Postmodern Structures in
Lost in the Funhouse by John Barth

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Written in 1968 and set during the World War II, on the surface, *Lost in the Funhouse* is the story of a thirteen-year-old boy's trip to the beach with his family on the fourth of July. With Ambrose are his older brother Peter, their mother and father, their Uncle Karl, and a fourteenyear-old neighbor girl, Magda, to whom both Ambrose and Peter are attracted. Having learned that they can not go to the beach, the group decides to go through the funhouse instead. Both boys fantasize about going through the maze with Magda, but it suddenly becomes clear to Ambrose that he has misunderstood the meaning of the funhouse which is associated with sexuality and for which he is not ready yet. He also realizes that he is different from his bother and Magda: he is not the type of person for whom funhouses are fun. Confused and separated from the others, Ambrose takes a wrong turn and loses his way. During the process of finding his way out of the dark corridors, he comes to some realizations about himself and about funhouses.

The story starts with the question "For whom is the funhouse fun?", and answers itself; "Perhaps for lovers."[1] However it adds; "For Ambrose it is a place of fear and confusion."[2] Choosing a place like a funhouse for the story and making a start like that gives us the idea that there is something exceptional about this funhouse and in the following paragraphs we will be introduced with the information why it is "fear and confusion" for Ambrose. The day the family chose for the trip is The 4th of July, Independence Day, symbolizing the transformation of our hero into an adult leaving his childhood back. However, because of the style used by Barth, it is impossible to wait for a usual initiation kind of story.

Writing in the second half of the 20th century, Barth is a postmodern author. Although he is usually praised for his usage of the techniques of postmodernist writing

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1. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice. (LF)*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), p.69.
2. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.69.

successfully, his works are sometimes blamed of being too much "self-conscious, self-indulgent, and selfreferential almost to the exclusion of any "realistic," external, or "objective" content" or being "fake and immoral because they depict life as absurd."[3] The reason for these attacks may be because of Barth's own words that claim "the possibilities of fiction [has] already been used up and that nothing [is] left for writers but to lapse into self-conscious parody."[4] The purpose for Barth with his complex writing style and stories within stories is to "disturb us metaphysically: When the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they're in, we're reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence."[5] Like Roland Barthes who believes in the death of the author and claims "to give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing,"[6] for Barth the process of writing is a collaborative work between the writer, readers and even the characters of the work itself and "the text… asks of the reader a practical collaboration."[7] With this purpose, he employs techniques such as intertextuality and self-referentiality and makes use of a rich symbolism which helps him to create endless possible meanings as expected from a postmodernist text.

Intertextuality, which is a widely used postmodern technique, can be defined as "reference to previous texts."[8] Discussed by critics such as Kristeva and Barthes, the technique reaches its most radical point with Derrida who claims that the whole world is (inter-)text and that there is no "reality" outside "textuality."[9] As Bakhtin puts it; "only the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation."[10] Thus no one has the chance of producing something fully original. To imply this one and only text and to point at the unavoidable relations between all texts, Barth refers to some nineteenth-century fiction and their common features such as using blanks or giving proper names to create the impact of reality, to *The 42nd Parallel* by John Dos Passos to describe the train journeys and to *Ulysses* by James Joyce to describe the sea while the family is approaching Ocean City:

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3. James Kurtzleben, *Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English,* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000), p.49.
4. James Kurtzleben, *Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English,* p.49.
5. James Kurtzleben, *Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English,* p.52.
6. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text,* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), p.117.
7. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text,* p.117.
8. Hans Bertens, *International Postmodernism,* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997), p.249.
9. Hans Bertens, *International Postmodernism,* p.251.
10. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.279.

"Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality."[11]

"When Ambrose and Peter's father was their age, the excursion was made by train, as mentioned in the novel *The 42nd Parallel* by John Dos Passos."[12]

"The Irish author James Joyce, in his unusual novel entitled *Ulysses*, now avaible in this country, uses the adjectives *snot-green* and *scrotum-tightening* to describe the sea."[13]

By using these references, Barth informs us that his usage of language, these expressions are no longer original but have been used before. What makes the author original in postmodern period is to have a style of his own rather than talking about something original. Barth's words prove his adopting the approach since he states "If narrative originality is impossible, if [the author] accepts his fate as parodic translator and annotator of pre-existing archetypes, what can still be original is the unique source of the voice, the authorial instrument that shapes the retelling."[14]

As well as being intertextual, *Lost in the Funhouse* is a highly self-referential work which means the author, readers, characters and even the text itself are all conscious about the text being written. From the very beginning of the story, by giving us information especially about writing a story, Barth makes us feel this process:

"Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction."[15]

