



## British Values and the Deconstruction of Thomas Hardy's Short Story "Netty Sargent's Copyhold"

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**Abstract** *The present study deals with the analysis of Thomas Hardy's short story "Netty Sargent's Copyhold". To have a deconstructive analysis of the short story, Barry's (2002) three levels of analysis, i.e., verbal, textual and linguistic, have been used. It was found that the story has words with contradictory and confusing meaning entrenched in the British values. Also, the story has a diversion in ideas and grammar. However, no such examples of the third level were found in the story. In short, the story has words, grammar, and other ideas which give it a loose structure when reading from the perspective of deconstruction, which lead the researchers to conclude that the work is a fine specimen of the spirit of the Victorian age.*

**Key Words:** Poststructuralism, deconstruction, Barry's three-level/stages, Netty Sargent's Copyhold.

### Introduction

The present study deals with the deconstructive analysis of Thomas Hardy's short story *Netty Sargent's Copyhold*. This is a story about Netty Sargent, her uncle Sargent and her lover Jasper Cliff. Netty Sargent was entrapped by the love of Jasper, who was considered a selfish being but still, she tried to get him at every cost. Jasper tried to marry her in order to get her uncle's house. Her uncle tried to postpone the transfer of the house till the end when he dies but it was Netty who got it through her treachery. Sargent dies and the documents could not be signed legally but Netty made it by getting signature on the document through her tricks and thus, she succeeds in getting Jasper for whom she had deceived the dead body of her uncle. Later on, Jasper turns against her and the story ends with a lesson for Netty.

In order to analyze the story, Barry's (2002) three levels, i.e., verbal, textual and linguistic, have been used. Verbal is that level which deals with the contradictions or confusions in the ideas. The second level is called Textual. At this level, breaks or shifts in terms of continuity of the narrative or text are observed. These diversions can be in idea, time, point of view, word choice or grammatical choices. The third level that Barry suggests is linguistic. It is the level where the author of the work is not sure of the power of the language he/she is using but it makes a difference.

Deconstruction is a form of literary criticism that looks into secrets, contradictions or ironies in the intra-textual orientation of lexical comprehensibility. Its basic aim is to interrelate two ways to reach hermeneutics; unraveling the established and valid or authentic and then locating ways to disorganize and destabilize the already consolidated meaning to pave a way for the real soul of deconstruction practice. Derrida, the chief exponent of this argument, believes that the flexibility of meaning is a reward of this argument, and yoked meaning is not a good way to understand things in totality; there is, he contends, an unending array where meanings of meanings emanate until it reaches a question of infinity. This infinity is a reality, he argues. Deconstruction began as a reaction to structuralism where the interpretation of work was perceived as looking into signs and images. In this

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way, the ultimate meaning was sought. Deconstruction, on the other hand, believes that fix and absolute meaning is impossible. What they believe is that there are different layers of interpretation.

Derrida himself falls on the grounds of uncertainty when he evades attaching fixed definitions to the phrases/lexemes he argues or offers for reasoning. Readings in deconstruction demonstrate how cultural contexts in Western texts would furnish a good approach to understand a text rather than rendering a text comprehensible when it stands in isolation. The other argument which may be connected here is the dispute in intra-textual materials which always surge until it is inspected through the lens of floating connections of meanings and contextual frameworks. A text when subjected to deconstruction will engender multifaceted layers of meanings, each encountering and favoring the other at the same time; contentions and contradiction will undulate after the text arrives at an inconclusive ground. Numerous results will come into force such as certain areas and meanings which have been discarded or stood derelict when a juxtaposition is made between the two readings in vogue: a traditional one and the recent deconstruction (Encyclopedia, 2004).

