

## On Word-Play in *The Dead Father* by Donald Barthelme

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### Abstract

*The Dead Father* (1975) by Donald Barthelme recounts a quite simple story but it won Barthelme a well-deserved reputation; the most significant element for the achievements concerning this novel lies in the writing itself, which represents a splendid application of postmodern writing techniques, especially word-play. In this novel, Barthelme manages to transform the traditional rational language in a playing manner. This employment contributes *The Dead Father* as a typical postmodern work, which reflects the postmodern society in Barthelme's eyes and displays prominently Barthelme's intention and talents to evolve the literary writing techniques. Nothing of the traditional literature is safe from his challenging pen in the context of this novel: words, phrases, sentences or fables are equally dismantled and deconstructed.

**Key words:** *The Dead Father*; Word-play; Postmodernism

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### INTRODUCTION

Donald Antrim, who writes a foreword for the edition of *The Dead Father* published in 2004, seemingly features this novel with a simple word: play, the element “considered most artistically important...for

the postmodernist tendency” (Steiner, 1999, p.28). Obviously, this brief expression has not only ascertained a conspicuous feature of Barthelme's oeuvre but also simultaneously highlighted his countermeasure to his anxiety about what to write and how to set out to write. His anxiety accompanying his entire writing career inspired him to write in his unique way, with the employment of postmodern techniques inevitably, including word-play. He utilizes word-play to exhibit his unique order to the postmodern world rather than leads it to or depicts it as a disordered state. Just as Donald Antrim confirms “[i]n his surface disorder and his comic chaos, Barthelme brings his own astonishing brand of order to the world” (Antrim, 1975).

### 1. BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO WORD-PLAY

The definition of language-game was first given by Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1945, which actually refers to a kind of analogy drawn between language and play. He uses the term “language-game” to designate forms of language simpler than the entirety of a language itself. He calls it, in *Philosophical Investigations*, a “consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.7) and adds later that the concept is intended “to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life” (Ibid., p.23) The theory of language-game proposed by Wittgenstein defines the speech activity of human being as a kind of competition like football game, which is no more complex or important than other activities. This philosophical viewpoint based on linguistics has been advocated and promoted by critics and linguists from then on, especially the postmodern scholars.

Jean-Francois Lyotard, who utilizes word-play to frame all the fields of human activities, including science and social relation, expands word-play further by introducing

it into pragmatics. Viewing from the perspective of art criticism, his theory formally and thoroughly launches challenge to grand narrative, taking literary writing as a language game totally and at the same time taking word symbols as the focus of readers, divorced from the originally stressed explicit and clarified meaning and lost in the relating of words.

Jacques Derrida's development of the word-play intention on the basis of Ferdinand De Saussure's linguistic theory foregrounds the playfulness of literature, especially postmodern literature. According to Saussure, language may be analyzed as a formal system of differential elements, including linguistic sign. The sign is described as a "double entity", made up of the signifier, or sound image, (signifiant), and the signified, or concept (signifié). The sound image is a psychological, not a material concept. Both components of the linguistic sign are inseparable. One way to appreciate this is to consider them as being like either side of a piece of paper: one side simply cannot exist without the other. And also he insisted the basic principle of the arbitrariness of the sign (Saussure, 1999, p.67). When this language unit idea is met by Derrida, he begins to doubt the stability in each language unit. He explains that "[o]ne could no longer include différence in the concept of the sign, which always has meant the representation of a presence, and has been constituted in a system (thought or language) governed by and moving toward presence." (Derrida, 2001, p.212)

Lois Tyson summarizes Derrida's argument by two important characteristics of language: "(a) its play of signifiers continually defers, or postpones, meaning, and (b) the meaning it seems to have is the result of the differences by which we distinguish one signifier from another." (Tyson, 1999, p.253) The playfulness of language makes its meaning indefinite.

After the development, expansion, deconstruction and subversion step by step by so many contemporary philosophers, the Western modernist and postmodernist philosophy finally completes the so called new-Copernicus revolution, that is, the linguistic turn in literary criticism. This turning breaks through the language-centrism, invalidating thoroughly the human being speaking language which is the home of human existence as well as human being the center of language. In postmodernism context, it is no longer the case that language is controlled by human being, but that language controls human being; nor that "I am speaking", but "language speaks me".

