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Subject:

A Study of Parody in John Barth's
Giles Goat-Boy and *Lost In the Funhouse*

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IN THE NAME OF GOD

Dedication

To my Mother and Father, The true beings in my life

And to my wife, for her love and support

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Abstract

John Barth is regarded as one of the most famous and appreciated authors of contemporary age which has an important effect on postmodern literature specifically through his unique views to literature and language. His essays “The literature of exhaustion” and “The literature of Replenishment” announce his belief in the ability of concerned and able writers to revitalize old forms and forge new ones. Parody, as one of the prevalent features of all ages of art, also plays a cardinal role in postmodern literature which is believed to question almost all the previous unquestioned notions concerning Language, meaning, reality and human subjects. Being Barth’s favorite device in reconsidering the great and rich works of the past through general awareness about history, Parody along with postmodernism uses and abuses, installs and subverts, the very concepts it challenges. Presenting a history of parody, this thesis discusses the origin of parody and its relation to other literary terms like Metafiction, Pastiche, Allusion, Irony and Satire. The thesis explores the gravitation towards parody in John Barth’s great novels *Giles Goat-Boy* and *Lost in the Funhouse*, through which John Barth’s skill of mythology and classical literature can be revealed as well as his interest in exploiting new methods to present and revive fiction. This thesis focuses on the role of parody in this revitalization and invites the readers to approach these contemporary novels through parody.

Key Words: John Barth – Postmodernism - Parody – Exhaustion - Mythology

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 General Overview

"Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story."
– (Barth, *End of the Road* 88)

John Simmons Barth was born on May 27, 1930. His parents were John Jacob Barth and Georgia Simmons. He spent his childhood in Maryland in Cambridge. Music, particularly Jazz, was the first thing which he found his interest in. After his graduation from high school, he went to the Julliard School of Music and began to learn the theories of music. Although his first inclination was to study music, he went to Johns Hopkins University due to his financial problems. In spite of his only one term study at Julliard School of Music, his whole life and literary works was significantly affected by his study of music there. Barth changed his way towards writing at Johns Hopkins University and began studying journalism. In 1951 he graduated in creative writing and obtained his

M.A in 1952. He married Harriette Anne Strickland on January 11, 1950. After one year of doctoral study at Johns Hopkins University, he was forced to search for a better job to support his family. When he went to Penn State University, he was very surprised to know that all fields of study have similar importance. It was that large campus which he used as a metaphor for society in his great book *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966).

Despite his priorities, he was promoted to assistant professor in 1957 and associate professor in 1960. At Penn State University, Barth wrote four of his great novels. The first one was *The Floating Opera* (1956), which was written in a short period. Barth started writing his existentialist novel, *The End of the Road* (1958), which took him two years to finish. In 1960, he finished *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), one of his best novels, and began his fourth great novel, *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966). *Giles Goat-Boy* was so difficult that he faced difficulties in managing it and could not organize the book on key-sort cards.

It took six years for Barth to finish *Giles Goat-Boy*, his most difficult novel. The book became a *New York Times* best-seller. The novel consists of many characteristics of the University Park Campus, like a department called Founders Hall that was as Old Main. The university is depicted as a universe in the book, exactly in such a way that it was in the eyes of the students and faculty at Penn State University. The main character, Giles, is half-human, half-goat. It is most likely that Barth has acquired the idea of the novel from the sheep farm in the agricultural department of Penn State University.

In 1965, Barth achieved the professorship of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo and then left Penn State University. Four years later, his marital life underwent a failure and the couple got divorced. For the second time, on December 1970,

Barth married a girl called Shelly Rosenberg, whom he first met at Penn State University. After his two previous nominations for *The Floating Opera* and *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Barth won the National Book Award for his novel *Chimera* (1972). He became one of the most well-known Post-Vietnam-War writers and won many awards and grants.

His achievements show his skill and talent in both writing and influencing his readers. He is known to portray rather realistic things through a fantastical perspective that attract the reader. Although many critics look at Barth as an outstanding author due to his postmodern aesthetic and his philosophical views, his most important interest is to write compelling stories and making himself lost in his writings.

The field of comparative mythology, much of which is grounded in Joseph Campbell's works, was the basic idea for *Giles Goat-Boy*. John Barth spent many years of his life lost in mythology, a field that had captured his interest while working in libraries at Johns Hopkins as an undergraduate. Creation of George Giles' character took its basis from the notion of an archetypical hero. In order to search his quest, like many other mythological heroes, Giles must descend into an underworld, conquer his fears, and attain the immortality. The plot happens within the University. It could be supposed that the novel is a pioneer for *The Matrix*: a computer controls the university, determining who will pass or fail.

Lost in the Funhouse, one of Barth's popular books and first endeavors in the genre of short story, is often considered as a demonstration of Barth's claim that postmodern writers need to regenerate fiction by productively acknowledging its thematic and formal used-upness. An ordered, related arrangement of stories, the book exactly

refers to John Barth's interest in exploiting new methods to present and revive fiction—some of the stories were meant to be heard as tape recordings, or as performances containing both taped portions and live readings. More than showing John Barth's knowledge of media innovations and contemporary fiction, *Lost in the Funhouse* reveals his skill of mythology and classical literature.

