

Analysis of *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* From Deconstructive Perspective

Hao Sun

Krieger School of Arts and Science, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC, 20036

**Corresponding author. E-mail: hsun44@alumni.jh.edu*

ABSTRACT

This article takes a short story *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* as an experimental case to analyze deconstructive ideology of excavating the paradoxes and conflicts. Selecting this story is because of its canny design of the fusion of succinct plot and whimsical characters, elevating the possibility of exploiting a variety of divergent and even incompatible interpretation through closing reading. The reason this article pivots on the deployment of deconstruction is that deconstructive literary analysis challenges readers' common sense of comprehending literature, taking issue with and revolutionizing the foundation of western philosophy and humanity.

Keywords: *The Life You Save May Be Your Own, deconstruction, paradox*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article fastens upon analyzing the short story *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* with the lens of deconstruction. *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* is written by Flannery O'Connor in her short story collection *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*. The general ploy of deconstruction analysis this article will utilize is to unravel the underlying logical conflicts and paradoxes within the text through close reading. Literary review of deconstruction will be encapsulated and the short story' deconstruction analysis will be provided. In the main part, this article will elucidate why certain facets of this story merit deconstruction and how they are deconstructed. In the last part, the conclusion and the limitation of this article will be epitomized.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the second half of the 20th century, many literary critics expressed dissatisfaction with the rigidity and stagnancy of literary criticism. For instance, Paul De Man castigates the tendency in literary criticism toward stereotyping literature genre and elevating certain literary interpretations to an unchallenged orthodox position that "literature as well as criticism... is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language". [1] Deconstruction, deemed by many critics to be a revolutionary development in critical theory, is found by Derrida who published three essays pioneeringly, which contain the concept of deconstruction and challenge the institutionalization in literature academics in 1967.[2]

One of the fundamental canons of deconstruction is that it refutes the binary opposition beloved by structuralism that draws strict boundaries between speciously opposite substance or essence such as self and otherness, truth and falsehood, masculinity and femininity, good and evil, and so on [3]. Derrida denies traditional literary criticism, which reproduces the significant, conscious, and intentional textual relationship established by the author in his texts. He calls this method "double comment." Rather, Derrida enunciates that deconstructionist aim at enabling the unperceived and unconscious accessible to the readers [5]. Norris claims that deconstruct equates to lay a text open to challenge of its orthodox interpretation. Deconstructionists' goal is to grapple with a text characterized by terminated structure and interpretation with the insubordination to fix structure until the text embarrasses and contradicts its own linguistic and logical system [6]. However, that is not to say that deconstruction yearns for dismembering the text until it becomes incomprehensible; On the contrary, deconstruction endeavors to prove that every literary text has the essence of gainsaying itself, which might be unscrupulously neglected by structuralists, while merits exploration with the assistance of deconstruction. "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the text structure but a demonstration that it (text) has already dismantled itself". Wolfreys further explains that deconstructionists seek to detect the underlyingly subversive power in even the most unambiguous work, embracing reexamination of the text and ceaseless overturn of the previous recognition[7]. Along with Derrida, Roland Barthes is another earliest pioneer in initiating the concept of deconstruction and post-structuralism [4]. Many scholars express that deconstruction is equivalent to post-structuralism and often utilizes deconstruction/post-structuralism interchangeably since deconstruction is the fundamental frame of mindset of post-structuralism [3,4].

Therefore, this essay will use the term “deconstruction” exclusively since this article is applying the major critical methodology of post-structuralism-deconstruction much more than the elucidation of the history and development of post-structuralism itself.

3. THE NECESSITY OF DISCUSSING FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S WORKS

This paragraph will explain why *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, written by Flannery O’Connor, can be probed as an exemplary case study of deconstructive analysis. Barthes claims the independence of the text from both the authors and literary critics who intend to unite a text abiding by certain patterns and restrain the text from developing plural significance [8]. Barthes also contends that a text of bliss should evoke a sense of loss and discompose the readers through displaying the inconsistency of the text and an antagonism toward a certain cultural pattern. Barthes appreciates the text characteristic with unexpectedness and eccentricity since this genre of text impedes readers from simplifying and doubling commenting the text and is “succulent in its newness” [9]. O’Connor’s novels are endowed with rebellious, bizarre plots and grotesque characters, toppling down readers’ perceptions of linguistic practices and social norms [10]. Nonetheless the text is aloof from author once it is finished, O’Connor herself (we may consider her criticism to her own work as another detached, independent, deconstructive analysis) and many other scholars all agree that grotesqueness and unsympathetic are predominant attributes in O’Connor’s writing [10,11,12]. Therefore, the short story *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* is a experimental field for deconstructive analysis.

4. DECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS

Notwithstanding from a deconstructionists perspective, it is meaningless and impossible to summarize the plot of a story, by which deconstructionists deridingly call “doubling commentary”. It is helpful to provide a most basic and unornamented plot summary which will be challenged, toppled down, subversed, and eventually deconstructed.

The story begins with an old lady and her mentally disable daughter, both named Lucknell Crater, sitting on their porch in their almost desolate plantation. A one-armed homeless man named Tom Shiftlet comes to them to inquire if he can make a living in that plantation. The old lady replies with that she does not have money to offer him and can only provide him food and a desolate car for him to sleep. Mr. Shiftlet stays and he promises that he will be able to make some progress of this plantation. The next day Mr. Shiftlet fixes plenty of things in the plantation, and teaches the girl to utter the first word in her life, “bird.” On the third day of his arrival, the old lady

starts to imply that she intends to get her daughter married with Mr. Shiftlet. On Day 4, he walks into the town buying some automobile parts and fixes the car. At night of Day 4, the old lady immediately talks to him about the possibility of the marriage between her daughter and Mr. Shiftlet. Mr. Shiftlet asks for money since he expresses that he wants to take her daughter to a hotel and gives her some food to eat. The old lady finally yields to his willingness and promises to give him seventeen-fifty. On Saturday, they drive to town and obtain a piece of marriage paper from government office. Mr. Shiftlet and two ladies return to their house. After lunch, Mr. Shiftlet and his wife start their road trip. They stop at a place called The Hot Spot. After eating, Lucynell falls asleep on the counter. Mr. Shiftlet decides to leave without her and he gets asked by a service boy that who she is. He says she is hitch-hiker and then directly starts his own road trip. On his drive, he notices a sign warning “Drive carefully, the life you save may be your own.” Then he sees a boy walking along the road and he gives the boy a ride. Mr. Shiftlet keeps talking about how kind Mr. Shiftlet’s Mom is and how he missed his mom. The boy turned angrily in the seat. “You go to the devil!” he cried. “My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!” He flung the door open and jumped out with his suitcase into the ditch [13]. Mr. Shiftlet is shocked for a while and then gets his composure back and praises God. The story ends with Mr. Shiftlet driving alone under the upcoming storm.

What deconstructionists do is to find textual subconscious, disunity, and paradoxes within even the most self-validating text. They tend to tenaciously and relentlessly to fasten upon dissecting a single passage or paragraph until it is impossible to sift out an unilateral logical system of a text and the text is exploded into manifold and floating explanations [4]. Hence, this article will focus on unraveling some most conspicuous contradictions within the text, and selecting some passages to dissect until their textual rationale becomes untenable.

From the outset of the story to the moment Mr. Shiftlet takes off with Lucknell for a road trip, the old lady is protraiaed as a dominant position over Mr. Shiftlet, while the ending shows otherwise, demonstrating that this whole story is built upon underlying paradox awaiting to be recognized and deconstructed. The old lady’s earliest impression on Mr. Shiftlet is that “she could tell, even from a distance, that he was a tramp and no one to be afraid of”, and then “she didn’t change her position until he was almost into her yard”[13]. Nonetheless what happens subsequently shows her judgement and her arrogance unintelligently flawed. It turns out Mr. Shiftlet a capable and shrewd man under his handicapped appearance: he makes tremendous improvement of the plantation, teaches Lucynell to speak, fixes a desolate car, and even successfully deceives the whole family. Ironically, almost half of the story depicts how the old lady endeavors to take advantage of Mr. Shiftlet and arrange a marriage between her half-witted daughter Lucynell and a one-armed man Mr. Shiftlet, “She was ravenous for a son-in-law. That night, rocking on the

porch, the old woman began her business at once. ‘You want you an innocent woman, don't you?’[13].

After scrutinizing the text, we can easily find that over half of the dialogue initiated by the old lady is pivotal on boasting about her daughter and arranging this marriage, “she is the sweetest girl in the world... She’s smart too”. She brainwashes Mr. Shiftlet into the marriage by humiliating his physical disability that “lemme tell you something: There ain’t any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man”[13]. It is not until the moment Mr. Shiftlet leaves Lucynell along on the counter does Mr. Shiftlet begin his business, scamming the old lady and taking her car. Thereafter, this article announces that one of the most obvious paradoxes is that the over 8 out of 10 pages of this story discusses the injustice and inequality of how the old lady demonstrate toward Mr. Shift and the old lady’s dominance over Mr. Shiftlet, which supposedly leads the story into how the old lady deprives a one-armed man, while in fact the ending deviates its narrative logic abruptly to a discrepant story that Mr. Shiftlet manipulates this family to take over their car.

