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ON DECONSTRUCTION AND NEW HISTORICISM

Abstract

New Historicism has been one of the most influential literary theories since the early 1980s. It is fact that new historicism was influenced by Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction theory. For this reason it is very crucial to figure out the nature of deconstruction technique to understand new historicism. While deconstruction technique attempts to interpret a text by understanding its subconscious, new historicism tries to understand a literary work by reading non-literary works of that era. In contrast to this similarity between them, there are also considerable differences between the two theories. In this study, these two theories are evaluated comparatively.

Keywords: new historicism, deconstruction, literary theory

YAPISÖKÜM VE YENİ TARİHSELÇİLİK ÜZERİNE

Özet

Yeni tarihselcilik, 1980'lerin başından bu yana en etkili edebi teorilerden birisi olmuştur. Aslında yeni tarihselçiliğin Jacques Derrida'nın yapısöküm teorisinden etkilendiği bilinen bir gerçek. Bu nedenle, yeni tarihselçiliği anlamak için yapısöküm tekniğinin özünü anlamak çok önemlidir. Yapisöküm tekniği metnin bilinç altında okuyup doğrudan ifade edilmeyen, yani ima edilen anlamı yüzeye çıkarmak suretiyle metni yorumlamaya çalışırken, yeni tarihselcilik incelenen edebiyat eserinin ait olduğu dönemde yazılan, edebi olmayan eserleri okumak yoluya edebi bir eseri anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Aralarındaki bu benzerliğe karşılık,
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iki kuram arasında oldukça önemli farklılıklar da bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışmada bu iki kuram karşılaştırmalı olarak ele alınarak değerlendirilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: yeni tarihselcilik, yapısöküm, edebiyat eleştirisi

Introduction

Being two frequently used literary theories, deconstruction and new historicism have been influential in the literary world since their emergence in the late twentieth century. Although there seems to be similarity between the two theories in terms of their close reading of a text in deconstruction and of a period in new historicism, there are great differences between the two theories. It is fact that, the only similarity between these theories is their approach. Deconstruction is a close reading of a text in order to interpret underlying meaning. New historicism is a close reading of non-literary texts of a specific period to understand a literary work. Apart from this resemblance, there is no other similarity between the two theories. In order to understand the similarities and differences better, it is significant to remember these two theories successively.

1. Deconstruction

In 1960s, poststructuralism emerged as a reaction against structuralism in France and Jacques Derrida was one of the leading figures of this new movement. Some authors including Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault took part in this new movement and commenced to defend the views of poststructuralism. Poststructuralists, in those years’ France, started to defend the concept of ‘self’ and underlined the paramount nature of the different perceptions of the same signifiers. Saussurean understanding of signification which consists of a signifier and a signified combination left its place to a contingency of multiple meanings in poststructuralist criticism.

Jacques Derrida’s famous works Of Grammatology, Speech and Phenomena and Writing and Difference have had a great impact on the intellectual world since their publication in 1967. In these works, Derrida strictly criticized the Saussurean point of view as regards the meaning and text. He not only rejected the structuralist point of view, but also founded a new way of criticism so as to figure out the relation between the meaning and text called deconstruction. On the grounds that Derrida’s deconstruction method has a philosophical background, it is pretty difficult to grasp its gist. Therefore, it is crucial to know Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Fredrich Nietzsche, Martin Heiddegger, Ferdinand de Saussure, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and their philosophical views in order to understand Derrida’s deconstruction theory. According to Barry “Derrida sees in modern times a particular intellectual ‘event’ which constitutes a radical break from past ways of thought, loosely associating this break with the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger and the psychoanalysis of Freud” (2002, p. 66).

In order to explain Derrida’s deconstruction theory clearly, I will try to explain it in detail. First of all, Derrida refuses Saussure’s signification theory concerning meaning. As it is well known, Saussure in his Course in General Linguistics defends the view that a language is a system of signs. All the words in a language system are signifiers and the images emerging regarding the meaning of those signifiers in our minds are the signifieds. According to Saussure, this signification system of a language can be studied synchronically and there is no need to study the system of a language diachronically.
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However, Derrida opposes this idea in his *Writing and Difference*. Referring to the verbs ‘defer’ and ‘differ’ Derrida coins a new word ‘différance’ so as to focus on the temporal and spatial differences in a language. He explains his views through this new word ‘différance’. According to Derrida there are two axes of difference. The first one is spatial difference. A word for instance can be understood differently in different cultures, countries or places. The second one is the temporal difference. Because the level of knowledge of a human being changes as long as time goes by, or owing to different factors, a word can be understood differently at different ages, for instance Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Prior to Sigmund Freud’s invention of Psychoanalysis theory in 1900, understanding the repressed feelings of Shakespeare’s Hamlet was impossible without Freud’s Oedipal interpretation.

Secondly, Derrida was influenced by Platonic and Kantian ontologies. As is known, both philosophers have similar theories concerning the presence of knowledge. While Plato is describing two worlds, the perceptible world and the world of ideal forms; Immanuel Kant similarly depicts two different worlds of noumenal realm and phenomenal realm in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant’s noumenal realm and Plato’s world of ideals represent the spatial difference from the phenomenal realm and the world of forms. Because both the noumenal realm and the world of ideals are untouchable and unphysical realms, they demonstrate the spatial difference with regard to substance and presence. Derrida believes that there are both temporal and spatial differences regarding the meaning, knowledge and truth.

