Review Article

A Study of the Absurdity in *the Glass Mountain*

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Abstract

As a leading writer of postmodernism, Donald Barthelme in his masterpiece *The Glass Mountain* makes use of some postmodern writing skills, such as parody, fragment and irony, to demonstrate a destructive world and clearly illustrates an absurd story. Actually, the absurdity in the story has its profound social meaning, reflecting the author's profound insight into the postmodern social reality.

Keywords: *The Glass Mountain*, Postmodernism, Absurdity, Parody, Fragment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature, to some extent, is the reflection of the author's values and outlooks on life, and an alternative embodiment of the social, political and cultural reality. Greatly influenced by the industrialization, existentialism, the thoughts of Frankfurt School and Nietzsche's philosophy, the postmodern literature, originated at the end of 1950s and the start of 1960s, challenged the main features of modern literature, while inheriting some legacies from it, to reflect the culture in postmodern era. As a leading postmodern writer, Barthelme in his masterpiece *The Glass Mountain* makes use of some postmodern writing techniques, such as parody, fragment, and irony etc., to demonstrate a destructive world and clearly illustrate the theme of absurdity. At the same time, the absurdity depicted by Barthelme actually has its profound social meaning, reflecting the author's real insight into the postmodern social reality.

2. The Origin of Postmodernism

After World War two, America came into the so-called "postindustrial era", during which Americans ushered in the advent of "the affluent society" (Galbraith, 1958). Modern science and technology have been overwhelmingly in dominance of American lives, resulting in the serious cleavage between the spiritual civilization and the material progress. The advanced science and achievements severely mitigated the labor intensity on the one hand, while on the other, translated Americans to be materialistic, therefore, technology and rationality gradually became the yardstick for the evaluation of everything. The conventional Protestant ethics and Puritanism seemed futile and nothing at all, while the consumerism and hedonism were pervasive in the United States. Moreover, the communication with high technology and advanced equipment alienated Americans, and the rat race in society and the voracious desires for material comforts forcefully fueled Americans to be apathetic between each other. Therefore, the highly advanced material achievements in America further incurred the divide between spiritual civilization and material progress and even the contradiction between them, instead of paving a way for the improvement and betterment of the mental civilization.

Existentialism, one of the major ideological trends in the West, gradually played a pivotal role in welcoming the postmodern era. On the one hand, existentialism gives priority to the notion that "existence precedes essence", which means that the essences of the human beings are determined by their wills and behaviors, rather than God or something else, so as to further confirm the truth of the ontological meanings of human beings. On the other hand, existentialism vigorously advocates the "absolute freedom", that is to say, human beings are destined to be free and freedom is the essence of "being" instead of some specific property of human beings. Therefore, the thought of "absolute freedom" attracted tens of thousands of souls with no freedom in the West. In the 1960s, as liberalism was pervasive everywhere in America, President John Kennedy refreshed Americans with his vigorous leadership. His household speech "please ask not what the country can do for you; ask what you can do for the

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country" further resonated among the idealistic youth far beyond for "the New Frontier". The ensuing president Lyndon Johnson put forward "the Great Society" so as to keep the liberalism going on. Under such an environment, American youth immersed themselves into a prosperous vision full of bright future.

The Frankfurt School, represented by Marcuse Herbert, was especially eloquent on the nation's ills and cures. In his masterpiece *One-Dimensional Man*, he mainly made it clear that: with the development of capitalist science and technology, technological controls had been pervasive in all the fields of society and had penetrated into economy, politics, culture, ideology or even the unconsciousness of human beings. The ruling class took advantage of the mass media and some other advanced technologies to create a kind of "fake needs", which induced Americans to adopt the lifestyle of consumerism so as to benumb and alter their consciousness. In such a way, the ruling class tranquilly assimilated and emasculated American critical thinking competence, resulting in the bankruptcy of Americans in personality, rationality for freedom and criticism, and finally the American ultimately reduced to be "*One-Dimensional Man*" (Marcuse, 2012). The influence of industrialization, the existentialism of Sartre and thoughts of Marcuse, in various degrees, converged together to help shape the postmodern era.

