Multiple Meaning and A Critique of Discursive Practices in Barthelme’s Short Fiction

Abstract

Dissatisfied with the realistic fiction conventions, Barthelme turned to postmodernist techniques in his short story writing to make fun of such conventions as well as to expose the absurdities of some discursive practices taken for granted by people in the society. With the postmodern techniques, his short stories can be read for more than one meaning and one interpretation. Analyses of three short stories “Views of My Father Weeping,” “The Glass Mountain,” and “At the Tolstoy Museum” are offered as an illustration. These stories are merely a commentary on the practices but offer no solutions or alternative approaches to such practices.

Keywords: Donald Barthelme’s short stories, Multiple Meaning, Commentary on Discursive Practices, “View of My Father Weeping,” “The Glass Mountain,” “At the Tolstoy Museum”

บทคัดย่อ

บาร์เธลเม่ไม่พึงพอใจกับขนบวิธีการเขียนแบบสมจริง ด้วยเหตุนี้เขาจึงนำเทคนิคการเขียนแบบโพสต์โมเดิร์นมาใช้ เพื่อที่จะล้อเลียนการเขียนแบบเดิมและเพื่อเปิดโปงความขบขันของธรรมเนียมปฏิบัติของสังคมที่ผู้คนรับมาโดยปราศจากการไตร่ตรอง การใช้เทคนิคการเขียนแบบโพสต์โมเดิร์นทำให้สามารถอ่านและตีความเรื่องสั้นของเขาได้มากกว่าหนึ่งความหมาย เพื่อสนับสนุนความคิดเห็นนี้ ได้มีการวิเคราะห์เรื่องสามสามเรื่องคือ เรื่อง “View of My Father Weeping” เรื่อง “The Glass Mountain” และเรื่อง “At the Tolstoy Museum” เรื่องสั้นเหล่านี้เพียงแต่เสนอความน่าขบขันเท่านั้น แต่มิได้เสนอทางแก้ไขข้อขบขันเหล่านั้น

คำสำคัญ: เรื่องสั้นของโดนัลด์ บาร์เธลเม่ พหุความหมาย การวิพากษ์ธรรมเนียมปฏิบัติ “View of My Father Weeping” “The Glass Mountain” “At the Tolstoy Museum”
Introduction

The objective of this paper is to show that Donald Barthelme’s short stories are embedded with multiple meanings and commentary on the discursive practices and artistic conventions of his time (i.e., before the 1960s). For Barthelme and other postmodern writers, the fictional conventions, especially the 19th century realism frameworks or premises, offer no new or innovative methods, except banalities and overused plots and characters. Defying the realistic fiction writing frameworks, Barthelme employs postmodern fiction writing techniques both to make fun of the conventions and to expose and comment on the absurdities of some discursive practices in the society. By employing the new techniques, he is able to offer in his stories more than one meaning—meaning at the surface level, and those at deeper levels. With these multi-levels of meanings, the stories make comments on the absurdities of the discursive practices; however, they offer no alternatives or solutions to such practices. For example, “The President”, a story collected in Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts (1968) and later in Sixty Stories (1981), Barthelme exposes a discursive practice of contemporary American people in voting for their president. The people don’t know why they vote. They vote for the man in spite of his strangeness. Some people believe that the President will do great things for them and what great things are they do not know. And the people keep fainting—indicating they are unconscious or ignorant about what they want or don’t want. They even applaud him frantically when he appears in public. By exposing this, Barhleme makes an implicit critique or commentary on the irresponsibility of the people who do not perform their duty as democratic citizens. In this paper three short stories “Views of My Father Weeping,” “The Glass Mountain,” and “At the Tolstoy Museum”, will be analyzed to show that they are critiques of contemporary discursive practices. The first story offers a critique on philosophy of truth; the second, on fairy tale genre and the third, on the institutionalization of art. However, no explicit solutions are offered as an alternative to those practices. Before the three stories are analyzed, the characteristics of postmodern literary works are first described since they are employed in the stories.

