
Deconstruction and Parodying of Genre in Donald Barthelme's *A Man's Face*

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Abstract:

This article aims to explore Donald Barthelme's short story *A Man's Face*. It is a parody of literary genres. It is a typical example of self-reflexive fiction. It parodies various genres of detective fiction, psychological drama, and speculative fiction. Barthelme's often fragmented and absurdist style of narration poses challenges to conventional genre expectations of a reader. Barthelme can be considered a deconstructionist who disrupts the narrative coherence, character identity, and emotional depth, thus, creating a space where genres are distorted and redefined using a postmodern approach,

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Introduction:

Donald Barthelme known for his experimental form of writing is considered as a postmodern writer. His writings are playful, fragmented and disjointed narratives, His satirical approach to storytelling makes him a difficult writer to read. His short story *A Man's Face* is a typical example of it. It parodies a range of literary genres. This article will explore how Barthelme's *A Man's Face* deconstructs and parodies other genres through its experimental style and thematic exploration of identity and perception by parodying the form itself.

Waugh (1984) considers Barthelme's work as postmodern due to his rejection of traditional narrative structures and his excessive use of irony, pastiche, and self-referentiality that distances the text from the original (p. 53). Barthelme refuses to adhere to the linear storytelling typical of genre fiction. McCaffery (1982) feels that Barthelme's reputation for using the fragmented nature of the narrative is

coupled with the surreal focus on the man's Face that creates an experience that is more about the exploration of form than about resolving any traditional plot points (p. 18).

Larry McCaffery considers Barthelme a metafictionist who mocks modern credos such as alienation, sexual frustration, the sublimity of language, and traditional storytelling methodologies. ("Metafictional Muse", p. 87). Barthelme's texts explore deeper themes through their fragmented nature. He employs a number of strategies to dissolve his texts. In his techniques, he can be compared to Nabokov, as he is aware of the collapse of tradition that has fragmented twentieth-century fiction and art. He wishes that the process of text-making becomes stable like in the past. Barthelme's fictions lack coherence. Barthelme delves deep and explores the possibilities and restrictions of language and its uses. Classified as Surrealistic, his works lack plot, characterization, and point of view. Barthelme is known for using familiar language in unfamiliar ways and forces the readers to concentrate on his words as words, thereby forcing them to question their meaning. His works, though amusing, are satiric portraits of information about crazed individuals who blurt words at each other. This is a clue to his works. Barthelme's lack of plot is a sign that words lose their meaning, all forms of communication are subverted, and therefore, knowledge of self, others, and the entire universe seems impossible. His stories reconfirm the power of language. Barthelme's use of language is shocking, bold, and terrifying (p. 196).

Barthelme is a great parodist because his writings are a meta-discourse that impairs the readers' ability to get things into focus as he has many stories to tell. His parodies are about the power of fragments. He parodies the inability of language to express thoughts. He is a great reader of cultural theorists. According to him, the rationalization of art under capitalism is a process of miniaturization. The artist in today's world is simplified and reduced to produce variety. Michael Trussler (2011) treats Barthelme's fiction as literary artifacts, which are ekphrastic, meaning the verbal representations of visuals (p. 253).

Parody as a tool in Deconstruction

Parody has a long history. Its purpose and motive vary depending on the need. It is known as a quizzical art that is quick to seize the mannerisms of people to stir a laugh by an outrageous fooling or malice. Parody is an art in terms of its nervousness, inventiveness, restlessness, and cleverness to ridicule everything that is new and blatant. Parody is ridiculed because it has been society's most effective means of curing the oddities of understanding. Classical scholar Christopher Stone, in *The Art and Craft of Letters* (1922), mentions the characteristics of Parody as follows: [Parody] explodes the pompous, corrects the well-meaning eccentric, cools the fanatical, and prevents the incompetent from achieving success. The truth will prevail over it, falsehood will cower under it: and it is well known that when reason, indignation, entreaty, and menace fail, ridicule will often cause a government to

abandon a Bill, a lover his mistress, a younger brother his sartorial indiscretions (p. 8). Parody functions as a cure. A variation of Parody known as burlesque is an effective method to satirize without hurting. Careful attempts should be made while distinguishing the terms parody, burlesque, skit, imitation, and travesty. A parodist is a man of literary tastes. He should be able to distinguish between good works and bad works and know the limits to what extent to go. Parody is usually not mere imitation (p. 128). Parody is considered to be the imitation and transformation of another's words. It is also one of the intertextual forms of allusion where another text is created. Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson define Parody in terms of hyperreality and pastiche. Baudrillard feels that Parody in the postmodern era is unintentional without the element of mockery. Hyperreality is the total reconstruction of reality, and it is impossible to return to the real (Hutcheon, Politics, p. 7). In Fredric Jameson's opinion, the previous art forms are continuously renewed and recycled, and postmodern artists rejuvenate the exhausted art forms through pastiche. He defines pastiche in a derogatory way as "blank parody" and "parody that has lost its humor" (Hutcheon, Politics, p. 17).

