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Semiotic Study of the Poem 'Birches' by Robert Frost

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Abstract

'Birches' an eminent poem by Robert Frost has been analyzed here from semiotic perspective. This poem is a pastoral lyric as the poet uses a number of natural elements like birches, woods, cobwebs, winter, snow, branches and heaven to signify life and its various situations. As these words have various symbolic connotations, so readers particularly students of literature face problems in true comprehension and appreciation of author's point of view. This paper intends to enlarge readers' critical perception in literature. In addition, this study applies a new analytical framework, semiotics for analysis of the poem. Thus, it provides a new angle for the researchers to judge a poetic work.

Key Words: *Style, Semiotics, Signs, Images, Symbols, Birches.*

Introduction

Style is a unique way of expression which a writer adopts in his writings to convey his thoughts to the readers (Leech & Short, 2007). Authors use various techniques and devices in their writings to enhance the artistic beauty of their works. All these literary techniques are studied under stylistics. Stylistics came to existence in the 2nd half of the twentieth century (Freeman, 1971). Widdowson (1975) called it a linguistic study of a literary text. Another linguist David Crystal (1985) further elaborated it as a sub-field of linguistics discussing various aspects of linguistic deviation. Stylistic analysis explores how certain social and cultural realities are constructed through language (Birch, 1989). As an inhabitant of New England, Frost adopted simple, colloquial speaking style of New Englanders in his writings. For his traditional style, Lynen (1960) distinguished him from his contemporaries. His poetry is symbolic and philosophical in nature. Thus, comprehensive analysis of his poetry is prerequisite to fully understand it. Existing research studies are related to his poems 'Bereft, Fire and Ice, and Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening'. However, no comprehensive work is present on his poem 'Birches'. The present study endeavors to explore a correlation between denotative and connotative meanings of the poem 'Birches'. Furthermore, a new theoretical framework, semiotics is applied in analysis of the poem. This analysis will enhance literary students' critical understanding in literature, and contribute in better comprehension of the themes of the poem. A precise introductory background of this analytical framework is given forth.

Semiotics studies sign their linguistic functions (Cobley & Jansz, 1997). Chandler (2007) quotes Pierce called it 'prescribed code of signs'. It became popular among philosophers and linguists in the 20th century (Danesi, 2004). Two important schools of thoughts, European and American, in semiotics are subsequently introduced by Fredinand de Saussure and Pierce (Abbas & Kadim, 2019). These linguists established fundamental principles for description and interpretation of signs (Yakin & Totu, 2014; Abbas & Kadim, 2019). In de Saussure's view sign is combination of two terms signifier (sound image) and signified (abstract idea). Signifier and signified both are interlinked in arbitrary relation. Opposed to de Saussure's dyadic tradition, Pierce follows triadic system as his theory contains three elements Representamen (apparent form of sign) object (the referent) and interpretant (meaning) (Siau & Tian, 2009).

Robert Frost (1874-1964) was a renowned American poet who originally belonged to New England. His own geographical region, New England and its indigenous' activities are main central points around which his whole poetry revolves. He is a poet of nature but in a unique way. He initiates his poems with the description of a natural phenomenon then delivers a moral lesson to humanity through his poetry. His poems expose universal ideas of life, death and humans' destiny in universe. His poetry is superfluous in use of natural elements like flowers, woods, trees, birds, snow and fruits (Everything2, 2001). He uses these words in symbolic way which make his style gnomic or misleading (Schndeider, 1931).

Since his poem "Birches" is rich in use of such symbols, semiotics is vital framework for its analysis. The present work shows how Frost makes skilful use of poetic symbols and images in his poem 'Birches'. This poem originally titled 'Swinging Birches' was appeared in 1916 in Frost's collection 'Mountain Interval'. It describes a common sight of New England where birches trees are covered with snow in winter season. This scene reminds the poet his own childhood when he used to be the swinger of these birches trees. Symbolically, these trees represent the various conditions and bitter realities of life from which a man has to pass in his whole life. Poet is tired of calamities of life and seeks a transitory escape in the world of imagination. This temporal escape in dreamy world makes him refresh and energetic to accept the real life with open arms.

