

Indeterminacy of Meaning in William Blake's "The Sick Rose"

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Abstract

This study attempts to make deconstructive reading of William Blake's poem "The Sick Rose". It also shows how the literary text can be interpreted from multiple perspectives deriving infinite meanings from the same text. The major motive of this research is to demonstrate potentiality of every text to be creatively misread generating various possible meanings. The paper also projects the fact that deconstruction is not destruction, rather it is reconstruction. It displays how the use of language in the text creates contradiction, un-decidability and multiplicity opening up possibility for new meanings. To justify the argument, deconstructive ideas of the philosophers Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes have been used. The four steps of deconstructive reading- a. Reading the Text b. Finding the Binaries c. Hierarchizing the Binaries and d. Creative Misreading-have been followed for the study of the poem "The Sick Rose". This research can be a contributing source for promotion of deconstructive reading of anything prevailing in the society and thereby decentering the center and re-centering the margin opening up possibilities for new perspectives, meanings and truths.

Keywords: deconstruction, binary, creative misreading, hierarchy, multiplicity, indeterminacy of meaning

Deconstructing any literary text focuses on demonstrating the fact that the text and language used within it create contradiction, confusion and multiple interpretations leading to un-decidability. It is nothing more than playing upon the words and deriving multiple meanings and thereby questioning and challenging the so-called single meaning and truth. With many other critics of deconstruction, Derrida himself comments on deconstruction. "What is deconstruction? Nothing, of course" (275). Deconstruction is nothing, he simply answers. But, there is a great meaning in that simple answer that it is everything, everywhere and every time. He further opines, "Deconstruction doesn't consist in a set of theorems, axioms, tools, rules, techniques, methods... there is no deconstruction, deconstruction has no specific object. . ." (qtd. in Gary 274). His saying itself is deconstructive. Gayatri C Spivak gives her opinion about Derrida's deconstruction in her 'Translator's Preface' to *Of Grammatology* (1976) : "to locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is

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always already inscribed. In gist, deconstruction is dismantling of hierarchy in order to reconstitute. “Deconstruction consists in putting this authority out of joint” (Derrida 25). Deconstruction acts to disjoint the joint of the so-called center. “Deconstruction is the enemy of the authorized/authoritarian text, the text that tries to tell it like it is, including this one” (Gary 275). It stands as a strong enemy of the authoritarian philosophy. “Deconstruction is the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts its traditional values and concepts” (Norris, qtd. in Gary 275).

Deconstruction is liberation from authoritarianism. “Deconstruction works to deregulate controlled dissemination and celebrate misreading. Therefore, the theory of deconstruction seeks to liberate the text” (Leitch 122). According to Derrida “The aim of deconstruction is to overthrow the hierarchy of dualism which is at the foundation of philosophy” (qtd. in Guney and Guney 224). “But undoing, decomposing and de-sedimenting of structures was not a negative operation” (Derrida 85–87).

Deconstruction is not destruction, in other words, but rather the dismantling of cultural, philosophical, institutional structures that starts from textual. Every system is a social construction, something that has been assembled, and construction entails exclusions: “Deconstruction seeks out those points or cracks in the system, where it disguises the fact of its incompleteness, its failure to cohere as a self-contained whole. In locating these points and applying a kind of authority to them, one is able to deconstruct the system” (Derrida 151). According to Hendricks, “Deconstruction distrusts all systems” (2). All the conventionally established systems are prone to subversion. Derrida insists that “Deconstruction has nothing to do with destruction” (Abrams 59).

Roland Barthes challenges the supremacy of the author upon the text claiming that the birth of the reader is death of the author as multiple readers interpret the same text differently. He decenters the mythical center of authorship created conventionally in his essay “The Death of the Author”. He asserts, “We must reverse the myth: the birth of the reader must be required by the death of the author” (1133). Reader is more decisive in meaning of the text than the author. “Writing is that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (1130-1131). For Barthes, people write to gain the identity of the author but with writing, they lose their identity. There is always a gap between what is said and what is understood. “This gap appears, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (1131). He further adds, “To assign an author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing” (1132). Authorship does not open the writing rather it closes the writing as it destroys the possible meanings. Barthes highlights on decentering philosophy focusing on the idea that the author dies when the reader is born- the center gets decentered.

In the same spotlight, Blake’s poem “The Sick Rose” has been creatively misread focusing on its invitation for multiple meanings. The use of the language and the

binaries in the poem creates contradiction, multiplicity, infinity and undecidability. As the rose can be proved as the ruling and dominant being dismantling the traditional belief that worm is superior to the rose, the poem is prone to have deconstructive reading.