Donald Barthelme uses Parody as a tool of the postmodern to challenge the authoritativeness of knowledge that exists in the form of discourses. Barthelme's Parody can be understood from Linda Hutcheon's perspective of postmodern Parody,

Donald Barthelme, a popular postmodern writer, is known for his playful, often absurd approach to narrative, where the conventional structure of storytelling and meaning are frequently disrupted. *Man's Face* is an example of how Barthelme uses Parody not only to critique but also as humor to critique literary conventions, identity, and the function of art itself. Barthelme in *Man's Face* uses Parody to challenge reader expectations, undermine the significance of identity as seen through appearances, and deconstruct the seriousness often attributed to both literature and art.

A central element of Barthelme's Parody in *Man's Face* is the disruption of traditional narrative structure. In realist fiction, stories typically follow a linear progression as events unfold logically, and characters are presented with clear motivations. Barthelme fragments the story in such a way that it disorients the reader and denies them a sense of closure or clear understanding. By doing so, he parodies the reader's expectation of a well-ordered narrative and mocks the idea that fiction must conform to a specific format. As critics have noted, Barthelme's work frequently employs fragmentation and disruption as a method of undermining literary conventions (Lehman 45).

In *Man's Face*, the narrative is centered on an image — a man's face — that appears to promise some deeper significance. The Face, a focal point of identity in many cultures, is something readers are conditioned to view as a key to understanding character or thematic elements. Barthelme deliberately avoids offering any definitive

insights about this Face. Instead, his descriptions remain elusive, defying interpretation. In this way, the story parodies the literary expectation that images and symbols must carry inherent meaning (Cohen 78). This refusal to conform to traditional storytelling structures is a hallmark of Barthelme's postmodern style, where the Parody extends not only to the narrative form but also to the reader's interpretive role.

Detective fiction is known for its reliance on clues, logic, and resolution; however, Barthelme subverts these expectations by presenting a mystery without offering any clear answers or resolutions in *Man's Face*. The narrative is not driven by the discovery of "who did it," as in a traditional detective story, but by absurd observations about the man's Face. Therefore, Friedman (2000) says that this undermining of narrative closure is central to Barthelme's Parody, as it critiques the reader's desire for resolution and certainty in genre fiction (p. 72).

In *Mans Face*, Barthelme employs a unique narrative structure consisting of 40 coaxial chapters, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. This novel is an exemplary representation of Barthelme's fascination with language, fragmentation, and the human experience. Through the protagonist's quest for self-discovery, Barthelme critiques the notion of identity, challenging readers to reevaluate their perceptions of reality.

In the context of postmodernist literature, *Mans Face* presents a scathing critique of the fragmented self. Barthelme's use of non-linear narrative structures and metafictional elements leaves the reader perplexed. In Barthelme's hands, the Face is reduced to absurd descriptions and meaningless observations, stripping the narrative of any emotional resonance. This distortion of identity reflects postmodern critiques of the subject as fragmented and unknowable (Hutcheon 45). Barthelme's Parody here lies in his refusal to give psychological depth to the character, leaving readers with nothing but the superficial.

The grotesque distortion of the man's Face suggests elements of speculative fiction or science fiction, where physical mutations or transformations are common. Barthelme, however, uses this trope in an absurdist manner, presenting the physical transformation of the man's Face as an event without consequence or explanation. By stripping the speculative elements of their typical futuristic or fantastical context, Barthelme parodies the genre's tendency to explore alternate realities and scientific possibilities (Jameson 101).

Conclusion

Donald Barthelme's *A Man's Face* is an apt text for exploring the ways in which postmodernism deconstructs and parodies genre conventions. By engaging with and distorting elements of detective fiction, psychological drama, and speculative fiction, Barthelme challenges readers' expectations and forces them to confront the limitations of genre categories. His use of absurdity, fragmentation, and

lack of resolution creates a work that is not only a parody of these genres but also a critique of the narrative itself.

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