

Binary Opposition in Robert Frost's Poetry

A Structuralist Reading Strategy

المتناقضات الثنائية في شعر روبرت فروست دراسة بنيوية

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الملخص

يعتبر نشوء المدرسة البنيوية في النصف الثاني من القرن العشرين عاملا مهما ومؤثرا في الدراسات الادبية، الامر الذي ادى الى تطور العديد من الاساليب التحليلية المنهجية. يعد اسلوب المتناقضات الثنائية من اهم وابرز تلك الاساليب والذي يعتمد في تحليله على الاختلافات او التناقضات التي يمكن ايجادها في ظاهرة ادبية او اجتماعية او غيرها، فضلا عن اهتمامه بطريقة تاويل الافكار. في هذه الدراسة تم استخدام اسلوب المتناقضات لتوضيح الاسباب التي تقف وراء الثيمات المتناقضة في شعر روبرت فروست، تحديدا في قصيدة (ترميم الجدار) وقصيدة (الاماكن المهجورة) حيث تعرض كل قصيدة ثيمة مختلفة عن الاخرى.

Abstract

The emergence of literary structuralism during the second half of the twentieth century was so influential, as far as literary studies are concerned. It leads to the development of various analytical, systematic approaches; the most important of these approaches is the thematic binary opposition that can be seen as a system of differences between opposing ideas that feed each other in a cultural framework. Binary opposition is concerned with the way that meaning is interpreted. In this study, the thematic binary opposition is used to explain why some of the themes of Robert Frost (1874-1963) are described as being dualistic. To do so, the study discusses two poems related to two different periods and volumes. These poems are "Mending Wall," and "Desert Places." Each one has its own theme that represents an opposite to the theme of the other poem. The juxtaposition of these two antonymous themes might be helpful in explaining the contradictions in the literary life of the poet.

Key words: Binary opposition/ structuralism/ Isolation/ Communication

كلمات البحث: المتناقضات الثنائية/ المدرسة البنيوية/ العزلة/ تبادل الاراء.

I: Binary Opposition: The Genesis:

First and foremost, it is well known that the human brain has the extraordinary nerve to put in plain words a huge numbers of related antonyms such as cold and hot, right and wrong, good and bad, and so on and so forth. To achieve this, it relies heavily upon the binary system that dominates its mental activities. In fact, the human brain's use of this objective system is neither newly discovered nor is bound to the modern man in particular; its genesis can be traced back to the Greek intellectuality because, "[a]ccording to Derrida, one of the most 'violent hierarchies' derived from Platonic and Aristotelian thought is speech/ writing, with speech being privileged. Consequently, speech is awarded presence, and writing is equated with absence."¹

At the dawn of the 20th c., the concept of binary system was utilized by the Swiss philologist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in his quest to revolutionize the nineteenth and early twentieth century philologists' diachronic approach that "traced language change throughout long expanses of time, discovering ... how a particular phenomenon, such as a word or sound, in one language had changed etymologically or phonologically...."² In fact, Saussure's contribution cannot be denied as he creates a totally new direction for the study of language. He subordinates the diachronic approach to the synchronic (ahistorical) approach that pays little attention to the act of following language changes over a long period of time. Actually, he realizes that any language consists of a system of signs that "are in first instance arbitrary---after which they have become conventions--- and have *not* taken their specific form because of what they mean, but to be *different from other signs*"³ [italics mine]. In fact, the relationship between the sign and what it refers to is arbitrary and it is defined by the culture in which it is used. That is why the name (sign) of an object in one language is different in other languages. Realizing that the form of a sign is *not* determined by its relationship with what it refers to, Saussure comes to the fact that the form of a linguistic sign (word) is conditioned by the principle of differentiation (Binary System). So, it becomes obvious that the binary system is an objective way that can be used to give meaning to the language units, each one is defined by its opposite. In other words, the term is widely used to highlight the interrelationship between two related linguistic units that are opposite in their denotation. In fact, the very difference that occurs between them is very helpful in highlighting their meaning. Accordingly, the term,

binary opposition, becomes one of the most substantial concepts of structuralism that is initiated by the aforementioned Swiss Scholar. In fact, he applies this concept on the linguistic field for the sake of getting better understanding of how language works.

