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The Generation of Endless Interpretations in Frost's *The Road not Taken*: A Deconstructive Reading

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Abstract

Derrida's deconstructive approach is considered one of the significant concepts that criticize the central idea of modernism and any other previous movements. Deconstructivists aim to re-examine literary texts from an individual perspective. This individuality may generate endless interpretations of a certain text. The deconstructive approach is mainly a reaction to the systematic rules of structuralism as well as it is a reaction to the formalist approach and to all the Western logos. The selected poem of this study is Frost's "*The Road not Taken*". The poem is challenging as it does not follow a traditional method. It keeps generating ideas and endless interpretations because the meaning is not located. The study aims to analyze the poem from a deconstructive perspective and blur the binary opposition.

Keywords: Modernism, Binary opposition, Deconstruction, Frost, Derrida

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توليد التفسيرات اللامتناهية في قصيدة "الطريق الذي لم يُسلك" لروبرت فروست:
قراءة تفكيكية

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المستخلص

يُعتبر النهج التفكيكي لدريدا واحدًا من المناهج المهمة التي تنتقد الفكرة المركزية للحدث وأيّ حركات سابقة أخرى. يهدف التفكيكيون إلى إعادة فحص النصوص الأدبية من منظور فردي. قد تؤدي هذه الفردية إلى توليد تفسيرات لا متناهية لنص معين. يعد النهج التفكيكي في الأساس رد فعل على القواعد المنهجية للبنوية، كما أنه رد فعل على المنهج الشكلي وعلى كل ما يسمى بـ "الشعارات" الغربية. القصيدة المختارة لهذه الدراسة هي قصيدة "الطريق الذي لم يُسلك" لروبرت فروست. القصيدة تمثل تحديًا لأنها لا تتبع نهجًا تقليديًا. فهي تستمر في توليد أفكار وتفسيرات لا نهائية لأن المعنى غير محدد. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل القصيدة من منظور تفكيكي وتفكيك الثنائيات المتعارضة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحادثة، الثنائيات المتعارضة، التفكيك، فروست، دريدا

1. INTRODUCTION

The deconstructive theory is mainly one of the postmodern schools that aim to read a text closely. At the same time, to prove that any text is not fixed rather it bears several contradictions within itself. Derrida defines it as "*a position one has with regard to something*" (Bressler, 2011, p. 107). The term deconstruction initially emerged in America when Derrida interrogated Western metaphysics, tracing back to Plato, in his essay "*Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*" (1966). Despite Derrida's assertion that his analysis serves merely as a tool for interpreting literary texts, numerous poststructuralists embrace it as a theoretical framework. Derrida declines to assign a principal title to his methodology inside the language, as his theory seeks to analyse the text and demolish its framework. Defining it within the language could undermine the theory itself. Thus, Derrida posits that his methodology can be comprehended solely inside its contextual framework.

Deconstruction does not exist somewhere, pure, proper, self-identical, outside of its inscriptions in conflictual and differentiated contexts; it „is“ only what it does and what is done with it, there

where it takes place. It is difficult today to give a univocal definition or an adequate description of this "taking place" (Sikirivwa, 2020, p. 45)

Derrida starts his study with a critique of Platonic metaphysics. Platonic belief stands for the everlasting binary oppositions. There is always perfect and imperfect as everything in this world is a copy of something more superior in the *Realm of Forms*. They also believe in the supremacy of the spoken language over the written one. For Plato writing is tied only to memory therefore it does not provide an immediate truth as speaking does. When the ideas are transmitted to a paper, they may become contradictory; consequently, the truth would not be reliable. On the other hand, Derrida states that writing is more important than speaking because it is the spirit of the language; without writing, civilizations would not know their past. However, the problem is not with writing but with the inaccurate speaking sources that are transferred as written sources. The basic contradiction is with speaking not with writing because writing can be analyzed whereas speaking is immediate therefore it is difficult to catch it (Sikirivwa, 2020).

