Dissecting the Structure of Joyce Kilmer's 'Trees'

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ABSTRACT: This literary research aimed to analyze the poem of Joyce Kilmer's Trees. This textual analysis utilizes a structural approach that explores binary oppositions in the content. A structural analysis uncovered the deep structures and underlying patterns that inform literary texts. It also identified recurring themes, motifs, and narrative structures that contribute to the overall meaning of a work. The elements include light and darkness, strength and fragility, rootedness and freedom. It sought to find the meaning of the text in-depth by identifying the relationship between the binary oppositions. The result revealed that the use of vivid imagery and contrasting ideas highlighted the complexity and interconnectedness of the natural world.

KEYWORDS: structural analysis, binary oppositions, imagery, complexity

INTRODUCTION

Joyce Kilmer is a notable figure in the expansive realm of American literature whose literary contributions endure in the hearts of readers today. As an American poet and journalist, Kilmer's most renowned creation, "Trees," epitomizes his romantic and lyrical approach to poetry. Throughout his career, he garnered recognition for his adept exploration of themes rooted in nature, spirituality, and patriotism. What distinguishes Kilmer is his remarkable talent for capturing the inherent beauty and essence of the natural world while delving into profound subjects like faith and love for one's homeland. Through his enchanting verse, Kilmer captivated audiences, leaving an unmistakable imprint on the literary landscape.

His famous poem, "Trees," is a testament to his profound connection with the natural world. In this piece, Kilmer extols the magnificence and resilience of trees, drawing parallels with the human spirit. The vividness of his imagery, as well as his use of his melodic language, transcends readers into a realm where nature becomes an intrinsic part of their existence. Kilmer also incorporated themes and stylistic elements reminiscent of Romanticism in his poetry.

Indeed, his significant contributions to American literature are immense. He is a unique poet who displays a unique ability to blend lyrical beauty, spiritual contemplation, and a deep connection to nature within his poetry, which has influenced countless writers over the years. He also exhibited a subversive writing style that challenged the prevailing literary trends of his time, emphasizing simplicity and sincerity. The impact of his works can still be seen today in contemporary poets who draw inspiration from his ability to express profound emotions with clarity and precision. He has left an enduring legacy that inspires readers and writers today.

Meanwhile, literary criticism, as a discipline, encompasses various approaches that enable readers to interpret and analyze works of literature more effectively. One such approach is structuralism, which focuses on a literary text's underlying structure and systems. Structuralism is a critical theory and approach to literature that emerged in the mid-20th century as a reaction against the subjective and impressionistic methods of literary analysis prevalent at the time. Developed and pioneered by linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and literary theorists like Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss, structuralism seeks to understand and interpret the underlying structures and systems that shape and give meaning to language and literature. Compared to other approaches, structuralism places significant emphasis on the role of language as a system of signs and symbols. It argues that language is not simply a means of communication but a structure with rules, conventions, and underlying patterns. Structuralists examine how language operates to construct meaning and shape our understanding of the world.

Within the parameters of this research, this paper sought to analyze Kilmer's Trees as a well-known poem of all time.

METHODOLOGY

This literary research used a textual analysis, utilizing a structural analysis and exploring the presence of binary oppositions in the text. Through structural analysis, it seeks to uncover the deep structures and underlying patterns that inform literary texts while also identifying recurring themes, motifs, and narrative structures that contribute to the overall meaning of a work.

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Structuralists aim to identify the foundational structures that govern an organization by analyzing the relationships and interconnections between elements in a text.

In addition, the binary oppositions in the text were also explored. Binary opposition refers to juxtaposing and contrasting opposing concepts or categories, such as light and dark, good and evil, or male and female. These oppositions create tension and contribute to a literary work's structure and meaning.

