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BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN NOEL COWARD'S LIVES: A STRUCTURAL APPROACH

A B S T R A C T

This paper delves into the concept of Binary Oppositions (BOs) in Structuralist critical theory and their application in uncovering hidden themes within Noel Coward's Private Lives. The paper acknowledges the established role of BOs in structuring human thought and language. However, it proposes to explore their effectiveness in revealing deeper layers of meaning within a literary text. The study aims to utilize a Structuralist approach to analyze BOs present in Private Lives. This analysis will target thematic oppositions, character contrasts, and spatial arrangements within the play. By examining these BOs, the paper seeks to unveil the underlying tensions, motives, and concepts that Coward might be trying to convey to the audience. This approach can offer a fresh perspective on the play's meaning and enrich our understanding of Coward's artistic choices. The paper employs a structuralist lens to dissect Private Lives, focusing on identifying and interpreting BOs at various levels of the text – themes, characters, and setting.

KEYWORDS: Noel Coward, Private Lives, Binary Oppositions (BOs) Structuralist Criticism, binary oppositions.

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يتناول هذا البحث مفهوم "الثنائيات الضدية" في نظرية النقد البنيوي وتطبيقها في الكشف عن الموضوعات الخفية في مسرحية "حياة خاصة" لنويل كوارد. يعترف البحث بالدور الراسخ للثنائيات الضدية في تشكيل الفكر واللغة البشرية. ومع ذلك، فإنه يسعى إلى استكشاف فعاليتها في الكشف عن طبقات أعمق من المعاني داخل النص الأدبي. تهدف الدراسة إلى استخدام نهج بنيوي لتحليل الثنائيات الضدية الموجودة في مسرحية "حياة خاصة". يركز هذا التحليل على التناقضات الموضوعية، وتباين الشخصيات، والترتيبات المكانية داخل المسرحية. من خلال فحص هذه الثنائيات الضدية، يسعى البحث إلى كشف التوترات والدوافع والمفاهيم الكامنة التي ربما كان كوارد يسعى إلى إيصالها للجمهور. يمكن أن يوفر هذا النهج منظوراً جديداً لمعنى المسرحية ويثري فهمنا لخيارات كوارد الفنية. يعتمد البحث على عدسة بنيوية لتحليل مسرحية "حياة خاصة"، مع التركيز على تحديد وتفسير الثنائيات الضدية على مستويات متعددة من النص – مثل الموضوعات، والشخصيات، والخلفية

الكلمات المفتاحية: نويل كوارد، حياة خاصة، الثنائيات الضدية، النقد البنيوي، الثنائيات الضدية

Introduction

Binary Oppositions (BOs) are fundamental to Structuralist critical theory. They also appear to be fundamental not only to human thought in general but even in some cases to the natural order itself. Consider the following BOs: masculine/feminine, black/white, night/day, open/closed, high/low. The list does not contain uniformly equivalent BOs. We confidently assign the first two to the natural order of things. While the others are less natural and more cultural. It is equally obvious that "night" and "day" take on a wide range of cultural meanings (evil/good, and so on) and thereby become "signs". The concepts of "privatives" is also important in this context. We can describe the world in terms of the absence of certain qualities. This is sometimes called definition by negation. Darkness, for example, is the absence of light. (Seldon, 57) These binary oppositions can clearly be discerned in Noel Coward's comedy of manners *Private Lives*, which appeared in the first act of the play is set in France at the terrace of a hotel. The time is evening in Summer. Binary oppositions are found even in the setting itself, characters personality and attitude through binary opposition we will be able to discover deep meaning and intention of the play .

The Intrusion of the Past: Amanda and the Binary of Love

Structuralist theory emphasizes the importance of binary oppositions (BOs) in shaping our understanding of the world. These pairs of contrasting concepts, like masculine/feminine or light/dark, seem fundamental not only to human thought but potentially even to the natural order. However, the weight these oppositions carry can vary. While some, like black/white, appear more inherent, others, like night/day, acquire deeper cultural meanings (good/evil). The concept of "privatives" further expands this notion. We can define things by the absence of their opposites – darkness as the absence of light.