3. The Postmodern Writing Style

In the postmodern society, the postmodern literature takes on some distinguished forms and features. Some of the typical postmodern writing techniques, such as parody, pastiche, fragments, and irony etc., were frequently adopted to demonstrate the destructive world and social absurdity.

3.1. Parody in *the Glass Mountain*

Parody is a kind of writing style which imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for a comic effect. Generally speaking, it always overstates the daily phenomenon, the theme, contents, form, or style of the classic literature, so as to criticize, make fun of or even subvert the conventional, historical and current literature values and the literature paradigm.

In *The Glass Mountain*, Barthelme retold the Polish original fairy tale of *The Princess on The Glass Mountain*, however, it was in a comic or even distorted style. The author altered the traditional heroic plot of climbing the glass mountain to rescue the princess, but settled it in the setting of the modern city of probably New York; the climber was climbing a glass mountain, like some splendid immense office building, which was actually a hard and impossible process of reaching the goal; the author transformed the conventional happy ending of the marriage of the princess and the heroic climber into "throwing the princess headfirst down the mountain to my acquaintances"(Yu, 2010: 117-121); at last, the climber was disillusioned of the devoid of solid meaning of the "symbol" after he arrived atop. On the one hand, the author vividly presented the absurdity through the distortion and subversion of the legendary, which was also a symbol of the real world; on the other hand, by means of such a creative writing, he gave up the traditional old-fashioned writing and made use of the new postmodernism style, parody, to criticize the social reality with an irony.

3.2. Fragment in *the Glass Mountain*

Barthelme gave up the traditional plot structure, relying instead on a steady accumulation of unrelated details. Barthelme tried to focus much more on the form than the content of his works. In his book, *Unspeakable Practices* and *Unnatural Acts*, he once proclaimed that fragments are the only forms he trusts. In *The Glass Mountain*, he composed a list of 100 numbered sentences and fragments, which were symbolic of his opposition to and subversion of the conventional literary works. On the one hand, the form was taken in priority by the author, so as to the historical reading paradigm was crushed; on the other hand, the numbered sentences and fragments are indicating the futility and tediousness of the conventional literary text and even the numbers were used to make clear of the profound meaning of literature. It seems that the list of number has nothing to do with the theme and contents of the story; however, it actually is the irony of the dominance of instrumental-reason in a literary form.

In *The Glass Mountain*, some unrelated fragmented images were stated in the story, such as: young people shooting up in doorways, dog shit in brilliant colors, cutting down trees, a lengthy list of names, fictional famous sayings etc. These fragmented images increased the audiences' reading difficulty, besides they implied the fragmentation and divide of American minds in the postmodernist society, even though they enjoyed the material affluence. The young people shooting up in doorways, as the typical street scene in America, was symbolic of the turmoil and disorder in the city life; dog shit in brilliant colors were described in some chosen and elegant words, indicating the author's distain of modern American's closer relationship with dogs than that with human beings; cutting down trees, a row of elms broken-backed among the VWs and Valiants, was the bitter criticism of the fast development of modern technology, represented by car industry, at the cost of natural environment, such as cutting down trees. The four seemingly unrelated famous sayings further blurred the theme and story. Barthelme once wrote, "we like books that have a lot of *dreck* in them, matter which presents itself as not whole relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of 'sense' of what is going on" (Barthelme, 1967: 106). By means of fragment and some seemingly unrelated "dreck", the traditional theme in

literature was further decentralized, and the traditional meanings and values of the literary were deconstructed.

4. Absurdity in the Story

Living in the postmodern era, Barthelme had experienced and testified some distorted and alienated social phenomenon, therefore, his works, to a large extent, will embody the real social absurdity. Waugh Patricia once stated that "in most of Barthelme's work, bits and pieces of undigested 'real life' appear to float into the fictional frame" (Waugh, 1984: 143).

