

Absurdity and Postmodernism: An Analysis of Barthelme's *The Glass Mountain*

Lingeng Han

Changchun University, Changchun, China

Abstract—Barthelme's *Glass Mountain* is a masterpiece of postmodernism. As a leading author of his age, Barthelme makes use of techniques of postmodernism, such as parody, pastiche, fragments, and irony, to demonstrate a world of deconstruction and a theme of absurdity. However, the absurdity depicted by Barthelme actually has its profound social meaning, which reflects the author's real understanding to the reality.

Index Terms—*Glass Mountain*, postmodernism, absurdity

I. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism started in the end of the 1950's and the beginning of the 1960's. It is well-accepted that the turbulence and change of the second world war has directly caused the rise of the postmodernist literature. The appalling violence of the Nazism as well as the atomic explosion had overturned the traditional mores and values, and caused great spiritual crisis and suspicious mood in the western world after the war. The confusion pervaded also to America, giving birth to a new trend of culture, the postmodernism, especially in literature. Donald Barthelme (1931 –1989) is called the father of the new generation of the postmodernist writers, whose celebrated masterpieces including *Snow White* (1967), *The Dead Father* (1975), *The Glass Mountain* (1979), *Paradise* (1986), and *The King* (1990). As an important writer of experimental fiction, Barthelme created stories that are untraditional by juxtaposing incongruous elements of contemporary language and culture. *Glass Mountain* is one of them. *Glass Mountain* is a parody creation based on a fairy tale that is well known in the western culture. The ironic parody reflects the absurdity of the modern world, and is a success of postmodernism.

II. ABSURDITY REFLECTED IN THE STORY

Glass Mountain was originally a Nordic fairy tale with a happy ending---in a fantastic golden castle lofting on a high glass mountain, a beautiful but bewitched princess lived. She was such a beauty as to attract all the brave romantic and legendary cavaliers to rescue her with their lives. The cavaliers fell over one another, mounting their steeds in splendid attires and charging up the glass mountain for the princess. A knight in golden armor was also attracted by the bewitched beauty and came to try. But he and his horse, without wonder, also fell to their deaths. Finally, a young man climbed the glass mountain with the claws of a lynx he killed attached to his feet and hands. When the eagle that guarded the castle flew down to eat him thinking he was carrion, the youth grabbed the eagle, and so the eagle carried him the rest of the way to the castle. When they arrived at the top of the room where the prince lived, the young man cut off the eagle's feet and fell into the apple tree. The peels of the apples were used to cure the young man's wounds, and the eagle's blood was used to bring everyone to life that had died trying to climb the mountain. Finally, like all the happy endings of the fairy tales, the princess was made his wife.

Barthelme tells us the story of *Glass Mountain* in another way. The whole story contains 100 sentences. The author intentionally numbers all these sentences, short or long, and makes each of them an independent paragraph. So there are 100 such paragraphs in the story and it goes like this: "I" was climbing the glass mountain located in the center of New York City. The mysterious mountain has a golden castle on top of it, and it is said there is an enchanted symbol living in the castle. Ignoring the sneer of the "acquaintances" as well as the failures of other knights', overcoming many difficulties, "I" kept climbing to the top with much struggling, and entered the castle, but only find the enchanted symbol is a cursed beautiful princess. In his great disappointment, "I" dropped the beautiful princess headfirst off the mountain.

Barthelme shows a modern world that is absurd. It is a despairing, ridiculous, and irrational. On the landscape of the modern city, people lead boring and despairing lives; we see them walking dogs, cursing, fighting, and even destroying. Such meaninglessness gives the readers a thought about life's significance. Camus, the French writer who is also a philosopher, pointed out the essence of insignificance and absurdity of human life. Human beings are helpless in front of nature and society; they cannot even control the psych and thoughts of his own. Not only the world is illogical, the individual's spiritual pursuits are affected by the "enchanted symbol". In Barthelme's story, the symbol has turned to a beauty at last, yet actually, no matter what it finally became, it is inevitable that the sense of absurdity would be felt.

