

## **Distorted Human Relationships in Donald Barthelme's Postmodern Works**

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### **Abstract**

**The present paper is an analysis of the distorted human relationships in Donald Barthelme's postmodern works. Insecure human relationships, commercialized human relationships, assaultive human relationships and abnormal human relationships are introduced in proper sequence. The conclusion is that by presenting distorted human relationships, Barthelme aims to expose various aspects of the society he lives in to his readers.**

### **Keywords**

**Distorted, human relationships, Donald Barthelme, postmodern works.**

### **1. Introduction**

Donald Barthelme may be one of the most avant-garde postmodern writers in both English and American literature. While Barthelme's works do characterize themselves by their deconstructive tendencies of indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, depthlessness etc, they also reveal various aspects of the society the writer lives in. One of the most important aspects of his society is the distorted human relationships exposed in many of Barthelme's works. The present paper tries to introduce four major distorted human relationships in Barthelme's novella "Snow White" and several other short stories in a bid to help readers better comprehend a corrupted bourgeois society in which Barthelme lives.

### **2. Body**

#### **2.1. Insecure Human Relationships in "Will You Tell Me"**

In the story, Hubert and Irene are lovers despite their identity of being married. Both characters in modern society are unemotional, unable to pour their affections to each other on impulse. Their expression of mutual love is often delayed indefinitely. Hubert and Irene's "intense emotional constraint disappears only in a darkened room in a timeless, spaceless world". [1] Thus Hubert's confession of love to Irene can only occur in a darkened enclosed space such as a newsreel theatre where he feels completely secure. On that occasion, Hubert's ability to express love seems to be resumed upon catching sight of something eventful or shocking. So when Hubert and Irene together watch a piece of news of massacre occurring years ago, Hubert gets inspired all of a sudden and begins to show his love out to Irene.

Hubert gives the couple Charles and Irene a baby named Paul as a gift. Even though Hubert and Irene have been together for twenty years, Irene still feels insecure about their long-term relationship and keeps wondering if Hubert really loves her and if the gift of Paul from Hubert is an expression of love from him.

Irene's adopted son Paul turns out to be an anarchist when he grows up. Paul has never been able to love Hilda wholeheartedly for his absent-mindedness and coldness. Paul trusts nobody and feels insecure about the complicated society he lives in, which renders him to fail to communicate with anybody effectively and live in harmony with anybody. For Paul, the human

relationships are so incomprehensible and unbearable that he makes up his mind to make bombs to end all the torturing human relationships. In a word, human relationships in modern society are characterized by the sense of insecurity for everybody involved.

## **2.2. Commercialized Human Relationships in “To London and Rome”**

“To London and Rome” is a story about a couple Peter and Alison who have difficulty in establishing and sustaining meaningful human relationships with each other. The couple get bored with everyday routine and often quarrel. To ease their strained relationship in a debased modern world, they turn to money to buy the happiness and excitement they desire.

When on a tour, the couple buy a horse named Dan for fun. To keep the horse, they buy a house in a superb suburb. To train the horse, they hire a jockey. To offer proper environment for the horse, they hire a gardener. When the horse gets ill, they buy a hospital for 1.5 million dollars to cure it. Peter also has his mistress Amelia who asks for 5,500 dollars to keep him company. After Peter’s paying the exact amount, Amelia agrees to have fun with him by making love the whole afternoon.

Despite the absurdity of the story, readers can get that human relationships in modern society, even those between husband and wife, have been totally commercialized. People in the society are linked to one another by money. Everything including love can be bought and sold. The source of happiness of all the characters involved seems to be money-related. It appears that the more money they spend, the happier they become. Their happiness tends to be dependent on consecutive spending. But after much spending, they still feel empty and depressed as they have no life goals and schedules.