Semiotic Study of Poem

The very title of the poem has symbolic interpretation. Denotatively, 'birches' mean big trees with flaking bark. Connotatively, birch trees represent life and its various paths. Like most of his poems, this poem is also based on Frost's own personal experience. In the first line, use of singular personal pronoun 'I' and verb of perception 'see' give the idea of poet's own involvement in it. The word 'boy' signifies the pleasures and adventures of youth, further, its preceding expression 'Like to think' suggests poet's desire to be lost in sweet memories of his childhood. After looking at the bending branches of birches he thinks swinging might be the cause of their bent down condition. Suddenly, reality appears in form of 'ice storms', and shatters the mask of poet's fancy. Here coordinating conjunction 'but' signifies a sharp contrast between poet's perceptions and real world. 'Ice storms' denote heavy snowfall, but metaphorically they symbolize the calamities of life. Through this metaphor, the poet tries to convey that calamities destroy man's life as ice storms destroy trees. The word 'winter' stands for one of four seasons. This season is characterized with heavy snowfall especially in England. Frost uses it for death.

He uses various pictorial images like crystal shells, snow crust, trunks arching and white trunk to portray seasonal beauty of his motherland. All these images are appealing for readers' eyes. Beside the visual imagery, sound imagery is also present in terms of phrase 'shattering and avalanching'. This phrase indicates musical sounds produced from the movement of branches. These movements of branches break

the snow-crust and scatter them on land in the form of short pieces. These broken shapes of ice are metaphorically associated with 'broken glass' which evoke in reader's mind the beauty of Heaven. 'Heaven' represents ideal and spiritual world free from worldly tensions. This word 'Heaven' once again shows poet's pensive mood.

In England, the snow falling permanently bends the trees and their branches. The trunks bent down under the burden of snow are compared to girls with their hands on knees. Through this comparison, the poet has highlighted the delicateness and beauty of birches trees which are similar to girls in both these qualities. In utterance "never right themselves" trees are personified as rigid people with ability to correct themselves, but unwilling to do so. In next line, another personification is used in word 'Truth'. Truth denotes fact. In the clause 'when Truth broke in' truth is referred by a feminine personal pronoun 'her'. This suggests that truth possess the power of expression which shatters the poet's spell of imagination and brings him back to the world of reality through its arguments.

Frost's own life was full of pains and sufferings. In his adulthood, he lost his wife, son and daughter. Further, his passionate desire to win noble prize never fulfilled. All such pathos make the poet's life miserable, and he remembers his early days when he was tension free. Here the sight of birch trees reminds him his youth when he used to play baseball over there. Here, 'Baseball' metaphorically suggests pleasures and delights of childhood. Since birches symbolize life, the boy's climbing up the birches signifies journey of one's life in which everyone makes a number of experiments and learns new things. In fact, life is combination of two psychological processes, assimilation and adaptation. Every new generation brings changes in existent values and systems, and this change of old values with new ones is referred as adaptation. Here, the noun phrase 'Father's trees' symbolize traditional values. Since old people are rigid in their opinions, the noun, 'stiffness' connotes rigidness. Although old ones are rigid, sometimes they have to surrender before their young ones. The infinitive 'to conquer' refers the victory of modern generation.

To achieve high position in life is not an easy task. Upward mobility is risky as well as difficult. The greatest vigilance is needed on the way of success as is required to fill a cup up to brim. The phrase 'Weary of consideration' is an organic image which suggests humans' sufferings specifically poet's exhaustion and fatigue. In the next line, the poet compares life with a "pathless wood". Denotatively, wood is a piece of land with a large number of trees and bushes. However, in metaphorical sense wood refers life while its preceding word 'pathless' modifies it. Thus, the complete phrase 'pathless wood' suggests complexities of life. Another word 'Cobweb' is also a metaphor for the confusion and bewilderments of man's life.

