THE QUEST FOR THE WHOLE BEHIND THE PARTS:
STRUCTURALISM OF INDIVIDUAL WORKS

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Submitted to the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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المدرسة البنوية في تحليل النص الأدبي المفرد: تحدي البحث عن الكل خلف التفاصيل

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ABSTRACT

One of the harshest criticisms against Structuralism is the claim that it is not useful for the study of individual works. The paper interprets this claim as a misreading of the success of the theory in the area of poetics. It accuses such criticism of ignoring the theory’s applicability to different levels of analysis—anything from the institution of literature and an individual work. This paper defends the theory against this claim through two steps. The first introduces three major structuralist principles: "autonomy," "langue/parole" and "relations" and shows the variety of values that these principles can assume according to the level of analysis adopted in a study—i.e., literature, a homogenous group of literary works or an individual literary work. Establishing the variety of the values that the theoretical principles can take in application is necessary as it defeats the belief that these principles, when employed in a critical study, have only one true value that is related to producing poetics of either the institution of literature, a genre or a group of homogeneous works. The second step presents a practical example of how the three principles discussed in the first chapter can be applied to the study of an individual work. William Shakespeare's As You Like It is selected for this purpose. The application of the three principles in the study of the play prove to be both feasible and useful in determining the identity of the play as a comedy. The paper concludes by affirming the flexibility of the original spirit of Structuralism, which does not frown upon studying individual literary works.
ملخص البحث

كثيراً ما ينظر للنظرية البنوية على أنها غير ذات جدوى في تحليل الأعمال الفردية، وهو ما يعد أحد أكثر الانتقادات شراسة ضد هذه النظرية. عمل هذا البحث على تحليل هذا النقد بأنه القراءة الخاطئة لنجاح هذه النظرية في ميدان الشعر. وقد أظهر البحث أن مثل هذه الانتقادات تجاوزت مدى قابلية تطبيق هذه النظرية على مستويات التحليل المختلفة - التي تنطوي بين المؤسسة الأدبية والعمل الفردي. ويدعم هذا البحث النظرية البنوية ضد هذه الانتقادات في اتجاهين: حيث يقدم الأول ثلاث من المبادئ الرئيسية التي يقوم عليها المنهج البنوي، وهي: الاستقلالية، واللغة، الخطب، والعلاقات، كما أظهر البحث تباينًا في القيم التي تفترضها تلك المبادئ تبعًا لمستوى التحليل المتين في الدراسة في مجال الأدب، إما على مستوى مجموعات الأعمال الأدبية المتاجسة، أو تلك الفردية. وبعد تحديد مثل هذا التباين القيم الذي يمكن تطبيقه خلال هذه المبادئ النظرية أhaarًا هاماً في حرص الاعتقاد القائل بأنه ليس لهذه المبادئ عند تطبيقها في الدراسات النقدية إلا قيمة حقيقية مفردة. ثم يعني الاتجاه الثاني مثالاً عملياً الكيفية التي يمكن بها تطبيق المبادئ الثلاثة التي تمت مناقشتها في الفصل الأول من البحث على الأعمال الفردية. وقد اختبرت مسرحية الكاتب البريطاني وليام شكسبير، كما تحبها As You Like It المسرحية بأنها نافعة للتطبيق وصالحة في تحديد الهوية الكوميدية للفردية.

وتحمل هذه الورقة البحثية بالتأكيد على مرونة الروح الأصلية للمنهج البنوي الذي لا ينبغي إقصائه في تحليل الأعمال الفردية.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

If a group of literature students were asked to demonstrate their knowledge of a literary theory of their choice, chances are they will avoid working with Structuralism. This hypothetical yet very likely situation indicates the strong prejudice of many against this theory, and its connection with enigma and complexity. It is imaginable that in some classes Structuralism as a literary method does not lend itself well to pedagogical purposes, given the variety of schools and methods that it tolerates and allows. However, this fact can be well handled by skilled teachers who introduce the variety as an authentic characteristic that entails enrichment rather than deficiency. Another likable and more serious reason for apprehension of the structuralist method in literature classes is the propaganda that Structuralism is only successful in the area of poetics. Since poetics is admittedly ranked difficult, even by top structuralist critics such as Jonathan Culler (preface viii), Structuralism by association is ranked difficult, too.