4.1. The Absurdity of Postmodern Society

The social unrest and upheaval in the 1960s had easily triggered the social crisis. With the rapid growth and expansion of the U.S., the national conflicts sprung up unceasingly and demonstrated a tendency of drastic worsening. Under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., the American blacks who were suffering from oppression, one after another, came to spiritually awaken from their unfair situations, and initiated the civil rights movement sweeping the United States; owing to the discontent to the unfair and discriminated status quo in the society, American women launched the vigorous and large-scale feminist movement to protest the policies and practices which were discriminatory to them, but merely beneficial to the white males; in pace with the escalation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the United States waged the extremely tragic Vietnam War to guard against the emergence of socialism and the ensuing Domino Effect in the Southeast Asia, and then it resulted in the fierce anti-war movement; the development and utilization of nuclear energy resulted in the vicious expansion of military race between the United States and the Soviet Union.

By means of TV or radio, the Americans watched or heard the inflammatory speech of "I Have a Dream" by Martin Luther King, Jr., American women's protest, the death of the innocent Vietnamese in the Vietnam battlefield, the uprising of their fellow citizens, and the snowballing of the anti-war passion, then, they couldn't help being lost in the spiritual wasteland. What's wrong with their beloved motherland? And what course their motherland, once a dream land of "freedom, democracy and equality", would follow or take? Between this malaise of feeling and a casual hedonism, between spiritual hunger and a radical politics, the adversary ethos of modernism was becoming real, in the fresh, in a generation that found little in society to trust or believe. To some extent, the absurdity of the historical events and social milieus were presented in the story.

4.2. The Absurd Theme in the Story

In the story, the climber tried his best to realize his dream by climbing the glass mountain to reach the golden castle. In fact, there exists no glass mountain in the world at all, this image hinted at the modern city. Besides, the golden castle was a symbol of the American

dream, attracting wave after wave of followers. The hesitation and fear of the climber vividly presented his confusion and bewilderment in the dream-chasing process in postmodern phrase. The masses below, whom the author called my acquaintances, were savage, aggressive blood-suckers. Instead of getting support and encouragement from his acquaintances and the masses below, the climber received "disturbed eyes", curse and a torrent of abuse, like "shithead", "asshole", and "dump motherfucker" (Yu, 2010:117-121). Facing the erstwhile fallen knights, the climber's acquaintances, without offering help and rescue, cold-bloodily "moved among the fallen knights, collecting rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies' favors" (Ibid), or even inhumanly looted a burning house by "prising out the gold teeth of not-yet dead knights" (Ibid). Living in the social absurdity, the postmodern features of material-worship, selfishness, and apathetic relationships were entirely demonstrated.

Though having known lots of fallen knights dead or groaning in the heap, the climber still managed to gain even a "minimal, not an arm's length" (Ibid) with difficulty, so as to be nearing his ideal goal. The masses were sure that the climber would fall and die like the former knights, so they greedily waited for the falling of the climber to rob him, to discuss who can get his apartment, to see if he makes a splash when he falls and to dip their handkerchiefs in his blood as they did to the ones who have fallen before. Here, the contemporary mass society was vividly demonstrated, and the masses in such a turbulent social setting were alienated and distorted in mind and gradually became "other-directed person" (Riesman, 1961: 17-24). The climber, on the one hand, tried to escape from this apathetic and alienated society and system, so he suffered a lot to reach the golden castle; on the other hand, he finally got disillusioned that it is only an ideal goal that was nothing but illusion when "it (the symbol) changed into a beautiful princess" (Yu, 2010: 117-121). At last, the throwing down of the princess headfirst was the ultimate disillusion of the climber and even symbolized the deconstruction of the conventional American mind after "the death of god" claimed by Nietzsche.

5. CONCLUSION

In the postmodern era, while Americans were enjoying "the social plenty and affluence" (Potter, 1954), they were also suffering the alienation between society and the masses in a destructive society, due to the absurd historical events and mainline intellectual thoughts. In *The Glass Mountain*, Barthelme made use of the typical postmodern writing style, such as: parody of the fairy tale in form and fragments and pastiche in contents, to deconstruct the conventional literary, make irony of the alienation of the masses and demonstrate the social absurdity.

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