The main ideology behind deconstructionism is its penetration into the context where contradicting issues/ideas occur and then it readjusts the connection between them. The fascinating point for the deconstructionists' thought is meaning in discrepancy to its counterpart meaning. Jonathan Culler (1982) in his book, *On Deconstruction*, comes forward with numerous definitions where he asserts that deconstructing any issue or discourse entails the proposition that it actually subverts the very foundation of the philosophy it propagates or in other terms, it rather nullifies the very argument of binary opposites it itself stands for. Structuralism clothed with a theoretical framework first received its acknowledgment in literary circles in 1960s and the scholars in these literary institutions made a proliferating number of critiques (Kano, 2002). The orientation of structuralism is linked with the poorly unripe stage of criticism; structuralism stood by that time on a very haggard footing as it was found wanting for correction and support. The lack of scientific discipline made structuralism look ill-disciplined and unattractive. It was heavily witnessed that a little effort based on empirical or objective arguments would have helped to bring it under codified management of confinement of form. It was purely based on subjective and personal thought which exacerbated the notion of affirmation and authenticity, though certain objective laws had already been vogue. Some genres, modals, aspects, traditional and superstitious beliefs helped dissect issues in works for concepts in structuralism (Eagleton, 1999). The two contrasting points on which structuralism and deconstructionism stand divided is the belief that structuralism sees the world in a systemic and orderly mode, while deconstructionism counter argues and contends that there is not true or valid order but there is anomaly and everything is in perpetual oscillation.

Structuralism as a concept relates all aspects of observation to some aspect of language (Eagleton 1999). Ferdinand de Saussure in his book *Course in General Linguistics* (1921) relates the foundational aspects of observations to the structure of language. A structuralist perspective considers phenomenal observations to the organizations and systems of the language and finds linguistic forms as the best window to such view. The authors, therefore, claim that structuralism offers a systematic approach to the understanding of the world we live in. It makes one understand the culture, thoughts and ideas that underlie the reality. Strauss (1958) further elaborated Saussure's approach to language and applied it in understanding of the social realities through elaborating the function of mythology. They are for Strauss, just a linguistic representation of social reality that can be easily analyzed as "mythemes"- a unit of language. Their linguistic signification becomes obvious only in a form allowed by the concept of correctness in that language. The morphological and syntactic forms obviate this concept of correctness. The grammar of a language allows the myths to become meaningful. The generality of philosophers deems language as universally signaling or suggesting a meaning or directly hinting at something. Actually, the existence of reality is corroborated by a signifier who talks about or hints at a signified. Derrida (1978) goes against the notion that 'when language is subjected to a calculated system, it harbors an established center which in other words is a reality, he (Derrida) deconstructs this idea in his popular essay named "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." "Deconstruction is destruction and desedimentation of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos" (Derrida, 1997, p. 10). It is an attempt to deconstruct this center in "logos". However, this does not mean to destroy as Derrida writes, "Rather than destroying, it was also necessary to understand how a whole was constituted and reconstruct it to the end" (Derrida, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, deconstruction is an attempt to reconstruct and "to dismantle" logocentrism or phonocentrism. He

holds the opinion that centered structure is basically the idea of a play upon words the center of which holds no grounds but revolves around itself which eventually ends up in attaching no significance. It is the center which has affixation and chiefly confines the play of the sign but without the same center it may lose its immunity against decentralism. Saying it the other way around, those who oppose Derrida contend that structure has an attached center which is yoked and the motion of which falls outside the domain of language. Derrida considers that permanence in the understanding of language is not possible. He attributes to lack fixation to the ever-changing and elastic nature of the form and contents in language. Languages have no permanent meaning, he says. This plasticity allows language to become, "no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces" (Derrida, 1979). Berry adds, "The verbal sign, in its view, is constantly floating free of the concept it is supposed to designate. Thus, the post-structuralists way of speaking about language involves rather obsessive imagery based on liquids- signs float free of what they designate, meaning is fluid" (2002). The questioning and subversion are not only thematic or conceptual only but in linguistic entries and elements which ultimately bases to establish themes and concepts of the discourse.

The deconstructionist theory revolves around and is augmented by a few fundamental and integral phrases or technical terms such as logocentrism, signifiers that are transcendental in nature and difference. Derrida recommends a reversal practice that opposing terms or words must be swapped and the word/phrase that comes last between two should be honored and focused. However, Derrida does not recommend this substitution in a straightforward manner as it has a chronologically defined philosophical history and moving such place where it will lose its virtue of discernment and significance, such a move will be quite perverted and unwise. The main purpose of deconstructionists is to make efforts to retain the ulterior integrity of the reverted or substituted phrases when transcending them beyond its actuality.

### **Analysis of Text**

As said earlier, the short story taken for analysis is about Netty Sargent and her husband Jasper Cliff, the way they succeeded in their plan of marriage and finally, the ill fortune of Netty Sargent when she is disliked by her husband. The analysis has been carried out according to the three levels proposed by Barry for deconstructive analysis. In the following section, the verbal, textual and linguistic levels have been discussed. However, the third level, i.e., linguistics, was not found in the story.