Thirdly, Derrida rejects the binary oppositions that were initially introduced by Aristotle in the tenth book of *Poetics*. Aristotle was the first philosopher to introduce us to the Pythagorean opposites (table 1.1). “Aristotle associated moral prestige with the left-hand column, because the “good” things appear in that column” (Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 2016). Derrida totally opposes to binary oppositions and he believes that there are no logical reasons behind the binary oppositions. According to Derrida binary oppositions create ‘violent hierarchy’. Instead, he defends a decentered world. When he says “There is nothing outside the text” he means, there is no centre for the certain truth and there are different meanings perceived by different readers at different places and at different times. By doing so, Derrida rejects all kinds of hierarchies and binary oppositions of western metaphysical opinion. He deconstructs the buildings of texts from the hierarchies, binary oppositions and logocentrism. This decentered point of view of Derrida is profoundly associated with the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Apart from Sigmund Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger were presumably the most important philosophers in influencing Derrida in his deconstruction theory. According to Barry, for instance, “Derrida sees in modern times a particular intellectual ‘event’ which constitutes a radical break from past ways of thought, loosely associating this break with the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger and the psychoanalysis of Freud” (2002, p. 66). Nietzsche was among the few philosophers questioning the accuracy of knowledge in the age of positivism. In his 1873 essay ‘On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense’ he started to question the assumptions about the certainty of knowledge (cited in Rivkin 2000, p. 262). According to Rivkin, “When the Post-Structuralists declare that there is no “transcendental signified,” they are echoing Nietzsche’s claim that there is teleology, no theological origin or goal to the world” (2000, p. 266)
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Table 1.1: Pythagorean opposites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limited</th>
<th>Unlimited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Odd</td>
<td>Even</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Rest</td>
<td>In Motion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Curved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light</td>
<td>Darkness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Square</td>
<td>Oblong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Aristotle’s table of the Pythagorean Opposites (Encyclopedia Britannica Online 2016)

Martin Heidegger as one of the important philosophers influencing Derrida’s deconstruction theory elaborated on the necessity of difference to any determination of identity in his essay ‘Identity and Difference’ (Rivkin, 2000, p. 271).

French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, who applied Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis to the language system, found out the fact that the language system and subconscious of human beings have got the same working principles. To put it another way, Lacan proved that the working system of a language is similar to the working system of the subconscious. He claimed that metaphors and metonyms demonstrate the subconscious of the human mind. Similar to Freudian slip of tongue which suddenly reveals the repressed feelings or opinions of the speaker, metaphors and metonyms have the same duty and are the symbols of the repressed feelings. Therefore, when a text is read deeply in the light of psychoanalysis, it is possible to grasp the underlying or hidden meaning of the text.

According to Derrida the text itself is enough to understand the full meaning of the text. Most of the time there are hidden messages behind the written texts. In order to acquire the subconscious of the text deconstructive critics employ psychoanalysis.

Different from Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Sassure’s view as regards the signifier and signified, Derrida claims that the signified existed before the signifier. Similar to binary oppositions like black and white, up and down, good and bad, woman and man, when we read a text we are faced with two different meanings. The first one is expressed meaning and the other one is hidden meaning of the text.

2. What is New Historicism?

New historicism emerged in the early 1980s as a literary theory in North America. Stephen Greenblatt, English Professor at Harvard University, was the leading figure of this new movement. It was a kind of reaction against traditional approaches. New historicists do not study the literary work autonomously. On the contrary, they build a bridge between literary and...
non-literary texts and forms so as to evaluate the literary work as a product of specific politic, cultural and social contexts (Leitch 2001, p. 27). In other words, new historicists’ main aim is to figure out the literary work within its own historical context. Therefore, a simultaneous study of literary work and its historical context is essential in order to figure out the literary work. According to Peter Barry it is crucial to read both literary and non-literary texts of the same period in order to make a new historicist criticism (2002, p. 172). History books, chronicles, newspapers, letters or any other historical records are extremely significant to understand the age in which literary work was written. Because of this dependence of new historicist criticism on the texts, both literary and non-literary, Peter Barry claims that new historicism is influenced by Derrida’s deconstruction theory which claims that there is nothing outside the text (2002, p. 175).

Conclusion

According to deconstruction theory it is only possible to understand the text by only reading the text itself. New historicists employ any kind of printed historical material like legal documents of courts, parliaments or churches, diaries, letters or newspapers in their analysis of a literary work. By doing so, they try to show how the literary work was influenced by the political, cultural, religious or social context. Deconstructionists, on the other hand, try to understand the hidden meaning or inconsistencies in a literary work by utilizing only the literary work itself.

Peter Barry defines new historicism as a theory which is “based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period” (2002, p. 172) and states the idea that new historicism is influenced by Derrida’s deconstruction theory as new historicists also believe that there is nothing outside the text (Barry, 2002, p. 175). It is a fact that we learn most of the historical events as regards our past through texts. Therefore, text is crucially significant both in new historicism and in deconstruction. In this respect, new historicists employ any kind of printed historical documents like legal documents of courts, parliaments or churches, diaries, letters or newspapers in their analysis of a literary work. By doing so, they try to show how the literary work was influenced by the political, cultural, religious or social context. Consequently, being two widely used literary theories, deconstruction and new historicism have one thing in common. Deconstruction is a close reading of a text in order to interpret underlying meaning. New historicism is a close reading of non-literary texts of a specific period to understand a literary work. Apart from this resemblance, there is no other similarity between the two theories.

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