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A Broken Kaleidoscope——The Postmodern Writing Techniques in Donald Barthelme's "The School"

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Abstract: *Viewed as "father of the new generation of postmodernism writers", Donald Barthelme ranks top among the most influential postmodernism writers. "The School" is one of his postmodern short stories. With the application of innovative genre, style and language, and such writing techniques as collage and fragmentation, Barthelme juxtaposes intentionally incongruous elements of contemporary language and culture, creating an atmosphere both humorous and unsettling. And the story is no longer trying to offer a narrative that could be grounded in reality but instead addressing larger philosophical questions.*

Keywords: *Postmodernism, "The School", Collage, Fragmentation*

1. Introduction

Donald Barthelme, American short-story writer known for his modernist "collages," is marked by technical experimentation and a kind of melancholy gaiety.

A one-time journalist, Barthelme was managing editor of Location, an art and literature review, and director (1961–1962) of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. In 1964 he published his first collection of short stories, Come Back, Dr. Caligari. His first novel, Snow White (1967), initially was published in The New Yorker, a magazine to which he was a regular contributor. Other collections of stories include City Life (1970), Sadness (1972), Sixty Stories (1981), and Overnight to Many Distant Cities (1983). He wrote three additional novels: The Dead Father (1975), Paradise (1986), and The King (1990). His children's book, The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine or the Hithering Thithering Djinn (1971), won the National Book Award in 1972. He was distinguished visiting professor of English (1974–1975) at the City College of the City University of New York. Flying to America: 45 More Stories, a posthumous collection of previously unpublished or uncollected stories, was published in 2007 [1].

Donald Barthelme (1931--1989) was an American writer known for his postmodern, surrealistic style. He published more than 100 stories in his lifetime, many of which were quite compact, making him an important influence on contemporary flash fiction. "The School" -- a classic escalation story with only about 1,200 words -- was originally published in 1974 in The New Yorker. Barthelme's writing is characterized by literary collages, the absence of plot and character development, incoherent syntax and dialogue and parodies of technical.

Published in the New Yorker, "The School" is a short story about death, in which a series of animals and, eventually, children die at a school. One of the teachers at the school narrates these events, and the story ends with a discussion between the teacher and his pupils about the meaning of life when all life is filled with, and must end in, death.

Postmodernism literally means 'after the modernist movement'. Ihab Hassan offers eleven postmodern features related to the literary sense: indeterminacy; fragmentation; decanonization; selflessness, depthlessness; the unpreventable, unrepresentable; irony; hybridization; carnivalization; performance, participation; constructionism; immanence (Hassan, 1987:168-172).

"The School" begins with an ordinary situation everyone can recognize: a failed classroom gardening project. But then it piles on so many other recognizable classroom failures (involving herb gardens, a salamander, and even a puppy) that the sheer accumulation becomes preposterous. This essay intends to explore how Donald Barthelme successfully presents the alienation, absurdity and purposelessness of the modern world in "The School" by using the postmodern writing techniques like collage and fragmentation [2].

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2. Postmodernism

We are currently living in a historical period called "Postmodern." What we call "Postmodern" is simply what happens after the historical period called "Modern." In the historical development of Western philosophy, we can see various major transitions. What is typically called "modern" philosophy starts with Descartes around the year 1630. Descartes marks a departure from the older Medieval Philosophy that had dominated European thinking. Medieval thought is marked by its adherence to authorities: the Bible and Plato/Aristotle. With the development of the Protestant Reformation (16th century) the reliance on religious authorities was undermined. As the various Protestant churches developed and fought for power with the older Catholic Church, it became unclear which church (if any) might actually have a correct understanding of Christianity. Also with the advances of science, the older Aristotelian model of the world was collapsing. This problem led Descartes and many other European thinkers away from reliance on religious and classical authority. Descartes is "modern" because he refuses to rely on older authorities and, instead, bases his arguments in human reason.

