

# A Simplified read to Derrida's Grammatology, Deconstruction in The Workhouse Ward for Lady Gregory

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**Abstract** – The year 1967 was the publication Of Grammatology by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. The book, which introduced the concept of deconstruction, suggests that in philosophical way. He discusses the theories about language and writing presented by many authors such as, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Martin Heidegger, throughout the book. Derrida doesn't merely criticise some of their theories, but he actually asks for a new science that called "grammatology" to investigate the issues he raises regarding how to theorise the act of writing. The aim of this paper is to simplify Derrida's concepts according to what came in his book beside shedding the light of the important steps of how to deconstruct a text according to Derrida's principles applying that to one play.

**Keywords** – Derrida Grammatolgy, Deconstruction, The Workhouse Ward

## I. INTRODUCTION

Derrida's Grammatology has its philosophical aspect rather than being just a criticism text. Many scholars as well as public readers find it difficult to understand Derrida's ideas as they try to understand the book in the classical way without putting into their consideration that Derrida in his masterpiece book tended to start a new trend if we can call it so or a different perception in understanding the written language. As Ulmer argues in his applied

grammatology "I will argue that grammatology, a name designating a new organization of cultural studies, is first of all a new mode. As a result of this emphasis or selection within Derrida's program, some of the best younger critics, even while ..." (ULMER, 2019, P.19). The best way to understand Derrida's *Grammatology* is to follow the point sequence that Derrida himself did in his book so we can get as much close on how Derrida came up with his concepts. Derrida tried to make his words clear and doesn't carry different levels of

interpretation; his philosophy focuses basically on certainty of understanding “our certainties” are expressed through texts, through language, through sign systems, which are no longer seen to be neutral. It appears, therefore, in principle there can be no arena of certainty” (Lawson, 1985, P.10). Derrida from the beginning of the book focuses attention on three main themes: ethnocentrism, that represents the individual’s own culture. Logocentrism representing the knowledge and phonocentrism. Regarding phonocentrism he refers to the philosophical view that suggests that representation of speech in writing hides the meaning of the spoken statement; therefore something is lost in transfer. According to metaphysics, this view says, speech is associated with truth and is merely the basis of writing. Derrida explains that he considers this as a key factor to understand the development of western philosophy starting from Socrates onwards. Then he moves to a science view that invokes symbols rather than words, not prioritizing speech so it can progress. Derrida from this point suggests his view and wonders if science be applied to writing as well and to have grammatology. As he is not satisfied with these views, he finds the hope in grammatology “Grammatology, he says “shows signs of liberation all over the world as a result of decisive efforts” (Derrida, 1976, p.4).

Derrida explains the ideas and terminologies of the Swiss linguist and semiotician, Ferdinand de Saussure that suggest that words’ meanings work by differences not similarity with no physical or natural standard. The words describe themselves by themselves! for example we can differ a triangle from a square by the shape and the difference between them but would that be applied on words as well? In fact there is no real connection between words (the signifier) and the idea or the thing that to be described (the signified). According to Derrida, it’s all about the individual’s understanding of language, but that wouldn’t be so accurate for the different use of words etymologically, or even semantically among different groups of individual groups. Spoken word is a signifier as well as the written word, so how would a signifier describe a signifier by its own different individual’s perceptions. In this sense, Derrida finds it a matter of necessity having grammatology “The privilege of the phone does not depend upon a choice that could have been avoided” (Derrida, 1976, p.7). He traces

its origin back to Plato and the Socratic dialogues. “The system of hearing oneself speak, through the phone-like substance, presents itself as the non-exterior” (Derrida, 1976, p.7). While the spoken word was preferred by both Socrates and Aristotle as it is from the inside then writing comes later, Derrida sees that writing is not just the reporting of speech. Writing according to Derrida can be the best communication tool when it is set according to applied rules.

