

Donald Barthelme's "The Glass Mountain": A Deconstructive Postmodern Parody on Genres and Art

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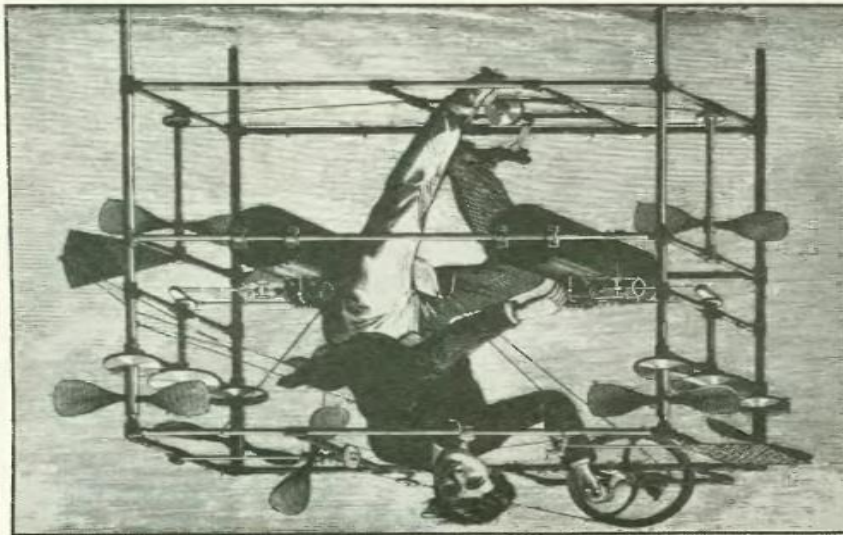
Abstract

This article aims to demystify the techniques of a writer who was exemplary in his techniques yet not famous because of his eccentric style of writing. It takes up one of his short stories for discussion to show how he is innovative in his narrative strategies, thereby singling him out from his contemporaries and encourage creative writing of this sort.

Key words: innovative, postmodern, metafictional, collage, fabulist, experimental.

Donald Barthelme is a central figure in the late 1960s. His writings are innovative and short stories are filled with verbal wit and domestic themes. He is categorized as a postmodernist and fabulist because of his metafictional strategies. He is projected as a ludic writer, an ironist who uses humour to disguise himself to preserve his freedom and though playful in his strategies; is much serious about art and its techniques. He is not held in high reference because of his less serious themes. His books are often shelved with the playful. He belongs to the senseless movement or movement for its own sake. John Barth's proclaimed in 1967 that certain forms of literature were exhausted. Writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Ronald Sukenick, Jerzy Kosinski and Donald Barthelme created a new trend in literature. Old fictional modes were to be replaced with a new mode. His Writing techniques were eccentric and radical. No specific name can be given to the technique that these writers had been using. Critics were reluctant to brand them under a specific label. They were branded as experimental, metafictional, parafiction and surfiction. Works were indifferent in the backdrop of the traditional perspectives because, the audience were conditioned to read fiction with plot, theme and character. His writing techniques were eccentric and radical. His works were seen as the process of construction and evolution of fiction. Times Magazine called him as "America's Weirdest Literary Genius". To cite an example of his weird form of writing;

The efforts of the young Scotsman "Wrong Way" McKim were applauded, up to a point.



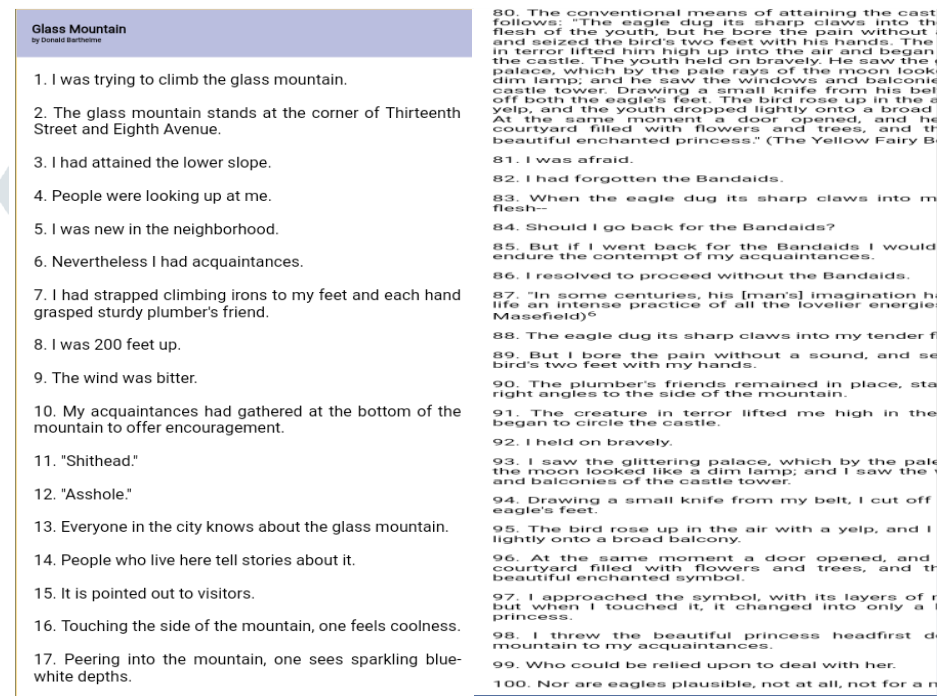
His writing are categorized as nonfictional parodies and inventive fictions with a few miscellaneous writings that do not fall into any categories. These works signalled the advent of a new era. Barthelme's short stories are always similar to that of collages. The point of collage is that, unlike things are stuck together to create a new reality (Kasia 73).