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## 2. WORD-PLAY IN THE DEAD FATHER

If the above mentioned postmodern viewpoints of language are still based on philosophy, then language is rendered as the thing itself in the postmodern literary works, attracting ultimate attention from the postmodern writers, till it is taken as a free play. Word-play involves all the language structure, whose ultimate meaning is

either dispelled or marginalized, and consequently the characteristics of language in postmodern novels widely divergent from the ones in classics. Another sumptuous banquet of word-play has been offered in *The Dead Father*, which shows unintentionally that the word-play appearing frequently is used not as an aim but an approach to deconstruct the discourse and to challenge the traditional hierarchical structure and order. Donald Antrim comments that "in this book, the habitually practiced" word-play emerges from the beginning to the end, like "the lists and the slang terms; the miniature fables and the possibly-never-before-heard clichés; throwaway lines, invented words, and shaggy-dog stories-within-stories" (Antrim, 1975). In the present essay, the application of word-play in *The Dead Father* is demonstrated in the following three aspects: list, contradiction and direct speech used as narrative discourse.

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## 3. LIST

Brian McHale discusses the normally applied word-play strategies by postmodern writers in his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, which includes lexical exhibitionism, the catalogue and back-broke and invertebrate sentences (McHale, 1987, p.151). These three strategies can be grouped under the higher-level skill of list, from the perspectives of word, phrase and sentence, respectively. These three strategies perform spectacularly in *The Dead Father*.

### 3.1 Lexical Exhibitionism

According to Brian McHale, lexical exhibitionism "involves introducing words which are by their very nature highly conspicuous, self-foregrounding as it were: rare, pedantic, archaic, neologistic, technical, foreign words. Words, in short, which many readers will need to look up, and which they may not be able to find outside" (Ibid.) the text. It refers to insertion in the text of the words, like rare words, academic words, archaic words, newly coined words, technology words and foreign words, and so on and the insertion is aimed to arrest readers' eyes.

Solid evidences and ample examples of this skill can be found very easily throughout the text of *The Dead Father*, among which the most obvious and concentrated one locates in Chapter Twenty-two, a chapter full of new coined words which may never be heard before. Such like the word "AndI" or "EndI", and the former should be constructed by "And" and "I", the latter "End" and "I"; the word "Williturt" should be the abbreviation of "will it hurt"; "dampdream" is definitely the combination of "damp" and "dream". Obviously, all of these words are made either by causal pastiche or by word-formation, to the same effect that any of these newly coined words, or we can call Barthelme's words, cannot be found in any dictionary, which implies that they uniquely exist in this novel. Having been familiar with the works by Barthelme,

readers can find that Barthelme seems to focus on the new-word skill with great passion and in his works these evidences exist in abundance. Like in short story "Views of My Father Weeping", the word "Peccadillos" is coined firstly by Barthelme, taking the latter half part of "the collared peccary" and the former part of "the nine-banded srmadillo", but the meaning of the new born word is, just like a Sphinx, a riddle.

When reading these paragraphs or chapters constituted by all these never- appearing-words previously or elsewhere, readers are puzzled, because no one will be sure the accurate connotation or denotation of these new words, and consequently the horizon of expectation is toppled or destroyed ultimately. Hence no consistence of finding the textual meaning, let alone the deep meaning underlying there, and what left for their attention or what the viewers can choose is only to play with Barthelme.

### 3.2 Catalogue

The demonstration of the skill catalogue mainly focuses on the limited and random listing, the seemingly endless listing intending to show the limitless of the substances. It is a very significant part of list, and it seems that "[c]atalogues in postmodernist fiction... inevitably gravitate toward the word-list pole" (Ibid., p.153). Barthelme is particularly interested in this skill and its effect, and once he said straightforwardly "[catalogues] also provide stability in what is often a colatile environment" (McCaffery, 1997, pp.261-273). All his works which contain this splendidly employed skill serve as the expression of his interest, and *The Dead Father* is, absolutely, one of them.

In the first chapter, extremely raged by the rejection and humiliation of Julie, *Dead Father*. rushed out to slay at his own will and Barthelme lists here a list of the slayed victims, which swells to extreme:

First he slew a harpist and then a performer upon the serpent and also a banger upon the rattle and also a blower of Persian trumpet and one upon the Indian trumpet and one upon the Hebrew trumpet and one upon the Roman trumpet and one upon the Chinese trumpet of copper-covered wood...he slew four buzzers and a shawmist and one blower upon the water jar and a clavicytheriunist and ...a manipulator of the glided ball.  
Barthelme, 1975, p. 11)

Forty-three musicians or artists in total are listed here, involving musical instruments players from almost all countries all over the world and players performing almost all kinds of instruments from almost all nations. In the end the world "and so on" is attached, which implies that this list is actually limitless and can be extended to another page or chapter, according to the original intention of Barthelme.