Thus, Modernism is the recognition of the limits of older authorities and the reliance, first and foremost, on human reason. As this "modern" world-view develops, it includes the historical era called the "Enlightenment" with its emphasis on the "universal" values of liberal, secular, democratic Europe and North America. The list of great "modern" thinkers usually includes such men as Galileo, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Isaac Newton. The "modern" way of thinking culminates in the late 19th century with a great wave of optimism; the Western world believed that their own way of rational-scientific thinking was transforming the world into a paradise of freedom and technological mastery.

That optimism collapsed in the first half of the 20th century. World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II collectively functioned as an on-going crisis. By the end of the First World War (1914-18) France and been economically devastated, the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires had collapsed, Germany was in ruins, the Russian Empire had crumbled and some 15 to 20 million people had died in Europe as a result of the war. Then came the Great Depression (1929-1940) which was the worst economic collapse in modern history. It left tens of millions of people without work or income. Then World War Two (1939-1945) concluded with some 60 or 70 million deaths. The rational-scientific methods of the Western world culminated in atomic bombs capable of destroying entire cities. The willingness of the "modern" world to engage in a "rational" and highly technological frenzy of self-destruction was horrifically obvious. By 1945 the world of the "modern" lay in ruins throughout Europe and much of the rest of the world.

In an important way, the "Modern" world had valued universal reason as the key to human fulfillment, but after World War II the Western conception of "reason" itself came to be questioned. Postmodern thinking is often associated with a rejection of grand narratives like "progress," "modernity," and "reason." One of the early proponents of Postmodernism was the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998). He claimed that cultures cohere, in part, because people within a specific culture believe in a dominant narrative. For most Christians of the Middle Ages that narrative was told in the Bible. For the people of Ancient Greece, their dominant narrative was told by Homer in The Iliad and The Odyssey. For the peoples of Europe and North America living at the end of the 19th century their dominant narrative was that of science, democracy, and rational thought. Even the radical 19th century ideals of "Communism" are part of that older (modern) culture. Karl Marx's narrative of the collective workers of the world overthrowing their capitalist masters and re-building the world as the "workers' paradise" had been a dominant narrative for the Soviet Union and Communist China; Communism is now seen as just one of many old-fashioned stories that has proven itself ineffective. Grand narratives are understood by Postmodernists as collective myths that never had a reality; grand narratives were attractive and widely believed but they were, at best, collective delusions and, at worst, impositions of power that went unnoticed. Once dominant narratives are shattered, people enter into a period of great uncertainty, groping for meanings and, perhaps, cherishing the "good old days" when they had a single comprehensive narrative that gave their lives meaning. However, the end of traditional meaning also produces the opportunity for people to create new meanings for themselves.

3. Postmodern Philosophy

Postmodernism in philosophy can be defined against the background of modern philosophy. Modern philosophical thinkers espoused a variety of presuppositions in their work including, in simplified form:

Objectivism - Objectivism holds that the universe is populated by determinate objects. Moreover,

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suggestions can be made about these objects that are either true or false.

Rationalism - Rationalism holds that human reason can be used to discover various truths, assuming that reason is adequately disciplined to prevent error.

Materialism - Materialism holds that everything is made of matter, which changes and moves according to the mechanical laws of nature.

4. Postmodernism in Literature

Postmodernism was not only a critique of modernist theories about reality; it was a movement about how to write literature and what to make literature about. Postmodern literature can be associated with a variety of features that include:

Maximalism - Many postmodern novels are long and deliberately disorganized. This is presumably due to the desire to present consciousness as fragmented and disorganized.

Intertextuality - Many postmodern works are intertextual, meaning they contain explicit references to other works. This undermines the idea of an independent, complete work.

Self-consciousness - Postmodern works often include material that highlights how the work is itself merely a literary work and not something where the reader should suspend disbelief. In other words, the work draws attention to itself as a specific work to be viewed or read.

5. “The School”: Plot Summary

The story is narrated in the first person by Edgar, a teacher at the titular school. He begins by recounting a failed attempt on behalf of the children at the school to plant trees, the aim being to teach them about responsibility and taking care of living things. However, all of the trees died.

This was made worse, he tells us, by the fact that a couple of weeks earlier, the snakes which the children had been looking after had died, too, after a four-day strike at the school meant the heating was switched off and the snakes died from the cold. Similarly, the herb gardens the children tended failed because the pupils overwatered the seeds.

