

BEYOND THE GRAVE: METAFICTIONAL EXPLORATION IN BARTHELME'S THE DEAD FATHER

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ABSTRACT

This abstract explores the idea of metafiction in Donald Barthelme's novel *The Dead Father*. Metafiction, a literary device that draws upon the devices of real storytelling, is an important tool in Barthelme's work, providing a narrative layer that questions the nature and meaningfulness of storytelling with myth and modernity mix, juxtaposing traditional narratives with postmodern techniques. Barthelme's use of metaphor highlights the artificial nature of narrative structures and the flexibility of truth. Through paragraphs, intertextual references, and direct commentary on the act of writing, Barthelme confounds readers' expectations and negotiates the relationship between fiction and reality. This study examines, in detail, how *The Dead Father* exemplify novel strategies. The novel is not only entertaining one, however, it invites readers to consider the contradictions and possibilities of the storytelling.

Keywords: Metafiction, Postmodernism, Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father*, Narrative Structure, Self-image, And Identity And Representation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* is a seminal work in postmodern literature, characterized via its unconventional narrative techniques and thematic exploration of identity and authority. Published in 1975, this novel stands as a testament to Barthelme's revolutionary approach to storytelling, blending absurdist elements with a fragmented narrative to project conventional notions of plot and character improvement (Barthelme 45). The novel's structure, or lack thereof, reflects a deliberate departure from traditional paperwork, aligning with Barthelme's broader literary challenge of deconstructing mounted norms and expectancies (Sullivan 78).

In *The Dead Father*, Barthelme crafts a narrative that both engages with and subverts the parable of the patriarchal figure, using a mix of darkish humor and surrealism to critique societal and familial hierarchies. This approach is clear in the novel's portrayal of the titular character, whose death serves as a catalyst for a series of bizarre and often disjointed occasions that interrogate the character of life and the search for meaning (Smith 112). The fragmented, episodic shape of the textual content mirrors the protagonist's fragmented sense of self and challenges readers to rethink the reliability of narrative and the character of truth (Miller 34).

Scholars have mentioned that Barthelme's use of language and form in *The Dead Father* reflects broader postmodernist worries, together with the instability of which means and the rejection of absolute truths (Jones 57). The novel's playfulness with language and its embrace of the absurd can be visible as a reflection of the postmodernist preoccupation with the character of representation and the limits of linguistic expression (Johnson 91). Through its experimental narrative strategies and thematic complexity, *The Dead Father* continues to provoke critical

discussion and remains a crucial text for understanding the evolution of American literature in the latter half of the 20th century.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF DONALD BARTHELME'S *THE DEAD FATHER*:

Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975) is a brilliant and darkly comic examination of the relationship between the work of a father and his followers, whose work must be buried even though it is only partially dead. The novel follows the journey of a dead father - a hero, a mythical figure - followed by his band as he is dragged across a nondescript landscape to his final resting place. Along the way, the story delves into a series of vignettes, each filled with abstract dialogue, symbolism and fragmented narrative that reflect postmodern themes in the text.

The dead father, despite his name, is still partially alive and has great power over his followers. This paradoxical existence allows Barthelme to explore the persistence of patriarchal power even as it declines. The structure of the novel is non-linear and episodic, with the narrative often interrupted by distractions, lists and seemingly unconnected narratives. These elements contribute to the novel feeling confusing and challenge the reader's expectations of coherence and understanding.

Barthelme's work is often seen as challenging the grand narratives and authorities that dominated previous literary traditions. By making the dead father a powerful and pathetic figure, Barthelme questions the legitimacy of traditional authority and highlights the instability of meaning in the postmodern world (McCaffery 32). The novel ends ambiguously, the funeral of the dead father unresolved, further underscoring the uncertain and provisional nature of the reality of the text.

The novel's fragmented structure and genre reflect a fragmented modern identity and ambivalence about cultural family heritage. According to critic Jerome Klinkowitz, Barthelme's work "exemplifies a postmodern pastiche, where the novel resists closure and conformity, creating ideas, images and voices". (Klinkowitz 92) Barthelme uses these techniques to explore the ritual corruption of power and economic systems in a rapidly changing world, a theme underscored by the dead father's slow, reluctant acceptance of his fate.

