

**“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA
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**DOCTORAL THESIS
SUMMARY**

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**DONALD BARTHELME AND
POSTMODERN DISCOURSE**

DONALD BARTHELME SI DISCURSUL POSTMODERN

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SUMMARY:

DONALD BARTHELME AND POSTMODERN DISCOURSE

Abstract

The present research is concerned with the analysis of the themes recurrent in Donald Barthelme's fiction, with a focus on the ones that have not been discussed so far or have only been briefly touched upon in the published studies. The major objectives of this research are: the identification of power relations, the analysis of dominant and subordinate discourses, the influence of consumerism, "social wrongs," the classification of personal, social and role identity, the identification and analysis of stylistic parody, irony and transtextuality, collage and finally the absurd. Starting from the assumption that discourse has been considerably used in understanding fictional and non-fictional texts, we employ discourse analysis as it provides a wide range of social and material elements, with a view to focusing not only on society as a whole, but also on the subtleties that make Barthelme's work so challenging.

Key words

power relations, consumerism, identity, parody, irony, transtextuality, collage, fragmentation, absurd

While in the recent years there has been some interest in Donald Barthelme's fiction, only seven studies and one collection of critical essays have been devoted entirely or primarily to his writings.¹ The present study focuses on the analysis of particular topics and matters, which have not been discussed yet or which have only been briefly mentioned, such as power relations, consumerism, social and role identity, transtextuality and the absurd.

The title of the thesis, *Donald Barthelme and Postmodern Discourse*, makes clear reference to the subject of analysis, namely the postmodern discourse which is the most discussed aspect of Barthelme's fiction. Starting from the assumption that discourse has been considerably used in understanding fictional and non-fictional texts, we make use of it to delve further into Barthelme's fiction. According to Diane Macdonnell (1986), "discourses differ with the kinds of institutions and social practices in which they take shape and with the positions of those who speak and those whom they address" (1). Therefore, discourses incorporate all matters of the personal and social, all actions, utterances or thoughts of an individual and all accounts of these actions, utterances and thoughts.

The thesis focuses on Barthelme's novels: *Snow White* (1967), *The Dead Father* (1975), *Paradise* (1986), *The King* (1990), on his short stories, published in collections such as: *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (1964), *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), *Guilty Pleasures* (1974), *City Life* (1970), *Sadness* (1972), *Amateurs* (1976), *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* (1983), *Sam's Bar* (1987), *Sixty Stories* (1981), *Forty Stories* (1987), *Flying to America: 45 More Stories* (2007), and also on *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme* (1997), noting that not all short stories have been included in this research.

As Barthelme pointed out in an interview with J.D. O'Hara, in the 80th issue of *The Paris Review*, 1981, reality is what we make of it, everything being subject to our perception and interpretation. "That's what's so curious when people say, of writers, this one's a realist, this one's a surrealist, this one's a super-realist, and so forth. In fact, everybody's a realist offering true accounts of the activity of the mind. They are only realists" (O'Hara, 201). In our research we focus on the very subjective nature of the

¹ Lois G. Gordon, *Donald Barthelme*. (1981), Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass* (1982), Charles Molesworth, *Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved from Drowning* (1982), Maurice Couturier, *Donald Barthelme* (1982), Wayne B. Stengel, *The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme* (1985), Jerome Klinkowitz, *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition* (1991), Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon* (1991), and the volume edited by Richard F. Patteson, *Critical Essays on Donald Barthelme* (1992).

individual, the writer included, through critical analysis, with a view to disclosing the obvious and hidden aspects of our behavior. According to this interpretation, the writer is a historian, a witness and teller of his generation's views, an "accountant" of the real world, as it is experienced and interpreted at the time of his writing. For this reason, while glancing at the manner in which Barthelme visualizes the world around him, we undertake a sociological approach to his fiction, mostly focusing on society in its entirety, determining the social elements at work and revealing the role played by the institutions. Thus, discourse analysis provides a wide range of social and material elements which unveil not only the American society transfigured in Barthelme's fiction, but also the technical and stylistic layers which compose the fictional text. Structured in five chapters, the thesis focuses on the analysis of what we consider to be relevant postmodern topics in Barthelme's work: dominant and subordinate discourses, power, 'social wrongs' and particular approaches to them, consumerism, personal, role and social identity, parody, irony and transtextuality, collage, fragmentation and the Absurd.