The world is absurd, the enchanted symbol on the glass mountain, that is, the spiritual pursuit, is absurd too, but then

why our lives are worth living? What's the point that makes human beings continue living in this empty, frustrating, and absurd world? One cannot bear the meaningless life. Certainly, the world is absurd and human beings are bound to fail, but Camus told people that resistance is what they are living for. The image of "I" in this story is an exact representation of Camus's "resistant man" in his philosophy. The narrator rebels against the ridiculous and irrational reality through escaping it and pursuing a new world by climbing the glass mountain, and the narrator resisted the absurd ideal by throwing the enchanted symbol away. The narrator got his own significance of existence by resistance. In this way, *Glass Mountain* is to some extent a good explanation of Camus' philosophy.

People in this story live in a modern metropolis with a forest of tall buildings and crisscross wide roads. However, what's on the road? "A heap of corpses both of horses and riders ringed the bottom of the mountain, many dying men groaning there" (Barthelme, 1978, p.87). And "my acquaintances moved among the fallen knights." (ibid). On both sides of the road, "...someone had been apprehended cutting down trees, a row of elms broken-backed among the VWs and Valliant", "Otherwise what was I doing there, 206 feet above the power-sawed elms, whose white meat I could see from my height?" (ibid). And on the sidewalks, there are "... (full of) dogshit in brilliant colors..." (ibid). This is a highly developed society, as well as a place where people who makes desperate effort climbing gets wounded, falls down and soon dies. However, nonentities here are numb and cold-blooded, idling around and doing nothing. What modern industrial civilization brings about is severe destruction to nature and way of life, and the cities are nothing but burying ground or waste yard. Though "I" climbed high and could see everything, "I" am still helpless. So "It was cold there at 206 feet and when I looked down I was not encouraged." (ibid). However, "I" still has to live in such a reality. Though seemingly absurd, people would agree that this is a true reflection of the modern urban wasteland.

III. THE POSTMODERNIST THEME OF THE STORY

To the postmodernists, the world is not just a place of violence and blood, but one more affected in the pursuit of money and earthly materials, which is evidently revealed in *Glass Mountain*. In the conversation of "my acquaintances", there is a strong smell of money transactions like "Ten bucks you bust your ass in the next four minutes!" (Barthelme, 1978, p. 88) What they would like to do is to "move among the fallen knights, collecting rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies' favors." and "prise out the gold teeth of not-yet dead knights." (ibid) Even animals are failed to get rid of money worship, like "a lean-headed eagle with blazing rubies for eyes." guarding the golden castle. And when "I" was climbing the glass mountain, "My acquaintances were debating the question, which of them would get my apartment?" (ibid) All these are extreme depictions of the monetary and material world in one way, but still a helpless manner of humor towards the cold postmodern society.

From these analyses above we can see that short as the story, it unfolds a real postmodern society, numb, cold, indifferent, dissimilated and anomic, which images its theme of absurdity. Barthelme combines realistic writing with exaggeration, reality with absurdity, seriousness with irony in a happy way, which helps reader to understand in a non-traditional way.

The postmodernist symbolism gives the objects in the story profound signified meanings. The key image in the story is the glass mountain located in the downtown of the city. What does it symbolize? Obviously, it is not a real mountain but quite possibly a skyscraper that is glittering under the sun. Barthelme changed the natural mountain in the story into an artificial high building. The hero in the story and other knights exerted themselves to climb the vicious mountain, but all fell down to their deaths except the hero. Thus, it is not a story of human conquest of nature, but a tale of a struggle between man and the man-made society. In this way, the theme of the story is not that of a traditional fairy tale, that is, a fight of man and nature or any other supernatural power, but a theme of postmodernism.

