

Analysis of Parody in Donald Barthelme's Short Story *Bluebeard*

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Keywords: Parody; *Bluebeard*; Deconstruction; Reconstruction

Abstract: Parody is a method of literary creation by creating new texts and reconstructing new meanings with the help of imitation and deconstruction of previous texts. Parody is like a writer directing a new language game, however the essence is to express different creative themes and new ideological connotations. This article takes the short story *Bluebeard* written by American novelist Donald Barthelme as an example, trying to interpret the use of parody in short stories, and analyzes the postmodernism artistic characteristics and cultural connotation of the work.

1. Introduction

Parody, also known as harmonic imitation, funny imitation or mocking imitation, is regarded as one of the most intentional and analytical literary techniques and one of the most favored forms of comedy. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, parody refers to a form of satire or mockery in literature. By imitating the style and techniques of a particular writer or genre, the author aims to highlight the previous author's flaws or the cliché of the literary school. Parody can be adopted in a wide range of literature category. It could be a writer, a literary work, a literary creation techniques and it can also be a writer's standpoint, viewpoint or even literary style. Making use of parody, a writer makes a conscious mockery of the object and make his work funny as well as hyperbole to achieve the purpose of satire. To some extent, parody means to deny, satirize and criticize traditional values and literary models. American novelist Donald Barthelme (1931-1989) often subverts the narrative and text forms of traditional novels. He likes to write new novels with new words, new styles and new methods. Parody is the typical postmodernism style that Barthelme is good at and it also gives his literary work a distinct and unique style. As a result, he is known as the father of a new generation of postmodern writers. Among his short stories, *Bluebeard* is a typical work with parody. From the title of the work, the characters and the plots, it is not difficult to realize that the previous fairy tale is subverted. In order to bring readers new reading experience and to innovate the concept of literary creation, Barthelme's short story *Bluebeard* shows obvious characteristics of postmodernism style.

2. Uses of Parody in Donald Barthelme's *Bluebeard*

2.1 Parody of the Title

The title of Barthelme's short story is a kind of parody itself. The story's title conjures up images of the protagonist of the folklore compiled by the French poet Charles Perrault, or the fairy tale of the British Grimm brothers. Bluebeard is usually used as a metaphor for a cruel husband; a man who marries a concubine indiscriminately.

Barthelme's short story does not restate the fairy tale itself. Instead, he parodies the original fairy tale with the readers' cognition and understanding of the original fairy tale, and retains the original title. On the one hand, parody of the same title will arouse readers' curiosity and expectation. On the other hand, it will arouse readers to compare the original works while reading, and actively experience the ideological connotation and artistic characteristics of Barthelme's new work. As the postmodernist literary theorist Ihab Hassan points out: The imitation of the same title from an original literary work means that the author makes an attempt to exert the polysemy, ambiguity and uncertainty of language and characters, so that the creative life implied in the work can be extended freely and flexibly in uncertainty. Therefore, for reading and interpretation of any literary work, if it

is to maintain and develop the creative vitality, it is natural and must take advantage of the uncertainty in the language structure of literary works.

2.2 Parody of the Characters from the Fairy Tale

Barthelme's parody of the characters is gradual. He unfolds the narrative from the perspective of the first-person "I"—Bluebeard's seventh wife. At the beginning of the short story, Bluebeard's identity has changed to a rather forgetful man of forty-five, who knows how to appreciate the works of art. Judging from his appearance, the daunting blue-beard was also replaced by a ugly nose of a black rocky object covered with silver. Nevertheless, the charm of Bluebeard remains. His pure vitality is dry and decadent while thinking about the details, and he even inadvertently knows the famous 20th-century architect Le Corbusier by saying the famous quotes "the history of architecture is the history of the struggle for light." It can be seen that Barthelme dissolves the aristocratic image of Bluebeard in original fairy tale. Letting time and space travel to modern, Barthelme begins to deconstruct male image and male authority and starts to reconstruct a modern, ridiculous, absurd but also charming Bluebeard image.

In addition, Barthelme also parodies the language of the characters. There are three times in the novel when Bluebeard asks his wife if she would like to open the forbidden room. "You haven't tried to open the door?", "Will you never try to open that door?" and "You must open that door." His tone ranges from tentative interrogatories, impatient questioning to harsh orders. This is completely different from the language of Bluebeard in the original fairy tale. It can be seen from the words that it is not the "I", the wife who is interested in the forbidden room, but Bluebeard himself. This flip design of the characters' words, to a great extent, plays an important role in subversion of the typical characters and deconstruction of the classic plot, meanwhile creates a funny, humorous and ironic comedy effect. Therefore, readers will easily realize that it is Bluebeard who deliberately designs a self-righteous prank and waits for "I" to unlock the secret. Ironically, "I" as the wife who has known the original fairy tale plot, has no interest in his arrangement, which not only makes Bluebeard feel upset, but even angers him. Eventually the motivation for opening the forbidden room comes from Bluebeard's order but not curiosity.

Through the alienation of the novel characters, Barthelme aims to reflect the absurdity of the society of that time. In American society at that time, the mechanical nature of daily life raised doubts about the value and purpose of existence, and made people feel confused about the state or value of self-existence. Therefore, people place hope on the future and actually it is a kind of self-deception because future denies the meaning of being present. At the same time, people realized the fate of death. In fact, people saw their own limitations and had the feeling of being abandoned in a different world, which is strange and broken, so they must find a sense of existence through some absurd behavior.