Postmodern Literature

When the literary works of postmodernist writers were published in the 1960’s, they were “totally ignored by the public and were often misrepresented by critics” (McCaffery, 1980, 75). This is mainly because, according to McCaffery (1980) these works “defied the accepted premises of what we had come to expect from fiction. These premises derived primarily from the conventions of the realistic novel and had come to so dominate our view of fiction that it was difficult for many readers and critics to realize that they were
conventions rather than unalterable “givens” (p. 75). According to James Fleming (Postmodernism), postmodern literature is defined as a form of literature marked stylistically and ideologically by its reliance on fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, often unrealistic and impossible plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humor and authorial self-reference. Flemming further adds that postmodern writers tend to reject meaning in their work—whether novels, stories and poems, but highlight and celebrate the possibility of multiple meanings, or a complete lack of meaning, within a single literary work. Frequently, they also reject the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' forms of art and literature, as well as the distinctions between different genres and forms of writing and storytelling.

In discussing “metafiction”, which is a kind of postmodern fiction or text, Bran Nicol (2009) says that they are characterized by 1) a self-reflexive acknowledgement of a text’s own status as constructed aesthetic artifact; 2) an implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing a fictional “world”; and 3) a tendency to draw the reader’s attention to his or her own process of interpretation as s/he reads the text (xvi). These characteristics are used in metafiction, or fiction about fiction, to problematize the notion of fictionality and reality as well as to undermine the writer’s authority in that the work is open for plurality of interpretations with the author having no control over the multiple meanings once the work is taken over by the reader, as Roland Barthes (1977) argues in his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author.” For Barthes, the meanings of a text lie in the reader, not in the author. He says that the reader is “the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost” (148). He also argues that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (148).

McCaffery (1980) also offers a similar view to that of Nicol’s. McCaffery (1980) argues that at first glance the works of postmodernists seem diverse, varied, and having nothing much in common, but on closer examination they share several common aspects such as a sense of playfulness and self-consciousness, willful artificiality, preoccupation with metafictional strategies, and general plot. McCaffery (1980) further states that these postmodern fictions focus on the fiction-process and follow the same general plot, which looks something like this: “a main character creates a fictional system to provide order, meaning, or diversion in a world which seems chaotic destructive or banal. The fictions devised by these characters are sometimes obviously artificial in nature…and other time are more subtly subjective” (McCaffery, 1980: 75-76). Furthermore,
these works consciously attempt to make use of the formal possibilities of fiction to stress the notion of the subjective nature of all systems. Consequently, these fictions tended to present themselves self-consciously as invented entities and insisted on the fact that all forms of art are merely another of man’s subjective creations. No pattern of interpretation, whether it be provided by the novel, science, history, or psychology, can hope to “mirror reality” or “tell the truth” because “reality” and “truth” are themselves fictional abstractions whose validity has become increasingly suspect as this century has proceeded.

(McCaffery: 1980, 76)

In general, certain stylistic techniques are employed in postmodern literary works which differentiate them from traditional or mimetic ones. These techniques are used to dispute, deconstruct, mock and defy the traditional conventions of fiction writing, to show the limitation of the old ways of writing, as well as to establish an alternative fiction writing style.

Barthelme’s Works

As one of the preeminent American writers who was best known for his short fiction, Donald Barthelme (April 7, 1931 – July 2, 1989) wrote his fiction to illustrate the notion that reality does not exist outside language; what is often taken for granted as reality or truth is, in fact, constructed by language; fiction does not reflect the re/presentation of the physical world. Most of his stories are very compact and short, with some containing about five to ten pages and often “focusing only on an incident rather than complete narratives” (en.wikipedia.org.) For example, “On Angel” is only three pages long; “The Policemen’s Ball”, three pages long; “The Death of Edward Lear”, four pages long; “The King of Jazz”, about five pages long, with the fifth page containing only six lines; “Me and Miss Mandible”, about seven and a half pages long; and “A Shower of Gold” is about nine and a half pages long. Very few short stories of his are longer than 10 pages. The longest one is ‘A Manual for Songs”, which is 23 and a half pages long. Because of its compactness and short length, his fiction is often dubbed as short-short story, flash fiction, or sudden fiction (Mohammadi, 2013, 117; en.wikipedia.org.). Apart from short fiction, Barthelme has also published a number of novels such as Snow White (1967), The Dead Father (1975), Paradise (1986) and The King (1990).

