A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF BILBO, THE MAIN CHARACTER IN TOLKIEN'S "THE HOBBIT"

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

Sarjana Sastra

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A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF BILBO, THE MAIN
CHARACTER IN TOLKIEN'S THE HOBBIT

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Abstract

The contrasting portrayal of Bilbo, the protagonist of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's The Hobbit, before and after his decision to join the dwarfs' struggle to reclaim their wealth is an interesting phenomenon which motivated this study as well as the borrowing of deconstruction strategy in which concepts such as paradoxes, floating signifiers, binary oppositions, différance, and logo-centric are applied. Deconstruction was selected to interpret the data because it "reads the text against itself so as to expose what might be thought of as the 'textual subconscious', where meanings may be expressed directly contrary to the surface meaning". Since Bilbo is described as an ordinary person coincidentally turns to be a hero although his characteristics do not meet the stereotypical ones of a hero, this study addressed the question how his representation affects the concept of heroes raised in subsequent literary works. It seems that the portrayal of the hero acts as a sign which is caught up in a chain of signifiers that never rests on a definite signified. Besides, it challenged the general understanding of a hero. As a result, the general ideas of a hero cannot be used as a benchmark to assess a hero's attitudes.

Keyword: paradox; floating signifiers; binary oppositions; différance; logocentric; hero

Introduction

Written by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, The Hobbit is a fantasy epic novel published on 21 September 1937 and is considered the most beloved and the best-known fantasy book in 2015 rated 9.7/10 in Fantasy Book Review, a site dedicated to reading and reviewing the very best fantasy books for both young and old readers. It is reported that The Hobbit is fondly remembered by all who read it, a real delight (Fantasy Book Review). The book is not only enjoyed by children but also by adults. Moreover, the book was nominated for the Carnegie Medal and was awarded the best juvenile story of the season in 1938 by the New York Herald Tribune (The Tolkien Society). It also won the Keith Barker Millennium Book Award Winner presented in 2000 by the Youth Libraries Group, School Library Association and Library Association Schools Library Group for the most significant children's book.
published between 1920 and 1939 (The Tolkien Society). The book remains popular and has been transformed into three high fantasy adventure films; i.e. *An Unexpected journey*, *The Desolation of the Smaug* and *The Battle of the Five Armies* directed by Peter Jackson.

As an epic narrative, *The Hobbit* meets fantasy fiction’s description that it takes place in an unrecognizable version of the world called Middle Earth, which is home to several races; i.e. hobbits, dwarves, elves, wizard, eagles, dragon, trolls, goblins, orcs, giant spider and men. *The Hobbit* tells about an ordinary hobbit named Bilbo Baggins who lives in Sire, a hobbit village in the Middle Earth. Like the other hobbits his activities were mostly restricted to gardening, smoking cigarettes, drinking tea and other home-based activities (Tolkien 8-10). In short, the hobbits were homebodies. They also hardly ever accepted anything new for it was considered odd. However, Bilbo is a mixed-blood hobbit. His grandfather was a Took. The Tookish are the only hobbit-clan would go and have adventures. Unlike the other hobbits, Bilbo's grandfather was almost as tall as humans. Because of this, he rode a horse, instead of just a pony (Tolkien 18). It seems that his blood flowed in Bilbo Baggins, his grandchild, who ultimately decided to join the adventure of the dwarves.

