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A Comparative Analysis of Touchstone and Deconstruction Theory

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ABSTRACT:

This article focuses on the basic set of rules of the critical theories; touchstone and deconstruction theory. It exemplifies the different concepts in the respective theories. It also takes note of key words and terms in the concern theories. The theories have been selected keeping the variations in the root, terms, and methods of the theories in mind. The theories have been critically analysed taking the base and the functions of the theories into consideration. The paper also explores the steps and ways of analysing work of art under the particular critical theory. Finally, the theories have been critically compared on basic of assumptions and summarised in to the various features and limitations.

MATTHEW ARNOLD'S TOUCHSTONE THEORY:

Arnold's objective approach to criticism and his view that historical and biographical study are unnecessary was very influential on the new criticism. His emphasis on the importance of tradition also influenced F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot.

Eliot is also indebted to Arnold for his classicism, and for his objective approach which paved the way for Eliot to say that poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality, because it is not an expression of emotions but an escape from emotions.

Arnold's argument is that when dogmatic religions fail to provide ethical and spiritual consolation to people, poetry will have to be as source of consolation and comfort. For that poetry has to become serious and it can perform this function only to the extent to which it remains a criticism of life. After assigning a serious social function to poetry Arnold says that only poetry of high excellence will be able to perform its vital social function. The reader should know what is good poetry? and here lies the crucial role of the critic. Arnold is critical of the existing methods by which poets are judged; the two common methods- 'Historic estimate' and 'Personal estimate'. Arnold then proposes a new methods of evaluating poetry. He suggests that we would have always in our mind lines and expressions of the great masters of poetry, and that we should apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. He writes, "Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar, But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them will in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them". By taking a few passages from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton, he points out how they impress alike by the poetical quality. So they all 'belong to the class of the truly excellent'. He concludes, "critics give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete example;- to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very high quality, and to say: The characters of high quality of poetry are what is expressed there.

Arnold is unable to suggest any concrete criterion by determined; he considers 'tact' or taste as a sure enough guide. According to Arnold, the qualities of the highest kind of poetry can be found in the matter of poetry and also in its manner and style. Arnold says, "the best poetry is characterized by truth and seriousness to t an eminent degree".

Arnold's limitations

1. Arnold makes clear his disapproval of the vagaries of some of the Romantic poets. Perhaps he would have agreed with Goethe, who saw Romanticism as disease and Classicism as health. But Arnold occasionally looked at things with jaundiced eyes.
2. Arnold's inordinate love of classicism made him blind to the beauty of lyricism.
3. An excessive fondness for Greek and Latin classics produces a literary diet without variety, while modern poetry and drama have branched out in innumerable directions.
4. Arnold's lack of historic sense was another major failing. As we have seen, later critics praise Arnold, but it is only a qualified praise. Oliver Elton calls him a 'bad great critic'. T. S. Eliot said that Arnold is a 'Propagandist and not a creator of ideas'. According to Walter Raleigh, Arnold's method is like that of a man who took a brick to the market to give the buyers an impression of the building.
5. In an age when cheap literature caters to the taste of the common man, one might fear that the classics will fade into insignificance.
6. This theory has set limited criteria for work to be great where as great works do not require any criteria. All great work cannot be of same type and cannot be squeezed or fixed in the same frame of classical great works.
7. As all great work cannot be just classic or to be classic in frame doesn't stand synonym to the great judgement.

DECONSTRUCTION:

Post-Structuralism (which is often used synonymously with **Deconstruction** or **Postmodernism**) is a reaction to structuralism and works against seeing language as a stable, closed system. It is the critic's task to decipher, to seeing literature as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single center, essence, or meaning". **Jacques Derrida's** (dair-ree-DAH) paper on "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (delivered in 1966) proved particularly influential in the creation of post-structuralism. In addition to Jacques Derrida, **key** poststructuralist and deconstructive figures include Michel Foucault (fou-KOH), Roland Barthes (bart), Jean Baudrillard (zhon boh-dree-YAHR), Helene Cixous (seek-sou), Paul de Man (de-MAHN), J. Hillis Miller, Jacques Lacan (lawk-KAWN), and Barbara Johnson.

The father and founder of the most debated and yet unclear and equally abstruse theory, 'deconstruction', Jacques Derrida influenced literary theory and criticism by addressing broad philosophical questions with reference to reality, truth, and meaning.

One of the definitions of deconstruction by Jonathan Culler in his book 'On Deconstruction', is, 'to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it determines the philosophy it asserts, or hierarchical oppositions on which it relies'.

Derrida himself seems to be unclear, rather vague on definitions for the terms like play, centre is missing, that he uses in his book "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978)

Key Terms:

Aporia (ah-por-EE-ah)- a moment of undecidability; the inherent contradictions found in any text. Derrida, for example, cites the inherent contradictions at work in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's use of the words culture and nature by demonstrating that Rousseau's sense of the self's innocence (in nature) is already corrupted by the concept of culture (and existence) and vice-versa.

Différance - a combination of the meanings in the word *différance*. The concept means 1) *différer* or to differ, 2) *différance* which means to delay or postpone (defer), and 3) the idea of difference itself. To oversimplify, words are always at a distance from what they signify and, to make matters worse, must be described by using other words.

Erasure (sous rature) - to highlight suspect ideologies, notions linked to the metaphysics of presence, Derrida put them under "erasure," metaphorically pointing out the absence of any definitive meaning. By using erasure, however, Derrida realized that a "trace" will always remain but that these traces do not indicate the marks themselves but rather the absence of the marks (which emphasize the absence of "univocal meaning, truth, or origin"). In contrast, when Heidegger similarly "crossed out" words, he assumed that meaning would be (eventually) recoverable.