Bressler recognizes that Derrida's analysis is regarded as a critique of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (2011: 108). The structuralist approach asserts that a text can be interpreted through several language indicators. Structuralists assert that all social or cultural acts are regulated by specific laws and codes. Consequently, as long as a text results from these behaviours, it is quite straightforward to ascertain its meaning. Conversely, deconstructionists advocate the notion of undecidability, asserting that a text lacks a definitive interpretation as each individual develops their own interpretive framework, particularly following the two World Wars. Derrida posits that a text may have several meanings beyond its apparent interpretation. A text may appear steady at first glance; however it contains several contradictions that allow a reader to derive meaning. This freedom ultimately results in the text producing multiple interpretations, as each reader derives conclusions from their individual perspective.

Derrida agrees with Saussure that language comprises a set of norms and structures, yet he also acknowledges that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. However, the intersection between these two philosophers arises with the concept of the signifier and signified. Derrida contests Saussure's notion of the inseparability of the signifier and signified. Saussure posits that the signifier varies between languages, whereas the signified remains a constant concept in humans' thoughts. Derrida refutes this notion, asserting that the signified is mutable and can shift from one form to another. The colour black may signify sorrow for X, while it may represent joy for Y. Consequently, from a deconstructive perspective, there is no inherent stability or permanence (Derrida, 1993, p. 223).

Formalism illustrates that a literary work can achieve cohesion by the analysis of its imagery, allusions, symbols, and other elements. Derrida dismisses these assertions, asserting that a text is fundamentally heterogeneous. He disagrees with the formalists who assert that a definitive meaning persists inside the text's ambiguity. Derrida recognises that each reader can independently uncover meaning, resulting in an infinite array of interpretations (ibid).

Furthermore, Derrida delves into his analysis by asserting that a fixed structure is a fallacy. He interrogates a highly sensitive topic known as the "Centre Transcendental Signified". This phrase denotes the fundamental principle upon which an individual may construct their beliefs. This is a fundamental aspect of his deconstruction theory that dismantles all permanent structures. Derrida contends that Western society constructs its framework around various basic transcendental concepts such as God, origin, reason, existence, and truth. These centers can also function as "logocentrism." "*There exists a belief in an ultimate reality or center of truth that can underpin all thoughts and actions*" (Bressler 2007: 120).

These logos have remained beyond scrutiny for millennia; hence, Derrida renders them problematic within the realm of language. They transform into discourses by introducing the concept of "binary oppositions," signifying that meaning is perpetually elusive and continuously shifts from one signifier to another without attaining a definitive signified. Derrida contends that Western society has established these dichotomies to differentiate between the superior and the inferior. Consequently, Derrida seeks to eliminate these boundaries via his deconstructive methodology (ibid).

2. DECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS OF FROST'S '*The Road not Taken*'

Frost's poem is one of the most ambiguous poems as it bears several interpretations therefore; deconstructive reading is considered the fittest one for such a poem. Frost confesses that this poem is based on his friend called Thomas who "*whichever road he went, would be sorry he did not go the other*" (Tyagi, 2015, p. 67). On the other hand, it may also refer to the poet's experience himself as he writes to Susan Haves that has walked through "*Two lonely cross roads, neither is much traveled*" (A.Pavani, 2015, p. 34). The dilemma of the poem starts from the very beginning in the title. The poet mentions two roads, one is taken and the other is not. He does not provide his readers with any claims as he puts the two roads at one level "*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood*"(1). The verse conveys a message that there is no better than the other. Pavani states that Frost intentionally makes his poem generates more than one meaning (A.Pavani, 2015). Each time he provides the readers with a certain hint; he comes back with an opposite idea. For example, he says that he takes the road that is "*grassy and wanted wear*", however, he hesitates again and says that:

Though as for that the passing there,
Had worn them really about the same (Frost, 1985)

These contradictions reveal how the poet is hesitant. It seems that he is so from the very beginning as he mentions in his title that he is focusing on "*The Road not Taken*". Frost provides his readers with signs and leaves the gate open to his readers' interpretations. For example, the road is a sign or a symbol of a decision or a lifeline. However, this symbol is not fixed according to the deconstructive theory as it is changeable from each person to another as well as it depends on the culture of the reader himself. Obviously, the road in this poem shows that the speaker is about to make a decision that would be a shift in his entire life. Besides, the speaker is alone on the road which also sends a sign that a man should discover the truth by himself and choose the right way.

Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" depicts an image of a solitary traveler who has come to a fork in the road in his journey and must make a decision on which way to proceed (A.Pavani, 2015, p. 35).

Emerson states that the idea of novelty stands for American culture as they refuse to imitate, they are always eager to generate new ideas. He acknowledges that "*we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. We will walk on our feet; we will work with our hands; and we will speak our own mind*" (1982:220)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves, no step had trodden black (Frost, 1985)

According to Derrida, reality cannot be discovered by the "binary oppositions". Frost uses two opposite colors in this stanza to blur the meaning. As long as the setting is in the autumn, therefore, the color yellow refers to the fallen leaves. On the other hand, black refers to the passing time of these leaves. The two colors refer to the instability of time consequently nothing is fixed or central. Although the road seems yellow and new for the first time, it turns to be black when the speaker takes it. Frost's description of nature also deconstructs the passing of time. He first describes autumn with its yellow leaves then he begins to describe winter when the same leaves become black. Lastly, he describes the spring when the leaves become green "*Because it was grassy*" (A.Pavani, 2015). All these binary colors could not give the reader a clear fixed meaning.

Throughout the poem, there is this sense of replacing ideas which are considered the main aspect of deconstruction. It is noticed that at the end of the poem, the speaker takes the road less traveled. However, this is not supposed to be the best choice rather Frost perceives reality that is different from other people who look at life from one angle. Moreover, Frost's usage of metaphors makes the poem look realistic as readers start to feel the freshness of the air in the autumn and hear the rustling of the yellow leaves in the trees for example:

And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth (Frost, 1985)

Asad (2022) mentions that the poet does not give a fixed meaning that a reader may take for granted. He does not prefer a road over another as he states "*Then took the other as just as fair*". Though Frost does not reveal the exact road that he has taken it seems that his choice has great influence as he says "*And that has made all the difference*". Frost aims to deconstruct the expectations of his readers with each verse. In this verse, the reader may expect that finally the speaker has chosen his way and made the right decision. He conveys a message that he is happy with his choice regardless of all the consequences. It also seems that it affects the speaker though it has taken place a long time ago "*ages and ages hence*". Frost invites his readers to do as he does and make their decision despite all the risks and difficulties. Hence, all these signs reveal that the speaker is happy with his choice (Richardson, 1997).

However, coming back, Frost once again deconstructs his readers' expectations with the word *sigh* "*I shall be telling this with a sigh*". This word symbolizes that the speaker is regretful of his decision and choice. The reader once again lives in a dilemma to find the fixed meaning. On the other hand, maybe the speaker is expressing his regret for not taking the other road. Ankit (2015) believes that the traveler has taken his final decision and there is no chance to come back. He expresses with a sigh that his decision has an adventurous spirit that may result in destructive consequences as no one has ever had to experience what he has already chosen (68). Consequently, the poem keeps generating meanings endlessly that with each reading a reader comes with different interpretations. Therefore, Frost's poems can be fit for all ages because their meaning bears several signs. In contrast with the previous classical poems, their meaning is obvious if a reader analyzes them from a biographical or historical approach.

According to the deconstructive theory, writing is superior to speaking because the first one is everlasting whereas the second one becomes dead once it is spoken. The poem is stored in the subconscious of the speaker. If he had just spoken it, it would have been dead by then. However, when he writes it down, it becomes immortal despite the poet being passed away. Even the composition of the poem is considered a deconstruction of Frost's previous poems in terms of meaning and form. Frost used to write with a four-line stanza, however, in this poem he writes with a five-line stanza. He also used to repeat the same ideas throughout his narration but in this poem, no idea is repeated. Ankit (2015) states that Frost does not repeat his ideas except one idea when he states that "*two roads diverged*". He inserts these verses in the first stanza and in the last one to remind his readers that there are still two choices (68). Frost does not give anything for granted as he states that "*I doubted if I should ever come back*". The poet seems to apply the deconstructive theory even before Derrida invents it.