Generally, Bilbo resembles his father who is a Baggins. He is just an ordinary Hobbit of average height, much shorter than humans, but taller than the dwarves. His stature was not manly. He was originally coward, on hearing the word 'dragon' he fell limp. When suddenly in the wood beyond the Water a flame leapt up, probably somebody lighting a wood-fire, he thought of plundering dragons settling on his quiet Hill and kindling it all to flames (Tolkien 16). Similar to the other Baggins, he had never left his hole. Therefore, it is interesting that he later decided to join the Dwarves' adventures to reclaim their home (Tolkien 26). Even, he was later remembered as a hero because of his heroic attitudes that he often saved his companions (Tolkien 7).
Bilbo’s portrayal as of one with contrasting qualities or characteristics to a conventional hero is an interesting part of the work. A hero in an epic narrative is generally characterized by bravery, loyalty, strength, eloquence and shrewdness (Goncalves 1). Similarly, *Literary Device* explained that a hero as the protagonist is generally admired for his bravery, strength, charm, ingenuity, etc. *Britannica Dictionary* online explained that a hero in literature term transcends ordinary men in skill, strength, and courage. The Homeric hero believed that men have to stand together in battle, men have to respect each other, and they have to refrain from excessive cruelty (CliffsNotes). Meanwhile as the hero of the story Bilbo has the characteristics which are usually associated with an anti-hero because he is depicted as typically clumsy, unsolicited, and unskilled and has both good and bad qualities. Throughout the story, Bilbo is often described as an anti-hero because he was not strong or brave enough to join the adventure, he would not take a risk in doing anything unpleasant, he preferred to stay at his comfortable home, he was not charming, even he could not make a decision and he only followed orders (Tolkien 27, 28-29). Bilbo’s anti-heroic characteristics make the story unique since it depicts the personal development from an initial anti-hero into a hero in the end. It also raises a question how the representation of Bilbo as a hero in the story affects the general concept of hero.

As the novel describes its hero in a portrayal contrasting to a common hero, this study strives to examine the story’s portrayal of the concept of hero as represented by its main character, Bilbo Baggins. Making use of library research in a descriptive qualitative study. The information collected from the novel are analyzed and described from the perspective of deconstruction. In pursuance of its aims, the deconstructive process will often fix on a detail of the text which looks incidental the presence of a particular metaphor, for instance and then will use it as a key to the whole text. 'As the novel describes its main protagonist’s contrasting traits, deconstructions will be selected to interpret the information because it
'reads the text against itself so as to expose what might be thought of as the 'textual subconscious', where meanings are expressed which may be directly contrary to the surface meaning' (Barry 56). According to Derrida, a deconstruction is a method of reading the text very carefully to the creation of conceptual distinctions that underlie the author of the text inconsistent and paradox in using the concepts in the text as a whole (qtd. in Sarup 49). This theory provides many perspectives that can help analyze the paradox that makes Bilbo a hero unaffected by the concept of hero.

Using the theory of deconstruction, this study is expected to help the readers have and develop their critical reading skills, particularly to read what is not written. Besides, it is expected to give knowledge in literary criticism and approach, especially deconstruction. In turn, it is expected to help improve the readers’ ability to think critically and to see more readily the ways in which experience is determined by ideologies of which we are unaware because they are “built into” language (Tyson 249).

There are many studies on *The Hobbit* based on different approaches and perspectives. For example, a research paper from Sigillum Universitatis Islandiae examines *The Hobbit* from the perspective of Marxism. Another paper entitled *Bilbo Baggins’ Transformation Depicted in Tolkien’s The Hobbit* discusses the changes in Bilbo. However, there has been no research paper that discusses *The Hobbit* using deconstruction theory to analyze the characteristics and attitude of Bilbo, the main character.

**Deconstruction**

Sarup defined deconstruction as a method of reading the text very carefully to the creation of conceptual distinctions that underlie the author of the text seemed inconsistent and paradox in using the concepts in the text as a whole (qtd. in Bary 49). M.A.R Habib understands it as “a way of reading, a mode of writing, and, above all, a way of challenging
interpretations of texts based upon conventional notions of the stability of the human self, the external world, and of language and meaning," (qtd. in Ozdemir 1).

Tyson describes that deconstruction theory of language is based on the belief that language is much more slippery and ambiguous than we realize (250). He further explains that to deconstruction, (1) language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating possible meanings; (2) existence has no center, no stable meaning, no fixed ground; and (3) human beings are fragmented battlefields for competing ideologies whose only “identities” are the ones we invent and choose to believe (Tyson 258).