Likewise, this paper also employed a close reading, which serves as a tool in structuralism to unravel the depths of literary works. Close reading is a fundamental practice within literary analysis, adopted by various critical approaches to interpreting the meaning of a text. Through this, the paper unveiled the intricate layers of meaning inherent in the text. This specifically focused on reconstructing binary oppositions, analyzing narrative structures, unraveling intertextuality, and employing semiotic analysis so readers can uncover the hidden layers of signification within a text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees" is a timeless piece of literature that celebrates the beauty of nature and highlights the profound connection between humans and their surroundings. Through a close analysis of the poem's language, form, and imagery, we can better understand Kilmer's intent and appreciate the significance of this poetic masterpiece.

I think that I shall never see
A poem is as lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may, in Summer, wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

One thing that makes Kilmer's poem a pleasant read is his choice of language. It is simple yet evocative and has a sentimental tone at the same time. In this way, he could perfectly capture the sense of awe and reverence for nature; apart from that, his use of adjectives like "lovely," "deep-rooted," and "beautiful" produce vivid images that elicit a strong emotional response to the readers.

Aside from this, Kilmer's application of figurative language, specifically allusion, and personification, is also revealed. Through allusion throughout his lines, he alludes to brief and indirect references to life, nature, and philosophy, which captures a deep and meaningful understanding of life. Moreover, he also attributes human-like qualities to the trees, emphasizing their enduring presence and significance as Kilmer writes in line 4, "A tree that may in summer wear a nest of robins in her hair," which encapsulates the nurturing nature of trees in providing protection and sustenance to various creatures. Using these figurative languages adds depth and establishes a connection between nature and humanity.

It was also highlighted that the poem's form is an essential element of equal importance, along with its use of language and meaning. This poem's structure, in particular, gives it a sense of organization, coherence, and rhythm. Kilmer has carefully structured this poem to enhance its overall impact and meaning while deepening the reader's understanding of its general idea. Hence, it comprises twelve concise lines constructed with a consistent iambic tetrameter. It has a regular meter and rhyme scheme (A-A-B-B-C-C-D-D-E-E-A-A), which lends a certain musicality that engages the reader audibly and rhythmically. This structured form captures the sense of harmony in nature and reflects the consistency and balance that the trees allude to.

Another interesting point is the ending line, *"Poems are made by fools like me, But only God can make a tree,"* at the end of both stanzas. This, too, highlights the poem's central theme, which revolves around the intricacy and the complexity of nature's beauty, which is beyond human creativity. In the end, this is a compelling and vital line that reminds us of the unfathomable power of our natural world while also reminding us of humble places.

Meanwhile, vivid and evocative imagery in Kilmer's poem is also important. Not only does it help create visual pictures in the reader's mind, but it also serves as a symbol to emphasize its much deeper meaning. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist language consists of a network of signs, each comprising a signifier and a signified. He proposed that a sign is a combination of a signifier, the physical form of the sign, and a point, which is the concept or meaning associated with the sign.

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Likely, he highlighted the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and socially constructed. Language is not innate but rather a product of society and culture.

Kilmer's poem, which uses a tree as a sign, can be broken down into several concepts it stands for. This idea can be construed from the lines of a poem where it discusses the nature of trees as symbolism for a profound idea about life. For example, in lines 3 and 4,

> *"A tree whose hungry mouth is prest*
> *Against the earth's sweet flowing breast*

and in lines 5 and 6,

> "*A tree that looks at God all day,*
> *And lifts her leafy arms to pray*;"

These illustrate nature's symbiotic and harmonious relationship, especially between the trees and the earth they inhabit. These images emphasize the interconnectedness of living things in the natural world. However, it must be noted that the poem presents a deeper and more complex understanding of the natural world, especially when using symbolism. According to renowned literary critic Roland Barthes (1964), symbolism is a literary device that refers to an object, person, or event that represents a more profound meaning or concept. It is used to convey abstract ideas and emotions through symbolic representations.