Furthermore, the French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss (1908 – 2009), was highly influenced by the Saussurian concept about language as being a system of signs that are dominated by differences. The incarnation of this influence can be seen in his establishment of what is called Anthropological Structuralism that reached its highest point of development in the later 1940s. His contribution can be seen in applying the Saussurian concept to the study of human cultures. In this respect, Hans Bertens proclaims the fact that “Levi-Strauss saw the possibilities of Saussure’s notion that meaning is ultimately the product of difference for the study of discrete cultural phenomena.”⁴ In fact, Strauss believes that the concept of binary opposition is used by our ancestors to get familiar with the world they dwelt in. Those people could understand their world by exploiting “[a]very basic mental operation [that] consists in the creation of opposites: some things are edible, others are not; some creatures are dangerous, others are not.”⁵ These opposites are closely related to each other for one of them expresses either the presence or the absence of one and the same thing. As a result, they start classifying the world into two opposed categories: light/dark, human-made/ natural, man/ woman, good/ evil, and so on. Thus, it becomes rather obvious that the employment of this concept leads Strauss to find a suitable answer to a fundamental question that how the pre-historic people get familiar with the natural world where they were living by understanding the way the human mind is interacted with the natural world.

In addition, Ronald Barth (1915–1980) is another French anthropologist that followed the example of Strauss in using the Saussurian concept of binary opposition to explain cultural phenomena. He claims that human actions express meanings that exist only because of the system of difference that can be noticed in the cultural context. Besides, he was interested in fashion because of its semiotic implication. For example, the teacher’s jacket may represent authority; whereas the student’s T-shirt may well stand for lack of power. Actually, the meaning of those types of clothes is highly conditioned by the difference they show within the institutional context. This is what Saussure calls Semiology.⁶

Moreover, Anthropological Structuralism has its own influence on the literary field; it paved the way for the emergence of the *Literary Structuralism* in 1960. Its theorist, Levi-Strauss, and as a result of his study of myths related to various cultures, “proposed a search for the underlying structure of all narratives, not only novels, stories, and other forms of fiction, but also reportage, biography and autobiography, travel literature, and so on.”⁷ Following the example of Strauss and in a thoughtful response to those critics who claim that structuralism is unqualified to interpret a literary text, the British and the American Structuralists “have developed analytical, systematic approaches to literary texts that avoid traditional categories like plot, character, setting, theme, tone, and the like.”⁸ One of these approaches is the thematic binary opposition which is considered an important reading strategy that leads to the thoughtful interpretation of the literary text.

Actually, literary critics often use binaries to determine the way through which the text's world is structured and to decipher the writer's way through which ideas are shaped in a literary text. Likewise, the reader uses binaries to classify the thematic elements of the text. In fact, the recognition of binary opposition in a text helps the reader easily figure out the ideas that the writer is trying to convey. It also allows the deep understanding of the literary text.

II: Binaries in Frost the Man and the Poet:

All in all, the life and literary productions of Robert Frost were widely dominated by a lot of contradictions or binaries. On the personal level, Frost was born in San Francisco, California. However, he is most often described as a New England poet, in spite of the fact that he has no roots in New England that consists of only six states, namely [Maine](#), [New Hampshire](#), [Vermont](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Rhode Island](#), and [Connecticut](#). So, he is not a New England poet. He might be given this attribution because of his father's birthplace; the latter was a native of New England. Moreover, the very name of the poet, Robert, can be seen as another noticeable example of binary opposition. The mother intended to name her son Robert because she was fascinated by the Scottish poet, Robert Burns (1759 -1796). However, the father, William, being descended from puritanic, revolutionary ancestors and as a result of his admiration for southern general Robert E. Lee, wants to name his son after that revolutionary celebrity. It seems that the parent participated in creating this disagreement right from the very beginning of the poet's life.⁹ On the academic level, the poet also suffered from a contradiction. He disliked study at school and refused, till the age of twelve, to read any book related to an academic discipline. However, he always

makes use of the teaching vocation to earn living as he was, for example, teaching psychology course for one year at the New Hampshire State Normal School in Plymouth. Lawrance Thompson states that “in spite of his asserted distaste for all things academic, he [Frost] became one of the first American poets to make arrangements with various institutions to live on campus as poet-in-residence, for a few months or years.”¹⁰ As far as the political tendency of the poet is concerned, the poet is well-known for his political protest. He dramatized an outspoken dissatisfaction with the then American policy, and was far away from the realm of politicians and their mundane tendencies. Nevertheless, he never hesitated to accept an “invitation to participate in the inauguration ceremonies of President-elect John F. Kennedy. On that occasion, he read his poem entitled ‘The Gift Outright.’”¹¹

Consequently, the contradictions that manifest themselves clearly in the poet’s personal, academic, and political life have their own reverberations in the productions of his literary life. One of the most noticeable kind of the thematic binary opposition in the poetry of Frost is *communication/ isolation*. This is going to be clarified by discussing two selected poems, namely “Mending Wall,” and “Desert Places.”