"The function of the *beginning* of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action, expose the background of the situation if necessary, plant motifs and foreshadowings where appropriate, and initiate the first complication or whatever of the "rising action." Actually, if one imagines a story called "The Funhouse," or "Lost in the Funhouse," the details of the drive to Ocean City don't seem especially relevant. The beginning should recount the events between Ambrose's first sight of the funhouse early in the afternoon and his entering in it with Magda and Peter in the evening. The *middle* would narrate all relevant eventsfrom the time he goes in to the time he loses his way; middles have the double and contradictory function of delaying the climax while at the same time preparing the reader for it and fetching him to it. Then the *ending* would tell what Ambrose does while he's lost, how he finally finds his way out, and what everybody makes of the experince. So far there's been no real dialogue, very little

11. John Barth, Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice. (LF), (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), p.69.
12. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* Tape, Live Voice. (LF), p.70.
13. John. Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* Tape, Live Voice. (LF), p.71.
14. Gerhard Joseph, John Barth–*American Writers 91: University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers* No. 91, (University of Minnesota Press, 1970), pp.47.
15. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* Tape, Live Voice. (LF), p.70.

sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a *theme*. And a long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person wonder. We haven't even reached Ocean City yet: we will never get out of the funhouse."[16]

Besides mentioning the production process of a story, Barth exposes his further plans about this story. However, he becomes a bit nervous in the following paragraphs telling that "at this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever. Narrative ordinarily consists of alternating dramatization and summarization."[17] The reason of the author's hurry is that like Ambrose, with whom he also shares the special gift of storytelling, he is lost in the mazes of language. Thus, the story which has followed an order so far, turns into a funhouse itself. Barth can not find his way out of the story; at the same time he desperately asks "what is the story's theme?"[18] or entertains himself with possible literary symbols by saying; "The diving make a suitable literary symbol."[19]

While Barth seeks his way together with Ambrose, we are given the information that Ambrose's location is a secret for everybody, "even the designer and operator have forgotten this other part."[20] By talking about the operator for the first time and mentioning his loss of control over the world he himself created, Barth emphasizes the death of the author one more time and the experince of the text "only in an activity of production."[21]

Unable to find the way out, Barth writes possible endings for his story or makes Ambrose, who "has some sort of receivers in his head; things speak to him, he understands more than he should, the world winks at him through its objects, grabs grinning at his coat,"[22] think about possible endings while he loses arrows and other signs through the dark corridors of the funhouse:

> "One possible ending would be to have Ambrosecome across another lost person in the dark. They'd match their wits together against the funhouse, struggle like Ulysses past obstacle after obstacle, help and encourage each other. Or a girl. By the time they found the exit they'd be closest friends, sweethearts if it were a girl: they'd know each other's inmost souls, be bound together *by*

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16. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* Tape, Live Voice. (LF), p.73
17. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* Tape, Live Voice. (LF), p.75.
18. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* Tape, Live Voice. (LF), p.75.
19. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* Tape, Live Voice. (LF), p.79.
20. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* Tape, Live Voice. (LF), p.80.
21. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text,* pp.167.
22. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, Tape, Live Voice. (LF), p.84.

the cement of shared adventure; then they'd emerge into the light and it would turn out that his friend was a Negro. A blind girl.[23]

Barth speculates about the ending of the story while Ambrose is conscious of what he is "experiencing"[24] and noticing "there was some simple, radical difference about him;" hoping "it was genius"and fearing "it was madness"[25] and difference can be interpreted in parallel to the awareness of Barth himself about the world around.

In addition to postmodern techiques like intertextuality and self-referentiality, Barth's work is rich with symbols which one can make use of many ways. The dominant symbol of the story is the funhouse itself. It is multifunctional, it is a literary symbol representing;

1. "the chaos and complexity of human experience" In the postmodern world, life is like a funhouse which does not make sense anymore.

2. "the rite of passage into adulthood"

"Everyone begins in the same place; how is it that most go along without difficulty but a few lose their way?"[26]

3. "the mysteries of sex and of the female anatomy"

"Spermatozoa … grope through hot, dark windings, past Love's Tunnel's fearsome obstacles. Some perhaps lose their way."[27]

4. "the comic, nonlinear, and labyrinthine structure of the narrative"

The plot of the story "doesn't rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires."[28]

"It is in fact impossible to determine what has actually occurred: a thirteen-year old Ambrose may be on his way to the funhouse (or on his way back), or he may have lost his way in the funhouse where he lingers yet, or he may be an adult (married with children) looking back at his youthful experience, or he may have died, and so on. Like Ambrose, the reader is made to wander in a (textual) funhouse, and the story thus performs the very disorientation that is its subject matter."[29]

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23. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.83.
24. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.81.
25. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.82.
26. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.85.
27. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.83.
28. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.92.
29. James Kurtzleben, Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English, (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000), pp.51.

