

Cleanth Brooks-The language of Paradox

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Abstract : Cleanth Brooks (1906-1994) was one of the most influential and innovative writers in what has come to be known as the new criticism '. Though he is best known for his collection of essays 'The well wrought urn' (1947) in which the new critical emphasis on irony and paradox find eloquent expression, he was also a scholar of Southern U.S writing , particularly the works of William Faulkner, and his William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha country(1963) is still widely read today.

During his tenure at The Southern Review, Brooks began to formulate the methodologies that would later become associated with the new criticism.He focussed mainly on poetry , which he thought offered readers a metaphorical and symbolic vision of life.In the opening chapter of The well Wrought Urn 'The language of paradox' ,Brooks argues that while the language of science requires the use of objective language free of rhetorical figures, 'paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry 'The argument is based on the contention that referential language is too vague for the specific message a poet expresses, he must make up his language as he goes'.This,Brooks argues, is because words are mutable and meaning shifts when words are placed in relation to one another.

In literature, the paradox is a literary device consisting of anomalous juxtaposition of incongruous ideas for the sake of striking exposition or unexpected insight.It functions as a method of literary composition-and analysis-which involves examining apparently contradictory statements and drawing conclusions either to reconcile them or to explain their presence.Brooks,an active member of The New Critical Movement, outlines the use of reading poems through paradox as a method of Critical interpretation.

Paradox in poetry means that tension at the surface of a poem can lead to obvious contradictions and speciousness. Brooks major essay The language of Paradox, lays out his argument for the centrality of paradox by demonstrating that paradox is 'the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry '.The argument is based on the contention that referential language is too vague for the specific message a poet expresses, he must make up his language as he goes. This is because words are mutable and meaning shifts when words are placed in relation to one another.

In The language of paradox, Cleanth Brooks emphasizes how the poetic language is different from that of the sciences, claiming that he is interested in our seeing that the paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet's language. 'It is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations. And I do not mean that the connotations are important as supplying some sort of frill or trimming, something external to the real matter in hand. I mean that the poet does not use a notation at all-as a scientist may properly be said to do so. The poet, within limits, has to make up his language as he goes'.

In this passage, Brooks stresses that poetic language is inherently different from scientific language because the poet constructs his language as he goes and defines his own rules. The poet then, has control over language, and must take an active role in the shaping of what literature means. The poet then, is not limited to the denotations of words, but, instead revel in the possible connotations of words. The individual poet is given a great deal of power, then, in the process of knowledge making and the reader is isolated from the production of meaning.

Literary or rhetorical paradoxes abound in the works of Oscar Wilde and G.K. Chesterton. Most literature deal with the paradox of situation: Rabelais, Cervantes, Sterne, Borges, and Chesterton are recognized as masters of situation as well verbal paradoxes. Also, statements that are illogical and metaphoric may be called paradoxes.

Cleanth Brooks, an active member of the New Criticism movement, outlines the use of reading poems through paradox as a method of critical interpretation. Paradox in poetry means that tension at the surface of a verse can lead to apparent contradictions and hypocrisies. Brooks seminal essay, The language of paradox, lays out his argument for the centrality of paradox by demonstrating that paradox is 'the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry'. The argument is based on the contention that referential language is too vague for the specific message a poet expresses; he must make up his language as he goes. This, Brooks argues, is because words are mutable and meaning shifts when words are placed in relation to one another.

In the writing of poems, paradox is used as a method by which unlikely comparisons can be drawn and meaning can be extracted from poems both straightforward and enigmatic.

Brooks points out to Wordsworth's poem 'It is a beautiful evening, calm and free'. He begins by outlining initial and surface conflict, which is that the speaker is filled with worship, which his female companion does not seem to be. The paradox is discovered by poem's end, in that the girl is more full of worship than the speaker precisely because she is always consumed with sympathy for nature and not-as is the speaker-in tune with nature while immersed in it.

In his reading of Wordsworth's poem 'Upon Westminster bridge', Brooks contends that the poem offers paradox not in its details, but in the situation which the speaker creates. Though London is a man-made marvel, and in many respects in opposition to nature, the speaker does not view London as a mechanical and artificial landscape,

but as a landscape composed entirely of nature. Since London was created by man, and man is a part of nature, London is thus too, a part of nature. It is this reason that gives the speaker the opportunity to remark upon the beauty of London as he would a natural phenomenon, and, as Brooks points out, can call the houses 'sleeping, rather than 'dead ' because they too are vilified with the natural spark of life, granted to them by the men that build them.

