

Significance of the Deconstructive Turn in Literature: Breaking of Logos in “The Second Coming” by W.B. Yeats

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of literary criticism, there have been constant shifts in levels of analysis of the texts. These levels may be literal, metaphorical, authoritative or superficial. The most primitive of the aesthetic theories, the mimetic theory, considered art as the imitation of the aspects of the universe. Around the sixteenth century, the focus was shifted to what effect art has on its audience, then to the artist in the seventeenth century, and finally to the work of art itself around the twentieth century. The advent of post-structuralism in the 1960s was an attack on structuralism’s constant search for an order, a structure, in novels, music, poetry, or visual texts. It is always assumed that a text yields meaning and significance once we untie its ‘core’ elements. Poststructuralists like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida gave way to a new school of thought that believed in the ‘openness’ of texts, the role of text in the production of meaning and its relation to other texts. This paper focuses on the deconstructive turn and its significance in literature. We shall be doing a reading of William Butler Yeats’s “The Second Coming” and try to prove the poem as breaking the Derridean “logos”.

Keywords: Literary criticism, theory, poem, art, deconstruction, post-structuralism, Jacques Derrida, Yeats.

Deconstruction was originally a movement in philosophy, by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, arguably one of the most controversial, elusive, and influential figures in Western philosophical thought. His work has spanned across literature, law, political and social theory. He was obsessed with the functioning of language. And the concept of deconstruction was first explained by him in his book *Of Grammatology*, originally published in 1967 under the name *De la grammatologie*. His earlier work focused on Saussurean notions of language. Derrida argued that if the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, then ‘reading’ is a process, a movement from one signifier to the other. We never reach the centre or the final meaning of the text. When we think that we have arrived at the meaning of a particular thing, we are faced with more signifiers. For example, when the word “cat” is said before two people,

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none of it can actually tell what signified image is there in their minds. In order to explain the word “cat”, we make further use of words like “fur”, “tail”, and “whiskers”- thus using more and more signifiers. We never reach, we only travel on the road of meaning-making. Every signifier is made up of an absence according to Derrida. “Cat” is “cat” because it is different from “hat”, “bat”, or “mat”. Every word carries inside itself the words that we know are different from the word in focus. Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary Theory* assert that

Derrida’s arguments focus on the need to pay more attention to the way in which meaning are produced temporarily rather than with any permanency, through contradictions and uncertainty, and have constantly opposed any authoritative meaning (Nayar 39).

The focus of this paper is to evaluate the significance of deconstruction in literature. To do so, we first have to know what deconstruction is and its key concepts. The first concept is “logocentrism” - a term used to describe the assumption and quest for a centre, a core, an essence or truth. It has always been our habit to look for meanings in a text to structure understanding. Western thinking, believes Derrida, places “meaning” at the centre of presence. Philosophy is a discipline that is driven by a desire for reliability associated with the existence of objective meaning that makes sense of our existence in the world. If we take a term, such as criticism, then this term becomes the centre, the reference point around which everything is theorized and efforts are made to interrogate meaning. So logocentrism just means the practice of finding a central meaning in everything. The way in which term, the “logos”, is made known is language- the translation of an idea into words. This is the “metaphysics of presence”, the way in which we present the object of our thought (Derrida 49). Différance is another concept that needs our attention. In the above example of the word “cat”, we came to learn that the meaning of this word also depends on its difference from other words. And to describe it, we used more signifiers- thus meaning was perpetually deferred. Différance is therefore a word that combines difference and deference. Writing and language are the result of this difference.

One of the most famous dictions of Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, “There is nothing outside of the text”, seems to be a significant expression of the theory of deconstruction. Deconstructionists believe there is always a way to look beyond what we already know about an institution. All the meanings lie inside the text we are reading or the film we are watching, there is nothing - no new knowledge that an outside discipline or text can give us. Texts are open and undecidable. Every text constitutes traces of other texts. Derrida’s definition of texts underlines that the traditional boundaries of a text- the beginning of a work, the margins, the

title, the references, the signatures- are no longer in consideration in the post-modern sense. An overrun has happened that spoils all these divisions and boundaries. This forces us to extend the concept of the dominant “text”, which is no longer a finished piece of writing, some content contained in a book, or the book’s margins, but a sort of network that refers endlessly to something other than itself (Bloom 83).