Deconstruction tends to find the hidden meanings in a so-called stable permanent meaning to prove that texts always depend on the context. This statement is linked to Saussure's concept of the diacritical nature of linguistic according to which the identity of a sign is constituted by its differences from other signs (Rivkin & Ryan 258). Saussure believes that a word is a linguistic sign. If the sign is a word, the signifier is the group of letters written or pronounced as a unit, and the signified is the word that pictured in mind. In response to the signifier of a word, different people will probably picture different kinds of the word so that any given signifier can refer to any number of signified at any given moment. Although context often helps limit the range of possible signified for some signifiers, it simultaneously increases the range of possible signified for the others.

Derrida argues that language has two important characteristics: its play of signifiers continually defers, or postpones, meaning, and the meaning it seems to have is the result of the differences by which we distinguish one signifier from another. He combines the French words for “to defer” and “to differ” to coin the word différance, which is his name for the only “meaning” language can have (Tyson 253). For deconstruction, language does not consist of the union of signifiers and signified; it consists only of chains of signifiers. Every
signifier consists and produces more signifiers in a never ending deferral, or postponement, of meaning (Tyson 252).

To explore the specific ways in which our language determines our experience, Derrida also borrowed and transformed structuralism’s idea that we tend to conceptualize our experience in terms of polar opposites, called binary oppositions. For structuralism binary oppositions are hierarchies, that is, one term in the pair is always privileged, or considered superior to the other. For example, ‘good’ is considered better than ‘evil’, ‘reason’ is more privileged than ‘emotion’. The first term in each pair is, in Western culture, is the privileged term (Tyson 254). However, Derrida observed, one must examine the ways in which the two members of the opposition are not completely opposite, the ways in which they overlap or share some things in common (qtd. in Tyson 254). In other words, Deconstruction perceives that binary oppositions are not a fixed idea.

Even deconstruction believes that its grounding principle is not fixed. In the history of Western thought since Plato, every philosophical system has had its ground of being. That is, all systems of Western philosophy are derived from and organized around one grounding principle from which we believe we can figure out the meaning of existence. Derrida called it logo-centric because it places at the center (centric) of its understanding of the world a concept (logos) that organizes and explains the world for us while remaining outside of the world it organizes and explains (Tyson 256). For deconstruction, language is the ground of being, but that ground is not out of play: it is itself as dynamic, evolving, problematical, and ideologically saturated as the world views it produces. For this reason, there is no center to our understanding of existence. Instead, there are an infinite number of vantage points from which to view it, and each of these vantage points has a language of its own, which deconstruction calls its discourse (Tyson 256). Barry explains that there are no absolutes or fixed points, so that the universe we live in is 'decentered' or inherently relativistic. Instead of
movement or deviation from a known center, all we have is 'free play' (Barry 52). Therefore we can have no access to any fixed landmark which is beyond linguistic processing, and hence we have no certain standard by which to measure anything (Barry 49). Nietzsche describes this as, 'There are no facts, only interpretations'. (qtd. in Barry 50).

Deconstructing a Text

Deconstructionist reads a text with the aim of unmasking internal contradictions or inconsistencies, aiming to show the disunity which underlies its apparent unity as well as the unity beneath apparent disunity. The deconstructive process will often fix on a detail of the text which looks incidental - the presence of a particular metaphor, for instance and then use it as the key to the whole text, so that everything is read through it. The deconstructionist looks for evidence of gaps, breaks, fissures and discontinuities of all kinds. To analyze a text, deconstruction seeks for contradictions or paradoxes, shifts/breaks in of time, and attitude of the character in the text (Barry 55-56).

Peter Barry describes what deconstruction does to a text:

1. They 'read the text against itself so as to expose what might be thought of as the 'textual subconscious', where meanings are expressed which may be directly contrary to the surface meaning.