This paper will explore how Noel Coward utilizes binary oppositions in his comedy of manners, *Private Lives*. The play's very setting hints at these contrasting forces. Set on a hotel terrace bathed in summer evening light, it presents two separate windows leading to distinct suites. The characters themselves embody contrasting emotions. Sibyl's effusive joy stands in stark opposition to Elyot's apparent indifference. Through these and other examples, we will analyze how Coward uses binary oppositions to reveal deeper tensions lurking beneath the seemingly idyllic honeymoon.

The arrival of Amanda, Elyot's ex-wife, introduces another layer to the play's exploration of binary oppositions. Sibyl's initial curiosity about Amanda's beauty quickly escalates into a suspicion that their marriage is a mere rebound for Elyot.

The conversation between Sibyl and Elyot reveals a stark contrast in their understanding of past love. Sibyl views Amanda as a foil, someone to be surpassed in terms of beauty, talent, and devotion. Elyot, however, remembers Amanda with a surprising fondness, highlighting her positive qualities and even expressing sympathy for her loss.

This contrasting perspective creates a psychological binary opposition. Sibyl represents a passionate, youthful love, focused on emotional intensity and competition. Elyot, on the other hand, reflects a more mature perspective, emphasizing understanding and a love tempered by experience. This shift from passionate youth to a wiser, more practical love is a key theme Coward explores through the characters' contrasting views on Amanda.

The play ultimately leaves the audience questioning the sustainability of Sibyl and Elyot's relationship. Can their passionate love, fueled by opposition to the past, evolve into the wiser love Elyot describes?

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Mirrored Entrances: Introducing the Parallel Couple, Victor and Amanda

Sibyl compares her own femininity to Amanda's feminism. She accuses Amanda of behaving like men and says that Elyot now needs femininity about a woman after witnessing Amanda's masculine features. Then Sibyl asks Elyot about the reason for his divorce with Amanda. Elyot explains that it was Amanda who divorced him. He tells Sibyl that the reason for Amanda's decision to divorce him was his unfaithful conduct. He cheated on her by having an affair with a woman who went by the name of Vera Williams, with whom he spent an entire weekend. Despite this fact, Sibyl insists to him on her own abrupt assumption that he would have not cheated her if she had shown him sufficient attention. Elyot tries to make her change the topic and he finally tells her that he does not want Amanda's name to be mentioned again. She promises not to mention her name again, but keeps forgetting herself and keeps referring to her time and time again (Hoare, 1995).

Characterization

The entrance, the dialog and the characterization of Elyot and Sibyl constitute one side of the binary oppositions in the play. The other side comes in when both Elyot and Sibyl exit the stage and the characters of Victor and Amanda enter the stage. The audience learns from the ensuing stage directions that follow that Victor and Amanda are also spending their honeymoon at the same time and in the same hotel. Moreover, they have booked another suite on the same floor where Elyot and Sibyl's suite is. It is in fact adjacent to it to the left. As Elyot and Sibyl exit the stage, Victor and Amanda enter the stage from their own suite. They are having a conversation

on their own balcony (Coward, 1930). Coincidentally, their dialog commences on the same topic of that that took place between Sibyl and Elyot. They are, as Englishmen and Englishwomen always do, speaking about the weather. Victor initiates the conversation by mentioning that the weather is nice and the view is wonderful. When Amanda comes out on the terrace in response to Victor's call, he comments on her beauty saying that she looks wonderful (Graecen, 1953).

The role of body language in interpreting binary oppositions body language, including gestures, facial expressions, and posture, adds depth to character interactions by revealing unspoken emotions and tensions. For instance, an upright posture can convey confidence, while a slouched one may indicate discomfort. In *Private Lives*, non-verbal cues highlight the underlying dynamics of binary oppositions between characters, such as love and conflict or confidence and insecurity. Exploring these cues enhances the understanding of Coward's characters and their relationships (Awain,2023)

Mirrored Desires: Reversing Roles and Foreshadowing Reunion

In contrast to Elyot and Sibyl, where Elyot was the practical, wise and logical partner and Sibyl was the passionate, romantic and obliging one, it is here Amanda who corresponds to Elyot and Victor who corresponds to Sibyl. Victor is more passionate, romantic and obliging, while in contrast to the initial pairing of Elyot and Sibyl, where Elyot embodied practicality and Sibyl passion, the arrival of Victor and Amanda introduces a reversal. Here, Amanda aligns more with Elyot's logical and measured nature, while Victor mirrors Sibyl's emotional intensity. This deliberate construction, as some critics argue (insert critic's name and brief explanation of their theory), serves as a form of foreshadowing. By highlighting the compatibility between Victor and Sibyl, and Amanda and Elyot, the playwright prepares the audience for the potential reunion of the original couples despite their current conflicts. This technique creates a sense of anticipation and intrigue, prompting the audience to wonder if the underlying connections between the characters will ultimately prevail (Atkinson & Brooks, 1931).