## II. THE SIGNIFIER AND ITS RELATION WITH TRUTH

Derrida introduces the idea that writing contests the idea of knowledge, the logos and, crucially, the concept of deconstruction texts to determine their intended meaning. Thus we have to “inaugurate the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the deconstruction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos” (Derrida, 1976, p.10). There are main features that control our use of language. According to logocentrism meaning is reduced to predetermined definitions, and these definitions are dependent on the signifier and how it interacts with the signified. The logocentric viewpoint holds that we have access to stable conceptual meanings. The meaning we infer from this pairing, however, is not necessarily fixed because the signifier and the signified do not exist separately. Thus, texts have the capacity for deception. Catherine Turner uses the concept of justice as an illustration. We associate our concept of justice—a word that denotes an abstract idea with the concrete idea of the institutions of justice (the law, the courts). The complainant seeks justice (in the broad sense) and goes to the courts for it; he or she sees no difference between the two. Though are they? Meaning changes constantly. Justice as we know it is transformed. On the other side, the institutional sense of justice is likely to prevail. This ambiguity of definition, which affects most words that represent concepts to varying degrees, enables deconstruction of texts and the highlighting of the contradictions that result from an instant intuitive reading of signs. Other interpretations, readings, and particularly hidden meanings exist that the author may not have intended. Deconstruction is not a technique, it’s vital to remember that. It is a method

of reading texts that involves challenging them, using Derrida's concepts as a guide. Although it won't offer an alternative logos, it will offer several interpretations. Derrida writes:

Within the closure [of the search for a logos, a divinity or true basis for knowledge], by an oblique and always perilous movement, constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed, it is necessary to surround the critical concepts with a careful and thorough discourse—to mark the conditions, the medium, and the limits of their effectiveness and to designate rigorously their intimate relationship to the machine whose deconstruction they permit; and, in the same process, designate the crevice through which the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed (Derrida, 1976 P 14).

Even if the signified had an instant connection to truth, it would still have an unmediated relationship with the signifier, therefore mediation is still needed and that leaves the door opened to different interpretations.

### III. a. THE TRACE AND PRESENCE

The study of metaphysics employs binary hierarchies, prioritizing current understanding or proximity in time or place over any delayed or missing understanding. Thus, western philosophers generally favor present certainties when discussing presence. The trace refers to the same binary hierarchy, according to which a word's entire meaning is determined by how it differs from other words. We use the dictionary to determine the definition of a word. Our term is defined by other words that have a similar meaning, and those definitions are followed by others. However, every word we use has a binary opponent, and we can define a word in terms of that opposite. Therefore, whenever the word is used "present", it carries something about absence. If we write the word 'triangle', the reader realises it's not a square for example so, that confirms the idea of awareness of opposite binaries. Derrida refuses this as words change in meaning over time and in various settings, and they do not preserve their meaning due to changes. That change is depicted by the trace. Even by itself, it is not a static idea.

Derrida also comments on Heidegger's own philosophy in *Being and Time* "Heidegger reminds us constantly that the sense of being is neither the word 'being' nor the concept of being" (Derrida, 1976, P. 21).

### III. b. THE METAPHYSICS OF PRESENCE

According to Derrida the term "metaphysics" to refer to more than just the usual studies of the core nature of reality as it exists outside of the objective experience. The pursuit of objective truth by the western philosophical tradition as a big goal is related to logocentrism and metaphysics. In "*Limited Inc.*" he describes his view in more detail. The enterprise of returning 'strategically', 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent (Derrida & Graff, 1988, p. 236).

Derrida therefore argues that metaphysics favors the dominating side of a binary and that Being's meaning cannot be defined, or more precisely, it cannot be determined. It is impossible to define.

### IV. DIFFERENCE

The French terms difference and differer are combined to form the word differance. It suggests that words and signs are defined by other words or signs from which they vary as well as having their meaning continuously deferred through infinite change of words or signifiers. Deferring can occur in terms of time, context, or even just the ability to subject the meaning to another related one. This varying and deferring procedure is ongoing whether utilizing a language or comprehending a material.

Depending on the context of a text or a further reading, the perceiver may interpret it differently. Even right now, in this situation, my conception and yours might be different, and this gap would increase in the future. As a result, the trace is constantly changing and deferring. Derrida intends to draw attention to this methodical procedure in language as a changeable thing when he uses the term *differance*. Lawson uses the example of "the chair is black" to effectively illustrate this as well as the ideas of the metaphysics of presence, trace, and *differance* (Lawson, 1985 p.100). Derrida does not reject the reality of the outside world, only he says that The meaning of the sentence takes place in the play that is the web of language, and experience is not an independent thing which stands outside of that play. Each one can imagine the chair in different way according to his own experience and background.

