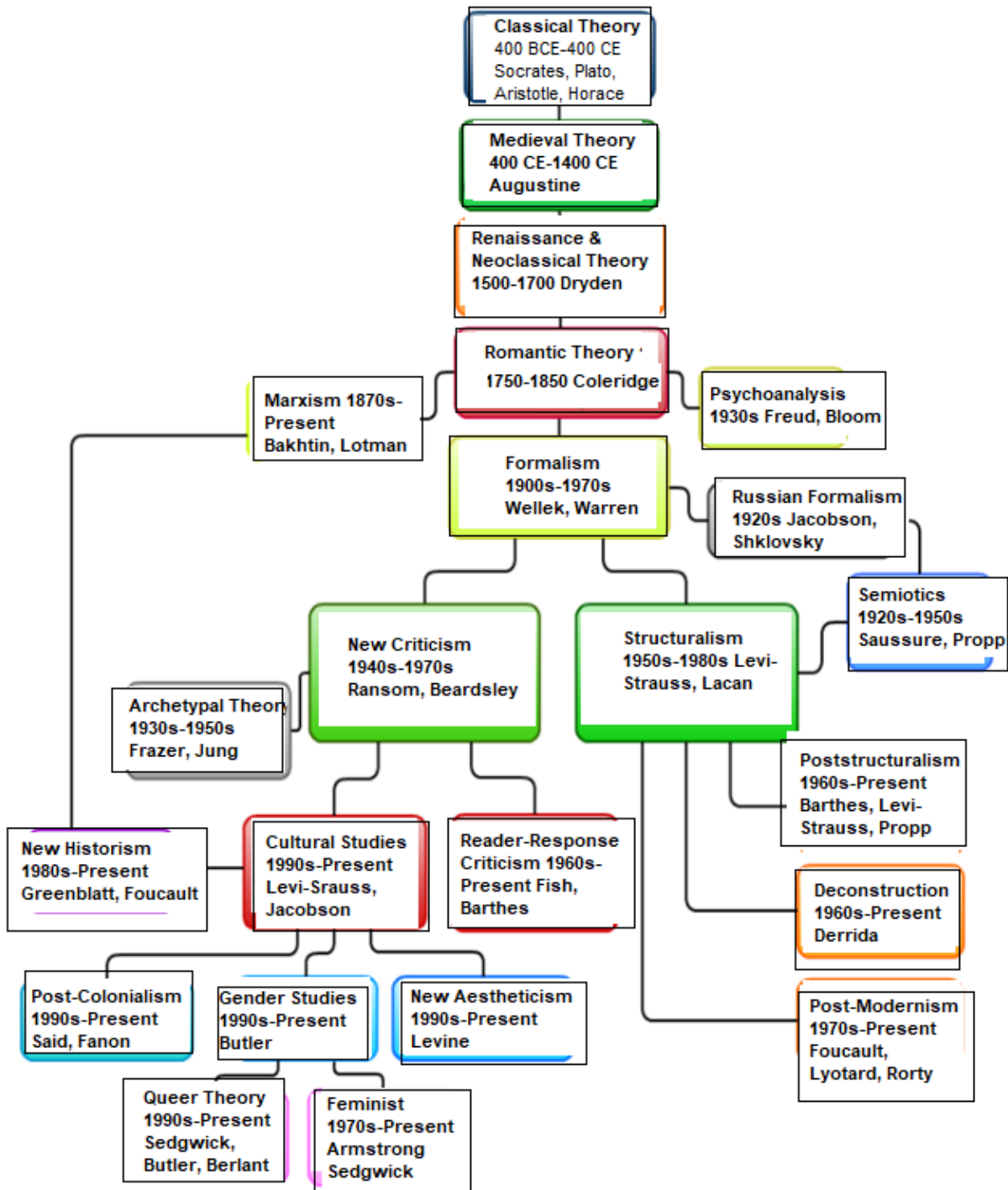
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## Appendix

### Timeline of Literary Theory



*Note.* Adapted from Nelson (2017), this chart shows the branching of literary theory from 400 BCE to the present. Structuralism is seen as derived from formalism. Poststructuralism responds to structuralism, as do deconstruction and post-modernism. Culler (2011) defines literary theory as “the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analyzing it” (p. 1).