Lost in the Funhouse consists of fourteen short pieces. The first, "Frame-Tale" contains only the words, "Once upon a time there / was a story that began" printed along the long edge of the page; instructions lead the reader to construct a Mobius strip out of the ten words. The resulting loop, in which the words turn back upon themselves infinitely, with no certain start/end points, is a symbol of the way characters, themes, images, and phrases are presented throughout *Lost in the Funhouse*. For instance, "Night-Sea Journey", a mock-heroic epic, is told from the viewpoint of a sperm on the way to a mysterious "Shore" or egg (*Lost in the Funhouse* 6); it seems that this egg will develop into Ambrose, the protagonist of many later stories, including "Ambrose His Mark", the third story of the book which recounts the period during which his family could not find an agreement about his name.

The fourth story, "Autobiography," is a tape-recorded story in which the protagonist criticizes his parents and laments his undesirable existence, like that of Oedipus. Stressing the relationship between writer, text, and reader, the story relates its endeavors to nullify the creative process, even asking the reader to turn off the tape recorder or stop reading the page, thereby ending its existence. Ambrose comes again in "Water-Message," which describes his school time's fears, his sexual puberty, his lack of

knowledge about sexual act, and the social leverage he derives from refusing to open the contents of a message he finds floating in a river.

The sixth story, "Petition," is a letter written to the King of Thailand by a pair of Siamese twins, who asks "His Most Gracious Majesty" to separate him from his brother (*Lost in the Funhouse* 49). The title story, which is repeatedly considered as a parody of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), depicts Ambrose on a trip to a seaside amusement park where he finishes competing with his brother for Magda. Barth uses an omniscient third-person narrator who comments on the development of the plot. "Lost in the Funhouse" relates the teenage Ambrose's attempts to engage in a sexual relationship with Magda. Engaged by self-conscious thoughts, he remains confused in his capability to enjoy a sexual encounter and become separated from Magda, eventually loses his way in the funhouse.

Like Barth's eighth story, "Autobiography," "Echo" was written to be recorded and played back. This piece is about to refer to the voice of the mythological figure Echo. No longer able to speak on her own, she repeats stories told by Tiresias and Narcissus, but the reader/listener cannot determine whether Echo is rehearsing the original stories, using their words to express her own feelings, or being manipulated by Barth to reach his own ends. "Two Meditations", a two-paragraph story, bringing into mind the Oedipus' story, suggest how secret sins can cause violence.

The narrator of John Barth's tenth story, "Title," rejects several false starts before encouraging readers to participate in his narrative. In "Glossolalia", another brief part, each of six figures speaks only one single paragraph. Although the voices are diverse—

mythological, biblical, and anthropomorphic—the paragraphs are metrically identical and share the same structure. “Life Story” is narrated by another writer who depicts his inability of producing new fiction in the late twentieth century, lamenting that he can offer only “another story about a writer writing a story” (*Lost in the Funhouse* 70). In “Menelaiad” the Greek hero Menelaus recounts his life history, focusing in particular on his relationship with Helen of Troy. Describing his tale—which has been compared in structure to a set of Chinese boxes—Menelaus distinguishes past conversations from his present account by employing multiple sets of quotation marks. “Anonymiad”, the final part, relates the tale of a minstrel marooned on an island. In his isolation, the minstrel writes stories inventing and revising narrative forms—forms employed in *Lost in the Funhouse*—until he believes he has exhausted all possibilities. However, the arrival of a message in a bottle renews his faith that others may also need to communicate: the world “might be astrew with islèd souls,” creating a sea “a-clink with literature!” (*Lost in the Funhouse* 114).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

John Barth is regarded as one of the most famous and appreciated postmodern authors. His unique views to literature and language, and the emergence of his ideas in each and every novel of him have made him a pioneer author of postmodern fiction.

The subject of this research is the way he exploits parody in his novels as the perfect literary works of postmodern fiction. Parody as one of the complicated figures in literature of all ages can be viewed and interpreted from very partial details of the novels

to the most important themes. Parody can be employed implicitly or explicitly, because of its ability to be in deep layers of the fiction.

Here, two great novels of John Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy* and *Lost in the Funhouse* are going to be studied in detail in order to reach through the parodical layers of the novel to perceive the ultimate meanings and themes.

In reading his novels through this perspective, these questions are raised to be answered:

- What are the definitions and importance of parody since seventeenth century up to now? And how it has been exploited in postmodern texts?
- What is the purpose of John Barth in using parody in *Giles Goat-Boy* and *Lost in the Funhouse*? Are they considered destructive or constructive parody?
- What is the relationship between Irony and Parody in the works of John Barth and how does he use them in order to make a postmodern comedy?
- Are there any traits of satire in the background of Parody? How these two devices bring together by John Barth in *Giles Goat-Boy* and *Lost in the Funhouse*?
- Are the novels self-parody of their own limitations or self-conscious of their own construction? And Does John Barth parody the traditional structure of realism through self-reflexive and metafictional texts?
- What do the postmodern writers like John Barth intend to parody the grand style and narration of myths? Also how and through which techniques John Barth achieve this goal?
- How characters, in a parodic perspective, are illustrated in *Giles Goat-Boy*? And what is the fate of self in the novel?