So, if a student is new to literature and he is about to begin reading all the “great” classics like Emily Bronte and Shakespeare, and if he writes an interpretation of these works in his own words without taking any reference from critics like Eliot or Dryden, then his interpretation is as important as those of our literary critics. Why do we always have to look for artistic validation in the “great” classic writers? What has made them “great”? Who was Aristotle to say that a perfect plot has a beginning, middle, and end? If the world would have believed him, a permanent constraint would be placed on the creative ability of a writer. Texts produce meanings not according to their position in history, but as a consequence of their aesthetic value. Good texts can create history themselves, and they can become signs themselves, like Shakespeare’s drama, or Robert Frost's poems.

The thought behind deconstruction is breaking all the censorship on the texts, appropriated by thinkers, theorists, and critics. How does deconstruction break this censorship? How is it able to remove the binding spell of reappropriation on various institutions by society? We all know that we have been taught to follow the path of righteousness since our childhood, and all the books that we read and all the various institutions of education, religion, family, and law, have made every effort to push us onto this path. The thought that the right path should be followed and the wrong path should be abandoned places the right above the wrong. That is where the concept of binaries and reversals comes in. The movies we watch, the texts we read, and the music we listen to are always able to function because they place one thing over the other. This placing of one thing over the other is known as “binary opposition”. Binary opposition simply means the smallest units of a language set up against each other, such as light/dark, man/woman, and right/wrong etc. Deconstruction at first aims at the reversal of these binaries. And when these binaries are reversed, it again breaks this opposition- thus creating the condition of “aporia”- A condition where none of the terms is privileged over the other. Thus, deconstruction pushes us onto a path where there is a never-ending process of meaning-making. Then what do we achieve by it? The answer is simple- possibility. A possibility to see the text

from a new angle, to make a new interpretation, and to analyse it from a level that has not yet been focused on, or more to discover a new level.

Now the question arises what are the ways to deconstruct a text? And the answer is there's none. There is no specific way for deconstruction. A method that is bent on breaking methods cannot have a particular way of application. If you want to deconstruct a text, simply look at the possibilities the text has to offer, regardless of what the canon says about it. At first, deconstruction performs an operation that is described as subverting, undermining, undoing, and transgressing. This operation is performed on traditional ideas, limits, logic, authoritarian readings, objectivity, the connotative meaning of a text (Ellis 259).

One important thing while deconstructing a text must be kept in mind that while doing it, we must also have access to the traditional analysis of that text because, after the analysis, we would need to show how our interpretation differs from the traditional version. For example, the famous poem "The Road not Taken" by Robert Frost is taught to us as a poem about the choices in life, the road and the path the author took. But if someone pays attention to the title and thinks again, is the poet talking about the path he chose or the path he didn't choose? Deconstruction aims to show how the text says (or also says) the opposite of what is appearing before us. How texts can go against their stated meanings.

"Logos" or the final meaning is believed to be contained in God, whom Derrida calls "a transcendental signified"- a signified that explains the very process of signification (Nayar 41). We are going to look at the poem "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats through a deconstructive lens and try to subvert what value previous readings have given to the poem. The purpose of deconstruction, as we already know is not to reach a specific meaning or a conclusion, but to create the condition of 'aporia' - a condition where one thing is not privileged over the other, thus rendering the text open for reading it the myriad number of times through a myriad number of critical methods. The title of the poem might suggest a large number of Americans and the English or the followers of Christianity as a declaration for the resurrection or rebirth of Jesus Christ. But nothing tells us that this is the "correct" interpretation or the final meaning of the title. The title might also suggest the coming of a new age, which might be better or worse than the previous. All we know is that we have to look at this "coming" in relation to the first one because this is the second coming. I have to quote lines along with my reading, to have a closer look at the poem.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre 1