That is not to say that O’Connor does not design any hints to underpin the final action that Mr. Shiftlet decides to abandon Lucynell, steal the car, and reverse the position between him and the old lady. What this article makes efforts to prove is that the dominant and subordinate position between the old lady and Mr. Shiftlet is actually shaky, floating, and hard to nail down to a settled summary due to the instability and incompatibility of the text. Thus, it is impossible to abide by structuralism’s ideology, which is to categorize this story into a certain story pattern and crystallize this story into a certain form of universality. No matter purposefully or unconsciously, O’Connor does scatter some noticeable controversial hints here and there foreshadowing this incident of Mr. Shiftlet stealing Lucynell’s car and subverting the position of him and the old lady to come. For instance, there are three times that Mr. Shiftlet deflects the conversation to how to fix and paint the car when the old lady is talking about arranging the marriage between him and her daughter. Mr. Shiftlet is reluctant to accept the marriage without taking her daughter out for a while and finally the old lady succumbs to him. Even though Mr. Shiftlet is the responder rather than questioner in the conversation section of this story. He whimsically drives the conversation to absurdity to dodge the old lady’s pry. When the first time they meet each other, old lady asks him what he is doing here, he replies with his view of heart surgery; When the old lady asks him who he is, he waywardly says that he could be anyone. Yet readers can not deduce from these evidence that the story is about how Mr. Shiftlet takes control and manipulates a poor family, abandons his wife and steals his mother-in-law’s car. Because the text indistinguishably makes room for both Mr. Shiftlet’s so-called manipulation of the family and the old lady’s exploitation of Mr. Shiftlet.

5. CONCLUSION

By virtue of the literary analytical technique drawn from deconstruction, this article aims to uncover one of the main paradoxes underlying in the story *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, which is the co-existence of the dominant position of the old lady Lucknell Crater over Mr. Shiftlet and vice versa. After scrutinizing, this story is both about how Mr. Shiftlet “milks”, as O’Connor herself describes his action through the speak of the old lady’s family and how the old lady taking advantage of Mr. Shiftlet because of the text’s self-contradictory quality. These two paradoxical themes co-exist within the text, hence, this story cannot simply be put into any story pattern and fixed structure following structuralism’s dogma. Instead, this article claims that the meaning and the structure of this story is luxuriantly discursive and colorfully buoyant with the help of even the most basic deconstructive analysis.

The limitation of this research is that this article totally dismisses author’s subjectivity in terms of choosing one specific facet of this story, that is, positional analysis between two main characters over other equally crucial facets. Due to words limitation, this article is also imperfect in all-encompassing articulating how the text organizing and how it is deconstructed by itself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am really grateful that Georgia Soares, a comparative literature Ph.D. candidate recommended me to read *Literary Theory* written by Eagleton Terry, which I found deconstruction particularly mesmerizing me. Georgia also tirelessly helped me walk through the application of deconstructive analysis to other reputational novels, facilitating me to observe literature, linguistics, and the surrounding with the lens of deconstruction. I also highly appreciate Professor Lingzhen Wang in Brown Wang, who further perfectly demonstrated the timeline of the development of deconstruction, and also, kept giving me enlightened ideas in my process of writing this article.

REFERENCES

- [1] De Man, Paul, et al. *Deconstruction and Criticism*. Seabury Press, 1979.
- [2] Lawlor, Leonard. Jacques Derrida. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2019 Edition,

Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/derrida/>.

[3] Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

[4] Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nd ed., Manchester University Press, 2002.

[5] Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

[6] Derrida, Jacques and John D. Caputo. "Deconstruction in a Nutshell." *Nursing Philosophy*, vol.5, 2004, pp. 274-276.

[7] Wolfreys, Julian. *Deconstruction – Derrida*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 1998.

[8] Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*. Edited by Roland Barthes, Translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana, 1977.

[9] Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of The Text*. Translated by Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, 1975.

[10] Basselin, Timothy J. *Flannery O'Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity*. Baylor University Press, 2013.

[11] O'Connor, Flannery. *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. Edited by Sally Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.

[12] Sykes, John D. *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*. University of Missouri, 2007.

[13] O'Connor, Flannery. *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1977.