In a postmodern story, the glass mountain is a symbol of what modern people pursue for – an artistic ideal or loftiness –the spiritual pursuit above reality. "I" was attracted by it, just like many intellectuals are attracted by spiritual ideals. Then the hero climbed the mountain without any hesitation. It is easy to figure out that the hero is an intellectual, at least a cynic who is unsatisfied with the reality and has some certain spiritual pursuit. Barthelme intentionally repeated "I was new in the neighborhood" several times in the story. Readers may wonder how the hero can be "always new" in the neighborhood, yet at the same time he said he has got quite many acquaintances? The answer can be clearly seen through the Barthelme's mentioning of the neighborhood. The neighbors, the so-called acquaintances are unfriendly even hostile to the narrator – they cursed him, sneered at him, waiting to get some advantage from his death. The narrator was surrounded by greedy and cold-blooded watchers, as well as hypocritical and numb passers-by. As for the environment they lived in, that is just a world of chaos! There were gun-fighting streets with colorful dog shits and power-sawn woods. Getting tired of this ugly world, the narrator had chosen to escape. Climbing the glass mountain and getting to the top of it is a good try to flee away. The narrator was so determined that he ignored all the pains and difficulties on the way of his climbing. Seven times the author repeated "I unstuck the left hand/right hand plumber's friend...", which symbolized the difficulties that an brave "resistant" met in his struggling against the frustrating reality and in his spiritual pursuit. As for the knights who failed and fell in the halfway of their climbing, they should be the hero's comrades somehow. However, they were a different kind of intellectuals in the real world. They were less practical but more straightforward comparing with the hero in the story. The knights didn't know the armors they wore were their burdens and horses their murderers while climbing the slippery mountain. They were brave to challenge the cruel reality, yet were doomed to fail because of their pedantry.

Now that the reality in a postmodern world is unbearable, did Barthelme offer any way out for the people who were trapped in? To the readers' disappointment, no way out was shown in the story. Reaching the top of the mountain seemed to be the only way to set people free from this post-industrial and post-modern society. After a painstaking struggle, the narrator reached the castle, yet only found the enchanted symbol which he had been so long expecting was no more than a beautiful but cursed princess. He was so disappointed that he dropped it off the glass mountain. The princess was too vulgar and meta-narrative, and was clearly a symbol for the traditional value, which is typically material and outmoded in the postmodern time. What he had been expecting must be some symbol that can enlighten his current life, something that can bring some change or hope to the reality. However, in the end of the story it is known that there is no salvation above the real world; nobody can break away from the society. No matter how hard the narrator had tried, his ideal is still at the society's disposal. That is the reason why he dumped the princess headfirst down the mountain without hesitation. He finally realized absurdity of the reality, yet he was still unable to escape.

IV. POST-MODERNIST FEATURES IN GLASS MOUNTAIN

To express the absurdity of the reality, the author makes use of postmodern skills. Postmodernism criticizes and surpasses modernism by striking a strong blow to interpreting and governing the world with unitary logic, fixed regulations or universal rules and advocating innovation and originality, emphasizing openness and diversity. As a masterpiece of postmodern literature, *Glass Mountain* basically covers almost all the postmodern features.

A. Parody in *Glass Mountain*

Parody is a "literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule." (Yu, 2012, p. 226) As a specific way of intertextuality, parody means imitation in some way. However, imitation alone brings little charm to the works. It's the differences or the unlikeness from contrast by imitating that gives the effects. The contrast relies on putting the elegance and seriousness of the classic known-to-all allusions into its opposite---absurdness and vulgarness without losing the similarity in forms so as to let the readers to make a comparison between the two versions. Parodies of fairy tales always impress readers with strong senses of humor and irony. *Glass Mountain* is a typical postmodern work of deconstruction. On reading the subject, one will easily associate it with the old Nordic tale, and that is just the author's intention. In the well-known old fairy tale *The Prince on the Glass Mountain*, a poor young man who is brave and kindhearted climbs to the top of the glass mountain. Encouraged by the cheers of the onlookers, he rescues the enchanted and imprisoned prince and later not only marries her but gets half of the lands and treasure of her kingdom. In Barthelme's new story *Glass Mountain*, the main plot is basically retold in the frame of the old story though the protagonist's image is deformed in some way. The intentional imitation reminds the readers of the romantic fairy tale. The glass mountain is located in the center of a modern city. The young man who is climbing is a cynical westerner, who seems to be an intellectual incompatible with his surroundings. Instead of encouragement, he receives fleers from his acquaintances who are watching and hope to get benefits from his falling off. The ending is even more out of expectation of the readers—in the last moment when he finally reaches the top of the mountain and finds the prince, he dumps her head firstly off mountain instead of rescuing and cherishing her. The contrast is thought-provoking to the readers. In the seemingly absurdity, people see the post-industrialized society, based on modern techniques and information, has commercialized everything. By overthrowing the classic romance of the brave knight and beautiful prince, which symbolizes an everlasting meaning, Barthelme throws away the ultimate meaning of life and existence. In postmodernism, nothing exists, no center, no meanings, no values, no themes—all are vanished in the reality. Thus, nothingness is represented as the theme of the story. In this rewritten story, Barthelme also uses repetition, collage and pastiche to reveal the absurdity and unreality.