The teacher refuses to rule out the possibility that the children had deliberately overwatered the herbs, because a number of other deaths at the school - of the gerbils, the white mice, and the salamander, which the children had been carrying around in plastic bags which suffocated the creatures - suggested that death was too common an occurrence at the school to be put down to coincidence. The tropical fish had died, too.

Edgar then recalls the puppy the class had looked after, when one of the girls had found it and saved it from being run over by a truck. This puppy, which the children named Edgar after their teacher, died a couple of weeks later, though the narrator isn’t entirely sure what caused its death: he guesses it got distemper.

The next ‘creature’ to die was a boy: a Korean orphan named Kim, who had been adopted by the school under a special program. Again, the cause of death is uncertain, but the experience puts the class, and the teacher, off the idea of adopting further orphans. Edgar starts to wonder if there is something wrong with the school, that so many living things die in it. But he chalks it up to a run of bad luck, and nothing worse. Quite a few parents of the children also die in a short space of time.

The next death the narrator recounts, however, is described as a tragedy: two of the school’s children died while playing near some large wooden beams which fell on them. The narrator isn’t sure whether the death was an unfortunate accident or due to negligence on the part of whoever stacked the beams. One of the other children lost his father, who was killed by a masked intruder in his home.

Eventually, the teacher has a discussion with his class about the nature of death. He tells the children that it is not death but life which gives meaning to life. The children ask him to make love to Helen, the teaching assistant, as they’re curious about what making love looks like. The narrator declines, but the children keep pleading, until Helen goes and embraces Edgar and he kisses her on the forehead. The children are excited by this demonstration, and cheer when the next class pet - another gerbil - arrives.

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6. "The School": Analysis

"The School" is a darkly humorous story about death, and the story's absurd elements - a trademark ingredient in many of Donald Barthelme's hard-to-categorise stories - invite us to contemplate our attitudes towards death. When the children ask their teacher whether death is the thing that gives meaning to life, the teacher is quick to answer 'no' (having been so doubtful or cagey in his responses to their earlier questions), telling them that life is what gives meaning to life.

But in a sense, both the narrator and the children are right, or at least, they're both half-right. Our lives are defined by death, quite literally, in that the word 'defined' means to set an 'end' or 'limit'(from the Latin finis, 'end') on something. All of our lives are quite literally defined, or ended, by death, and our knowledge of this fact - and the reminders of our own mortality which we receive, in the form of the deaths we witness around us - obviously does influence our attitude to life. But at the same time, one should not live one's life constantly in fear of death, or trying to stave off the inevitable fact of one's mortality.

The children seem to understand, unconsciously or implicitly, the relationship between what Freud called 'Eros'(life, but also the erotic, or life-giving) and 'Thanatos' (death), when they ask their teacher and the teaching assistant to demonstrate the act of making love (the way new life is created, after all). On some level, they understand this deep relationship between life and death, perhaps even more fully than their adult teacher does. When the children refuse to accept their teacher's answer that death has no bearing on life, they hit upon an important truth: that death can liberate us from the mundane nature of everyday life, if only because death reminds us that we won't be here every day: one day, we will be gone.

The narrative voice of "The School" is colloquial, even casual. Indeed, the fact that it is the teacher narrating the story to us, rather than some impersonal and detached third-person narrator, is significant because the teacher is not only involved, but possibly complicit, in the spate of deaths some of the school's inhabitants - human and non-human - have suffered. It is almost as if the teacher is nervously trying to absolve himself of any responsibility for what has happened, putting it down to a run of bad luck, as he says at one point.

We should also bear in mind that the story begins by talking about 'responsibility': the children plant trees as a way of learning about individual responsibility. Is anyone responsible for this 'run of bad luck' the school has experienced? The story suggests not, and the circumstances of the various deaths described are so various and unrelated (inside the school, but also outside of the school; parents, children, animals, plants; accidents and illness) that we are taken into the metaphysical, rather than the mundanely physical, in search of an answer. The children wildly cheering when their new pet is brought into the school suggests that, having dwelled on death together, they are ready to get back to life and the living.