The methodology for this study is mainly the method of textual analysis. The poem “The Sick Rose” by William Blake will be analyzed using Derridean and Barthean ideas of Deconstruction. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida propounds the idea of deconstruction and highlights on multiple meanings and centers through the terms undecidability, open-endedness, aporias, fluidity, difference, dangerous supplement etc. and challenging the notion of finality, singularity, closure, fixity, logo-centrism, phono-centrism, and so on. Deconstruction is not destruction rather it is reconstruction as his major motive is not only to destroy the centers but also to establish multiple centers which seems to be a democratic practice.

Another French philosopher Roland Barthes, through his essay “The Death of the Author” (1967), emphasizes on deconstructive ideas through his notion of the death of the author which presents the death of a single center and birth of the multiple centers. When the author completes the text and it goes to the readers, the reader is born and the author is dead as the text is interpreted and given meaning differently by the different readers. Therefore, the birth of the reader is the death of the author. It proves that there are multiple centers and meanings but not the single ones. In the same spotlight, Blake’s poem has been subversively analyzed.

Through deconstructive reading we do not destroy the meaning or the text rather we create new and different meanings from the text. It is a new style of reading the text challenging the traditional method of meaning-giving process. For this study, the researcher has followed a four-step technique of deconstructive reading of a text:

- Reading the Text
- Finding the Binaries
- Hierarchizing the Binaries
- Creative Misreading

Deconstructive reading of any literary text can be done through above-mentioned four-step process. The first step is reading of the text. Now, let’s look at the poem as the text.

a. Reading the Text “The Sick Rose”

O Rose thou art sick.
 The invisible worm,
 That flies in the night
 In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
 Of crimson joy:
 And his dark secret love
 Does thy life destroy.

The speaker of the poem addresses the Rose and informs her that she is sick. The cause of her sickness is a worm that is invisible and it howls in the storm at night. The worm comes to the crimson joy bed of the Rose in the dark night. The invisible worm infects her with his dark secret love and destroys her life. It means the Worm fulfils its sexual desire exploiting the Rose's beautiful body.

b. Finding the Binaries in “The Sick Rose”

The second step of deconstructive reading of a text is finding the binaries present in the text. It is necessary to find out the binaries first in order to list them in the hierarchical order. Now, let's find out the binaries in the poem:

rose	worm
sick	healthy
invisible	visible
fly	land
night	day
howling	silent
storm	peace
found	lost
bed	jungle
joy	sadness
crimson	colorless
dark	light
secret	open
love	hate
life	death
destroy	construct

c. Hierarchizing the binaries

The third step of making a deconstructive reading is hierarchizing the binaries found in the second step of reading. In this step, the binaries are organized in hierarchical order as per the traditional perspective and understanding. This task of hierarchization opens a path for dismantling the hierarchies and making creative misreading. Now, let's make hierarchical order of the binaries found in the poem "The Sick Rose":

worm	rose
healthy	sick
visible	invisible
fly	land
day	night
howling	silent
strom	peace
found	lost
bed	jungle
joy	sadness
crimson	colorless
light	dark
open	secret
love	hate
life	death
construct	destroy

d. Creative Misreading

The fourth and major step of deconstructive reading is creative misreading of the text in which the traditionally established hierarchical binary is subverted. "The function of deconstruction is to unravel the inconsistencies of language most outstandingly by highlighting the contradictions embedded in a text. In so doing, it demonstrates how a text destabilizes itself, thus undermining its fundamental premises" (Almasalmeh 98). The so-called concept of superiority and inferiority is challenged. Here, the center is decentered and the margin is brought to the center creating a different meaning and structured. It is not destruction of meaning rather it is reconstruction and restructuring the structure. The *Critical Difference* (1981), Barbara Johnson clarifies the term, "Deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction" (12). It means that deconstruction does not destroy the meaning of the text rather it recreates the multiple possible meanings. Now, let's make creative misreading of Blake's poem "The Sick Rose".

Deconstruction asserts on multiple meanings, truths and centers.