The falcon cannot hear the falconer; 2

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; 3

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, 4

If we look at the literal meaning of lines 1 and 2, it would simply mean that a falcon is flying spiral motion upwards and has reached a position so high that now he cannot hear the sound of the falconer. But do we ever look at the literal meaning while reading a poem? In literature, it has become our habit to see beyond everything that is written- to look at the metaphorical meaning of the text. A gyre is a conical geometrical shape which is narrow at the bottom and broad at the top, like a tornado. “Falcon” here could mean human beings. Human beings, who are so engrossed in this materialistic world, have forgotten the essence of their being, their humanity. The widening gyre could mean the large number of evil that is happening all over the world. An evil so strong that it could destroy the voice of humanity. In the 3rd line, everything is falling apart. Nothing is now attached to its centre of existence. This centre or the “logos” could mean one’s essence of being, or God, or moral values, or one’s place of birth or the more endless number of things. And in the next line, there is nothing but chaos in the world. If we see these four lines, on the level of literary criticism, then the eighteenth-century concept of pseudo-classicism kicks in where writers like Homer and Virgil were considered as a mark of any literary value, and any new writer’s value depended on its comparison to these “great” writers- this concept was then the centre of attention for the literary world. The form was privileged over the content. But as times progressed, the centre or the logos shifted to nature, and then to the mind, the inner psyche, the author, the reader, and the text. Cannot we agree more with the line third now? And this “anarchy” might refer to the theory of deconstruction itself. Of course, Yeats would’ve known nothing of deconstruction while composing this poem. But post-structuralism's focus was never on what the author wanted or intended for his readers. The focus is wholly on the text and the reader. This chaos in the fourth line could mean that there is the possibility of change in the absence of law and order. The previous law and order would have been suffocating for the development of the creative ability of the artist.

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere 5

The ceremony of innocence is drowned; 6

The best lack all conviction, while the worst 7

Are full of passionate intensity. 8

Surely some revelation is at hand; 9

Surely the Second Coming is at hand. 10

As we come to the fifth line, we know that the rivers are flowing with the blood of innocent beings. The “best” human beings or the human beings that are do-gooders have lost all conviction and determination, while the worst, the evildoers, are full of passionate intensity to do more and more evil. The poet says that an omen is about to become true, and a revelation is about to happen- something is coming. *Eternal Rhythms* describes the phrase “ceremony of innocence” as “the ceremonious life that sustains civilizations- ritual, art, manners, custom, tradition and values” (*Eternal Rhythms* 115). For a literary critic, who believes in the purity of literary genres and forms, the line “The ceremony of innocence is drowned” would mean something else. He would interpret that the purity or innocence of literature is destroyed by interdisciplinary studies. Surely a new theory, a new method is coming- which may be better or worse than the first.

Are we still holding on to the “logos” or the central meaning?

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out 11

When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi* 12

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert 13

A shape with lion body and the head of a man, 14

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.” 15

Here, we get to know what this second coming looks like? Is this a new age, a new religion, a new belief, or a new God? The phrase *Spiritus Mundi* means a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality and spirit. For a psychoanalytic critic, this would mean the collection of repressed images that lie in the unconscious mind of an individual. This critic would say that these lines could be describing a vision in the dream (where the unconscious mind is active) of the poet. This creature (if it’s a creature) has jumped out of this storehouse of images, with the face of a man and body of a lion- something we haven’t witnessed in this world of law and order. The mere appearance of this creature signifies chaos and anarchy. Its gaze is blank, it has no remorse, and it is as pitiless as the sun in the desert- is it merely the vision of the poet or the new law? Is this “gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” and the 'moving of slow thighs' symbolic of a creature that belongs to Nietzsche’s Dionysian era? We have multiple interpretations and again an indeterminate situation to go for a singular solution. N.H. Fletcher in “Yeats, Eliot and Apocalyptic Poetry” has described the

poem's title as an example of William Blake's contraries because the poem describes the opposite of the coming of Jesus Christ to the world. There is a very ill-passionate description of the coming of the beast. In most people, these images of gyres and the birth of a beast encapsulate an emotion that is contrary to the peaceful outlook of the Christian version. This title at first inspires positivity and hope and then destroys those expectations as the readers now realize that it is not the coming of Christ that the poem prophesies (Fletcher 24).

By now we are aware that this coming is definitely not what we hoped for it to be.

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it 16

Reel shadow of the indignant desert birds: 17

The darkness drops again; but now I know 18

Here, Yeats is staying intact to the image of the desert. Is he trying to stay at the centre of something? His struggle to stay at the centre signifies his inability to hold on to the centre or meaning. It might mean that he is constantly trying to stay back in the previous world. The desert signifies blankness, thirst, and silence, but it also signifies the happiness that one feels while seeing another human being in a desert with no signs of life. Our senses are heightened in the desert. Our eyes are in search of noticing another life, our ears are in dire need of listening to the sound of anything. Coming back to the poem, the creature we are talking about is making soft and slow-motion while above him there are angry desert birds making noises and casting their shadows on the ground. Such horrific imagery isn't suggesting our readers be happy about this new birth. The phrase "the darkness drops again" could mean that the poet has returned from his vision to the real world. Or it could mean that the night has fallen in the desert and nothing is visible to the poet now. Or does it mean that he doesn't want to see it? This darkness may belong to nature or the creature.