7. Postmodern Writing Techniques in "The School"

7.1 Fragmentation

In literature, fragmentation is a broad term for literary techniques that breaks up the text or narrative. For modernism, fragmentation is applied to achieve "totalization" while for postmodernism the technique is adopted to present "incompleteness".

Fragmentation in modernist literature is thematic, as well as formal. Plot, characters, theme, images, and narrative form itself are broken. William Faulkner's novels, such as "The Sound and the Fury" are also fragmented in form, consisting of disjointed and nonlinear narratives. Fragmented narratives, on the other hand, jumble up the sequencing of a story, challenging the reader to piece together the different components of the story to make sense of it. Fragmented narratives can start in the middle of the action, and they often hop back and forth through the timeline of events.

Why do writers use fragmentation? Writers change their sentence structure to create certain effects. In this example from O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi," sentence fragments are used to add emphasis and create urgency. The emphasis is being placed on the minimal amount of money that Della has available.

What is fragmented structure? Fragmentation, also known as trade in parts, components, and accessories (PCA), results in different companies producing component parts rather than the finished good, with the components assembled as a final product elsewhere. Suppliers do not have to be in the

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same geographical region.

The whole fiction is presented as a combination of fragments. Firstly, “The School” is composed of several independent incidents as if Barthelme was creating a comic strip while he was writing the short story. Besides, there are not close and logical connections in the fiction. Almost all the sentences in “The School” are simple declarative statements without obvious transition and explanation. Narrated in a nonlinear way, the story shifts among different scenes like the deaths of thirty orange trees, the salamander, the tropical fish, Edgar died of Distemper, parents, Matthew and Tony. Take sentences of each paragraph as examples:

Well, we had all these children out planting trees, see, because we figured that... And the trees all died.

It wouldn’t have been so bad except that just a couple of weeks before the thing with the trees, the snakes all died.

Of course we expected the tropical fish to die, that was no surprise.

We weren’t even supposed to have a puppy...I don’t know what it died of. Distemper, I guess.

The ambiguity of time and space, the frequent shifts of various subjects and the unexpected spots disturb the normal narration. Reader’s attention will be easily distracted by the loose structure.

7.2 Collage

Collage refers to the art of making a picture by sticking pieces like newspaper, wallpaper, printed text and illustrations, photographs, cloth onto a surface. In literature, the term is applied to those works which incorporate quotations, allusions, foreign expressions and nonverbal elements etc. A collage in literary terms may also refer to a layering of ideas or images. Collage is utilized in fashion design in the sketching process, as part of mixed media illustrations, where drawings together with diverse materials such as paper, photographs, yarns or fabric bring ideas into designs.

Collage in language-based work can now mean any composition that includes words, phrases, or sections of outside source material in juxtaposition. An early example is T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” which includes newspaper clippings, music lyrics, nursery rhymes, and overheard speech.

In an interview, Barthelme further explained his use of collage by saying, “the point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. The new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may also be much else. It’s an itself, if it's successful” (Bellamy, 1974:51-52).

“The School” is actually composed by sticking different fragmentation, which is literally recognized as collage. Collage in “The School” includes the following elements:

A. The colloquial writing skill

e.g. ...that was part of their education, to see how, you know.../ I mean, none of their parents would let them cross the picket line.../ Of course we expected the tropical fish to die, that was no surprise./ There were all these big wooden beams stacked, you know, at the edge of the excavation./ As soon as I saw the puppy I thought, Oh Christ, I bet...

B. The character's thoughts and feelings

e.g. We complained about it./ it was depressing./ The children were very conscientious./ I said that they shouldn’t be frightened(although I am often Frightened)./ The children were excited.

C. The inserted dialogue between students and “I”

e. g. I said, yes, maybe.

They said, we don’t like it.

I said, that’s sound.

They said, it’s a bloody shame!

D. Unexpected suspension points

e.g. the root systems... and also the sense of responsibility/ the reason that the snakes kicked off was that... you remember/ Or maybe... well, I don’t like to think about sabotage, although it did occur to us/

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the white mice had died, and the salamander... well, now they know not to carry them around in plastic bags.