“Deconstruction is the enemy of the authorized/authoritarian text, the text that tries to tell it like it is, including this one” (Gary 275). In this regard, M.A.R. Habib depicts, “Proponents of deconstruction often point out that it is not amenable to any static definition or systematization because the meaning of the terms it employs is always shifting and fluid, taking its color from the localized contexts and texts with which it engages” (605). The meaning often changing according to contexts- are usually related to the extended significance that Derrida accords to writing. Such terms include “trace, supplement, text, presence, absence and play” (652). In the same limelight, the poem prospects multiple interpretations. If we look at it from the Marxist angle, the worm is a capitalist and the rose is a proletariat where the former exploits the latter. In the same way, postcolonial reading sees the worm as the colonizer and the rose as the colonized in which the colonizer is superior and the colonized is inferiorized. Similarly, if we see the poem from the psychoanalytical line, the worm is a sex ridden phantom which uses the sexual energy with the rose. The worm is completely guided by id (pleasure principle) beyond the ego (reality principle) and superego (morality principle). Moreover, from the feminist perspective, the worm as a male sexually abuses the rose, the female. Furthermore, the poem can have so many other meanings if it is looked at from structuralist, culturalist, new critical, formalist and new historicist perspectives. John Story on Derrida writes, “Meaning is always deferred, never fully present, always both absent and present” (126).

Deconstruction glorifies and celebrates logical and creative misreading of any text. “Deconstruction works to deregulate controlled dissemination and celebrate misreading. Therefore, the theory of deconstruction seeks to liberate the text” (Leitch 122). According to Derrida, “the aim of deconstruction is to overthrow the hierarchy of dualism which is at the foundation of philosophy” (qtd. in Guney and Guney 224). The line “O Rose thou art sick” (1) has double meanings in which the rose can be both mentally and physically sick, and also psychologically and sexually sick. J. Hillis Miller points out, “Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently-solid ground is no rock, but thin air” (34). If we make creative misreading, we can say that the rose is sick with sexual desire and satiates her thirst with the worm. In addition, the worm is invisible and comes to the rose at night time with the howling storm. “The invisible worm” (2), / “That flies in the night” (3) / “In the howling storm” (4) show that the worm is not strong as per the traditional belief. It does not dare to come to the rose in the day time visibly. It has to wait for the chance to come to the rose. From this fact, we can deduce that the worm is weaker than the rose. Furthermore, it is not the worm which is using the rose rather it is the rose which is using the worm. The rose is using it to satisfy her sexual desire that has caused her sick. It also subverts the notion that males are more active and females are more passive in sexual activity. Here, the rose is showing her more active sexual role than the worm. Moreover, the worm is just like a

howling creature, that is, the weak creature in front of the rose. Jonathan Culler's idea is applicable here. He claims, "To deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies" (86). Traditionally, everything belongs to the male where the female holds nothing as she is taken as the property of the male. But the poem destabilizes such dogmatic belief claiming that the female is the owner not the male. "Deconstruction distrusts all systems" (Hendricks 2). In the same line, the poem acclaims:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy. (5-8)

The poem subverts the notion of male superiority and female inferiority. Here, the bed belongs to the female not to the male. The female's bed is full of crimson joy where she lives. But the worm lacks it and lives in the jungle. The worm has come to live with the rose in her bed. It is like the refugee in the rose's house. Then how can the worm be superior and rose inferior? Similarly, the patriarchal society stereotypes that females have dark aspects and are unbelievable which destroys the life of the males. But in the poem, the worm, not the rose, has dark, negative desire and thought which can destroy the life of females. On the other hand, it is not the fact that the life of the rose is destroyed by the dark secret love of the worm rather her sexual fire inside her has been watered. It means her sexual desire is fulfilled. When the worm comes to her own bed and has high sexual desire, she gets an opportunity just like getting god while searching a holy stone. Though the worm could be dangerous for her, she has used him in her favour. In this way, we can subvert the meaning of the poem by "taking it from other side" (Zizek 34) or making creative misreading. It is similar to Derrida's insistence that "Deconstruction has nothing to do with destruction" (Abrams 59).

To conclude, deconstructive reading is nothing more than displaying the contradiction, multiplicity and un-decidability prevailing within the text due to the language used in the text. In this reading, all the logo-centric aspects are dismantled creating spaces for the issues and categories forcefully thrown into displacement. Though the Rose is taken as inferior traditionally, deconstructively, the worm is inferior and the Rose is superior. It is not the worm that is using the Rose rather it is the Rose that is using the Worm to satisfy her sexual desire. The reading concludes with the proofs and findings that Blake's poem "The Sick Rose" is potential of contradictions, multiplicities and infinities which challenges all the hierarchical binaries, fixities, closures, single truths, centers and meanings giving central space to the marginalized and inferiorized.

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