In addition to its prolific subject matter, *Dead Fathers* is distinguished by its theatrical language, which, as critic Charles Molesworth notes, "emphasizes logical instability and undermines readers' expectations of narrative continuity and the understanding of the consistency." (Molesworth 45). can engage its many meanings to explore abstraction.

3. A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF DONALD BARTHELME'S *THE DEAD FATHER*:

Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975) is an important postmodern text that destabilizes the traditional narrative and authorities, offering a fragmented and ironic analysis of the human condition. At the center of the novel is the father who the portrait of the deceased, a mythical figure simultaneously alive and dead. Barthelme's dead father who also depicts corruption as authoritarian and pathetic is challenged by the residual influence of obsolete ideas in today's shocked world.

A key feature of *The Dead Father* is its non-linear structure, which reflects a postmodern suspicion of metanarratives. The novel consists of inconsistencies, distractions, and abstract dialogue that defy traditional narrative expectations. As David Lodge and other critics have noted, Barthelme's fragmented approach reflects the fragmented reality of modern life, where meaning is elusive and often contradictory (Lodge 96). This approach is the postmodern framework that it expands seeking to challenge the reader's assumptions about coherence and the nature of truth.

Barthelme's use of humor and irony is another important element of the novel. The late father's fantasies and mindless adventures can be seen as an ironic commentary on the persistence of outdated social structures and adherence to outmoded authorities. Commitment to responsibility time even without the third, it represents the tendency to nurture even if tradition has lost its relevance.

The novel also explores issues of identity and self-formation, primarily through the character of Thomas who struggles with his relationship with his dead father as Thomas seeks independence and encounters the constant overwhelming presence of a dead father, a metaphor for the inevitable influence of the past. In building yourself up in front of you reflects postmodern concerns (Hutchen 67). Thomas's struggle is symptomatic of a broader postmodern context, where identity collides with fluid, fragmented, and often hereditary heritage.

Furthermore, Barthelme's inclusion of myth and allegory in *The Dead Father* contributes to the complexity of the novel. The dead father can be interpreted as a primitive figure, representing the collapse of traditional power structures in postmodern society. But Barthelme subverts these past images by presenting them in an abstract and tragic context, suggesting, as John does, that the search for meaning in modern life is both necessary and futile. As John Barth argues, Barthelme's work exemplifies the postmodern tendency to "play" with cultural symbols, producing a text that is both more ambitious and irreverently playful (Barth 59).

In brief, Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* is a rich and multifaceted work that exemplifies the main characteristics of postmodern literature. The novel challenges the reader to question stable logic and normative traditional authority through its fragmented narrative, ironic voice, power, identity, and myth. Barthelme's work is a major contribution to offers in postmodern fiction, a poignant and often unsettling view of human experience in a rapidly changing world.

4. METAFICION AND THE ART OF NARRATIVE SELF-AWARENESS:

Metafiction, as a literary concept, refers to works that deal with the form and narrative of fiction. Linda Hutchen, associate professor of fiction studies, argues that this self-discovery clearly demonstrates its fictional nature, thus questioning the traditional boundaries between fiction and reality (Hacheon 29).

According to Patricia Waugh, another leading figure in fantasy theory, metafiction contains a narrative that underscores its status as literary art. Waugh argues that metafiction often reflects the use of history through persuasion attention to the literary structures and conventions of writing (Waugh 7). Stories often create, encouraging readers to engage with the text in a more significant way (Ibid. 15).

James Acheson elaborates that metafiction not only questions the nature of fiction but also challenges the reader's notion of truth and representation. In his analysis, Acheson argues that fantasy writing often blurs the line between fiction and reality is elusive, making it a layered narrative dynamic in its multiple meanings of unfolding from the reader -demanding engagement (Acheson 23). This connection between fiction and reality is central to the novel experience, because it encourages readers to question the authenticity of narrative constructs.