In the novel, Barthelme not only plays the imitation of Bluebeard, but also plays the imitation of wife "I". In fairy tales, the heroine is the daughter of an aristocratic family, with beautifully flower-like appearance and naive character. In the short story, Barthelme creates a self-centered wife who is good at lying, understanding politics, and cheating on her husband. The wife becomes not only the lover of the Mexican revolutionary leader, but also has an affair with the castle priest. Her feelings for Bluebeard is in a state of instant absence, and she has no interest in any of his orders, which is quite different from the fairy tale. Barthelme's wife "I" completely subverts the archetype of characters in fairy tales and has obvious feminist characteristics: she pursues sexual liberation, actively participates in politics, negates the male right and highlights the important position of women. Barthelme's portrayal of women breaks the barrier of fairy tales, deconstructs female characters in fairy tales, and reconstructs new female images in postmodern literary text. The wife's clever sophistication contrasts with the ridiculousness of Bluebeard. By controlling psychological activity and behavior, the wife has become the real protagonist of the novel, thus realizing the complete transformation of the protagonist characters in the fairy tale and the short story.

2.3 Parody of the Plot

Parody of the plot is also an important feature of the post-modern work *Bluebeard*. Parody novels mainly has two categories: one is based on classic text and the other is to rewrite. The meaning of parody determines that parody novels should have both imitation and mockery. To judge whether some specific text belongs to the parody text, the imitation of the previous text is the basis. The artistic approach of parody is dependent on a former text. However, an imitation of the former text is not enough to show the parody because the essence of parody lies in the mockery. Parody is a subversive and negative imitation of the former text to achieve deconstruction, transfer and displacement of the ideology, central theme of the former text. Through deconstructing the former text, the writer seeks and reconstructs new meanings.

The whole plot of the novel *Bluebeard* not only imitates fairy tales, but also mocks at fairy tales, bringing forth new ideas and constructing new ideas. First of all, Barthelme uses the narrative method of metafiction to let the newlyweds “I” know the killing behavior of Bluebeard in the original fairy tale, and let “I” lose interest in the secret of Bluebeard in the short story. When Bluebeard senses my indifference to the forbidden room, he tells me three times to open the forbidden room saying “If you want to continue to be my wife, you must occasionally be strong enough to disobey my wishes.” Compared with the plot in the fairy tale. “If you go in, don’t blame me for being angry.” Barthelme’s work has obvious black humor and absurd comedy effect, making people laugh and realize the reflection of fictional text to the real world.

Secondly, “I” am forced by Bluebeard to open the room. Although “I” had a little curiosity about the forbidden room, it was not because I want to know what is in the room but because “I” want to witness the original fairy tale plot is true. “Did he want me to open the door? To find, in the room behind the door, hanging on the hook, the beautiful bodies of my six predecessors? But what if, contrary to this assumption, the beautifully dressed bodies of my six predecessors were not behind the door? What is that? At that moment I became curious,…” Austrian language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein points out, “Language is like a game. In the game, something is meaningful, not because it has something to do with reality, but because it is in the game.” Barthelme is a novelist who is good at using word games. He makes language play the charm of uncertainty, makes the plot of the novel not only imitating fairy tales, but also bantering fairy tales, and then skillfully designs the reasonable ground that “I” must open the forbidden room. In this way, Barthelme promotes plot development and creates humorous absurd effect again.

Finally, Barthelme’s design of the novel ending unexpectedly parodies the fairy tale. “The room, hanging on the hook, shining in corruption and in the Coco Chanel dress, are seven zebras, and my husband appear beside me. ‘Happy, don’t you think it?’ He says, and I say ‘Yes, happy.’” The secret is revealed. The fairy tale is resolved and the display turns to be a planned prank. Bluebeard disappoints “my” expectations and lets “I” be defeated by the immediate reality while he is proud and happy in his performance. The ending thus ends in a string of ellipsis and Barthelme successfully deconstructs and reconstruct the fairy tale *Bluebeard* in a language game. As literary theorist Linda Hutcheon reminds us not to mix it with the realist world. “Postmodernism is unique to maintain aesthetic autonomy, while bringing the text back to the world.” she said. “However, it does not return to the world of ordinary facts; these texts are the world of words, the world of text and mutual texts. This world has a direct relationship to the real world of experience, but it is not itself the real world of this experience.”

3. Conclusion

As a representative of postmodernist novelists, Barthelme firmly believes that artists can reach all possible fields of knowledge, which can not be proved by numerical formulas, but does exist. Barthelme’s *Bluebeard* shows deconstruction impulse of a game language and the emphasis on absurdity and irrationality. This kind of deconstruction, on the one hand, deconstructs the traditional values and moral ideals represented by the fairy tale *Bluebeard*; on the other hand, deconstructs the language itself, subverts the traditional understanding that language is used as a communication tool,

and points out that language is a meaningless game in today's society. Through the parody and subversion of fairy tale title, fairy tale characters and fairy tale plot, *Bluebeard* implies Barthelme's irony and thinking about contemporary human society and American society under the structure of collage and scattered plot.

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