In *The Dead Father*, the section of Father's Name has listed twenty-seven male names with the initial letter "A" at a stretch. Nevertheless, it seems that Barthelme does not satisfy himself to the full, because he complies another list of twenty-five names beginning with the letter B in an interval of several sections. The triviality of content and

lack of meaning make readers give up the endeavor to expect the text meaning and concomitantly pay attention only on the word display themselves.

Such a paragraph of words, without any fundamental meaning, just perform to fill the paper. Barthelme also acclaims that he is especially interested in the uncomfortable things. No wonder Paul Maltby comments significantly, "repertoire (namely catalogue) is one of Barthelme's favourite forms, which is applied ingeniously as a symptom of weakening of language power. In a catalogue the situation of each word encoded by their location does not possess any profound meaning, they just being there as any of the listed articles, impaired from their language power" (Maltby, 1991, p.62)

### 3.3 Back-Broke and Invertebrate Sentences

Barthelme not only plays with words but also with sentences. In *The Dead Father*, he utilizes back-broke and invertebrate sentences to delay the meaning. According to Brian McHale, back-broke and invertebrate sentence, being "a recurrent feature of postmodernist writing" (McHale, 1987, p.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 Chapter Seven. "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, 1975, p.50), because the meaning is always delayed, and the delayed meaning makes viewers aware of the sentence structure itself but not the meaning underneath it. Even the present audience in the novel are utterly confused about the exact meaning of this speech. After the "spectacular speech", Emma asks, "What does it mean?" (Ibid., p.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.

Another remarkable performance of back-broke and invertebrate sentences is put on the minute Alexander, a representative of the volunteers, began to doubt the purpose and legitimacy of this march. His question is unfolded as follows:

...we that is to say us the men have a faint intuition that maybe the best is not to come in terms of the grand Father the moon-hanger the eye-in-the-sky the old meister the bey window the bit chammer the gaekwarder the incaling the khando kid the neatzam the shotgun of kyotowing the principal stadhtholder the coivode the top wali, this Being, I say, being a Being of the highest anthropocentric interest, as well as the one who keeps the corn popping from the fine green fields and the like and the like ... (Ibid., p.92)

The man's words does not stop here, and in fact what quoted here is only half of his tediously "repeated questionings of the value of the party's undertaking" (Allen, 1975). The ultimate meaning has been delayed by this back-broke and invertebrate sentence to the last three words: "we are dubious", without which the truly dubious ones should be readers undoubtedly. It seems that the meaning of this piece 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, 1987, p.155) These sentences are so awkward that "it is the sentence-structure itself that fixes the attention, distracting us from whatever content" (McHale, 1987, p.154) they may carry.

The majority of the narration in *The Dead Father* strives to make itself succinct, with a brief phrase to begin almost every chapter in order to reach a simple, clear and compact tempo; however, what is inserted into this compact construction turns out to be his own word-play, with the apparent effect to deconstruct the previous text constructed by him. The strategy like lexical exhibitionism, catalogue or back-broke and invertebrate sentences embodies a sense of randomness which reflects the challenge to traditional discourse completely. Barthelme's play in literary creation is just like a player in a paradise of word-play wearing very solemn clothes. His challenge and dispel to the ultimate meaning and conventions have been combined together splendidly. This word-play strategy makes language pale, and by employing the meaning-absent words, the impotence and defect are implied. Thus, it leads readers to doubt the ultimate meaning that words embody.

#### 4. CONTRADICTION

Indeterminacy is an intrinsic feature of postmodern works, and what it reveals is not only the indeterminacy of the objective language reflects but also the indeterminacy of language itself. The indeterminacy leads to the lack of certain criteria for every sentence, which makes the latter sentence overthrow the former one frequently, and indeterminacy also causes the inevitable result that the action taken later is contradictory to the previous one, being the norm. All of these contribute to the self-effacement, which is beyond description or interpretation, and hard to be ascertained. Such intrinsic feature of postmodernist works gives rise to contradictory discourse

directly. David Lodge divides the characteristics of language in postmodern literature into six kinds, and a vital one of these six is contradiction (Lodge, 1997, p.229).