2. They look for shifts and breaks of various kinds in the text and see these as evidence of what is repressed or glossed over or passed over in silence by the text. These discontinuities are sometimes called 'fault-lines', a geological metaphor referring to the breaks in rock formations which give evidence of previous activity and movement (Barry 56).
Deconstructive Reading of Bilbo, the Main Character of *The Hobbit*

*The Hobbit* revolves around Bilbo Baggins’ life and experiences, which can be divided into two contrasting parts. The big change happens after Bilbo has decided to join the dwarves’ struggle to reclaim their ancestral land. Before his decision to join the Dwarves’ struggle, Bilbo lives a safe and comfortable life. He has no experience outside his peaceful, secure world because the Hobbits considered adventures an odd thing (Tolkien 7). In contrast, after his decision to join the dwarves’ struggle to reclaim their wealth and land, Bilbo’s life is full of adventures of facing dangers which threaten his life. Considering this shift of life, this study would use it as a stepping stone to dig out what is not explicitly written in the story (Barry 56).

The portrayal of Bilbo's contrasting traits creates an ambiguity and paradox to the word 'hero' or what Peter Barry was called as a 'fault-lines' (56), which shows the shift of Bilbo's attitude from being an anti-hero to a hero. Since he inherited his father’s Baggins blood, who never went on adventures, Bilbo did not have any experiences and skills or anything that could help him in his adventure with the dwarves. These then made him a stumbling block to his friends on their journey.

"... and as poor Bilbo could not possibly go half as fast-for dwarves can roll along at a tremendous pace, I can tell you, when they have to - they took it in turn to carry him on their backs." (Tolkien 50).

"So Dori actually climbed out of the tree and let Bilbo scramble up and stand on his back." (Tolkien 73).

Another trait that makes Bilbo an obstacle in the journey is his inability to make a decision. For example, when Thorin gave his first assignment as their burglar to check the red light on
top of the hill, he rashly departed performing his duties, "Off Bilbo had to go, before he could explain that he could not hoot even once like any kind of owl any more than fly like a bat," (Tolkien 29). This matches Deconstruction’s belief that nothing is fixed or absolute (Barry 52).

The story’s further description of Bilbo confirms Deconstruction’s ideas as Bilbo is later portrayed as one who experiences changes. He turns out to be bolder, has a little courage more than ever, and is able to make decisions. Even he plays the role of the plan maker for the group, and later performs some heroic deeds when he, among others, saved his friends from the giant spider (Tolkien 110-115). This description turns the stereotypes about being a good member of the community upside down. As a member of the hobbit community, Bilbo should be timid, homebody, and be one who does not do anything new nor unexpected (Tolkien 8-11). In other words, he should just follow the common practice in his society. Paradoxically, as a good member of the dwarves’ journey, Bilbo should not be timid nor a homebody at all. He also does unexpected things to save the group. In other words, Bilbo greatly changes to be a good member of these different groups who both live in the Middle Earth. As Derrida maintained, the meaning of a word is always deferred and is affected by its relations to other words or its context (qtd. in Tyson 253). Similarly, the dwarves impression about Bilbo reflects Deconstructions principles. First, they first consider Bilbo a stumbling block. Now they regard Bilbo as a hero. As Tolkien explains, "They knew only too well that they would soon all have been dead, if it had not been for the hobbit," (116). The dwarves’ changed perception about Bilbo portrays Deconstruction’s idea of differance. Bilbo has two different sides in him, which even though the status and role changes, those two things remain within him. As a Hobbit, Bilbo has characteristics as an anti-hero, and as one member of the adventures he was a hero. As one person with two opposing sides, a hero who has anti-hero characteristics, makes the meaning of the hero continue differ, and does not refer to one
clear meaning, only it continues referring to different meanings or continually defers, or postpones, meaning, and the meaning it seems to have is the result of the differences by which we distinguish one signifier from another (Tyson 253).