Furthermore, the binary oppositions of the imagery in the poem captured the essence of the delicate balance between duality and harmony in nature. For instance, in light and dark in the first two lines, *"I think that I shall never see, A poem lovely as a tree."* These lines established the juxtaposition between light (loveliness) and darkness (never see). Light and dark are prominent symbols across many cultures. Generally, light stands for purity and enlightenment. At the same time, darkness represents something serious and beyond comprehension. This juxtaposition between light and dark presents the beauty of a tree that cannot be fully grasped or comprehended, which stands as a testament to the complexity of nature's grandeur.

Moreover, the other binary oppositions are the use of seasons like *summer* and *winter.* This cycle of seasons of the year is often associated with change. In lines 7, 8, and 9, Kilmer writes, "A tree that may in Summer wear A nest of robins in her hair; Upon whose bosom snow has lain," juxtaposing the vibrancy of summer with the purity of winter. This contrasting imagery further emphasizes the enduring beauty of trees throughout the changing seasons. It underscores their capacity to nurture life and provide refuge against the harsh seasons, while it could also be translated into reverence for life and growth. Thus, the poem expresses a profound reverence for the life cycle of trees.

Additionally, the poem conjures a poignant binary opposition between life and death through the imagery of trees. This cyclical nature of trees serves as a metaphor for the series of beginnings and endings experienced by all living beings. Apart from that, they can also stand for the changing cycles in our lives. The vibrancy of summer depicts happiness and contentment, while winter stands for sadness. These emotions pervade our human life and go on a cycle. Life is transient, a constant cycle of changes and repetitions, but above all, the tree reminds us of its beauty and urges us to embrace changes. This portrayal encourages readers to seek solace in nature, encouraging introspection and self-reflection. Moreover, it also describes trees as having "*strong arms that never flail."* This evokes a sense of strength and stability in nature. However, he then contrasts this with the line, *"Poems are made by fools like me, But only God can make a tree."* This binary opposition highlights the humility of human efforts compared to the inherent power and resilience trees exhibit. This contrast serves as a reminder of the delicate balance between human existence and the enduring strength of nature.

Another binary opposition present in "Trees" is the idea of materialism versus spirituality. The lines "*A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed, Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;*" suggest that the tree strives to survive and must depend on the earth that it inhibits. The earth here represents the physical world, where the tree depends for its nourishment. The following lines, "*A tree that looks at God all day, And lifts her leafy arms to pray;*" embody spiritualism. This refers to one's spiritual beliefs. The tree needs nourishment for its physical body, mind, and soul. This seeming contradiction between the fulfillment of one's material and spiritual needs signifies the balance and coexistence between the material and spiritual realms. It suggests that existence is not purely dependent on material needs but also on the need to be connected to the spiritual realm, where a deeper understanding of the self lies. It reveals the innate wisdom of trees, both rooted in their surroundings and omniscient beings, suggesting a life-giving connection between trees and the divine. However, the poem affirms, "*But only God can make a tree."* This contrast emphasizes mortality and the life cycle, with trees serving as a living testament to the short-term nature of existence.

CONCLUSION

Through its thematic, adept use of poetic devices, and careful structural construction, Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" emerges as a timeless ode to the beauty and significance of the natural world. By delving into its structure, we can better appreciate the poem's enduring appeal and profound insights into the human condition. Kilmer's language, through simple, carries a profound impact, skillfully navigating binary oppositions inherent in nature. Beyond its rhythmic and lyrical qualities, the poem delves into the themes of these binary oppositions. Using vivid imagery and contrasting concepts to underscore the complexity and interconnectedness of

the natural world through contrasts such as light and darkness, strength and fragility, rootedness and freedom, and life and death, Kilmer captures the intricate tapestry of nature. He invites readers to reflect on the delicate balance and interplay between these opposing forces, reminding us of the eternal beauty and mystery in the tree realm. Hence, a tree is a physical presence and a profound symbol of divine creation that commands our awe and respect.

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