## **2.3. Assaultive Human Relationships in “The Glass Mountain”**

The distorted human relationships seem to have been upgraded in Barthelme’s short story “The Glass Mountain” in which readers can see the open and direct attack on each other. The hero “I” tries to climb the glass mountain standing at the corner of Thirteen Street and Eight Avenue. The hero keeps emphasizing that he is new here in the neighborhood, but at the same time he has acquaintances. This contradictory claim seems to indicate the difficulty of establishing and sustaining harmonious human relationships in modern society. To climb the mountain, the hero intends to achieve something, to disenchant a traditional symbol to be specific. That is, he is doing something historic that deserves his acquaintances’ encouragement and support. However, his acquaintances at the foot of the mountain offer their curses and four-letter words. Also, “In the streets were many people with disturbed eyes.”[2] People in the neighborhood may be disturbed by the hero’s attempt to break the tradition, so they are obviously showing their hostility. “In the streets were hundreds of young people shooting up in doorways, behind parked cars.”[2] This suggests that gun fights do occasionally take place in the real world. The writer also gives a deteriorating picture of sidewalks full of dogshit in various colors and someone cutting down trees with power saws. The view of what is happening in the neighborhood from the perspective of the hero gives readers a panorama of the very society in which hostility exists, conflicts predominate and medium-scale attacks occasionally occur. The writer mentions that many riders or knights tried to climb to the top of the glass mountain but failed, which may be an indication that there is a lot of competition among the knights to reach the top or to seek fame or fortune in a figurative sense. The depiction of the hero’s acquaintances moving among fallen knights, collecting rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies’ favors vividly shows the assaultive nature of modern human relationships.

In “The Glass Mountain”, Barthelme boldly presents in an exaggerating manner a panorama in which people are hostile to each other, cursing, robbing, fighting and killing. For the writer, what he presents in the short story is what has really happened or is happening in the real

society. Barthelme just sticks all these assaultive happenings together to let his readers experience all the human hostility and conflicts once at a time.

#### 2.4. Abnormal Human Relationships in “Rebecca” and “Snow White”

In “Will You Tell Me” and “To London and Rome”, Barthelme presents his readers with two cases of love triangles or the mention of mistresses of the respective heroes. While this type of immoral human relationship is to some extent understood by many people despite their objection, the type of human relationship in “Rebecca” and “Snow White” are no doubt shocking to many readers. In “Rebecca”, the two main characters Rebecca and Hilda are lovers or homosexual lesbians. They love each other and act the same as heterosexual lovers. When Hilda mentions that she has had a drink with a lady called Stephanie, Rebecca gets jealous and keeps asking for the motives of Hilda’s having drinks with Stephanie. Rebecca gets so angry that she even pushes Hilda away. In the end they become reconciled and sit down enjoying their supper and talking to each other merrily. Barthelme objectively describes the homosexual relationship in “Rebecca”, giving readers typical pictures of homosexual lovers handling everyday trivial matters. The writer seems to suggest that homosexuality may be quite common in modern society, and this “abnormal” human relationship has become kind of “normal”, if not the trend. In Barthelme’s masterpiece “Snow White”, polyandry becomes the norm. Snow White cohabits with the seven dwarfs and make love with them all. She in some sense has become the common “horsewife” for the seven dwarfs. The seven dwarfs would work out every day to earn a living, while Snow White stays home doing some housework. Snow White also waits for her Mr Right every day, expecting him to save and marry her. Barthelme sets such messy human relationships in “Snow White” in order to suggest what may truly happen in the real world he is in.

### 3. Conclusion

Barthelme in his postmodern works introduces various distorted human relationships. In “Will You Tell Me”, the writer presents his readers with insecure human relationships; in “To London and Rome”, commercialized human relationships; in “The Glass Mountain”, assaultive human relationships; in “Rebecca” and “Snow White”, “abnormal” human relationships. These four major types of human relationships introduced by the writer may actually exist in the society Barthelme lives in. Barthelme once told Roe in 1988 that his writing is “a way of dealing with reality, an attempt to think about aspects of reality that have not, perhaps, been treated of heretofore”.[3] Therefore, Barthelme may intentionally presents the distorted human relationships to expose many aspect of the society he lives in.

### References

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