Answering the above questions will be supportive to the fact that the system at the background of John Barth's fiction is Parody. The subject of this study is the way he uses one of the crucial elements of postmodernism, parody, in his fiction.

1.3 Significance of the Problem

The appearance of postmodernism challenges and subverts many ideologies and conventions that have been long respected and practiced by the western world. It did not necessarily replace itself to give rise to another school of thought, but it only proposes questions that shakes the standards and norms of the social and cultural order. Despite other literary, economic, and social schools that always take one determined side for their arguments, postmodernism learned to take no side with any special group. It is because it does not believe in ideologies or absolutes. Others take side with one single principle and restrict themselves to the practice and could never consider the *what if* question. Postmodernism appears with many unanswered questions and never approves nor rejects any philosophy.

In literature the same attitude gives grounds to fiction writers to look at the world with doubt, hesitation, and uncertainty. Writer's presentation of real take different narration schemes that read confusingly and at the same time surprisingly. The core of meaning is not a center but a process that one is forced to arrive at. In fact the road to truth seems so difficult to comprehend that it become deceptive and hallucinatory. Writers like John Barth take this view and add some of their own philosophical outlooks and also their fiction writing skills.

The postmodern move toward meaning through literature can be approached intertextually, which refers to any discourse as text, the essential part of any concept, ideology, thought, and also the material in the universe. This text has no origin and keeps its existence through textualization. In literature, writers use these bodies of texts in their fiction whose source is undecided and indistinct. If the origin of any text is ambiguous, then how meaning can be reached? How can text be used for all purposes and create communication through itself?

In this research, John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* and *Lost in the Funhouse* will be studied to illustrate that language itself is a barrier, and meaning is not our logical interpretation of life. Barth's nihilistic views have led him to design his fiction as ambiguously. Meaning to Barth is ambiguous and cannot be reached, and this view gives enough reason for an intertextual study of his fiction. He has also believed that meaning is lost because what the author intends does not convey itself exactly in the reader's mind, thus the role of the author is reduced and the reader is invited to create meaning. Besides the reader's interaction in this way, the text is activated and can make its own meaning.

Different faces of intertextuality are parody, authoriality, Chinese boxes, Mobius strip and so forth. All these devices attempt to show the plays of text and how reality and meaning becomes subject of change. This research insists that texts have no origin, thus their meaning is fulfilled from other presupposed meanings. As a result, these intertexts disrupt the truth and fail to communicate their idea. Reality, based on this sort of meaning, can only be an allusion of truth. To John Barth, reality does not exist through our perception since what we perceive as reality is only the intertext of other intertexts.

This is the reason that John Barth has chosen the words *lost* and *funhouse*. We are always in our funhouse since no clear path is shown to us.

Parody, as the most important type of intertextuality, has a long antiquity in the literature of 17th century up to our time. It became one of the most important elements of postmodernism since it challenges originality and validity. Parody contradicts many things as it wants to represent the past, making the theme and plot very flexible. In fact, the very same representation foregrounds the historical “discontinuity” as Linda Hutcheon denotes and breaks the context of the plot, and shows the reader the multiplicity of meaning (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 87).

The purpose of this study is to examine John Barth’s fiction from the perspective of parody. Parody is one of the main aspects of modern intertextuality and also considered as one of the central elements of postmodernism. Parody can be an influential element in postmodern texts, twisting its structure and plot time. It is clearly seen that it functions as a form of text play and intertextuality, combined with different texts as Barth has used, from any text in one genre to any other text in another non-literary genre. It is never clear from what source and in what way it derives from, but the result is to create something new.

1.4 Delimitation

Much has been written about postmodern writers; some of them have concerned themselves about the works of John Barth, but none of them has undertaken the special study of Parody in his works. However, there are some illuminating references here and

there dispersed within such works which show the way to study a postmodernist novelist as John Barth.

John Barth is one of the outstanding authors of contemporary age which has an important effect on the postmodern literature specifically through his view on the exhaustion of literature. There are many books, articles and theses on his fiction, and his ideas about fiction that shows his great influence. There are some theses about his fiction which are in different subjects such as Barth's philosophical ideas, and his absurd and existential views, the narration of his novels, the text and play of the text in his novels, his labyrinths, and the artificial elements in his fiction, satire and many other subjects, but there is no specific study of parody in his novels, and his view about the very same device. This study is going to discuss about this important element which is one of the basic elements of John Barth's fiction in the background of his novels.

Parody is one of the old devices which have been used by many artists until now; its generality in all arts and its antiquity made it as a necessary element to discuss about.

1.5 Approach and Methodology

The framework that this study applies in order to analyze the two novels of John Barth, is according to the characteristics that parody offers. Since parody became more popular in postmodern age, it is helpful to have a review of postmodernism prior to parody.

Postmodernism is a difficult concept to define and the controversial definitions provided for it proves this. Some theorists depict postmodernism as a movement which