III: “Mending Wall”

The first poem to be discussed here is “Mending Wall” which was published in *North of Boston* (1914). It is one of the most remarkable literary productions the poet produced at the dawn of his poetic talent. It is a dramatic lyric that is presented in the form of monologue as it presents two characters: the narrator and his neighbor. Many critics assume the fact that the poet identifies himself with the narrator¹² to present a clear representation of his own social views. The other character is a person whose house is too close to the poet’s. This man does not participate in the narrative discourse of the poem, and remains silent till the very end of the poem. Accordingly, the narration of the poem is mainly uttered by the presumed persona of the poet.

Generally speaking, the poet makes use of easy and descriptive words to portray a comprehensible picture about the social environment in which he was living. The poem begins by depicting the poet as being driven by an irresistible, enthusiastic motive to *communicate* with his society, represented by his New Englander neighbor. The poet is dominated by a gregarious

tendency to exchange a few words that might be culminated in the establishment of a solid relationship between them. Yet, the problem of the narrator is the existence of a wall that separates him from his neighbor: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." (CP, 33, L: 1).¹³ This line clearly reflects the poet's aspiration to get assimilated within his society. He wants to live in a society whose members are integrated with each other. Unfortunately, the wall represents an obstacle in the poet's social quest of communication. So, he refuses it badly. On the other hand, the social attitude of the neighbor is totally different from that of the poet. He refuses any kind of interaction with the poet. He wants to lead an isolated life far away from any kind of social activities since he enjoys a deep-seated faith in the function of a wall and fence in his life:

He only says, '*Good fences make good neighbors.*'

(CP: 33, L: 28) [Italics mine].

Yet, the poet rejects all kinds of walls and fences, and wants to rear down the artificial barriers created by human beings. For him, these barriers are responsible for all the social diseases penetrating in the body of the American society. Moreover, the poet asserts that they are equal, as far as humanity is concerned. They share the selfsame individuality:

There where it is we do not need the
wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell
him.

(CP, 33, L: 23-27)

In addition to the equality notion presented in the aforementioned lines, 'He is all pine and I am apple orchard,' the poet tries to convince the neighbor that the act of erasing the artificial walls and fences will not cause a violation to the red lines between them. In other words, he will treat him with the degree of respect he deserves and expects to keep his humanity. But, the neighbor is a hard-headed person who insists on following the example of his ancestors in creating walls: "He will not go behind his father's saying." (CP, 34, L: 44) It is quite clear that the neighbor is dominated by "the darkness of a confining tradition,"¹⁴ represented by 'his father saying.' However, the

poet tries to metamorphose this highly reactionary notion to free him, and the American society in return, from the shackles of disintegration:

.....I
wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they [fences] make good neighbors? Isn't
it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.

(CP, 34, L: 29-35)

Here, the poet is upset and disappointed with the American social system. He wants to rationalize his refusal for these barriers by saying that they should not be used to separate people because they are used to keep and separate animals, 'cows.' So, they are not suitable to separate human beings at all. The poem ends by presenting its narrator in a rather dissatisfied state of mind. He gets upset because he does not succeed in his social project, namely establishing healthy and solid relationship far away from the physical and spiritual barriers and fences that hindered the presence of an integrated society.

Generally speaking, it seems that the wall discussed in the context of the poem is *not* an ordinary, tangible one that separates one person's property from others. It has a clear symbolic implication as it seems to stand for the spiritual and social barriers that are responsible for deepening the sense of segregation within the American society. Concerning the symbolic dimension of the wall in this poem, Christopher Beach claims that "[t]he physical wall in the poem is a wall of the psyche, a barrier to human understanding, connection, and *communication*"¹⁵ [italics mine].

IV: "Desert Places"

"Desert Places," that appeared in *A Further Range* (1936), presents a totally different point of view of the poet. It represents the bitter *isolation* the poet suffered in his life. The gloomy, melancholic tone of the poem can be detected right from the very outset for its title clearly reflects this idea. That is why Hyatt H. Waggoner, in his book entitled *American Poets: From*

the Puritans to the Present, describes this poem as one of the dark lyrics written by Frost.¹⁶

Here, the poet who is steady in his steps is passing by a deserted place in a dark, snowy night. In fact, this field is empty for two main reasons: darkness represented by the night and coldness represented by the snow. The land is totally covered with snow so that no one can be seen. Both the night and the snow are 'falling fast:'