These stories deal with a variety of subject matters, and they defy inclusive classifications. Whichever categories are invented, some of his stories are still left out. Still some critics have attempted to categorize his works. For example, Wayne Stengel (1985) has classified Barthelme’s works into four main groups: 1) identity stories, such as “Me and Miss Mandible,” (2) communication stories, such as “On the Steps of the Conservation,” (3) society stories, such as “Report,” and (4) art objects, such as “At the Tolstoy Museum”. Charles Molesworth (1982) has grouped Barthelme’s works into five categories which are completely different from those of Stengel. Molesworth’s categories include (1) total incoherency, such as “Bone Bubbles,” (2) the surreal place, such as “Paraguay,” (3) the counterpointed plot, such as “Daumier,” (4) the extended conceit, such as “Sentence,” and (5) parodies of narrative structure, such as “The Glass Mountain.” Other categories can be possible since Barthelme’s styles and contents are varied.

Barthelme composed both metafictional or self-reflexive (fiction about/or on fiction) and non-metafictional works. However, his works share similar traits in that they reject a mimetic approach to aesthetic art and avoid conventional modes of fiction writing, particularly the Freytag’s plot structure. The story line is non-linear, and the stories themselves are impregnated with seemingly-unrelated detail, fragmented verbal collages, the blurring of genres, ironies, parodies, satires, illustrations taken from 19th century with ironic caption, and the playfulness of language. One short stories that illustrates the use of fragmentations more clearly is “The Explanation”, collected in *The City Life*. Furthermore, Barthelme’s short stories (especially those written in his earlier career) almost always begin in a sudden with no background information given; the story line is broken and interspersed with passages taken from other people’s works, quotes by other people, and drawings or illustrations, or even blank black squares. The stories are told by the “I” narrator, the key person who provides the readers with the information about the happenings in the stories. Though in some stories multiple points of view are employed, they are only complementary to the I-point of view. When multiple viewpoints are used, they shift back and
forth and are sometimes, with no apparent reason, intrusive in the middle of the narration of another character. This technique makes his stories seemingly illogical, opaque, chaotic and confusing, causing difficulty for the reader to grasp the message the author wants to convey at first, or even second, reading. Because of these characteristics, Barthelme’s works have drawn both admirers and detractors.

Analyses of Barthelme’s Short Fiction

Donald Barthelme uses multiple layers of meanings in his short stories to implicitly critique the discursive practices and artistic conventions of his time. At the heart of each story, he seems to say (though he doesn’t say it) that such practices and conventions are absurd. However, no solutions are offered to change those practices from absurdities to non-absurdities. To illustrate this argument, three of his stories collected in City Life will be analyzed to support the claim.

“Views of My Father Weeping”: A Futility of Man’s Search for Absolute Truth

At the surface level, “View of My Father Weeping”, written in a series of disconnected paragraphs separated by bullet points, is a story is about the bewildered and disoriented narrator’s attempt to search for the information about his father’s murder. His father is supposedly run over by a carriage. During his search for the truth, he is given incongruous information about the incident. Two witnesses, including a little girl of eleven or twelve, agree that the carriage’s passenger seems to be an aristocrat because the coachman wears blue and green livery—a sign that he belongs to the Aristocracy. The accident is real since the father is dead. Other people provide him conflicting accounts of his father’s behavior at the time of collision. One person—a clerk in a draper shop—claims the old man is drunk and causes the accident himself while another person asserts that it is the fault of the coachman. The narrator himself says that when he has arrived at the scene of the incident, he smells no liquor coming from his father (p. 4). Eventually, the little girl tells the narrator that the coachman’s name is Lars Bang, who shortly visits the narrator's home and informs him that he is indeed involved in the mishap and will explain the circumstances later. Deciding to get the truth from Lars Bang, the narrator decides to go to the Aristocrat’s home and is subsequently drinking wine, which he has brought, with Lars Bang, two other men, and a beautiful young girl. The coachman explains that the narrator's drunken father sets upon the passing coach and attacks the pair of horses, who run over him and they flee in panic. Lars Bang says he wants to go back to see what has happened to the narrator’s father but his angry and ill-tempered master
forbids it, and he concludes that the narrator is "now in possession of all the facts, I trust you are satisfied" (p. 16). Before the narrator had time to give the coachman his reply, the dark –haired girl then claims that "Bang is an absolute bloody liar." The story ends with "Etc."

The story blends a detective genre with that of the nineteenth century realism novel genre, with fragmented, disconnected episodes, nonlinearity of narrative, and the use of seemingly irrelevant material such as the aristocracy in New York and two concurrent period of time in the same setting. The ending of the story “Etc.” underscores the inconclusiveness of the story and implies the endless search for the truth of the death of the narrator’s father. The story can also be read as a critique of language in that it is elusive and can never adequately convey absolute truth. And the search brings the narrator back to his starting point and renews his task again indefinitely.