The first chapter, entitled "Discourse and Postmodern Theories", establishes the theoretical framework and defines the concepts used in the analysis. Starting with a more detailed account of discourse and discourse theories, the chapter is further subdivided into four subchapters, covering most of the theoretical background of the subsequent chapters. The first subchapter, "The Postmodern Subject and Power Relations", deals with postmodern theories on the subject, namely subject position and power relations. We have introduced the theories and studies of scholars such as James Heartfield, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Stuart Hall. The second subchapter, "Social Discourse, Consumerism and Identity", is, in turn, divided into two, on the one hand focusing on Norman Fairclough's theories on Critical Discourse Analysis and Christian Van Tonder and A. Berner's views on the postmodern consumer and, on the other hand, dealing with issues of personal and social identity, based on the theories of John Turner, Michael Hogg, Penelope Oakes, and Richard Jenkins. The next subchapter, entitled "Parody, Irony and Intertextuality", introduces the theories of Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, Julia Kristeva, Gérard Genette, Linda Hutcheon and Robert Phiddian. The forth subchapter, entitled "Collage, Fragmentation and the Absurd", provides more information on one of Barthelme's favorite stylistic devices, namely collage, as well as on theory of the absurd. Since the Absurd brings about a combination of drama and comedy which provides the authors with the opportunity to deal with serious social problems in a humorous fashion, thus escaping the label of moralists, it

is evident that Barthelme's fictional work may be connected to the theatre of the Absurd. The studies referred to in this subchapter are those by Thomas P. Brockelman, Eddie Wolfram, Martin Esslin and Richard Dietrich.

The second chapter, entitled "Discourses of Power and Knowledge in Barthelme's fiction", focuses on the power relations and struggles present in Donald Barthelme's work, concerning subject and object identities. The chapter is divided into two parts, considering that representation in discourses involving issues of dominance, power and knowledge can be either oppositional or non-oppositional. The first sub-chapter, entitled "Dominant and Subordinate discourses", focuses on non-oppositional representation, namely instances of submission and dominance. Starting from the idea that discourses bear specific positions of agency and identity in relation to particular forms of knowledge and practice, we identify and analyze some of Barthelme's more dominant "subjects", together with their subordinate subjects. One of the most relevant examples is Barthelme's story "The Wound." Here we have found perfect illustrations of dominance, represented by what we can identify as the middle / upper class society and subordination, represented by what is ordinarily labeled as low commoners. What we have found salient here is the willingness of the poor or those considered to be inferior to accept their alleged position. Barthelme provides his readers with a strong representation of power within discourse, as the subject of the dominant discourse is capable of subduing the object(s), by treating it/them as having no power and as being inferior. The objects seem to have accepted this assigned inferiority and, though it seems that the desire to become subjects exists, they seem to be trapped in the roles they have previously been given.

The second subchapter, "Knowledge and power discourses", introduces the idea of representation as oppositional. Contrasting it to the previous sub-chapter, we have focused on an object that plays the part of the oppositional self of counter-discourse. S/He repeats and adapts to specific needs, openly contesting the dominant discourse. For example, the African American protagonist of "Margins," Carl, despite his constantly being undermined and treated as inferior, manages to maintain his stance and resist giving in to the avid desire which Edward, his white counterpart, has when it comes to changing Carl. In the Carl-Edward relationship, the former attributes himself the role of the dominant, treating the latter in consequence. Yet, this determination is undermined by Carl's strong personality and intelligence, as well as his unwillingness to swap roles.

The third chapter, "Identity, 'Social Wrongs' and Consumerism", deals with several social problems evident in Barthelme's fiction, from violence, to corruption and social

untruths, the spread of the media influence, consumerism and identity. The chapter is divided into four parts, each of them dealing with a particular social issue. Following Fairclough's steps in identifying and analyzing what he calls social wrongs as part of Critical Discourse Analysis, the first three subchapters cover the most common social issues we have identified in Barthelme's fiction. The first subchapter, "Technology and Television Madness," is dedicated to the subject of technological advancement and the negative effects which technology had on the American society in the second half of the twentieth century. For example, written against the background of the Vietnam War and the known advancements in weaponry, Barthelme's "Report" underlines, in a blunt manner, the dehumanization of mankind in relation to the "machinery" of war. He places in direct opposition two representatives of opposing views on war. Being described as "soft" and "hard," the characters manage to expose, in a subtle way, the desensitization of people in relation to the suffering and torture of others. Apart from the obvious lack of sensibility, the story also reveals the indifference of the people behind the war machine (e.g. the government), the people involved in the war, and the importance attached to the machine as opposed to the human being.

The second subchapter, "Violence and Desensitization to Suffering," deals with the consequences of war on the human psyche and the spread of violence which lead to the desensitization of the people as a result of over-exposure. For example, in one of Barthelme's more popular short stories, "The Indian Uprising", we witness a display of war in general, as violence is spread all around irrespective of the source. The origin of war is somewhat unclear, as it seems to be ranging from South Vietnam, Algeria, the American Indians, Russia, the I.R.A., France, university student rebellions, even race-riots, in a sense all possible sources of violence and distress present at that time in America. It becomes clear that both for the narrator and for the participants in the story, one war is the same as any other. The overflow of violent behavior and the witnessing of terrible acts, as a result of the increase in television popularity, has resulted in a lack of sensibility or even interest on behalf of the people in all matters war related such as weapon development and violence, the most shocking of which being torture. We register this desensitization of the people as intentional, a means of controlling the masses making them indifferent to matters of great importance or with great impact.