Nietzsche’s statement that, 'There are no facts, only interpretations’ (qtd. in Barry 50) is reflected in Bilbo’s anti-hero’s traits. In performing his heroic deeds, Bilbo sometimes uses anti-hero’s ways. First, Bilbo makes use of dishonest and unfair ways. For example, when he knew that the magic ring he found belonged to Gollum, he did not give the ring back to Gollum. Instead, he manipulated Gollum so that he could get out of the tunnel (Tolkien 62). Being timid, coward, unfair and dishonest are clearly not the attitudes of a hero. However, they seem to be interpreted as acceptable, even smart, ways to defeat the evil.

This interpretation may also affect the hierarchical pairs in binary oppositions perceived by Deconstruction. Good is opposed to evil. If the fact of good and evil deeds can be contrastingly interpreted, what is considered good may be understood as evil, and vice versa. In result, the hierarchy in the binary opposition is not fixed (Tyson 254).

Besides, Bilbo is reckless, and his recklessness leads to disaster for others. Bilbo explicitly explained to Smaug about where he came from and mentioned about barrel-Ridder, Smaug knew that Barrel-Ridder was a typical designation for Lake Town. He knew about Lake-Town since he came there because once he destroyed the town of Lake-men which once called Dale (Tolkien 22). Knowing that men of Lake helped Bilbo and the dwarves to get there made Smaug angry (Tolkien 158) and destroyed Lake-Town (Tolkien 168-169). Again, as Bilbo’s recklessness does not reduce the reverence given to him, it confirms Deconstruction’s idea that the opposition are not completely opposite, the ways in which they overlap or share some things in common (qtd. in Tyson 254).

Bilbo is also known as a burglar who “… stole from the shadow of the doorway, across the floor to the nearest edge of the mounds of treasure,” (Tolkien 147). The word
‘burglar’ has a negative connotation as it refers to a person who illegally enters buildings and steals things (Cambridge Dictionary Online). Similarly, Tolkien relates Bilbo’s task as a burglar to the word “stole” (147), which also has a negative connotation. However, these two negative connotative words are used in the story as if to justify Bilbo’s ways to be a hero who enables the dwarves to reclaim their ancestral treasure and land. Thus, Nietzsche’s belief that only interpretations instead of facts exist is once again confirmed (qtd. in Barry 50).

Bilbo’s contrasting attitudes create an ambiguity and paradox toward the word 'hero'. A hero is generally understood as one who is brave, fair, and gentleman-like. According to *Literary device* hero as the protagonist is generally admired for his bravery, strength, charm, ingenuity, etc. Viewed by structuralism formula about sign= signifier + signified:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sign</th>
<th>Signifier</th>
<th>Signified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HERO</td>
<td>&quot;HERO&quot;</td>
<td>Courage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Great body shape</td>
<td>Skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Strength</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The word hero as a sign produces a group of letters written or pronounced as a unit ("hero"), great body shape as the gesture of a hero and image of Bilbo as the hero of the story. In other side the sign of hero also produce courage, skill, and strength as the signified which is also as the concept to which the signifier refers. Viewed from the concepts of a hero's attitudes that mentioned in table 1, Bilbo possessed the same attitude. It is proven when
the company met the Giant Spiders, Bilbo turned to be more courageous and he saved the dwarves (Tolkien 110-116). Additionally, Bilbo also saved the dwarves while they were captured by the elves (Tolkien 120-128). There are other things that made Bilbo the hero in the story, such as he when he offered himself to find Smaug’s weak spot (Tolkien 151), or when he gave the Arkenstone to Lake-men and gave up his payment so that the Lake-men could claim their right (Tolkien 183-184). Besides, like other heroes, Bilbo also has a skill or a supporting strength as he is able to hear miles-away sound (Tolkien 7), move very quietly (Tolkien 29), and he has got a magic ring that could help him be invisible (Tolkien 63).