Similarly, Robert Alter asserts that metafiction often employs techniques such as narrative self-knowledge, direct description of the act of narrative. Alter notes that through traditional narrative told in a way that destroys and embraces self-explanation, spiritual works reveal the construction of the whole story.

History represents a significant departure from traditional narrative by prioritizing narrative fiction and a strict discussion of the nature of story. Through autobiographical and narrative approaches by examining telling, fiction challenges readers to rethink their assumptions about fiction and the relationship between the textual and the existential.

5. LINDA HUTCHEON'S CONCEPT OF METAFICTION AND ITS APPLICATION IN *THE DEAD FATHER*:

Linda Hutcheon's theories on metafiction offer a crucial framework for understanding the narrative complexities in Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*. In her seminal work, *A Theory of Metafiction*, Hutcheon defines metafiction as a form of self-referential literature that explicitly acknowledges its own fictionality and engages in a dialogue about the nature of storytelling itself (Hutcheon 5). This concept is particularly relevant to Barthelme's novel, which employs metafictional techniques to challenge conventional narrative structures and question the boundaries between reality and fiction.

Hutcheon argues that it disrupts traditional narrative through the prioritization of storytelling and the processes of literary manifestation (Hutcheon 29). In *The Dead Father*, Barthelme's fragmented narrative and playful language parallel Hutcheon's description of fictional action. The plot structure of the novel and the self-descriptive nature of its pages' invite readers to consider the act of reading and the making of meaning, thus introducing Hutcheon's notion of fiction as a descriptive of the nature of fiction itself is included (Smith 145).

Furthermore, Hutcheon's exploration of elemental story as a means of interrogating the relationship between author, text, and reader is reflected in Barthelme's Novel's fictional elements such as the non-linear plot and the constant question of narratives of authority reveal textual craftsmanship and engage readers in a critical analysis of how stories are constructed and interpreted (Jones 85). This is consistent with Hutcheon's view that metafiction often seeks to subvert established literary norms and encourages readers to question their assumptions about narrative and its representation (Hutcheon 78).

Scholars have noted that Barthelme's use of fictional techniques in *The Dead Father* not only challenges traditional narrative but also reflects broader postmodern concerns about the instability of meaning and its fragility. Personality has also been revealed (Miller 112). It is consistent with Hutcheon's view of literature as a site of active participation and introspection (Johnson 99).

Linda Hutcheon's theory of metaphor provides a valuable lens through which to examine *The Dead Father*. By examining the way in which Barthelme's novel uses fictional techniques to interrogate and explore authority, the researcher gains a deeper understanding of the new mode of storytelling and its implications for the nature of fiction.

At the beginning of *The Dead Father* readers are informed that the Dead Father is "[d]ead, but still with us, still with us, but dead" (3). A chiasmus is established as the master motif for the work. In the same way that his fundamental qualities are producing (or "fathering") and destroying (or "slaying"), he is perceived as both present and absent. Fatherhood serves as the central theme of the book. In a broad sense, the father represents all forms of coherence and order, including language; he is the embodiment of the meaning that must be found and the control that must be escaped. "Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least "turned down" in this generation - by the combined efforts of all of us together" (145) -, it is the father himself who, starting in chapter one, can now only "turn down" people and animals. On a symbolic level, this may be seen as an extreme

rejection of the old and a quest for the new, reflecting Barthelme's belief that language's current bounds must be drastically pushed past predetermined borders.

The attempt to capture "reality" in a web of linguistic nets, is one aspect of the text examples include the list of father types (136–137), the consequences of the Dead Father's involvement with Tullla (36–37), and the enumeration of musicians (11) and animals (52–3) killed by the Dead Father. The inventory or catalogue is a deep rooted literary device, and epic poetry comes suitably to mind since the master voice of the novel may stand for a literary father and *The Dead Father* is a parody of the epic as well as of the sexual exploits of legendary heroes, for instance, the leading character tells how he “fathered the Pool Table of Ballambangjang” (35). But Barthelme’s lists are hardly canonical:

They found the Dead Father standing in a wood, slaying. First he slew a snowshoe rabbit cleaving it in twain with a single blow and then he slew a spiny anteater and then he slew two rusty numbats and then whirling the great blade round and round his head he slew a wallaby and a lemur and a trio of ouakaris and a spider monkey and a common squid. (52)