Coming back to the word "grassy", Frost also keeps the road that he takes not clear enough. Logically, a man would choose the way that is easy and "*wanted*" by everyone. However, the speaker here is not a man who would go with the cattle as he wants to make a "*difference*". Frost keeps the poem ambiguous till the end although the reader expects to find the solution in the last line. Frost keeps the gate open once again when he states that his choice "*has made all the difference*". Lynn (2008) states that this "*difference*" is not clear enough to conclude whether it is positive or negative (16). The only difference that a reader comes through is the self-identity of the speaker who has made his choice by himself with no interference from external influence. The speaker keeps his emotions mysterious with his "*sigh*"; therefore, the difference is related to the speaker's emotion. Consequently, without coming across the speaker's emotion, a reader cannot know the exact difference that the traveler has done. Maybe the only fixed meaning that a reader comes through this poem is the celebration of individualism.

This poem shows the alienation of the modern man as he is alone throughout the entire poem. It also shows how much the speaker is hesitant to decide. The traveler may prefer to take the road less traveled in order not to socialize with people. He prefers solitude and individuality over society. Lynn (2008) states that there is a common ground between Frost's poem and Eliot's "*Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*" who also seems alienated in the poem. Both speakers are hesitant and afraid to socialize with people. This sense is one of the modern hero characteristics. Lynn adds that though Frost

attempts to over this struggle in his poem "*Mending Wall*", he seems to fail as he is once again alienated from the society in the current poem (20).

When it comes to analyzing the poem, a researcher has come across many different interpretations by critics. For example, Dr. Ahmed (2017) in his article claims that the two roads are the same but the speaker imagines that one road is good and the opposite is bad (18). Faggen has a contrary idea as he believes that this poem is considered an ironical one. He believes that the possibilities become limited in the modern world therefore, there are no such great chances to choose one of them (Faggen, 2015). Tyagi arguably suggests that the speaker does not take any of the two roads as he might have taken the middle one (67). Though the poem is written with simple language, however, its meaning is still ambiguous and deep. Asad refers to the ambiguity of the poem as follows:

Robert Frost's poetic masterpiece is arguably the [most infamously misunderstood poem](#) as of yet. Marrying elements of form and content, arresting artistic phraseology and [metaphors](#), the poem is mostly read without being understood (2022).

3. CONCLUSION

The study shows the significance of the deconstructive theory in Frost's poem. The theory is regarded as a rebellious one against the logos that are established since the time of Plato. Derrida shows through his study that there is no binary opposition as one is good and the other is bad. Instead, he believes the two are equal because no one of them can stand without the other. For example, there is no white unless there is black.

The Road not taken is considered the best depiction of modern poetry as it includes most of its characteristics. The best aspect of this poem is the open-ending interpretations which deconstruct the central interpretations of the previous poems. Frost depicts the individuality of the modern man and how he could finally free himself from the restrictions and the rules of the previous movements. Besides, Frost also depicts the misery of the modern hero after the war as a man begins to be skeptical towards anything. Frost could blur the binary opposition throughout his poem. For example, he portrays the modern man as free and hesitated at the same time. He also depicts the two roads as similar but one of them is taken and the other is not as if the poet wants to make them equal by taking it. The poem bears many contradictions within it which may lead the reader to investigate more.

Frost uses a modern method in his narration as he depends on economical narration with deep meaning. The poet challenges his readers to find a conclusion although he writes with simple language. Frost's poem keeps generating new meaning with each reading. The deconstructive reading of this poem does not prove anything as central or fixed. Rather, this study insists that a text is multidimensional as it depends on individual interpretations. The title of the poem encourages the researchers always to trace "*The Road Not Taken*" in order to produce endless interpretations.

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