For this reason, the characters of Victor and Amanda, who are currently married, are presented as binary oppositions. On the other hand, the characters of Elyot and Sibyl are presented also as binary oppositions in a way that is parallel to the former couple.

The conversation between Victor and Amanda echoes the dialog between Elyot and Sibyl. As in the former dialog, it is here Victor who opens the subject of Amanda's former marriage. He asks her if she loves him more than she loved her ex-husband. Like Sibyl, he also assumes that her ex-husband has been the cause of much of her misery. It is worth juxtaposing the following

extracts of their conversation in order to clearly discern the binary opposition the dramatist has intended to draw the audience's attention to (Atkinson & Brooks, 1931). Here is a piece of the dialog between Sibyl and Elyot where the former is chastising Elyot's ex-wife for being unfair, uncaring and unloving towards her husband and thus the reason for his emotional suffering:

SIBYL: I adore you much more than Amanda ever did. I would never cause you the misery she did.

ELYOT: We caused each other misery.

SIBYL: It was entirely her fault; you know it was.

ELYOT [with passion]: Yes, it was. Completely her fault.

SIBYL: She was foolish to let you go.

ELYOT: We let each other go.

SIBYL: She let you go, with her tantrums and scandals.

ELYOT: Will you please stop mentioning Amanda?

SIBYL: But I'm glad, because if she hadn't been so reckless, and wicked, and disloyal, we wouldn't be here now.

ELYOT: She wasn't disloyal.

SIBYL: How do you know? I bet she was. I bet she was disloyal every five minutes.

ELYOT: It would require a much more focused woman than Amanda to be disloyal every five minutes.

SIBYL [anxiously]: You do despise her, don't you? (Coward, 1930).

Compared to this conversation, the dialog between Victor and Amanda runs as both a contrast and a parallel where several words and phrases and even patterns of thought resonate. Here is Victor opening the subject of former marriage with Amanda on the terrace at the hotel:

VICTOR: No, but do you love me more than you loved Elyot?

AMANDA: I can't recall, it's been such a long time.

VICTOR: Not that long.

AMANDA [gesturing widely]: It feels like a lifetime ago.

VICTOR: I wish I could throttle him.

AMANDA [laughing]: Why?

VICTOR: For causing you so much pain.

AMANDA: It was mutual.

VICTOR: Nonsense! It was entirely his fault you know it was.

AMANDA: Yes, now that I think about it, it was. V

ICTOR: Despicable!

AMANDA: Don't be so intense, darling.

VICTOR: I'll never mistreat you like he did.

AMANDA: That's right.

VICTOR: I love you too deeply.

AMANDA: So did he.

VICTOR: That's not genuine love. He hit you once, didn't he?

AMANDA: More than once.

VICTOR: Where?

AMANDA: In various places.

VICTOR: What a scoundrel.

AMANDA: I hit him too. Once, I smashed four gramophone records over his head. It was quite satisfying.

VICTOR: You must have been incredibly frustrated.

AMANDA: Yes, I was, but let's not dwell on it, please. After all, it's a rather dreary topic for our honeymoon night. (Coward, 1930).

Top of Form

It is evident from the above juxtaposition of the two separate extracts from the dialog between the two couples that Victor resembles Sibyl in the way they open the subject of the former affair and marriage and in the way they seem to insist that the former marriage was made miserable by the ex-partner and that the current marriage is made comfortable and great through their opposing attitudes, kindness, care and love. When one takes the characters of Elyot and

Amanda, one also finds resemblances. For example, both wish not to talk about this topic again because it casts a gloomy cloud over their present marriage and prevents them from enjoying their honeymoon. Another resemblance is their tendency not to put all the blame on the former partner in marriage. They do acknowledge their own mistakes as well and take some of the blame too. For instance, Elyot says that they both lost each other and made each other miserable. Amanda also recognizes this and makes it clear to Victor that they cause pain to each other (Seldon, Raman). Sibyl and Victor seem to live under the shadow of the fear that their current spouses might get back to their former partners in marriage. This reunion is indeed the ultimate resolution that comes out of necessity and compatibility at the end of the play (Hoare, 1995).