The traces of this characteristic can be found without any difficulty in *The Dead Father*, where the most obvious contradiction lies in the creation of the image of Dead Father. This novel, though displaying the full-scale rebellion from children to Father, is unfolded around Dead Father, and thus he can be taken as the central figure of the story. Dead Father performs very actively and positively in the novel, taking charge of the operation of the whole world, and controlling both the language and parole of his children, even their thought and ideology. The center of him, however, is not his heart, nor his head, nor his mind but his left leg, which is made of metal. Hence the question has dwelt in readers: what brings the death if it is made of iron or steel? Even though this query can be left unsolved, his half-dead and half-living situation still serves as an open challenge to his "Dead". Additionally, after reading the whole book, readers will find that the word "Dead", title for both the book and the protagonist, is not merely an adjective; rather, it can be taken as a verb, which means "to make someone die", and if so, there will be double levels of meaning underlying the name "Dead Father": the first one is "a father who has already died" and the second one is "a father who has been made dead". Taking this into consideration, with the patricide thought unveiled in "A Manual of Sons" taken into account, the second interpretation accords with the whole central thought embodied in the entire novel apparently contradictory.

Contradiction pervades this novel, in terms of both discourse and action of the characters, the inevitable corollary to which must be indeterminacy. This seems to be a writing style for the works by Barthelme, a shared conviction by critics and scholars. "For Barthelme, trying to steady the world into linguistic definition is like pinning down a butterfly using pins without points." (Johnson, 1979)

#### 5. DIRECT SPEECH USED AS NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

The narrative discourse is normally constituted by the direct speech of the dialogues between characters, the indirect speech by figures and the narration and description made by narrators. But in postmodernism novels, the direct speech frequently used as narrative discourse is a unique landscape, and this characteristic has been taken as one of the features of American postmodernist works, according to Yang (2003). *The Dead Father* can be an excellent example for this tendency.

Two features of narration in *The Dead Father* cannot elude the eyes of readers: the first one is the fact that the majority of the narration discourse is made up by

monologue, dialogue or conversation between several figures in the story, together with a modicum of voice-over; the second one should be the assertive lack of quotation marks all over the twenty-three chapters in the whole book. For example, the talk between Julie and Emma in Chapter Three is the most solid evidence for this feature.

Whose little girl are you?  
I get by, I get by.  
Time to go.  
Hoping this will reach you at a favorable moment.  
Bad things can happen to people.

...  
We nodded when our carriages passed.  
Out of here, out of here.  
Not today, not today.  
Pop one of these it will give you a little lift.  
Will it hurt?

(Barthelme, 1975, p.23)

A conversation lasts for almost four pages, and the disappearance of quotation marks signifies the intention of using direct speech as narrative discourse, and the whole book is thick with this particular trend. Undoubtedly, this offers a new skill for the word-play by postmodern writers and in *The Dead Father* it creates another spectacular performance, to challenge the conventions and to subvert the tradition.

Another instance is the conversation in the sixteenth chapter the instance everybody plans to engage into the dancing party before Julie pairs off with an ape.

Is everyone ready for the big dance?  
How can we have a dance with only two women?  
The women will just have to dance twice hard,

...  
Is that horseman still following us?  
Yes, still.  
You dance very well.  
Yes I do dance well. You dance pretty well.  
Thank you. It's kind of hard to dance with this leg.

(Barthelme, 1975, p.98)

The dialogue continues till it occupies more than three pages. This piece of narrative discourse composed by direct speech sounds very colloquial. The words put on the page without quotation marks or any hint for who are talking imply that the real protagonist here is not the speaker but the language.

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## CONCLUSION

Word-play launches an outright challenge to the traditional literary narration, and in the context of *The Dead Father*,

the narrative language has been deconstructed and subverted from the level of word, phrase, sentence and paragraph, respectively. By the application of word-play, Barthelme manages to divert the readers' attention from the development of the story to the narration itself, that is to say, the word-play leads readers from the novel to the text, by following Barthelme. As the comment goes, the fantasy and absurdity appropriately guide readers to pay attention to both the action of narration and the story itself (Yang, 2004, p.198).

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