This short story makes a commentary on the modernist belief in absolute truth as absurd as there is no single truth, but only relative truth. To show this absurdity, the story depicts the narrator’s attempt to search for the truth about the incident of his father’s death. During the search, he is given conflicting accounts of the accident. This indicates that “truth” depends on the perspective of the person who happens to be at a particular time and place. This truth is further filtered by a person’s attitude and prejudice. One incident—the death of the narrator’s father—yields different accounts—one from the little girl, two from the people in the draper’s store, and one from the coachman himself. These people give their own accounts as they see it at one particular juncture. It’s their truths, but not the whole or absolute truth. Lars Bang, the coachman driving the carriage that killed the narrator’s father, provides an orderly version of the incident giving details of the accident "as if he were telling a tavern story” (p. 14). Lars Bang’s account characterizes the father as a brutal, irresponsible drunkard who caused his own death. He says that while taking his master on a coach to King’s New Square, on Friday, just before noon, at a modest, easy pace, “we found ourselves set upon by an elderly man thoroughly drunk, who flung himself at my lead pair and began cutting at their legs with a switch, in the most vicious manner imaginable” (p. 14). Lars Bang further says the horses were “rearing and plunging” beyond his control. He shouts at the old man, but the old man:

in his blindness, being not content with the mischief he had already worked, ran back in again, close to the animals, and began madly cutting at their legs with his stick. At this renewed attack the horses, frightened
out of their wits, jerked the reins from my hands, and ran headlong over your father, who fell beneath their hooves. The heavy wheels of the carriage passed over him. (I felt two quite distinct thumps), his body caught upon a projection under the boot, and he was dragged some forty feet, over the cobblestones. (p. 15)

Bang asserts that his account is the truth ("And so, you are now in possession of all the facts. I trust you are satisfied" (p. 16)). Just as the narrator is about to think that he has the Truth (with uppercase "T") and before he has time to frame a reply, the beautiful girl who is listening with the narrator contradicts and subverts Lars Bang’s account by claiming that “Bang is an absolute bloody liar" (p.15). The story, then offers no resolution or confirmation, and its final line “Etc.” implies that Bang’s story may or may not contain the truth and the search process will have to continue indefinitely. Therefore, if asked what the Truth of the matter is, the answer to it will likely be questionable. What the narrator gets from each witness is only a partial truth.

The notion of nonexistence of an ultimate or absolute truth can also be seen in the narrator’s views of his father which emphasize that a person is not unified and cannot be seen in only one perspective. During the search for how his father met his death, the narrator is offered “views” of the father weeping and behaving incongruously (such as throwing his ball of knitting up in the air, making thumbprints in a tray of pink cupcakes (p. 5), tying a red bandana around his face covering the nose and mouth and shooting a water pistol (p.7), leaping on the dog’s back, straddling him and kicking the dog in the ribs with his heels (p. 8), sitting in the bed and weeping, playing with the salt and pepper shakers and the sugar bowl (p. 10), clumsily upsetting the furniture in a doll's house (p. 11), looking at himself in a mirror while wearing a large straw hat with a number of blue and yellow plastic jonquils (p. 13), and attending a class in good behavior (p. 15). These different views emphasize that there is no unity in a person’s subjectivity or character. This is in contrast to a modernist belief that an individual is unified. Further, the story implicitly reminds the reader not to take one side of the event or thing as absolutely true. The narrator’s views of the father reveal many aspects of the father—he is a clownish, childish, stern, absurd, as well as well-behaved person. Whether the father is taken as a paragon for the son or an absurd person depends on one’s perspective, and no one can claim that his or her truth is the absolute one. At best, the claim is valid for that person who sees the person at a particular juncture, and the search for an absolute truth is absurd and futile.
At the third level, the story advocates indirectly that the readers make their own interpretations and create their own meanings when reading a literary work. One interpretation with one meaning is as good as another, but it cannot be taken as the only and final meaning. This is in line with the postmodern idea of plurality of interpretations and multiple meanings and readers as creators of meaning in a work of art. As Lois Gordon (1981) says, “At ‘any interaction’ one can react in any number of ways. The participant thus—the reader, like the lover-narrator—becomes the ultimate artist or creator” (91).