The third subchapter, "Advertising, Consumerism, the Media and Manipulation," deals with the feelings of mistrust as they existed during the sixties and early seventies, covering aspects ranging from consumerism to the manipulation of the people, be it by the

government or by the media. One of the stories best fitted in the subject is Barthelme's "Me and Miss Mandible," in which the reader is presented with a rather absurd situation: a man is sent back to school and turned into a child on paper. His conversion, though not a physical one, is indicative of the power the government has over the simple citizens. The character's predicament is the result of false advertising and of his inability to read between the lines and comprehend that signs are meaningless and that promises are made to be broken. While in school, the narrator is introduced to the world of the media, the world of consumerism and manipulation, of gossip magazines that display photos and stir the imagination of the reader, while announcing that pictures might be deceiving. This story combines the right amount of manipulation and lying, in the form of false advertising and the media, creating an absurdist, yet suitable, image of the consumerist society of the sixties.

The final subchapter, "Personal, role and social identity", focuses on the struggle of the individual to adjust to the life, role and society in which he has been positioned. The subchapter is divided into three parts, each concerned with one of the three key components of identity. The first part deals with personal identity, based on diverse features including appearance, skills and mannerism, principles, values, and personal experiences. The example used is "Rebecca", a story dealing mostly with the physical appearance and the distress which skin color might bring into a person's life. Without direct reference to African Americans, this story is about the integration of the people of color in modern day America. Rebecca, plagued with a skin disease that makes her resemble much like a lizard, incidentally her family name, attempts to change her last name so as not to attract any further unwanted attention. However, "the powers that be" seem to work against the individual and force her to keep her unpleasant name. Thus, Rebecca dwells further on personal dissatisfaction with her physical condition and personal development.

The second part focuses on social identity, namely the role which society plays on an individual's life choices and personal development. In "A City of Churches", the reader is presented with an obvious critique brought to social conformity and homogeneity in modern society. The obvious problem here is the lack of diversity, be it cultural, racial or just structural. Instead, we are presented with the ultimate form of social identification, as all the members seem to think alike and identify themselves as part of the same group. They even define themselves in relation to the outsiders, seeing locals as part of the "us" and Cecelia as part of "the other."

The final section of the subchapter covers the concept of role identity. By role identity we understand the representation of a particular behavior, with a view to completing certain expectations introduced by society as regards a particular role. We find this kind of behavior and struggle to comply with certain expectations in most of Barthelme's fairy tale stories and novels. The best example is the novel *Snow White*, in which the protagonist is in a constant limbo in between the world she is familiar with from the old days and the life she is living in the present. Snow White desires to be free of her role identity of *Snow White*, but, at the same time she desires to have all the perks that come with the role, namely a prince charming and the security that comes with marriage. Her battle with the past seems to be lost in the end as, while displeased with the male dominated world for failing to provide her with a prince, she resigns into the role she was assigned, that of the fragile helpless damsel locked in a well monitored tower.

Divided into three parts, the forth chapter, "Parody, Irony and Intertextuality", continues to discuss the lines of role identity and scrutinizes three of Barthelme's novels. The term used in this chapter is Gérard Genette's 'transtextuality', considering it to be more inclusive than 'intertextuality.' The first subchapter, "A Postmodern *Snow White*", underlines the distinctions between the hypotext and the hypertext, focusing on instances of parody and irony, which turn *Snow White* from the fairy tale, in which little girls find out the value of being fair and kind, into a novel mocking traditional values in an era full of promiscuity and decadence. The second subchapter, "Parody and Irony in *The King*", takes on Barthelme's last novel, once more tracing the ways in which Barthelme transforms a tale on values and righteousness into a story of inappropriate marital conduct, increase in media presence and influence and of impending doom from a war based on unholy weapons. There is a constant struggle to overcome the madness of the contemporary world and to maintain the righteousness of the middle ages. The characters constantly lament the beauty of the good old days, while, at the same time, are drawn into the decadent and flawed spirit of the modern world. The following subchapter takes a closer look at one of Barthelme's most intricate novels, *The Dead Father*, which presents the reader with numerous allusions and references to different hypotexts, familiar mythology and folklore, besides the clear echoing of Homer's *Odyssey*.

The chapter ends with a final look at Barthelme's short stories and brings further proof of transtextuality in his fiction. Published in the volume *Forty Stories* (1987), Barthelme's protagonists in "Sindbad," "Bluebeard" and "Captain Blood" are other well-known characters to be found in his fiction who display the refusal to accept their roles.