In an appropriate figure of speech, Amanda compares her former marriage to a chemical reaction between two opposing chemical substances that react on each other in a bottle at a laboratory. She says that as soon as the two chemical substances come into contact with each other, they flash in a kind of explosion, as if they can't stand each other. However, moments later they calm down and everything becomes quiet as the two substances begin to adjust to each other. What she implies, though subconsciously at the moment, is that she and Elyot might cope with each other now after their initial aggression towards each other has been eliminated and subsided. This statement makes Victor worried about her reactions. He tells her what this might indicate. She tells him that it means that she is "unreliable". When he inquires in what way unreliable, she tells him that she is reconsidering principles of morality.

After these two separate scenes between the two couples, there comes an episode that places the divorcees (Elyot and Amanda) together, also by the same token of coincidence that placed them in the same hotel and on the same floor at the same time. Amanda is sitting on the terrace waiting for Victor to come out. At the same time, Elyot comes out to the terrace and is waiting for Sibyl to join him. Elyot begins to hum a music tune. Amanda overhears him and it startles her because she recognizes the tune and the voice of her ex-husband. She gets out of her seat and approaches the fence to check who is the person who is humming the tune. To her surprise, she notices it is Elyot, her ex-husband. Unable to resist the excitement of the experience and also unable to resist the feeling of nostalgia and desire for her longing emotions, she begins to hum back the tune loud enough to let Elyot overhear her. He does overhear her and is similarly startled and surprised when he approaches the source of the voice and discovers it is his ex-wife, Amanda. Amanda initiates the conversation between them and they begin to ask each other questions. Amanda asks him what he is doing there and he replies that he is on

honeymoon. She replies to his question about the same thing with the same answer. From this upcoming conversation, they learn that they are both now married recently and are on their honeymoon.

At the onset of their conversation, they decide not to show their longings for each other. On the contrary, they try to hide their true emotions and pretend that they are very happy with their new life. When Amanda asks Elyot if he is enjoying his honeymoon, he replies in the affirmative. When he asks her the same question, she echoes his answer and also tells him that she is extremely happy.

However, as the plot unravels, we find that these binary oppositions are reconciled through the process of reunion. As an attempt to avoid any collision and unexpected undesirable consequences, Elyot calmly and strategically asks Sibyl that they leave the hotel and move to another place. After several and sustained attempts on his part, she refuses to move out. The same takes place between Victor and Amanda. Amanda asks Victor quietly to leave the hotel. Elyot suspects there is something wrong and finally refuses her suggestion to move out. After all, they both a considerable amount of money to move in to this resort and even if they move out, it is very hard at this time of year to find another place or hotel which is equally comfortable. Both Elyot and Amanda give their newly wed spouses false excuses to leave this place immediately. Amanda, for example, lies to Victor and tells him that this hotel reminds her of her sister's death a long time ago. Victor, however, sees through her lies and tells her so. she finally confesses and tells him the real reason. She says that Elyot is having his honeymoon in the same hotel. Elyot does the same with Sibyl.

When Elyot and Amanda meet alone, the audience senses a different tone in their dialog than the tone of the Amanda-Victor and the Elyot-Sibyl tone of conversation. In contrast, this dialog reveals a better compatibility in personality. Though at the beginning of the conversation there is a degree of slowness, reservation and caution, the dialog begins to take on pace and turns out to be more interesting for both parties. There seems to be more harmony and less clash. The reunion between the two is sensed and paved for when they begin to reminisce their past days together and their first honeymoon. This coincides with the music played by the band:

ELYOT: What were you recalling at that particular moment?

AMANDA: The scene at the Palace Hotel Skating Rink in the morning, the vibrant sunlight, everyone swirling around in vivid hues, and you kneeling to help me with my skates.

ELYOT: You had just fallen on your backside a moment earlier.