To start off, while talking about the love affair of Jasper and Netty, it is said in the very beginning of the story, "...he so greatly took her fancy that 'twas Jasper or nobody for her. He was a selfish customer". Here, Jasper Cliff is named as a selfish customer. Jasper is selfish because he wants to use Netty's uncle's property. If Jasper is selfish for the want of property, there is another kind of selfishness where somebody wants to use someone's beauty and what we think is that Netty is also selfish in this regard. She wants to use Jasper Cliff for whom she has a soft corner and is attracted to him. So, both are selfish fellows. This mutual selfishness bonds them together and catapult them into the main action of the plot where piles of selfishness is unravelled as they engage in the existential struggle for survival and self fulfilment.

These two selfish fellows want to get success in their respective purposes but are troubled when Netty's uncle refuses to transfer his house to Netty. It is said that "week after week, he put off calling at the squire's agent's office, saying to himself: 'I shall have more time next market day than I have now'." It does not necessarily mean that the old fellow wanted to annoy Jasper Cliff but the other interpretation is that the old fellow himself was a lazy person who procrastinated everything and this is one of the examples. The other interpretation is that Netty's uncle did not go to the squire's agent to transfer the house to his niece, not necessarily that he wanted to annoy Jasper Cliff but also to annoy his niece as his brother i.e. Netty's father was cruel to him who did not allow him to marry. That is why he is childless. Now, Netty's uncle wants to revenge his brother by not allowing his daughter to marry Jasper who is marrying her on the condition of transferring her to Mr. Sargent's house. The complexity of interpretation arises here from the ambivalence and undecidedness in the action and words of the characters. The characters in the undecided state do not commit to any particular pathway lest their chances of success may decrease or possibility of their failure may increase. The characters in true Derridean spirit amble freely in the silver lining of semantics and interpretation. However, this silver line does not yield to any certainty

in any stretch of imagination. The bane or the beauty of the perception of these characters is their belief to be versatile and ready to make the best of any offered opportunity. While they do not venture into committing to a particular line of action, they are blessed; however, their very act of remaining on the silver line make them a prey of uncertainty and setbacks.

It is further said in the story that "...Jasper could bear it no longer; he produced the money himself, and handed it to Netty, ...If you two let the house and ground slip out of your possession, I won't marry you!." Early in the story, it is mentioned that Jasper is a selfish fellow who wants to marry Netty for her wealth and in this extract, it is said that he is so mean that he has even arranged money for its transfer to Netty. But this might not be the case. One interpretation might be that he is caring for the family so much that he himself makes arrangement for it and at last arranges the fee for the process. And when he hands over the money to Netty, he asks her that if she did not succeed in compelling her uncle in transferring the house to her, he would not marry her. It is not because he is selfish, rather wants the family to be happy. In case the house does not come in the possession of Netty, she will lead a miserable life and that is why he urges her to urge her uncle. He challenges her not for the purpose to hurt her but only to stir up the process so that she lives a happy life which otherwise might not be possible. But the act of pushing her into happiness is so ambivalent that neither of them make anything out of it. Both suspect each other of subversion and exploitation and at the same time support each other to come out of the perceived and actual miseries they face or they might face in future. The future here mixes up with the present and in this way creates a mystic ground of illusions and confusion for them. While both want to support each other, the also oppose each other to make sure the support they intend for each other materializes. The conflict of intention, translates in to action in an amorphous and unfinished form, which leaves them confused and flabbergasted when things do not happen as the wish. The intricate interplay of whims and uncertainty in the play simulates the real world where so many things happen all the time that a straight line cannot be established between the cause and its effect. Rather, in the real world, the events' causality gets more bizarre as the myriad of intuitions, intentions, hesitations, imperfections come into play and make the eventuality unpredictable and full of surprises even for the connoisseur. The actions lead to unpredictable reactions and the semantic certainty of words associated with their description is lost in the real world. The same is approximation of the characters' ingenuity and plans that do not proceed as they wish and turn up a score of novel surprises for them to handle and stumble into further absurdities and miscalculations.