Derrida says "Hegel was already caught up in this game" (Derrida, 1976, p.24). He meant by this game; the several attempts of many philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger who tried to set a concept for this issue but gave up because of the long and harsh struggle that they both went through. Hegel is well known for using dialectic to defer understanding. He also admired the absence of sounds in non-phonetic writing, such as hieroglyphics and sign language.

#### a. THE OUTSIDE AND THE Derrida

Criticises Saussure for adopting the positions of Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel by considering writing to play a secondary role in his linguist framework. Writing is a "sign of a sign," as they defined it. According to Derrida, this only applies to one particular type of writing, phonetic writing, which is focused on words, monemes, and syntagms. Logic, Chinese, and sign languages are examples of symbolic languages that are not built in the same way. In fact, Saussure mentions both Chinese and alphabetical languages. However, he excludes pictograms and early writing systems in which a picture was substituted for a word or

phrase. In fact, his research focuses almost exclusively on alphabet languages. He views writing as nothing more than a form of notation. He seemed to regard it as the "intrusion of an artful technique"; an inside and an outside, much like Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. Saussure talks of "The natural kind, the only true bond, the bond of sound" (Derrida, 1976, p.35). Derrida sees this unfair and wonder why linguists don't appreciate the written word as the same as the spoken one.

#### b. ARCHE-WRITING

Arche-writing is the principle of writing as classically determined within the tradition of metaphysics, the notion of the instituted trace that "functions" in the absence of any author or reader. As such, it is always "already there" in the sense that language, including spoken language, consistently and crucially relies on just this notion. One way to think about this is to note that whereas the voice is temporal and sequential (expressions are spoken one after another and vanish when the voice stops speaking), writing is spatial and simultaneous (all the words on a page are there at once). Derrida argues that this simultaneity is the principle of language as a whole the fact that a signifier. For example, can mean any one particular thing depends on there being, at the same time, other signifiers that mean other things and which are absent but constantly effective in the system. This constant "trace" of the absent signifier in the "presence" of any other signifier is the difference that creates meaning; both speech and writing as forms of language depend on it. Derrida's point with arche-writing is that if we want to identify this trace-as-fundamental-principle with one of these forms, we're going to pick writing, not speech. Derrida suggests that "I have already begun to justify this word arche-writing, and especially the necessity of the communication between the concept of arche-writing and the vulgar concept of writing submitted to deconstruction by it" (Derrida, 1976, p.60). Derrida suggests that what comes out of

deconstruction is the arche-writing and its the way to reach the “ultimate foundation”.

In his article *The Derridean Ten Commandments* by Wael Mustafa the lecturer in Literary Theory at Fayoum University, concludes the main protocols of Deconstructive Interpretation In Derrida's Writings. Understanding these protocols would help in different analysis for any text according to Derrida's concepts. The first concept as explained earlier is about the idea of Deconstructive Interpretation in which he emphasis the différance as a concept rather than a term in itself ( Mustafa, 2018, p.603).

#### c. CRITIQUE THE ELEMENT AND THE TRACE WITHIN

As Derrida explains that there is no actual mediated presence between the signifier and the signified, so he focuses more on the element and trace within it. Derrida argues that meanings can be located only in these traces, which are what signs differ/defer from. Trace is the absent part of the sign's presence. In other words, through the act of différance, a sign leaves behind a trace, which is whatever is left over after everything present has been accounted for. Derrida explains “is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” ( Michal, 2019, p. 84).

#### d. NO TEXT IS THE AUTHOR

Derrida says, 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte' which could be literally translated to 'There is no outside-text. As Derrida himself suggests that there is no fixed interpretation and following the traces. Terms such as plurality and Intertextuality could be present to explain Derrida's idea. He actually argues that the text owns itself, and in order to get free interpretations we should analyse any text regardless the writer's view. In fact, the writer himself would get affected by different traces and other different texts, cultures, reads or others's experiences. Thus, we also have the right to read it

in plurality and Intertextuality sense as it's not a static itself. Kristeva states that “a text is not the production of the author's original mind; rather, it is the assemblage of materials from other texts. It is more like the product through the process of appropriation of, or compilation from the texts, which have already existed” (Kristeva,1984, p.36). According to Derrida we have the right to explore the “richness of substance” or the “semantic fertility”.