This story rejects the modernist idea of an absolute truth and shows an endeavor to search for one is futile and absurd since truth is relative. What truth is depends on the perspective of an individual who happens to be at a particular juncture where things intersect. Besides, it is almost impossible for one person to perceive truth from all junctures at one particular moment. At best, the truth a person can offer is just only one relative truth. The ending “Etc.” indicates the search is unfinished, and endless. This story, thus, advocates the notion of relative truth. It does not directly say why relativism is better than absolutism of truth. There are some other questions which the story does not address: If all truths are relative, would they lead to anxiety and frustration? Would a total embrace of relativism lead to nihilism?

At the Tolstoy Museum”: A Critique on the Practice of Institutionalization of an Artist

“At the Tolstoy Museum” is a very short, short story consisting of four pages of text and nine pictorial illustrations. Of the nine illustrations, two are inserted in the text pages—Tolstoy’s coat (p. 43) and Tolstoy at the disaster scene (p. 49) The others are on separate pages, some with captions, and others without captions. These pictures indicate Tolstoy at various stages of his life.

Basically, “At the Tolstoy Museum” is a story of the narrator’s experience in visiting the Leo Tolstoy Museum which holds “some thirty thousand pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy” (p. 43). The narrator first gives brief information about Leo Tolstoy such as the meaning of his last name, his shaving his eyebrows, his contraction of gonorrhea, his being bitten by a bear, his becoming a vegetarian, together with his occasional backward bowing behavior. After that, a physical building and the visitors’ behavior are described. The description includes the materials used to build the Museum, its architectural design, its appearance viewed from the street, and the architectural concept behind the design (Tolstoy’s moral authority).
The story makes fun of the act of institutionalizing someone and canonizing something in society. To institutionalize Tolstoy, every attempt has been made to make the writer towering other writers. First, the author uses a collage of text and pictures of Tolstoy, with each picture or illustration acting as a complete paragraph itself. Each tells a story of Tolstoy at various places and various phases of his life to underscore Tolstoy’s greatness and to magnify his life, as an extraordinary person that deserves either veneration or formalization as a national figure. For example, the first two pictures, each taking up the full page at the beginning of story, depict Tolstoy in his advanced age. With a small mouth, bushy beard, and prominent wrinkles above his small eyes, the large-sized pictures seem to communicate the notion of Tolstoy being the patriarch of the Russian writers. In the second picture, Tolstoy is compared to Napoleon who is, minute in size, contemplating Tolstoy’s visage, conveys the idea that the former is far greater than the latter. The third picture, placed at the bottom of the first page with the text, is a huge model of Tolstoy’s coat displayed in a hall of the museum with four visitors looking at the model (p. 43). The height of the giant coat almost reaches the ceiling of the room. In fact, Tolstoy’s coat is three times taller than the visitors and its size almost fills up the exhibition room, thus indicating the extraordinariness of the man himself and dwarfing the visitors and making them feel awed looking at the coat. On the following page is a picture of Tolstoy in his young age. He is well-dressed, except that his shirt and overcoat are too long. The length of his shirt almost reaches his knees and is buttoned down to his groin. His overcoat is longer than his knees. He holds a book in his left hand and a glass of wine in his right hand. This picture, with a caption of Tolstoy as a youth, indicates a young man who is growing to be great because of his love for reading and lifestyle of the great and the famous. Some people even liken him to Napoleon the Great. For example, Couturier and Durant (1982) point out that in this picture Tolstoy looks strangely like “a baby-faced Napoleon, with his unruly lock of hair” (p. 59). By depicting this physical similarity between Tolstoy and Napoleon, the writer classifies Tolstoy in the Great Man category. Other pictures, Tolstoy (in his middle age and by himself) with his bicycle at Starogladkovskaya about 1852, Tolstoy (in his advanced age) on a tiger hunt in Siberia, and Tolstoy at the disaster scene, all show Tolstoy as an adventurous person and a man who risks his life to help people in disaster—all these are characteristics of a person who deserves veneration. The drawing of the Anna-Vronsky Pavilion of the fictional museum (p. 48) is portrayed in an unusually large scale, indicating that everything associated with Tolstoy is exceptionally great.
On the last page of the story (p. 50) is a perspective drawing of the “Museum plaza”, with Tolstoy’s visage looming large at a distance at the point of infinity, indicating the eternity of his influence and greatness. The drawing also implies that he will be remembered as the alpha and omega of the Russian culture, or the culture of all mankind. From these pictures and drawings, it can be seen that the man is being elevated as the greatest author of all time and all places.