Meanwhile, Deconstruction viewed the word 'hero' as:

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sign</th>
<th>Signifier</th>
<th>Signified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HERO</td>
<td>&quot;HERO&quot;</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bilbo Baggins</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timid little hobbit</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anti-hero attitude</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burglar</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The word 'hero' never reaches the point when it refers to a concept, a signified, only chain of signifiers. The signifier refers to chains of signifiers in mind and evokes chains of signifiers in the mind of the person who heard the utterance ‘Bilbo as a hero’. The concept of a hero in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* does not refer to a clear meaning. The meaning seems to be
the result of the differences by which we distinguish one signifier from another (Tyson 253); meanwhile each signifier in those chains is itself constituted by another chain of signifiers, and so on (Tyson 252). That is what Deconstruction claim; that language is non-referential because it refers neither to things in the world nor to our concepts of things but only to the play of signifiers of which language itself consists (Tyson 252). For example, Bilbo as the hero of the story is depicted as a timid little hobbit who fell limp when he thought about dragon, "...and he thought of plundering dragons settling on his quiet Hill and kindling it all to flames. He shuddered; and very quickly he was plain Mr. Baggins of Bag-End, Under-Hill, again" (Tolkien 16). Bilbo does not meet the Homeric's concept of hero that men have to stand together in battle either (CliffsNotes). Bilbo did not join the war "On all this Bilbo looked with misery. He had taken his stand on Ravenhill among the Elves-partly because there was more chance of escape from that point," (Tolkien 193).

The above discussion shows that the word hero never meets a fixed meaning. Derrida explains that each signifier is trapped in the trap of différance forever floating. The sign of hero is always moving on the chain of signifiers never reaching a definite signified and thus no absolute meaning can be given to the sign and it is there that the indeterminacy of meaning is created (Amani 2). Before Bilbo decided to join the adventure he only homebodies and only did home-based activities (Tolkien 8-10). After he joined the adventure, he did many heroic rescue that makes him regarded as a hero.

"... and they thanked him many times. Some of them even got up and bowed right to the ground before him, though they fell over with the effort, and could not get on their legs again for some time. Knowing the truth about the vanishing did not lessen their opinion of Bilbo at all."

"In fact, they praised him so much that Bilbo began to feel there really was something of a bold adventurer about himself after all," (Tolkien 116). However as a hero he also did several bad deeds as that already mentioned above. Being timid, coward, unfair and dishonest are clearly not the attitudes of a hero. This makes the concept of hero always float.
Bilbo as the hero of the story then, proves that to be a hero, a person does not have to meet any criteria of a hero that are usually described in dictionaries and encyclopedias as a person or people who generally admired for his bravery, strength, charm, ingenuity, etc. (Literary Device). Unlike what is believed about a hero, Bilbo did not join the war between the dwarves and Smaug, "On all this Bilbo looked with misery. He had taken his stand on Ravenhill among the Elves-partly because there was more chance of escape from that point" (Tolkien 193). Even, before the war ended, he passed out being hit by rock, "'The Eagles!' cried Bilbo once more, but at that moment a stone hurtling from above smote heavily on his helm, and he fell with a crash and knew no more" (Tolkien 193). Although this is not what a hero is supposed to be like, Bilbo proved that he has saved the dwarves several times, he also meets many criteria which are suitable with the concept of a hero in general. This meets what Barry says about Deconstruction that there are no certain standard by which to measure anything (49) and Nietzsche's idea that 'There are no facts, only interpretations' (qtd. in Barry 50).

**Conclusion**

The Deconstructionist reading of The Hobbit reveals that the portrayal of Bilbo as a hero has challenged the general understanding and the concept of a hero. The novel describes that the meaning of a hero or the attitude of a hero does not fully contain fixed meanings, which reflects Deconstruction's objection of logo-centrism. A hero does not seem to have all-hero's attitudes and traits as represented by Bilbo, the hero and protagonist of the story. As a result, the general ideas of a hero cannot be used as a benchmark to assess the attitudes of the hero. To be a hero one does not have to fully meet certain requirements, or a specific benchmark as Barry explains that have no certain standard by which to measure anything (49).
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