As well as the funhouse, mirrors are significant symbols that represent the fragmanted world of Ambrose. Being so much self-conscious, Ambrose can not experience the outside world as others do or he can not just focus on the moment but his mind travels back and forth evaluating endless possibilities forever which makes him feel "an odd detachment, as though some one else were Master."[30]

Looking at the mirrors, although Ambrose sees many Ambroses reflecting upon each other, he can not find his real self and this makes impossible for him to find the way out. As Derrida puts forth "the absence of a center is here the absence of a subject and the absence of an author."[31] The reduced roles of both the author and the text in the postmodern world and the necessity of the contribution of the readers point at the fragmentation of the meaning that was once absolute. That means; today the text has no fixed, nailed down meaning which is served ready to its readers anymore. Each reader is active while reading and each add something new to the meaning of the text which will never be complete as long as it is read. Like the fragmanted text, Ambrose can not define himself:

> "You think you're yourself, but there are other persons in you. Ambrose gets hard when Ambrose doesn't want to, *and obversely*. Ambrose watches them disagree; Ambrose watches him watch. In the funhouse mirror-room you can't se yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way. Even if you had a glass periscope, the image of your eye would cover up the thing you really wanted to see."[32]

Ambrose's world and reality are so much in pieces that even Barth himself is not sure whether Ambrose is a real person or just an imagination of his own mind and asks ironically, "are there other errors of fact in this fiction?"[33] His purpose is certainly to create the effect of uncertainity on the readers to underline a characteristic of the postmodern era. His emphasize becomes stronger when he clearly states "nothing was what it looked like."[34] Human experience is without limits and everybody is conscious of their own reality:

> "Every instant, under the surface of the Atlantic Ocean, millions of living animals devoured one another. Pilots were falling in flames over Europe; women were being forcibly raped in the South Pacific."[35]

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30. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, p.81.
31. Jacques Derrida, "*Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*," [translated and published by A. Bass] Writing and Difference, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p.280.
32. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* pp.81.
33. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* pp.86.
34. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* pp.87.
35. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* pp.87.

That is why everbody claims his own right and the reality of each person intersects with each other creating the web-like structure introduced by Derrida with innumerable meanings in it. At this point, Barth addresses Ambrose and for the first time he mentions what they share through the words of Ambrose's father:

> "You and I are different. Not surprisingly, you've often wished you weren't. Don't think I haven't noticed how unhappy your childhood has been! But you'll understand, when I tell you, why it had to be kept secret until now. And you won't regret... *On the contrary*! If you knew all the stories behind all the people on the boardwalk, you'd see that *nothing* was what it looked like. Husbands and wives often hated each other; parents didn't necessarily love their children; et cetera. A child took things for granted because he had nothing to chis life to and everybody acted as if things were as they should be. Therefore each saw himself as the hero of the story, when the truth might turn out to be that he's the villain, or the coward. And there wasn't one thing you could do about it!"[36]

Leaving the fragmented world of Ambrose aside, Barth turns back to intertextuality and places diagrams in his stroy that refer to the diagrams known as Freitag's Triangles to represent the process of writing by showing the exposition, conflicts, development, climax and resolution of a story on them. Barth says; "this can't go on much longer; it can go on forever"[37] meaning storytelling. For him storytelling can be deconstructed but telling stories, no matter what their structures are, is his fate and duty in order to give a meaning to the meaninglessness of life as it is the fate and duty of Ambrose who may be forgotten and may be found dead in the funhouse:

> "He died of starvation telling stories to himself in the dark; but unbeknownst unbeknownst to him, an assistant operator of the funhouse, happening to overhear him, crouched just behind the plyboard partition and wrote down his every word."[38]

Every word of him being written, like Barth, Ambrose is now a stroyteller as well, an assistant of the Secret Operator who stands for God himself, and helping him to create the world by words. Moreover, he dreams of designing a funhouse himself and be the operator of it in which nobody would get lost; which means he wants to reconstruct the universe as an author to give it the order it lost a long time ago back. In this funhouse, it was the duty of the operator "to balance things out; if anyone seemed lost or frightened."[39]

At the end of the story, Ambrose seems not only accepting his lifelong entrapment within his own mind and language but also he calls the author of this story to finish it in a rational way since he has no turning back now after gaining consciousness:

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36. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.88.
37. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.92.
38. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.92.
39. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.93.

"He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. The he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator-though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed."[40]

The only way left for Ambrose is to accept his fate and create worlds for others even if he knows that they are not true like the secret operator of the funhouse who knows the tricks and lies of the funhouse but whose job is to hide them in order to make others happy.

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40. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* p.94.