Needless to say, this association is not accurate. No one can dispute the difficulty of poetics; however, Structuralism in its original sense is not all about poetics. The claim that Structuralism as a literary method fails at the level of the individual text and is only successful in producing poetics misreads and does a lot of damage to the original spirit of Structuralism that encourages multi-level adaptability. This accusation which Robert Scholes reports in his Structuralism in Literature (142), advocates only one school of Structuralism that takes interest in poetics and builds on the theory’s success there. Many well known structuralist projects, such as Vladimir Propp’s The Morphology of the Folktales and Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism, are large-scale projects, where a
large number of works are surveyed or referred to. It could be true that literary
Structuralism is more impressive in its assumptions and findings in these large-scale
projects. However, this should not question the method’s adequacy for the study of
individual works. Nor should it cancel or belittle the efforts made in smaller-scale
structuralist projects that deal with individual works. As a matter of fact, some of the
most celebrated structuralist critics have devoted some of their projects to the study of
single works, such as Roland Barthes in his book *S/Z*.

The popularity of this misconception can be interpreted as a form of either
rejection or ignorance of the theory’s applicability to different levels of literature—
anything from an individual work and the institution of literature itself. The countless
potential application methods of Structuralism’s principles are widely accepted. In
literary criticism, the variety of the values that the principles assume is closely connected
with the level of analysis adopted in the structuralist project. This paper will rely on this
fact in defending Structuralism against the claim that it is not a workable literary method
for the study of individual works. While the paper is not concerned with clearing up all
the misconceptions about the theory, it is the author's hope that it succeeds to prove false
a major myth about it.

In order to accomplish this goal, the paper will first choose and illustrate three
major principles of Structuralism: autonomy, langue/ parole and relations. Then, it will
explain how these principles can assume various values in literary criticism according to
the adopted level of analysis. The stress on the variety of application methods of the
chosen principles is designed to refute the assumption that the structuralist principles
have only one true method of application that is exclusively connected with producing
poetics. Moreover, the paper will present a practical example of how the three chosen principles can be applied to the study of an individual work. The chapters of the paper are designed to carry out the two-step plan; besides this introductory chapter, the paper is divided into two other chapters. The first chapter is a discussion of the major constructing principles of literary Structuralism; the discussion will shed some light on the linguistic roots of these principles. Referring to the linguistic origin of the theory is unavoidable since the two versions of the theory—the linguistic and the literary—are strongly connected. In fact, the literary version owes its existence, methodology and even its terminology to linguistic Structuralism. The paper will first explain each principle in its original linguistic context as Saussure, the father of linguistics, postulated it, then it will illustrate the various ways in which that principle or concept can be adopted in literary theory and practice. This should express the original spirit of Structuralism and its adaptability and flexibility. This is the spirit the paper wants to emphasize, rather than introducing the Structuralism of one school that would refute the other methods and understandings of the theory. The second chapter of the paper shows a detailed structuralist analysis of Shakespeare’s As You Like It based on the principles discussed in the first chapter. The second chapter is meant to present a practical example of how Structuralism can be used in the analysis of an individual text.

**Review of Literature**

Insofar as a structuralist analysis of As You Like It is concerned, my search results returned very little. The closest query word being Shakespearean Comedy, it turns out to be of genuine interest to at least one prominent structuralist critic, Northrop Frye. Frye has written much on Shakespeare and much on Comedy—Shakespearean and
none—but his books *A Natural Perspective* and *The Myth of Deliverance* are exclusively devoted to Shakespearean Comedies from a structuralist point of view. There, Frye argues for the existence of "Shakespearean Comedy," an independent genre with its own typical structure and shared conventions. However, this proposal of Frye’s only proves to be ill received by other non-structuralist Shakespeare’s critics, such as Ralph Berry. Berry insists on naming his book, which also deals with the structure of the comedies, *Shakespeare’s Comedies*, instead of, say, *Shakespearean Comedy* or *Shakespearean Comedies*. Berry’s decision is conscious; it is meant to oppose as well as refute Frye’s argument in his respective books. Choosing a collective noun instead for his book title indicates Berry’s disapproving stance on Frye’s suggestion of treating the Shakespearean comedies as a single unit. Berry’s objection is spelled out in the introduction to his book, where he voices his suspicion regarding the accuracy of Frye’s project (4). He further elaborates on his objections in a published article titled “Shakespearean Comedy and Northrop Frye.”

The differences in the two critics’ stands on the proper approach to Shakespeare’s comedies signify larger differences between the schools that the two critics come from, the Traditional school and the Structuralist school. Berry, the traditionalist, analyzes the form of each comedy separately in order to show how that form contributes to the meaning of the respective play. He conceives the comedies as quite unlike and never attempts to study the similarities among them. Even in the brief discussion of “the recurring techniques” in Shakespeare’s comedies that he admits their existence in the introduction to his book, Berry insists that the discussion comes off in his book only as a consequence rather than an aim (6). On the other hand, Frye, the structuralist,
acknowledges the differences among the comedies but always focuses his discussion on the similarities among them. Even more, he takes the comedies to be variations on one basic structure. Moreover, he presents Shakespeare’s productions as a continuum, where the Comedies anticipate the Romances that follow them.