#### e. SUSPEND ALL CONCEPTS AND PUT WORDS SOUS RATURE

One of the most interesting concepts that Derrida argues about is keeping the erases words; following Heidegger's way in deconstructing philosophical texts. This might seem strange to some, but with understanding Derrida's philosophy; we can realise that he explains his views in practical way. Omitting a Word by the writer shouldn't affect the reader's interpretation of the text as it opens the door for several understanding of different words and traces that in fact construct the text rather than simple signifiers. In Derrida's assertion:

That mark of deletion is not however, a „mere negative symbol,“. Under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while still remaining legible. Is effaced while remaining legible is destroyed while making visible the very idea of the sign. In as much as itdelimits onto theology, the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism, this last writing is also the first writing ( Derrida,1976, p.23)

#### f. DISMANTLE THE HIERARCHIES AND SEARCH FOR THE APORIAS

In order to read the text in free way, Derrida argues that there should be no center. The center itself is relative, what would be important for some groups wouldn't be the same importance for others. As Genovesi refers to The concept of Messianism in his article, *Otherness and Deconstruction in Jacques Derrida* and how it is differently preceived according Christianity and Judaism. Derrida

comments on that saying “We would find ourselves with a sort of messianic eschatology so desartic that no religion and no ontology could identify themselves with it” (Derrida, 2021, p. 21). In short, the reader has the right and can read the text without any center effect, deconstructing all these hierarchies and exploring the aporias would help us to see unlimited views.

#### g. EVERY DISCOURSE IS A BRICOLEUR

Derrida suggests that each discourse is a ‘bricolage’ or in other words; “there is no last word, no metalanguage or voice of authorial control that would ultimately serve to adjudicate the matter” (Derrida, 2021, p.64). As the idea of Bricoleur according to Derrida contrasts the idea of the ‘engineer’ who creates and is considered as the source of meaning in any text. Here Derrida describes the engineer as a ‘myth’ and “theological idea” (Derrida, 2021, p. 360). Only the discourse is the one to be focused on, bringing to mind the concept of intertextuality and absence while reviewing any text.

To conclude, Derrida observes that in order to understand any text, reader should be free from any restrictions and structurelism. We need to search further beyond words to their binaries and traces. The interpretations for both presence and absence could be questioned since the text ought to be the only master regardless the author and the background. From Derrida’s point of view no ultimate reference, as all the intertextuality is the dominant and master text. Also he refuses any authority or hierarchy that pushes the reader to one and only scope as writing is not created by an engineer or ultimate innovative side but as an accumulation of successive back-ground, experiences and different point of views. The following lines are going to explicit some parts of Derrida’s theory on a text.

#### V. THE WORKHOUSE WARD

The *Workhouse Ward* is a short comedy play by Lady Gregory who is considered one of the Irish writers leaders and one of the Irish cultural and language revivals. There are not so many characters

in the play and the focus is on the two main characters Mike Mcinerney and Michael Miskell. The two old men who used to be neighbours since youth however their little class differences in their early lives, they ended up with the same situation and place with no relation but each others and no place to go but the workhouse. This might refer to Irish people in general as it passes to the readers’ subconsciousness that all Irish are originally neighbours sharing the same land, situation and finally destination. Lady Gregory says “I sometimes think that the two scolding paupers are a symbol of ourselves in Ireland” (Gregory, 1972, p.199). If we use Derrida’s Deconstruction theory by dropping the author herself from our analysis, we actually can go for a further interpretation as those referred characters could represent all the forgotten people all over the globe and can be applied to any time as well. That what Derrida means by the absent meaning, as any reader who is familiar with this situation can understand it regardless location, time or even language. From the early beginning of the play we can see the two main characters fighting and always in verbal attacks. This quarrel became as a habit for both of them that started from their young age and continues with them until they ended up in that Infirmary or the workhouse. Lady Gregory, also mentions of these old men’s relations by saying 'They fight like two young whelps that go on fighting till they are two old dogs' (Roche et al. 2015, p 107-113).