Logocentrism - term associated with Derrida that "refers to the nature of western thought, language and culture since Plato's era. The Greek signifier for "word," "speech," and "reason," *logos* possesses connotations in western culture for law and truth. Hence, logocentrism refers to a culture that revolves around a central set of supposedly universal principles or beliefs" (Wolfreys 302 - see General Resources below).

Metaphysics of Presence - "beliefs including binary oppositions, logocentrism, and phonocentrism that have been the basis of Western philosophy since Plato" (Dobie 155, see General Resources below).

Supplement - "According to Derrida, Western thinking is characterized by the 'logic of supplementation', which is actually two apparently contradictory ideas. From one perspective, a supplement serves to enhance the presence of something which is already complete and self-sufficient. Thus, writing is the supplement of speech, Eve was the supplement of Adam, and masturbation is the supplement of 'natural sex'....But simultaneously, according to Derrida, the Western idea of the supplement has within it the idea that a thing that has a supplement cannot be truly 'complete in itself'. If it were complete without the supplement, it shouldn't need, or long-for, the supplement. The fact that a thing can be added-to to make it even more 'present' or 'whole' means that there is a hole and the supplement can fill that hole. The metaphorical opening of this "hole" Derrida called *invagination*. From this perspective, the supplement does not enhance something's presence, but rather underscores its absence" (from [Wikipedia - definition of supplement](#)).

Trace - from Lois Tyson (see General Resources below): "Meaning seems to reside in words (or in things) only when we distinguish their difference from other words (or things). For example, if we believed that all objects were the same color, we wouldn't need the word red (or blue or green) at all. Red is red only because we believe it to be different from blue and

green (and because we believe color to be different from shape). So the word red carries with it the trace of all the signifiers it is not (for it is in contrast to other signifiers that we define it)" (245). Tyson's explanation helps explain what Derrida means when he states "the trace itself does not exist."

Transcendental Signifier - from Charles Bressler (see General Resources below): a term introduced by Derrida who "asserts that from the time of Plato to the present, Western culture has been founded on a classic, fundamental error: the searching for a transcendental signified, an external point of reference on which one may build a concept or philosophy. Once found, this transcendental signified would provide ultimate meaning. It would guarantee a 'center' of meaning...." (287).

In short.....

- There are certain basic problems in giving a precise definition of deconstruction. Deconstruction has its origin in philosophy, in the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In the broadest sense deconstruction can be seen as radical critique of the Western epistemology.
- Deconstruction deals primarily with the text and not with any of the outside considerations such as author, the real world, audience, or other literature.
- **Deconstruction:** This approach assumes that language does not refer to any external reality. It can assert several, contradictory interpretations of one text. Deconstructionists make interpretations based on the political or social implications of language rather than examining an author's intention.
- Deconstruction is one of the most influential movements in the intellectual history of the Western world. Starting in the 60s its all-pervading influence has not been limited to literature and literary criticism alone.
- Deconstruction is primarily a textual strategy, and as a strategy of reading, it is inseparable from the rhetoric it uses.
- Deconstruction can also be called as an extension of and as a reaction to structuralism.
- The traces of the absent signs in the sign present constitutes what Derrida calls erasure: what is said is erased by the traces. Derrida uses the term 'free-play' to suggest that writing is only a play of differences without any centre.
- Derrida suggests that the nature of language makes any kind of presence impossible, as the absences. Keep disrupting it. Hence writing is the interplay of absence and presence, which is the freeplay of differences.
- Differing is the one not being the other. Deferring is something being delayed or postponed. Deconstruction tries to debunk such notions of truth, origin, unity and meaning and affirms the indeterminacy of meaning.
- In Derrida's view, every text affirms and negates its meaning at the same time. Deconstruction is not concerned with dismantling the structure of the book, but tries to demonstrate how the text itself has dismantled its structure.
- Deconstruction is not a 'method' in the sense of systematic pursuit of the text. It does not deploy any system of rules or principles to explore a certain fixed meaning of the text.
- On the contrary deconstruction believes that a text does not have any fixed meaning, but has potentials for meanings and admits several interpretations into a 'free play' of meaning.

- Deconstructive activity is ceaseless. It can never be resolved in a dialectic. Deconstructing offers the possibility of a continual revolution in literary criticism.
- Derrida sees signifying force in the gaps, margins, figures, digressions, discontinuities, contractions, and ambiguities of a text. When one Writes, one writes more than (or less than, or other than) one thinks.
- The reader's task is to read what is written rather than simply attempt to get the impression what might have been meant"

COMPARATIVE CONCLUSIONS:

ARNOLD'S TOUCHSTONE THEORY:

1. The touch stone theory could be called just an individual idea or (tact) than general theory.
2. It doesn't aim at reaching final meaning of the work of art. It just insists on comparison.
3. It is difficult as it raises several quests; is only classical work a 'standard' for judgments.

DECONSTRUCTION:

1. It is a theory which is an extended idea of structuralism but turned opposite it. As it refuses self comparison.
2. It is a theory that aims at reaching the final meanings of the work of art but ends up in saying meanings are subject to readers and elusive.
3. Deconstruction theory believes in text having no fix meaning.
4. It is one more theory that tells the hunters of the final meaning that no meaning is final.
5. It sends the ball in readers court saying read what is written than simply reading for getting the impression.

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