McCaffery quotes Ronald Sukenick's comment about the novel, as the contemporary writer can no longer rely on epistemological certainties. Reality to Barthelme does not exist, time does not exist and personality does not exist. Contemporary novels proclaim that the author is dead, no one knows the plot, and therefore there is no authenticity of the received version (76). These writers aware of their status of not being able to depict reality turned to the inward focus of reality imaginatively labelled as the postmodern metafictionists. Though these are manipulations of the literary conventions, their playful language invites the reader to demystify the systems.

Donald Barthelme was born in Philadelphia on 7th April 1931. He was the eldest child among five. All of them were talented writers including Frederick Barthelme (1943). Beginning in the late 1960s till his death in 1989, Donald Barthelme produced a body of works that were central to the postmodern movement. Barthelme is known as an exemplary New Yorker comic writer. This magazine published 130 of his stories. Along with writers like Thomas Pynchon and John Barth, he experimented with the boundaries of perception and assumption about the new style of fiction writing. Early in his career, when he began writing and publishing, he was more concerned with his literary stature, how readers may judge him and reward him creating a tension in his celebrity and literary figure. Though he shared an ironic tone and a keen imagination for literary structure of the contemporary postmodernists he was unique and separate in many ways compared to his peers. He had learnt from his father, a renowned architect, the

principal of the Bauhaus, which was a school of artists, designers, and architects that originated in Germany early in the twentieth century. The proponents of this school believed that excellence of form and design could greatly contribute to the quality of human existence. While postmodernists were busy with breaking down over used literary structures to bring out its silliness, Barthelme experimented with new forms. The short stories which make up most of his oeuvre are distinctive in form. The four novels *Snow White* (1967), *The Dead Father* (1975), *Paradise* (1986), and *The King* (1990) are playfully novelistic.

Here is a Screenshot of his original text “The Glass Mountain” from the collection called *Sixty Stories*



“The Glass Mountain” is one of his most important stories where an artist is armed with only two climbing irons and two sturdy plumber’s friends tries to climb a glass mountain at the top to find a castle of pure gold and a beautiful enchanted princess. The readers will not be able to interpret it still they enjoy it because of the separateness and discontinuity. The story achieves a traditional end by the narrator discovering a beautiful princess. The problem of the artist is further illustrated in “At the Tolstoy Museum” it shortly points out that Tolstoy’s kind of novel in today’s world can be seen only in museums. The story of the three hermits within that informs readers that each can speak only his own language. Thus Barthelme wishes to convey that the language and method of Tolstoy will not be appropriate to readers like Barthelme. It is clear from the story that the narrator can only see surfaces.

Barthelme describes the experience of climbing a glass mountain as “the disenchantment of symbols” (*City Life* 97), further the narrator of the story says “I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning; but when I touched it, it changed into a beautiful princess (64-65).

It is clear from this that Barthelme tries to multiply the layer of meanings, claiming that language lives a life of its own, and scientific investigation cannot comprehend it. (Couturier 23). Anybody who reads Barthelme is sure to experience the power and strangeness of fragments.

It is his best known story that consists of hundred numbered sentences that enumerate the artist’s climb to the top of the glass mountain. It is interesting to see that Barthelme rejects the conventional story telling form and the traditional explanation of the artist’s final discovery. The story resembles his former stories “The Balloon” and ‘The Tolstoy Museum”. Because, his proposition is that one must function within the quotidian; reality is fixed and traditional, and the methods are already given. He says that in spite of climbing with this attitude, the artist still may reject all things for personal satisfaction. He uses numbered sentences, to dismiss tradition, therefore seriously playful as in the following;

1. I was trying to climb the glass mountain.
2. The glass mountain stands at the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue.
3. I had attained the lower slope.
4. People were looking up at me.
5. I was new in the neighborhood.
6. Nevertheless I had acquaintances.
7. I had strapped climbing irons to my feet and each hand grasped a sturdy plumber's friend. (*Sixty Stories* 178)

Thus through his eccentric narrative techniques, he conveys the artists limitations in the “The Glass Mountain” parodying genre and art itself.

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