In *A Natural Perspective*, Frye treats the comedies “as one group unified by recurrent structures, devices and images” (Preface xxii). Treating the comedies as one unit is one essential characteristic that distinguishes his study as structuralist. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Frye focuses his study on the commonalities among the comedies rather than the differences. Of the common features among Shakespeare’s Comedies, Frye assigns structure the biggest role. Not only this, he also redefines Comedy, prioritizing the role played by structure in the definition: “a Comedy is not a play that ends happily: it is a play in which a certain structure is present and works through to its own logical end, whether we or the cast or the author feel happy about it or not” (46). As the quote above suggests, structure is prioritized in the definition of Comedy over the content of the comedy and the attitude of either the cast or the audience to that content.

Besides treating Shakespeare’s comedies as a single unit, Frye outlines in his book a typical Shakespearean structure that is supposedly applicable, with some variations, to the whole body of Shakespeare’s Comedies. This general pattern runs as follows:

The normal action is the effort of a young man to get possession of a young woman who is kept from him by various social barriers…. These are eventually circumvented, and the comedy ends at a point when a new society is crystallized, usually by the marriage or betrothal of a hero and
heroine. The birth of the new society is symbolized by a closing festive scene featuring a wedding, a banquet, or a dance. This conclusion is normally accompanied by some change of heart on the part of those who have been obstructing the comic resolution. (72)

Frye identifies three phases in this typical structure. The first is represented by an “anticomic society, a social organization blocking and opposed to the comic drive, which the action of the comedy evades or overcomes” (73). He explains that this anticomic society often takes the form of harsh or irrational laws, most of which are “preoccupied with trying to regulate the sexual drive, and so work counter to the wishes of the hero and the heroine, which form the impetus of the action” (74). Frye calls the second phase of the structure “the period of license and confusion” or the phase of “temporarily lost identity” (76). He explains that this phase is usually portrayed by “the stock device of impenetrable disguise, or by the activities of characters assumed to be invisible” (76). The third phase is the phase of the discovery of the identity—social or individual. Frye does not stop at outlining the typical structure of Shakespearean Comedy; he relates it to a mythic structure of ancient ritual that is believed to precede drama.

In The Myth of Deliverance, Frye deals with a smaller group of comedies than the one discussed in the previous book. The group consists of three plays commonly known as “the problem comedies:” Measure for Measure, All’s Well That Ends Well and Troilus and Cressida. Nonetheless, the discussion is never limited to these plays, as a true structuralist, Frye elaborates on other similar plays that support his argument. The book’s main argument is that Shakespeare’s Comedies have much to do with the myth of “deliverance” whereas his Romances have to do with the myth of “survival.” Deliverance
and Survival, Frye argues, are two myths that represent basic human concerns. Frye calls them myth or mythology because they are usually contained in “some kind of narrative (mythos) or story framework” (9). Throughout the book, Frye explains how the structure of the New Comedy, with which Shakespeare is associated, and in particular how the three comedies at hand demonstrate, especially in the climax, “a vision of deliverance, an expanded energy and freedom” (24). Frye believes the two myths—deliverance and survival—are closely connected. Based on this assumption, Frye links Shakespeare’s Comedies that represent the myth of deliverance with the Romances that represent the myth of survival. According to Frye, the comedies anticipate the Romances that represent the culmination of Shakespeare’s dramatic career. Frye elaborates on this idea in his discussion of each play. He also draws on Aristotle’s notion of “reversal” in analyzing these three plays. The three chapters of the book illustrate how Measure for Measure represents a reversal of Action, All’s Well That Ends Well a reversal of Energy and Troilus and Cressida a reversal of Reality.

Frye’s contributions to Shakespearean studies and literary Structuralism in A Natural Perspective and The Myth of Deliverance are huge. These books, which are in essence large-scale projects, are the type of projects with which Structuralism is often associated in the minds of many readers. The success and fame of such projects have unintentionally fed the myth that Structuralism can add little if anything to the study of individual works—all the reasons why a study of one of Shakespeare’s comedies from a structuralist perspective should be attempted in this paper. While Frye’s two books show, among other things, how Structuralist principles can be employed to illuminate a group of literary texts taken together, this paper intends to show how the same principles can be
applied in the study of an individual text. This does not mean that it disagrees with Frye’s assumptions made in his two books. On the contrary, it builds on them, especially on the idea that Shakespearean Comedy is an independent genre that has its own conventions. The paper makes another divergence from Frye’s Structuralist approach to literary works in not connecting the basic structure of the play at hand with any mythical structure. Frye, unlike the majority of Structuralist literary critics, takes an additional step in the analysis of literary texts in relating the basic structure of the work(s) he studies to the structure of popular myths. This step is recognized in the tradition of literary Structuralism, and is generally considered to be optional.