8. Humor and Escalation

"The School" is a classic escalation story, meaning it intensifies and becomes more and more grandiose as it goes on; this is how it achieves much of its humor. It begins with an ordinary situation everyone can recognize: a failed classroom gardening project. But then it piles on so many other recognizable classroom failures (involving herb gardens, a salamander, and even a puppy) that the sheer accumulation becomes preposterous.

That the narrator's understated, conversational tone never rises to the same fever pitch of preposterousness makes the story even funnier. His delivery continues as if these events are completely understandable— "just a run of bad luck."

9. Tone Shifts

There are two separate and significant tone changes in the story that interrupts the straightforward, escalation-style humor.

The first occurs with the phrase, "And then there was this Korean orphan." Until this point, the story has been amusing, with each death being of relatively little consequence. But the phrase about the Korean orphan is the first mention of human victims. It lands like a punch to the gut, and it heralds an extensive list of human fatalities.

What was funny when it was just gerbils and mice isn't so funny when we're talking about human beings. And while the sheer magnitude of the escalating calamities does retain a humorous edge, the story is undeniably in more serious territory from this point forward.

The second tone shift occurs when the children ask, "[I]s death that which gives meaning to life?" Until now, the children have sounded more or less like children, and not even the narrator has raised any existential questions. But then the children suddenly voice questions like:

"[I]sn't death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended in the direction of—"

The story takes a surreal turn at this point, no longer trying to offer a narrative that could be grounded in reality but instead addressing larger philosophical questions. The exaggerated formality of the children's speech only serves to emphasize the difficulty of articulating such questions in real life—the gap between the experience of death and our ability to make sense of it.

10. The Folly of Protection

One of the reasons the story is effective is the way it causes discomfort. The children are repeatedly faced with death—the one experience from which adults would like to protect them. It makes a reader squirm.

Yet after the first tone shift, the reader becomes like the children, confronting the inescapability and inevitability of death. We're all in school, and school is all around us. And sometimes, like the children, we might begin "to feel that maybe there [i]s something wrong with the school." But the story seems to be pointing out that there is no other "school" for us to attend. (If you're familiar with Margaret Atwood's short story "Happy Endings," you'll recognize thematic similarities here.)

The request from the now-surreal children for the teacher to make love with the teaching assistant seems to be a quest for the opposite of death—an attempt to find "that which gives meaning to life." Now that the children are no longer protected from death, they don't want to be protected from its opposite, either. They seem to be searching for balance.

It is only when the teacher asserts that there is "value everywhere" that the teaching assistant approaches him. Their embrace demonstrates a tender human connection that doesn't seem particularly sexualized.

And that's when the new gerbil walks in, in all its surreal, anthropomorphized glory. Life continues.

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The responsibility of caring for a living being continues—even if that living being, like all living beings, is doomed to eventual death. The children cheer because their response to the inevitability of death is to continue engaging in the activities of life.

11. Conclusion

Many modern and postmodern works of literature have the characteristic of fragmentation. Thus, Fragmentation can also apply to art, where colors and images are broken up as part of the art. Modernism as a cultural wave, which swept America at the turn of the twentieth century, influenced and affected most of the literary aspects either art or music or literature through the desolation of the traditional forms. It is a kind of a sharp breaking of past rigidity. The elements of the modernism are formal, stylistic and thematic.

Fragmentation and collage are used in “The School” to create the chaos and absurdity within the text. Readers may be easily misled and feel at lost, which is usually the effect expected by postmodern writers in order to prove the postmodern idea that the world is without center, completeness, order and rationality.

Although “The School” only contains about one thousand words, it embraces many obvious postmodern characteristics. The short fiction reveals the postmodern writing techniques like collage and fragmentation etc. In the meanwhile, the story exposes the questioning of “which gives meaning to life” and indicates that we all the readers are in “School” when confronting the inescapability and inevitability of death. School is all around us. The responsibility of caring for a living being continues -- even if that living being, like all living beings, is doomed to eventual death.

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