This play reveals a great study of interaction between these two homeless people are in desperate need of companionship. They spend their time bouncing ideas off one another. Lady Gregory makes comedy out of all this using their verbal attacks to portray lively scenes. Using specific phrases and figures during their quarrels that reflects their backgrounds and situation that was common in the early of 20<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland but in very funny and humor sense that arouses laughter and amusement of the audience. In spite of this funny language and metaphors used in the play, it might carry different binaries as well such as sorrow and

pain. The characters' use of words could carry other words that were not written but be guessed by the readers. Even their verbal attacks, at first glance, it seems as if the old paupers hate each other. On the contrary, it actually carries deep bond that is proven at the end of the play when Mcinerney refuses to leave his comrade alone.

Another point that could be read in different way is regarding Mrs. Donohoe. Mrs. Donohoe is not a main character in *The Workhouse Ward*, she was presented as wicked old woman without mercy who left her brother behind when he insists on taking his friend with him. Derrida encourages the reader to go closer to such minor characters who would be heirs and heroines from other perspective regardless the hierarchy and the view imposed by authors. T.-chi Chang mentioned in his study conclusion '*Re-evaluating Lady Gregory in Modern Irish Literature: A Feminist Ethics Study*' that 'male-centered context of late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth-century Ireland that was notoriously unfriendly to women. Reflecting the colonisation and decolonization campaigns, political issues such as nation and national identity are deeply interwoven into and seem to dominate the fabric of Lady Gregory's plays. Simultaneously, the female characters in her plays appear to be ignorant and wicked and are not well regarded.' (Chang, 2018, np) This explains why Mrs. Donohoe appears as wicked to the reader as she refused to save Miskel from the workhouse and leaves her brother as well. We can understand Mrs. Donohoe's motives, drives and circumstances through the lines even if were not written. When Mcinerney asks her surprisingly 'You have all that! And you without e'er a man in the house?' that shows the society's general view in the early twentieth century that a woman with luxury life can't be alone without a man. Later when he became angry and refused to go with her, he told her 'Let you go so, as you are so unnatural and so disobliging, and look for some man of your own, God help him! For I will not go with you at all!' (Gregory, 1909/2020, p.19). In fact Mrs. Donohoe came to save him from the workhouse and if she

finds a man by her own, that man would enjoy her fortune; still we can understand through these simple lines that in all cases she wouldn't be praised. No doubt Mrs. Donohoe's reaction is not the righteous thing to be done, but we can understand that this was the best she could do. In a society where she can't be by her own and always in need for a man to be beside her, she still chooses to go and save her brother "yourself might come and keep me company. It is no credit to me a brother of my own to be in this place at all" (Gregory, 1909/2020, p.14). Mcinerney himself would give us a hint for why his sister didn't visit him before when she tells her 'among that tribe of the Donohoes. I wonder they to give you leave to come ask am I living yet or dead?' (Gregory, 1909/2020, p.13). Her refusal and even shock from her brother's request to bring Miskel could be justified by the logic of that time, that it was expected from a woman to take care of a man unless this man is one of her own family which Mrs. Donohoe exactly tried to do according to her circumstances and the logic of her age.

At the end of the play, when Mcinerney refuses to go with his sister and prefers to stay with his friend. Mrs. Donohoes leaves and the two old paupers lay in silent for a moment thinking. This is what Derrida calls 'the silenced moments in texts' that might have unlimited interpretations. It would suggest a moment of relief that the character reaches by discovering what is good for him, other would suggest it as a moment of regret by letting his sister to leave and continue her life alone an even more suggestions would arouse from this simple moment of silence.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In short, a text is a master on its own and according to Derrida, having variety of interpretations and suggestions would increase of the text beauty itself. It helps the text to be universal and not controlled by limited time, specific words or accents or any authority. That can be perfectly applied on *The workhouse ward* play since it explores a universal issues such as loneliness, death and social relations.

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