In the beginning, it is said that Jasper was a selfish man but another secret is not disclosed, which is related to Netty's uncle. It is said in the story that "the agent promised to call on old Sargent for this purpose at five o'clock, and doing this, she heard a slight cry from her uncle, and she saw that he had fallen forward in his chair. She went and lifted him, but he was unconscious, and he remained so." It is obvious from this that it was not Jasper who was selfish but the old Sargent himself. He was so selfish that till the end of his life he kept the house with himself and did not hand it over to his only relative, Netty. Furthermore, Netty is also selfish as she gets the documents signed through her trickery from the dead man. As the events unfold, it becomes increasingly clear/unclear that who is selfish and who is altruistic. The line between altruism and selfishness simply vanishes and leaves a haze of shimmering chimera where each actions can be altruistic or selfish simultaneously. The aporia of words verges on the actions as their illusionary references. Promise as a case in the quote deconstructs into commission from people who do not know what they are actually committing, perhaps their hopes, desires, beliefs, selfishness, sincerity make a ratatouille, a hotchpotch of conflicting implicatures which effectively neutralize each other and thus renders any promise meaningless in effect. The claim to certainty in the maze of confusion is a self-deception that the lead characters of the play are confronted with and the more they emphasize certainty the deeper they go down the rabbit hole of wondrous surprises and reversal, which the reader is partially introduced through a selection of glimpses in to mirror house of wonders in the story.

Near the end of the story, Netty is beaten by her husband Jasper. This practice is continued until the end. In the story, it is shown that Jasper is beating her because he has benefited from Netty's uncle's property and now when he is done, he does not love Netty anymore. It is said that "every good or bad deed has its just reward, they say. Fate punished Netty for her clever trick to gain Jasper." This does not mean that Jasper is selfish. Though he advised Netty to get the documents signed by her uncle but did not tell her to cheat him as she did. Now, Jasper is beating her not because he has gotten all the things that he needed but because of the fact that she has

cheated the squire's agent as well as her uncle. Jasper now fears that she might cheat him and that is why he is beating her. The husband's dissociation from the wrong side of gaining the property and association with conceived right to the property and protection of the very family he is bent on destroying is reciprocated by the wife's schemes to lay a trap for the husband and uncle to fall into. Actions of wife and husband converge on making a family they soon start to destroy is aligned with lovers' commitment to find their love and lose the lover. Each action is therefore attributable to an ever expanding repertoire of intentions and motives that disagree and conflict. The conflict also approximates the conflicting role each character intentionally or under duress plays or aspires to play. A lover stands in contrast to spouse, a schemer contrasts with well-wisher. A patriarch contrasts with selfish old man. The actions of each character feeds into various roles they play and the words that paint these actions correlate with facts of the real world the reader believes to live in. The artistic blending of the inconsistencies and contrasts makes the story a subterfuge of desires.

In the end, she really cheats Jasper. There is a situational shift. First, she loves Jasper but when the squire dies and his son takes his position, she really falls in his love. It is said "when the old squire was dead, and his son took his place, her confession began to be whispered around. But Netty was a pretty young woman, and the squire's son was an attractive young man, and more broad-minded than his father, and he never took any action against her." Why the squire's son did not take any action against her? It is because both Netty and the squire's son fell in love with each other. Their affair started and in this way, Netty betrayed the Jasper. It was Netty as well as her uncle who were selfish, not Jasper was blamed to be selfish. The text "Suppose, sir that you see him sign, and he doesn't see you looking at him?" has a grammatical flaw. Instead of using "he doesn't, the author has used "he doesn't". This shows that at textual level too, the story has somehow a weak structure.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we have analyzed the story *Netty Sargent's Copyhold* while using the framework of deconstruction. Many flaws were observed in the story which was canceled by bringing the marginalized to the center. Here, Jasper who was considered as a selfish fellow and thus was marginalized was brought to the center by proving him as a good fellow. The hierarchy is reversed and the plot is broken. In this way, a deconstructive analysis of the story has been done. The deconstruction accompany a series of traps for the reader and characters where they fall and are faced with amazed contrasts of interpretation of the realities and illusions they find themselves trapped in. Aporia of the flickering actions, thoughts and desires hinge on the unresolvable ambiguity in the words that are meant to make them available to the reader. In the closure, suffice it say, the story is the rabbit hole of Alice in the Wonderland, the deeper one wanders, the greater mysteries and wonders one faces.

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