AMANDA: It was unkind of you to laugh like that, I felt so embarrassed.

ELYOT: My poor dear.

AMANDA: Do you remember waking up in the morning, standing on the balcony, gazing out over the valley?

ELYOT: Blue shadows on the white snow, a pristine landscape, transcending everything in the world. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

AMANDA: It's comforting to reminisce about those wonderful moments we shared (Coward, 1930).

The negative experience they went through with each other when they were married seems to have given them the wisdom and the insight into each other's characters and now they have come all the way to reconsider and appreciate their personalities. Amanda says that, "Selfishness, cruelty, hatred, possessiveness, petty jealousy. All those qualities came out in us just because we loved each other." Their earlier disagreement and quarrels were in fact just a stepping stone that led this to the present realization. Their relationship now is wiser and deeper than its earlier version when it was superficial and rash.

As their conversation develops, Amanda finally confesses that she still loves him and she asks him not to leave her again admitting that if he does, she will go mad immediately. Elyot also admits to her that although he travelled wide around the world ever since their divorce, he never truly loved anyone else except her. Then they start flirting with each other and expressing their love and passion towards each other. They start arguing whether to tell Sibyl and Victor about their decision to return to each other. However, as they start quarreling, they realize and fear that things might go wrong between them and history will repeat itself. So they invent an ingenious way to put a stop to a quarrel before it begins. They agree that whenever they sense that they are about to start fighting, one of them mentions the phrase "Solomon Isaacs" which will force them both to stop talking and keep silent for two minutes (Seldon, Raman). During these two minutes, they will collect their thoughts, give what they originally wanted to say a second thought and reconsider the situation. It will also give them the chance to calm down and cool off in case they intended unknowingly and unconsciously to hurt each other's feelings. They begin to apply this

new method they invented and find out to their surprise that it is working (Hoare, 1995 and Morse, 1973).

The binary oppositions in the play begin to have a wider scope when this dialog between Amanda and Elyot is juxtaposed to that between Sibyl and Victor when they meet. The dialog that Amanda and Elyot have is calm, calculated, logical, and it is based on common sense and mutual understanding. On the other hand, the conversation that Sibyl and Victor engage in is charged with bickering, quarrels, disagreement, misunderstanding and violence. It ends with the end of the play itself as Sibyl shouts at Victor and slaps him on the face very hard. In reaction, he holds her by the shoulder and shakes her very hard in retaliation. During their quarrel, Amanda and Elyot are all the time sitting aside watching them fight and listening to their quarrel. Finally, they get hold of their suitcases and walk silently, carefully and quietly out of the door exiting the stage in order not to let Sibyl and Victor notice their departure. The curtain falls to wrap up this closing scene of the play.

CONCLUSION

Coward's *Private Lives* offers an effective example of how a Structuralist approach to a text in terms of binary oppositions can shed deep light on the themes and concepts presented in a dramatic text and facilitate the understanding of the audience of the text.

The binary oppositions presented in the play can be discerned at several levels. At the structural level, we find that the play is divided into scenes that alternate the dialogs between two couples. Each conversation and interaction mirrors or counters the one that comes before it and the one that comes after it. At the setting level, we also find that there are two suites adjacent to each other in a hotel, both of which have a terrace that the audience confronts. Hence, the idea of binary oppositions is visually reflected on the stage in the existence of two terraces side by side. At the level of characterization, we also find two sets of characters. There are Amanda and Victor, who had recently got married. Amanda has got a divorce. On the other hand, there are Elyot and Sibyl who have also got married recently. Amanda has also got a divorce. Both couples are currently spending their honeymoon at the same hotel.

The link between the two stories and marriages is the divorce of Elyot and Amanda. The end of the play also serves as a binary opposition to its beginning, since the play begins with Amanda and Victor as marriage partners and Elyot and Sibyl as marriage partners too. At the end of the play, however, we find Elyot with Amanda reunited and Sibyl and Victor together as partners.

Binary oppositions within the text also exist at the thematic level. As a major theme in the play, marriage is presented in two forms: a success or a failure. The Elyot-Amanda marriage, which ended up in divorce and is therefore taken to be a failure, returns to the stage as a success with their reunion. On the other hand, the two recent marriages end up in complete failure and are short-lived (Morgan,

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