B. Pastiche and Fragment

In this story, Barthelme particularly focuses himself on creating ridiculous and absurd atmosphere by cutting and reforming the originally traditional stories with the techniques of pastiche and collage.

Pastiche is to "combine, or paste together, multiple elements. It can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic, or information-drenched aspects of postmodern society. It can be a combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situations in postmodernity." (Yu, 2012, p. 237)

Glass Mountain is a typical work of pastiche in spite of its length of only one hundred sentences. Barthelme discards the conventional rules of fiction writing by tearing all the elements such as time, space and language structure apart into fragments and then pastes them. The first impression of fragmentation is the 100 numbered paragraphs, some as long as 6 or 7 sentences and some as short as just one word. The logical relationship among each sentence disappears, instead of which is simply a combination of numbers. In addition to that, Barthelme pastes some symbolic famous sayings, quotations of imaginary characters, technical terms and excerpts from fairy tales, making a fuss of giving the references, which aggravates the fragmental sense by making a further destruction to the coherence of narration, such as the part from the 65th paragraph to the 68th paragraph.

We cannot find anything logical here. Barthelme interrupts the readers' expectation toward the story by using temporal distortion, shifting the viewpoint of narration, and sprinkling casually weird quotations of unknown origin, by which the sense of a fragmental world crept over the readers. However this is just the postmodern fictionists' intention,

for in their eyes, fragmental language is exactly the reflection of a irrational postmodern world.

The pastiche of intrasentential elements is also obviously employed besides the pastiche of sentences, such as the generic terms of color in the 30th paragraph, "The sidewalks were full of dog shits in brilliant colors: ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder." (Barthelme, 1978) Another example is the names of 19 knights who had failed to climb the mountain in the 63rd paragraph. These fragments, like the intentionally marked numbers before each paragraph, piece together a discontinuous and synchronic story. By various pastiches like this, Barthelme mocks at the conventional literary forms as well as the ridiculous and absurd western culture by creating a strong sense of chaos and absurdity, which gives a brand new taste to readers in both form and content.

C. Repetition

As a traditional technique of writing, repetition has found new application and connotation in Barthelme's *Glass Mountain*. Repetition employed in conventional works is for emphasizing and highlighting something special or different, while in this story, repetition is used to put more punch into the narrative discontinuity by cutting or blocking. "I was new in the neighborhood.", for instance, occurs 3 times in the 5th, 25th and 33rd paragraph respectively; and the movement of my climbing the mountain also runs through the whole story.

This kind of repetition that seriously breaks the conventional way of narration is rarely seen in story-writing, which perfectly exemplifies the postmodern aesthetic features as discontinuity and word expansion.

D. Irony, Playfulness and Black Humor

It's common for postmodernists to treat serious subjects in a playful and humorous way, so irony, playfulness and black humor are viewed as the dominant manner penetrating the postmodern literature, for in no other way can postmodernism be better expressed or interpreted.