Similar to the failed role performances experienced in the previously mentioned novels, Barthelme's short story characters fail to rise up to their hypotext counterparts. Introducing famous figures like Snow White and King Arthur, to name a few, directly in the universe of pop culture and consumerism, Barthelme employs legends, fairy tales and myths to touch upon the new system that is not able to sustain them. In his portrayal of a dysfunctional fairy tale, Barthelme manages to voice the common thoughts and general discontent experienced by people in his time.

The fifth and final chapter, "Collage, Fragmentation and the Absurd", completes the thesis from a stylistic point of view. While the previous chapters have focused on aspects of representation and meaning, this chapter deals with collage, the most obvious technique in Barthelme's work, and with the writer's use of the characteristics of the absurd as found in the famous Theatre of the Absurd of the sixties. The chapter is, therefore, divided into two parts, one focused on collage and fragmentation and the other on the themes and motifs of the absurd employed by the author.

The first subchapter, entitled "Instances of Collage and Fragmentation in Barthelme's Fiction", scrutinizes Barthelme's most intricate stories. Starting from the assumption that, to Barthelme, collage is a compositional technique which emphasizes the presence of the artifact rather than its objects of depiction, we notice that he intentionally challenges the frontiers between text and image and between language and picture. For example, in one of Barthelme's earliest published collage stories, "Adventure," we find a particular interconnection between the storyline and the complementary imagery. As we follow Christine on her "adventure" and exploration of the city, we come to realize that her experience is re-created by means of images and collages of architecture, which, at some point, come to literally overshadow the text as the words are dwarfed on the page eclipsed by drawings and pictures.

The second subchapter, "Instances of Absurd in Barthelme's fiction", takes a closer look at some of the Absurdist elements present in Barthelme's fiction. Since the theatre of the absurd illustrates the modern society largely based on people's insecurities and lack of purpose in life, we have identified a number of themes and motifs in Barthelme's fiction as well. Typical of the absurdist plays is the lack of communication between individuals, often portrayed as discontinuous or incongruous. The spectators or readers are faced with characters whose general purpose and behavior are largely incomprehensible, and barely human. Besides communication distortions, we have also identified a feeling of isolation

among people, resulting in the breakdown and senselessness of human existence. Moreover, the plot is fragmented and scattered and the story offers an unexpected, yet obscure, ending.

An example to the point is Barthelme's "The Glass Mountain", which parodies the fairy tale with the same name, and, representative of postmodern fiction, largely displays absurdist elements. In his refusal to use traditional chronology, plot, character, time, space, grammar, syntax and the distinctions between fact and fiction, Barthelme attempts to expose a chaotic and absurd world as well as current social challenges. The discontinuity and lack of logic in the story, despite the exact numbering of the sentence-paragraphs, contribute to the construction of an overt clash between form and content, and reveal the controversy between the human expectation and the chaotic society. The fluctuation between present and past tenses in the short story is indicative of the transition between fantasy and reality, highlighting the absurd nature of the inner world and the constant battle between fiction and reality, expectation and failure, illusion and disillusion.

Barthelme's tone is never dire, he makes use of irony and parody, not to mention his witty charm, transporting his readers to a world that illustrates the absurdity of contemporary society, making them laugh and ponder on the current problems of life at the same time. Barthelme makes use of well known characters or stories to underline the failure of contemporary society. He plucks his characters from a stable past and drops them in a completely new environment, on a blank slate with endless possibilities, making use of parody and irony to emphasize the collapse of social standards.

Taking into consideration the social element, the influence which society has on its inhabitants, the consumer society of the postmodern age, Barthelme's work provides the canvas for a social portrait. We can, therefore, glimpse at this portrayal and dismiss a representation of urban life, snapshots of the city with its residents, and finally, witness the unraveling of the postmodern consumerist society of the sixties and seventies. Many forms of social identity may be found in Barthelme's work, showcasing the countless tactics whereby people associate to other groups and social categories. Barthelme makes use of collage and the absurd to strip his subjects of any real unity, making them short of complete entities, vulnerable to external forces.

As we have noticed, his subjects are representative of the contemporary era, more than willing to take upon themselves the roles which the society deems as suitable. Bearing in mind that the subject is produced within discourse, as well as subjected to discourse,

Barthelme's characters are in a constant search for a role within that discourse accepting, challenging, or subduing the power that comes with it. The purpose of our thesis has been to scrutinize the representation of power, dominance and subordination evident in Barthelme's fiction. We have attempted to identify and analyze the factors leading to the formation and occurrence of social conflict, and the resulting absurdity of situation, evident by the clash between expectancy and result. We have considered the three dimensions of text, discursive practice and social practice focusing also on personal, social and role identity, in addition to transtextuality as a means of identification of what we considered to be evidence of decay in social values and morals as present in Barthelme's fiction.

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