The fictional museum building itself is of unusual and unique architectural style, whose design is based on Tolstoy’s moral authority. The building is made of “cunningly wrought” (p. 45) stone. Viewed from the street, it looks like three boxes, one stacked on another, to form three levels, with the third level being larger than the second, and the second, larger than the first. The glass floor allows visitors to “look straight down and provides a ‘floating’ feeling (p. 45). The entire building, when viewed from the street, looks as if it was going to fall the viewer. Thus, the building is not just a place for displaying his works but it represents the magnitude of his moral authority as well.

Tolstoy’s greatness is also depicted in the visitors’ reaction while looking at his picture and at his works. They feel so awed and so moved that they weep when seeing such pictures and works, or the mere titles of the works, of a great man. The narrator says:

More than any other Museum, the Tolstoy Museum induces weeping. Even the bare title of a Tolstoy work, with its burden of love, can induce weeping—for example, the article titled “Who Should Teach Whom to Write. We the Peasant Children or the Peasant Children Us?” Many people stand before this article, weeping. Too, those who are caught by Tolstoy’s eyes, in the various portraits, room after room after room, are not unaffected by the experience. (p. 45)

The museum has to provide white clean pocket handkerchiefs for them to wipe their tears. This, too, is a discursive practice reproduced the play on the emotion of the visitor. Employing the principles of psychology the crowd, the museum creates awe and appreciation of Tolstoy and his works by encouraging visitors to cry by providing the visitors the handkerchiefs to wipe their tears and to induce more crying through contagion, with the crying of one visitor catching on to another visitor’s crying. The more the people burst in tears, the more recognition
and reverence the artist receives. This is one technique of elevating a person to great height. The narrator says that the museum also holds a series of lectures for visitors, and at one lecture 741 Sunday visitors were struck with sadness by an eloquent speaker who gives a lecture on “Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves.”

To make the artist greater than any other Russian writer, the museum staff ensures that the pictures of Tolstoy the novelist overshadow other Russian authors and poets. “People stared at tiny pictures of Turgenev, Nekrasev, and Fet. These and other small pictures hung alongside extremely large pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy” (p. 49). This illustrates an attempt to demote or to marginalize these writers through suppression and to valorize Tolstoy. The Museum also puts on display Tolstoy’s published works of 640,086 pages—the Jubilee Edition. The number of the pages is exaggerated in order to show that Tolstoy was really a prolific and productive author. According to the Soviet edition of Tolstoy’s works, the number of pages is not as large (Tolstoy,1998: xxix).

This story critiques the practice of institutionalizing an artist; that is, the greatness of an artist depends on the official recognition of the person. With no official recognition, the artist will remain marginalized or will be left in oblivion. This is a common practice in society. For example, Virginia Wolf and Kate Chopin were once condemned but later were rediscovered. Barthelme himself was at first berated as the early critics did not understand his works, especially his use of fragments and vignettes instead of linear plot, and he was redeemed by later critics who recognize him as one of the most prominent American postmodern writers. The question regarding who will be recognized as a great artist or writer at a certain period of time depends on the standards of moral judgment currently held in a society. It is true that, institutionalization has its weakness as the criteria for elevating an artist or a writer can be questionable. “At the Tolstoy Museum” exposes such a practice but offer no an alternative to replace one considered absurd and even undesirable. There are some questions which need to be addressed. What would be the best alternative to replace institutionalization or canonization? If there is no institutionalization, would it mean that all the artists or writers are equally good? And are their works of the same quality?
“The Glass Mountain”: A Parody of Fairy and Chivalric Romance Genres

Composed of 100 numbered paragraphs with each paragraph consisting of either one sentence or a fragment, “The Glass Mountain” is based on a Polish fairy tale, collected in Andrew Lang’s *The Yellow Fairy Book*, first published in 1894. Lang published 437 fairy tales from various cultures and countries between 1889 and 1910 in twelve collections volumes, with each volume having its own color—blue, green yellow, pink, grey, violet crimson brown, orange, olive, and lilac.) Of the 100 paragraphs, five are taken from other sources; they have been interwoven, as intertextuality, into the fabric of the story (paragraphs 56, 66, 71, 80, and 87).