Thus, Wordsworth has employed paradoxical structure in the poem. In his famous work 'Preface to the lyrical ballads', Wordsworth has expressed his views his primary goal was to choose incidents and situations from the life of rural rustics and commoners. What he wants to convey to the readers is that what is considered as common and ordinary is actually uncommon. Coleridge comments 'Wordsworth gives charm and Novelty to the everyday things and excites a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention and directing it to the business and wonders of the world before us '.

Brooks finds in Wordsworth's poem Lines composed upon Westminster bridge both awe and wonder of the English Romanticism. According to Brooks, they are fantastic paradoxes employed by Wordsworth.

It is to be noted that the neo classical writers like Alexander Pope has also made a fine use of paradoxes along with irony.; the paradoxical expressions convey a wide range of ideas to the reader. In his famous work 'Essay on man', Pope handled the subject matter in a novel fashion.

According to Brooks, the paradoxes and irony are cradled in the poets language on which both connotations and denotations play a vital role. It is important to note that there is a fine blending of irony and paradoxes in some of Wordsworth's poems also. The works of William Blake and Thomas Gray are also no exceptions. Coleridge in his Ancient Mariner has dextrously used these poetic devices.

Brooks ends his essay with a reading of John Donne's poem 'The canonization ' which uses a paradox as its underlying metaphor. Using a charged religious term to describe the speaker's physical love as saintly, Donne effectively argues that in rejecting the material world and withdrawing to a world of each other, the two lovers are appropriate candidates for canonization. This seem to parody both love and religion, but in part it combines them, pairing unlike circumstances and demonstrating their resulting complex meaning. Brooks points also to secondary paradoxes in the poem; the simultaneous duality and singleness of love., and the double and contradictory meanings of 'die' in metaphysical poetry (used here as both sexual union and literal death). He contends tha...

Paradox, however, is essential to the structure and being of the poem. In *The Language Of Paradox (The Well Wrought Urn)*, Brooks shows that paradox was so essential to poetic meaning that paradox was almost identical to poetry. According to fellow New critic Leroy Searle, Brooks use of paradox emphasized the indeterminate lines between form and content.

The form of the poem uniquely embodies its meaning., and the language of the poem effects the reconciliation of the opposites or contraries .While irony functions within the poem ,paradox often refers to the meaning and structure of the poem and is thus inclusive of irony.The existence of opposites or contraries and the reconciliation thereof is poetry and the meaning of the poem.

In the preface, Cleanth Brooks admits that he has not considered the historical background of the poems he has discussed. It is not because he has discounted or failed to take into account literary history.He has ignored literary history because of a feeling that very little will be left after referring a poem to its cultural background.

Speaking about the relativistic temper of the times, Brooks comments,"we have had impressed upon us the necessity for reading a poem in terms of its historical context, and that kind of reading has been carried on so successfully that some of us have been tempted to feel that it is the only kind of reading possible.We tend to say that every poem is an expression of its age; that we must be careful to ask of it only what it's own age asked; that we must judge it only by the canons of its age".

This emphasis on the historical context rejected the view of art as *sub specie aeternitatis* (universally/eternally true) Lt.under the aspect of eternity. Spinoza used it as an honorific expression describing what is universally and eternally true, without any reference to or dependence upon the temporal portions of reality.

Brooks points the difficulties of studying poetry against historical background, poetry of the past may become mere cultural anthropology and poetry of the present may become merely political,or religious,or moral instrument. The poets referred to in *The Well Wrought Urn* thought that their poems will transcend the limitations of time.They never wrote only for their generation. Brooks sums up the preface by stating his aim in the book.It is to make the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem.

In *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren assert poetry should be taught as poetry ,and the critic should resist reducing a poem to a simple paraphrase, explicating it through biographical or historical contexts , and interpreting it didactically.For Brooks and Warren, paraphrase, and biographical, and historical background information is useful as a means of clarifying interpretation, but it should be used as means to an end.

Brooks took this notion of paraphrase and developed it further in his classic *The Well Wrought Urn*. The book is a polemic against the tendency for critics to reduce a poem to a single narrative or didactic message.He describes summative, reductionist reading of poetry phrase still popular today(the heresy of paraphrase).In fact, he argues

poetry serves no didactic purpose because producing some kind of statement would be counter to a poems purpose. Brooks argues"through irony,paradox, ambiguity and other rhetorical and poetic devices of his or her art, the poet works constantly to resist any reduction of the poem to a paraphrasable core, favouring the presentation of conflicting facets of themes and patterns of resolved stresses".

References:-

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