The darkness drops again; but now I know 18

That twenty centuries of stony sleep 19

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, 20

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, 21

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? 22

Here we return to the eighteenth line. Yeats says that he now knows. It is the hour of discovery, of knowledge, of acceptance. But wasn't another discovery made in the ninth line when he said "Surely some revelation is at hand;" so is it one more discovery or the previous discovery has

become clearer? The phrase “stony sleep” may refer to the twenty centuries of Christianity or the sleep of the beast. It may also mean that when Christ was born the beast went to sleep and now when Christ is dead, he is awakened, or reborn because in the poem the beast is described as sleeping in the cradle. But wait! In lines 21 and 22 we learn that the beast or the creature we are talking about isn't born yet. This is the beauty of this poem, as soon as we reach a conclusion, a meaning, the next line comes and thrashes our beliefs and opinions. Since deconstruction shows that the text says the opposite (or: also says the opposite) of what it seems to originally say, or is conventionally thought to say, the conventional version of the text's meaning is the reference point that deconstruction needs both during and after it has done its work to exist (Ellis 263). This is where justice to our paper is done. The poem breaks itself from the “logos” or the focal point, the centre, the meaning. It doesn't stand true to a single interpretation and is endlessly open to be seen through various critical lenses.

And, finally, the closing lines of this poem bring goosebumps to our bodies. '...its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?' makes us think where is this Yeatsean Bethlehem? Is it the Biblical place? Is it the name of the 'desert' from where the 'rough beast' will come? Is it a labyrinth? In line 21, Yeats may not be too sure about the identity of this beast or he might be warning us not to take his words for granted. Yeats is dead now and constantly referring to what he wanted or intended would be to put censorship on his ability as a poet and the poem as a work of art. A scholar of Indian Mythology would see the poem as a reference to the words spoken by Krishna in Bhagwat Geeta.

Yada yada hi dharmasya, glanirbhavati bharata.

Abhyutthanam adharmasya, tadatmanam srijamyaham.

Paritrانayan sadhunam, vinashaya chadushkritam.

Dharmasansthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge.

These words would roughly translate to “Whenever there is the decay of righteousness, O Bharata, And there is the increasing of unrighteousness, then I Myself will come forth; For the protection of the good, for the annihilation of evil-doers, For the sake of establishing righteousness, I take birth from time to time.” Hence, no one knows from how many angles this poem could be analysed. With this, 'The Second Coming' as a poem is over, but this deconstructionist reading has left it open forever. We will not be able to close or restrict its reading now.

The validity of this reading will remain intact until it is replaced by another reading which will deconstruct it and take its place. The reading of the poem proves that Derrida's criticism can be fruitful. The text is a sort of discourse, and discourses continue to produce new meanings. So, nothing is better than deconstruction in analyzing literary texts.

Deconstruction can also help one understand the well-stitched hegemony into the fabric of society. There are institutions of law, religion, politics, justice etc. that work in a certain manner to maintain their dominance in society. So, deconstruction can provide a critique of society by breaking down various cultural practices as used by certain institutions to maintain their dominance. For example, popular culture films appeal to a large part of the public. Bollywood films like Prem Rog (1982) and Ram Teri Ganga Maili (1985) propagate the injustices met by a woman to even survive in the world. The protagonists of these films suffered physical and sexual violence by people of “high” social standards. A deconstructive analysis of these films would ask questions like- Why do these women not seek legal help when they are raped? How do these films play with the binary of decision/indecision? Why is “rape” only something that is done to women? Are these movies simply showing the mirror to society or showing the “naturalness” of physical violence? What factors are at work in these films that perpetrate the practice of sexual violence?

Finally, the significance of deconstruction lies in the possibilities it provides to criticism, critical and social theory, art and literature. Deconstruction fixes nothing, and this disorder, this chaos provides a literary critic with a ground which is like the Yeatsian desert- full of endless opportunities.

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