At a story level, Barthelme’s “The Glass Mountain” is a story of a narrator climbing a mountain to disenchant a beautiful symbol in a castle on top of the mountain. This enchanted symbol sits in a castle of pure gold guarded by an eagle. He also sees many people with disturbed eyes, hundreds of young people shooting up in doorways, behind parked cars, and older people walking dogs, and dogshit of various colors (ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, iron black, and rose madder—Paragraph 30). He also sees someone apprehended for cutting down trees. At the height of 206 feet, he sees a heap of corpses of horses and knights ringed the bottom of the mountain with some rapine acquaintances pillaging the dying and groaning knights.

The main reason for the narrator to climb the mountain is to disenchant a symbol. He says contemporary egos still need symbols. He also considers conventional literature’s arbitrary distinction between its “symbols” (nightingales) and mere contemporary “signs” (traffic lights). While on the side of the mountain, he sees a nightingale flying past with traffic lights tied to its legs. From a fairy tale, he learns how to reach the castle by holding onto an eagle’s feet. When the eagle appears, he imitates the action told in the conventional fairy tale. When the eagle flies over the castle, he cuts the eagle’s feet and falls on where the castle is located. He goes inside the castle to claim the beautiful enchanted symbol. As he touches the petrified symbol, it turns into a beautiful princess. Unsatisfied with the symbol, he quickly throws the princess down the mountain. This ending deconstructs the endings of most conventional fairy tales where the couples marry and live happily together forever.

At another level, this story parodies the fairy tale and chivalric romance genres. Both of these genres have always had a fixed structure or formula. The story always takes place in a far-away place, not in a real world; the symbol, almost always enchanted or threatened by a spell or magic cast by an unknown force, needs to be rescued by a hero who is usually a young and valiant knight.
After the symbol is disenchanted and rescued and danger is driven off, the story ends happily with the marriage of the hero and the heroine. The pattern is perpetuated in one story after another, making the genre vapid and unsatisfying as no novelty is added. When the reader begins to read the first few sentences, he or she can predict what the ending will be. Since we live in the world of late capitalism where simulacra permeate every aspect of human life, chivalric romance stories have no place in the present time. People spend more time in watching television, buying consumer goods at shopping centers, in enjoying themselves in amusement parks, rather than reading stories about medieval kings and knights and their adventure, or distressed ladies who suffer from the unfulfilled love. This genre is dying out as it is attested by the death and groaning of knights at the foot of the mountain because they have failed in their adventure or their role. This genre belongs to the past where people still enjoyed the make-believe that knights ventured and valiantly risked their lives fighting monsters to rescue a spell-bound princess in an isolated palace. Instead of a real mountain located in a far-away place, the mountain is only a glass building in a city standing ‘at the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue” (Paragraph 2, p.59).

In the parody, the building in a city, which is not a real mountain, is used; knights are shown to be failures because they could not adjust themselves to the modern world. They use horses to climb a glass building erected perpendicular to the earth, with no slopes to navigate. The climber who succeeds in the task is not knight, but an ordinary person; the tools the narrator uses are not horses, as knights do, but climbing irons and a plumber’s friend. By using the glass building as the glass mountain, by having an ordinary person achieving the feat, by mentioning the knights in full armor and their horses when riding up the glass mountain, by describing the scene of the corpses of dying and groaning knights and horses, and together with twist ending, the stories makes fun of the old genre—the fairy tale and chivalric romance genres. How can a horse and a knight in full armor (which might be very heavy and cause inconvenient movement) climb a building at a right angle? How can a building erected at a right angle have a slope? The narrator says, “I had attained the lower slope” to make it sound like a real slope. (Paragraph 3, p. 59). Is this story a really fairy tale story since the mountain is not a real one? Do the two genres become stale through overuse? The narrator tells us that “Everyone in the city knows about the glass mountain. People who live here tell stories about it. It is pointed out to visitors” (Paragraphs 13, 14, and 15). There are many other questions that can be asked about the two genres, and these questions make us realize that they are not a satisfactory form of a literary work at the time the story was written.
To further subvert the fairy tale and chivalric romance conventions (and realist fiction as well), Barthelme numbers his paragraphs, all of which consist of one sentence, with the shortest having only one single word (paragraphs 11, and 12) and the longest one having 151 words including the source of the work in the brackets (paragraph 80). The narrative of the “I” is disrupted by other voices, but most importantly by the insertion of five quotations; three of which (paragraphs 56, 66, and 87) are taken from sayings by famous people who have actually lived in this world and two (paragraphs 71 and 80) are either from a dictionary or a book. For example, a quotation in paragraph 56 is by Anton Ehrenzweig—a philosopher and professor at the University of Texas, which is the same school Barthelme once attended. Other quotations include the saying by M. Pompidou of France, President of France during 1969 to 1974 (paragraph 66); a definition of symbol taken from *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (paragraph 71); a portion of the Polish Fairy tale taken from Andrew Lang’s *The Yellow Fairy Book* (paragraph 80); and a saying by the late British poet laureate John Masefield (1878 – 1967), which emphasizes the significance of human imagination. The insertion of quotations makes the story like an academic article, where reliability and credibility depend on sources. This practice departs completely from a fairy tale narrative, and the ending where the young man throws the beautiful princes down the top of the mountain (building) is a subversion of the genre.