In Frost's view, fate is malignant power that can snatch his own life as his loved ones. For this pessimistic view, he equals Victorian novelist, Thomas Hardy who says 'we are like flies to the gods who kill us for their sport.

The poem 'Birches' is also very similar with Keats' poem 'Ode to Nightingale' in use of symbols. The verbs 'burns', 'broken' and 'weeping' of this poem signify humans' sufferings and miseries in very similar way as Keats' line 'The weariness, the fever, and the fret'. Although both poets have suffered, they have different approaches towards life. Keats becomes pessimist and escapist with his love for death while Frost becomes optimist and realist with his love for life as he asserts 'Earth is right place to love'. The authors of both poems 'Birches' and 'Ode to Nightingale' find escape in their fantasy, however, Frost's stay in imaginary world is momentary and short-lived. The word 'truth' in the next line is like a bell which makes the author realize the author the limitation of fancy, and finally brings him back in the real world.

Table 1: Words and their Connotations

Words and Phrases	Connotations
Birches	Life with its various paths and conditions
Boy	Tension free life, Pleasures and adventures of youth
Ice Storms	Disasters of life which upset life
Heaven	Spiritual world free from worldly tensions, A fantastic world
Baseball	pleasures and delights of life
Father's trees	Traditions and values
Weary of consideration	Sufferings of life that make a man exhausted
Cobweb	Confusion and bewilderments of man's life
Pathless wood	Complexity of life

An overview of the Style of the Poem

Frost calls his verse 'playing tennis without a net' without any particular rhythm and sound patterns (Frost,1963). His poem 'Birches" is written in free verse. However, an irregular rhyming pattern is still followed in poem by the use of sound devices, alliteration and assonance. Like alliteration occurs from the repetition of /b/ sound in bend and birches; / ʃ/ sound in shed and shells; and /k/ sound in cracks, crazes, climb and carefully. All these examples of alliteration are echoes of visual and sound images of nature. Further, repetitive vowel sounds in successive words like /e/ in bend, left, them, shed, shells; /æ/ in shattering and avalanching; /i:/ in heaps and sweep add melodious effects to the poem. From grammatical perspective, he has made use of personal pronouns, first person 'I' for himself; second person 'You' for 'New Englanders, and third person pronoun 'They' to refer to natural elements. The nouns as birches, trees, winter, morning, ice, rain, breeze, sun, heaven, cows, summer, branches, woods, ice-storms and snow-crust reveal poet's descriptive power and passionate love for nature. Usage of mental verbs sees, think, prefer and dream give idea about poet's inner working of mind.

Four adjectives darker, sunny, arching and pathless are thoughtfully used to represent denotative meanings in poem. On syntactic level, he has used two devices enjambment and anaphora. The technique of enjambment is frequently applied in poem. Its frequent use indicates the abundance of compliments in poet's mind for the beauty of nature. Anaphora is repetition of exact words or phrases in beginning of lines of verse as it is shown in 'eight and line' which both start with 'as the'.

Conclusion

Frost's verse is characterized by extensive use of symbols and allusive images. He makes a skillful selection of words from nature and uses them in symbolic sense. His poem 'Birches' is clear example of it. Apparently, this poem is about nature as a number of elements from nature like woods, snow, trees, branches, earth, summer, winter and ice-storms are mentioned in it. However, all these words have deep symbolic significance as well. As Pathless wood and cobwebs metaphorically signify the confusions of life which make the poet depressed, and he desires for ideal world. Here, the word 'Heaven' refers to the ideal world which is free of tensions. On the contrary, the word 'truth' represents real world. Analysis of the poem indicates that the poem is full of images and symbols, and language of the poem is emotive and suggestive. Since language of the poem is symbolic and evocative, semiotics is significant analytical approach for its analysis. In this way, students' comprehension of the poem and critical consciousness in literary texts will be increased.

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