There are ironies, playfulness and black humors in *Glass Mountain*, through which a disheartening, violent, bloody and filthy postmodern world is unfold before the readers. For example in the 10th paragraph it is mentioned that "My acquaintances had gathered at the bottom of the mountain to offer encouragement" while the means of offering "encouragement" is nothing but "Shithead", "Asshole", "Dumb motherfucker", "Better than a kick in the crotch." (Barthelme, 1978, p. 87) "Better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick", (ibid) "Better than a slap in the belly with a wet fish", (ibid) "Better than a thump on the back wit a stone", (ibid) "Won't he make a splash when he falls, now?" (ibid) and "Fart-faced fool."(ibid) Exaggerations like these words show to the reader that it's indifferent and lacking of warmth among people in the postmodern society, despite that they are acquaintances. And postmodern world is full of insidious schemes, vicious gossips and bankrupt moral codes.

E. Deconstruction in *Glass Mountain*

The language in Barthelme's novel is self-referent, which counteracts the fictitious feature of the novel, and meanwhile, the language itself is also the rallying point of deconstruction and subversion. All these factors, with the parody in the fiction, deconstruct the story from three aspects.

1. Superficial deconstruction of the content and plot.

The original tale about the valiant rider saving the elegant princess is totally aberrant. The "rider" rides no horse, and while he finally fined the princess, he throws her headfirst down the mountain instead of living a happy life with her. Barthelme discards in his works the traditional techniques such as pellucid linearity in narration and clear allegory in intention, instead of which are discontinuity in time and logical sequence and uncertainty or disorderliness in plot.

2. Deeper deconstruction of the traditional values and moral ideals.

In Barthelme's *Glass Mountain*, the hero, a legendary cavalier in splendid attire, is turned into a somewhat cynic city young man, who makes light of all difficulties and totally neglects jeer and sneer of his acquaintances pursuing his dream----to rescue an enchanting symbol on the top of the glass mountain, a skyscraper. It's no longer a romantic save-the-damsel-in-distress and they-live-happily-ever-after story, instead of which is a disheartening and all-in-vain ending. Everything originally beautiful and fascinating turns seemingly absurd and stupid in his novel, just in the way that all good values and ideals being deconstructed into ugliness and nonentity, which unfold a picture of thoroughly meaningless modern life.

3. Ultimate deconstruction of the language.

The conventional view that language as the means of communication is totally subverted in Barthelme's works. Language, a game played under some certain rules, gradually losing its connections with reality and its connotations to the real world, has been reduced to a heap of hodgepodge and piece-together of stereotype. Barthelme is just good at employing quaint language and chaotic sentences to familiar circumstances. And not only did he hammer at displaying the fragmental reality of contemporary society by doing this but meanwhile, Barthelme also devoted himself in inventing new form and meaning by juxtaposition of these fragments. The textual arrangement of *Glass Mountain* of 100 paragraphs with each sentence as an independent and intentionally numbered paragraph precisely exemplifies Barthelme's innovative creation. Obviously Barthelme is playing on words like that. Another typical case is that a lot of postmodern devices such as repetition, pastiche and collage are frequently used, which shows the game play on words and reveals the fictitious feature of the story. For example, in the 30th paragraph "The sidewalks were full of dogs hit in brilliant colors: ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder" (Barthelme, 1978, p.89)

Barthelme tries to create a funny and ridiculous atmosphere with so many specialized terms about color piling up.

Deconstruction to the story in three aspects from the superficial part as form and content to a deeper one as values or moral ideals and then to the ultimate, the language itself shows that the postmodern world is, at long last, meaningless and all in vain.

V. CONCLUSION

Donald Barthelme is the father of postmodern literature, with his works to be the typical ones of postmodernism. *Glass Mountain* depicts a grotesque and absurd postmodern world, profoundly revealing the boredom of the postmodern life and the ugliness of human nature. It reflects most postmodernists' point of view that the world is absurd, and with no final goal. With his boldness in the innovation of language in both form and content, such as the techniques of parody, fragmentation, pastiche, repetition, irony, black humor, deconstruction and so on, Barthelme ironically reflects the modern western society of every aspect as being absurd. By doing this, he actually gives the readers a full understanding of the meaning of the reality.

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Lingeng Han was born in Jilin province, China in October, 1979. She got her Master degree in English Languages and Literature from Jilin Normal University, China in 2006.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of International Education, Changchun University, China. Her research interests include American and British Literature, and cross-cultural communication.