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in
snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

(CP, 296, L: 1-4)

Actually, this fastness creates a rather gloomy and horrible image in the mind of the poet. With a little exception, to be objective, the combination of these two effective factors (night and snow) resulted in the emptiness of any place, even the one that is occupied by hundreds. This is because the act of seeking protection from the darkness of the night and the coldness of winter is something quite natural and is spontaneous for the majority of living beings, even animals: "All animals are smothered in their lairs." (CP: 296, L: 6) The whole field is covered with snow except 'few weeds and stubble' that can be seen here and there around the field. They are, metaphorically speaking, wearing white by the snow. Moreover, it seems that the poet identifies himself with these plants because they are alone too. So, the poet shares with them the selfsame loneliness:

I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me
unawares.
And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less
-
A blanker whiteness of benighted
snow
With no expression, nothing to
express. (CP, 296, L: 7-12)

These lines reflect the fact that the poet's loneliness is intensified by the emptiness of the scene because he could not find anyone to communicate with. This emptiness creates a quite ghastly picture in his mind. He becomes absolutely absent-minded by that horrible view so that he cannot identify the limits of loneliness inside him as it is immeasurable. This sense of loneliness makes the poet, metaphorically speaking, bleed from the deepest level of his heart because it seems that he is living death in life. In addition, the severe solitude is sustained by the description of the thickness of the snow. In the first stanza, the snow is described as being 'smooth,' whereas in this stanza, it is described as 'A blanker whiteness of benighted snow.' This reflects clearly the increasing falling down of snow and, in return, the transformation in its thickness from a simple 'smooth' snow to 'benighted' one. This leads to the disappearance of any physical expression in the view the poet is observing. As a result, his suffering is naturally increased 'loneliness will be more lonely.' Furthermore, the gloominess of the scene is further increased with the absence of the natural characteristics of the scene that is caused by the dominance of the snow; its utter whiteness that is spread all over the place makes it next to impossible to be expressed.

However, in the following stanza, the poet tells us about the effects of the empty scene on him:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars - on stars where no human race
is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

(CP, 296, L: 13-16)

In this stanza, the poet talks about the spiritual strength he has inside him. Part of this strength is resulted from his familiarity with the idea of loneliness. This is because loneliness is not something new for the poet. That is why he claims that those empty places have little effect upon him: '[t]hey cannot scare me with their empty spaces.' To prove this, the poet identifies himself with the cosmic stars. He believes that the stars are still there and are independent, though they are far away from each other and also void of any 'human race.' They are alone; however, their loneliness does not affect their high estimation, as far as their beauty is concerned. Yet, the poet is still too

weak to overcome the spiritual loneliness inside him, although he has the spiritual strength to face the physical loneliness outside.

CONCLUSION

Being an important reading strategy, the thematic binary opposition is used in this study to understand why some of Frost's themes run counter to each other. For example, the *communication* theme of "Mending Wall" has nothing to do with the *isolation* theme of "Desert Places." In the first poem, the neighbor who is presented as the source of social estrangement because of his refusal to communicate with the poet has no name as the poet wants him to represent a common idea, namely the social segregation of the American society. As a result of the unsociable nature of the people in his society, the poet fails in his social quest to establish and enhance the social ties needed to reach the ideal community. This failure inaugurates in him a sense of withdrawal or isolation that is highly represented in the second poem where the poet identifies himself with the stars. This generalization is intended to highlight the fact that he is not the only one in his country that suffers from the social solitude. It becomes the nation's dilemma. In fact, the turning point in Frost's thematic orientation reflects his psychological deterioration resulted from the unstable familial and social circumstances he was living in. Accordingly, binary opposition helped resolve some of the mysteries in the literary and social life of the poet.

NOTES

¹Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An introduction to Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007), 122.

²Ibid., 102.

³Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Books Ltd., 2001), 56.

⁴Ibid., 61.

⁵Ibid., 62.

⁶Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An introduction to Theory and Practice*, 4th ed., 108.

⁷Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, 67.

⁸Wilfred L. Guerin et al eds., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2005), 369.

⁹Leonard Unger, ed., *Seven Modern American Poets: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), 10.

¹⁰Ibid., 12.

¹¹Ibid., 13.

¹²Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of the American Poetry* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1961), 278.

¹³Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winstan, Inc., 1969), 33. If not otherwise indicated, all sub-sequent references to Frost's poems are to this edition, and pagination is given parenthetically.

¹⁴Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.

¹⁵Ibid., 19.

¹⁶Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Poets from the Puritan to the Present* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 303.

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