There is no reality here but mainly discourse, an inventory which draws attention to itself as a mere word display, interfering with the narrative transmission. Related to this device is Barthelme’s treatment of fragments as strategies to subvert patterns and undermine continuities. In the dialogues of Julie and Emma we “look at the parts separately” and “get an exploded view” (151), but the action of the story does not move forward. Based on repetition, cliché or mere babble, these dialogues represent a form of counter communication, “printed circuits reprinting themselves” (147) meant to leave the reader with “a boiled brain and a burnt one” (151). They are an exhibition of a vapid, hollow language, so easily reproducible that it demands a new approach and innovative modes of expression. As Barbara Maloy notes: “with words Barthelme startles the reader into experiencing something out of the ordinary. ... He also revives old words ... and by using them in a modern context, forces the reader to really see the words”.

This is part of the typical Barthelme a strategy, the effort to disenchant or demystify inherited beliefs and imperatives informs all of his work. Barthelme's immediate modernist forebears, the masters of meaning whose influence he finds difficult to subdue and who cause him great anxiety about their effect, are embodied in *The Dead Father*. Additionally, *the Dead Father* personifies the need for purpose: “You take my meaning. We had no choice, said Julie” (19). But he resists final naming, preferring the pleasure of ambiguity: “Having it both ways is a thing I like” (15). Commanding “Authority. Fragile, yet present” (67), He values structure and order, especially when he asks two of his kids: “What purpose? What entelechy? What will you do with yourselves when it is all over?” (168).

Barthelme plays with phrases in addition to words. He uses backbreaking and inverting sentences in *The Dead Father* in order to postpone the meaning. Brian McHale claims that a back broken and invertebrate sentence is “a recurrent feature of postmodernist writing” (1987 154), features rambling, apparently interminable and shape-shifting constructions. Brian McHale even names it as back-broke and invertebrate sentence, an influent name, and appreciates the aesthetics embodied in it (Ibid.).

Barthelme himself has even proposed an aesthetic defense for this kind of sentence, “I look for a particular kind of sentence, perhaps more often the awkward than the beautiful.” (Ibid.) To him, the back-broke and invertebrate sentences are interesting. This kind of sentence, which is also named “the device of deliberate nonfluency” (Ibid.), appears frequently in postmodern

works, including *The Dead Father*, where the most important example is the speech given by Dead Father:

In contemplating I say these additionally arrived human beings not provided for by anticipatory design hocus or pocus and thus problematical, we must reliably extend a set of ever-advancing speeding poised lingering or dwelling pattern behaviors sufficient unto the day or adequate until the next time.

Readers must be lost in this “climactic gobbledygook monologue” (Barthelme 50), because viewers are always made aware of the sentence structure but not the message that lies beneath it because the meaning is always postponed. The precise meaning of this speech is so unclear that even the audience in the story is completely perplexed. After the “spectacular speech”, Emma asks, “What does it mean?” (Ibid. 51) which all readers will incline to ask, and to which *the Dead Father*’s response is only “It means I made a speech”, direct and dictatorial enough. This succinct answer can be taken as a footnote for the skill of back-broke and invertebrate sentences.

It seems that the meaning of discourse is delayed on the level of signifier, leaving readers pondering about its real intention. “The postmodernist sentences invite us to relieve them of their meaning and then denying us to put meaning back into them again.” (McHale 154). These sentences are so awkward that “it is the sentence-structure itself that fixes the attention, distracting us from whatever content” (Ibid. 155) they may carry.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* stands as a prime example of metafiction, weaving its narrative techniques to challenge traditional storytelling norms. Through its fragmented structure, stories and the explicit commentary on the nature of fiction, it invites readers to Barthelme's new approach not only artifice and subjectivity in history Underline but also offers a critique of power presumably in traditional narratives As the boundaries between fact and fiction blur, Father Death prompts readers to question their sense of truth, ways of communicating and it demonstrates the power of original fiction to evoke a deeper reflection on the program.

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