Apart from parodying the folktale and chivalric genres, the story also critiques the people who criticize other people who are attempting something new. The climber or narrator is being jeered at and spoken inanely of while he is climbing. The act of climbing itself can be taken as the act of writing. The narrator is like an author attempting to transform the old, stale, and vapid genre into a captivating, new one. Along the way, he is being criticized. For example, at the height of 200 feet above the street, the wind is bitterly cold and he, looking down, hears his acquaintances jeering at him, talking about him unfavorably, calling him “shit head” and “asshole” (paragraphs 1-12), “dumb motherfucker” (paragraph 24; p. 60) and “Fart-faced fool” (Paragraph 41; p. 61), and they also bet that he will fail in his endeavor (paragraph 50; p.61). Instead of giving the narrator words of encouragement, the critics (or the onlookers in the story), would rather see him fail. For example, in paragraph 39, one of them says, “Won’t he make a splash when he falls, now?” In paragraph 40, we don’t know whether it is the same person as in paragraph 39 or not who says, “I hope to be here to see it. Dip my handkerchief in the blood.” The criticism underlines the wish for the downfall of those who invent novelty and who depart from the conventional practices. For these critics, they would prefer to tread the path that has been familiar to them.
Though this story makes fun of the fairy tale genre, the structure of the plot still follows the fairy tale conventions, which have long been observed and recognized. The novelty is its self-reflexivity, an urban setting instead of a far-away place, and a protagonist of common stock. The presence of the knights is characteristic of chivalric romance, and the presence of an enchanted symbol is characteristic of the fairy tale genre. In this story, no explicit alternative conventions are suggested to replace what the writer considers as old, stale, and so overused that the genre has lost its charm.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the three stories above, it can be seen that they are multi-layered stories which invite a plurality of interpretations. With the use of postmodern literary writing styles, they are able to mock the discursive practices which are often taken for granted. “The Glass Mountain” illustrates that things we do can be outworn, banal, and pointless, but we still keep doing it without questioning it. When someone steps out of bounds and does something new and innovative, the person would be quickly jeered at and castigated with harsh words. Sometimes it is absurd to find a fixed and precise meaning behind ideas and events but people still continue on their quest. Language, too, has its shortcomings—it does not effectively communicate. For example, in “Views of My Father Weeping,” each witness gives only a bit of information which does not add up for a full understanding the event. “At the Tolstoy’s Museum” is a critique of institutionalization of art. To privilege one artist, the museum (or the institution) suppress or marginalize the other artists and by exaggeration or by making that particular artist larger what he or she really is.

The three stories expose not only the banality but also the absurdity of discursive practices. However, they do not explicitly offer an alternative to substitute those practices. In “Views of My Father Weeping”, the writer seems to imply that relativism is better than absolutism, but he does not point out the weaknesses of relative truths. If truth is subjective, would the person telling that truth be trusted? If searching for truth is endless and absurd, would that lead to ennui and nihilism? In “The Glass Mountain”, he parodies the fairy tale genre and convention. However, he still employs the fairy tale plot structure to convey his idea. By employing an urban setting and an ordinary man as a protagonist, does the writer advocate that the genre should employ similar character types and setting as he did? Would the people still recognize the story as a fairy tale when the conventions have shifted? Once the conventions were established and practiced, would they not become stale and overused? In “At the Tolstoy’s Museum”, the writer similarly offers no alternative to the existing method of privileging and canonizing the artist. The story merely exposes the absurdities of
such practices. That the writers offer no alternative can be construed that he either implies that what he has exposed in stories are his alternatives, in spite of their weaknesses, or leave the issues for the readers to decide for themselves.

References


