An Offprint from

Short Stories for Students

Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Short Stories

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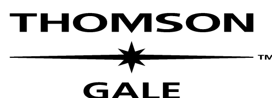

Short Stories for Students

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
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Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of *Short Stories for Students* (*SSfS*) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying short stories by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's ''For Students'' Literature line, *SSfS* is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific short fiction. While each volume contains entries on ''classic'' stories frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary stories, including works by multicultural, international, and women writers.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the story and the story's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in the work; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the narrative as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the story; analysis of important themes in the story; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the work.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the story itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the story was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the story or author. A unique feature of *SSfS* is a specially commissioned critical essay on each story, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each story, information on media adaptations is provided (if available), as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the work.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of *SSfS* were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed include: literature anthologies, *Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges*; *Teaching the Short Story: A Guide to Using Stories from around the World*, by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE); and ''A Study of High School Literature Anthologies,'' conducted by Arthur Applebee at the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature and sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of ''classic'' stories (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary stories for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. Works not selected for the present volume were noted as possibilities for future volumes. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in *SSfS* focuses on one story. Each entry heading lists the title of the story, the author's name, and the date of the story's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the story which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that may have inspired the story in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a description of the events in the story. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of the characters who appear in the story. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the story, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation.

  Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in ''The Eatonville Anthology''—the character is listed as ''The Narrator'' and alphabetized as ''Narrator.'' If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name.
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the story. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the story, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** this section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate *in which the author lived and the work was created.* This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the story is historical in nature, information regarding the time in which the story is set is also included. Long sections are broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the author and the story, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section may include a history of how the story was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent works, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by *SSfS* which specifically deals with the story and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).
- **Sources:** an alphabetical list of critical material used in compiling the entry, with bibliographical information.
- **Further Reading:** an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. It includes bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- **Media Adaptations:** if available, a list of film and television adaptations of the story, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.

- **Topics for Further Study:** a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the story. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- **Compare and Contrast:** an ''at-a-glance'' comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century or early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the story was written, the time or place the story was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- **What Do I Read Next?:** a list of works that might complement the featured story or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes ''Why Study Literature At All?,'' a foreword by Thomas E. Barden, Professor of English and Director of Graduate English Studies at the University of Toledo. This essay provides a number of very fundamental reasons for studying literature and, therefore, reasons why a book such as *SSfS*, designed to facilitate the study of literture, is useful.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the *SSfS* series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the *SSfS* series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in **boldface**.

Each entry may include illustrations, including photo of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of *SSfS* may use the following general forms to document their source. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, thus, the following examples may be adapted as needed.

When citing text from *SSfS* that is not attributed to a particular author (for example, the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format may be used:

> ''The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calavaras County.'' *Short Stories for Students*. Ed. Kathleen Wilson. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 19–20.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from *SSfS* (usually the first essay under the Criticism subhead), the following format may be used:

> Korb, Rena. Critical essay on ''Children of the Sea.'' *Short Stories for Students*. Ed. Kathleen Wilson. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 42.

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> Schmidt, Paul. ''The Deadpan on Simon Wheeler.'' *Southwest Review* Vol. XLI, No. 3 (Summer, 1956), 270–77; excerpted and reprinted in *Short Stories for Students*, Vol. 1, ed. Kathleen Wilson. (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 29–31.

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> Bell-Villada, Gene H. ''The Master of Short Forms,'' in *Garcia Marquez: The Man and His Work*. University of North Carolina Press, 1990 pp. 119–300; excerpted and reprinted in *Short Stories for Students*, Vol. 1, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 89–90.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of *Short Stories for Students* welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest short stories to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via E-mail at: **ForStudentsEditors@gale.com.** Or write to the editor at:

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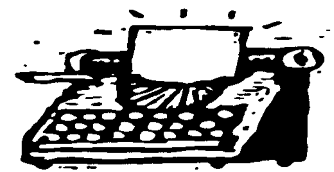
Lost in the Funhouse

John Barth

1967

The first thing John Barth asks the reader to do when opening the cover of the book that contains his story ‘‘Lost in the Funhouse’’ is cut out a little strip of paper on which the words ‘‘Once upon a time’’ appear on one side and ‘‘There was a story that began’’ on the other. If the reader follows Barth’s directions for connecting the opposite corners to each other, he will have made a Moebius strip, a continuous loop about stories about stories, a visual demonstration of the theory behind the stories in the collection.

The title story is the centerpiece of the book. First published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1967, ‘‘Lost in the Funhouse’’ has become not just one of Barth’s most famous pieces, but one of the most critically acclaimed short stories of the latter half of the twentieth century. While some readers are baffled or put-off by Barth’s interrupting and self-conscious narrator, others have been dazzled by his virtuosity and humor. Most agree, however, that he succeeds in his declared intent to present old material in new ways. In the words of critic Charles Harris, ‘‘Barth’s fiction reflects the grim if often comic—at times noble—determination to find new ways to express the old (which is to say *fundamental, essential*) significances.’’



Author Biography

John Simmons Barth was born on May, 27, 1930, to John Jacob and Georgia Barth in Cambridge, Maryland. After graduating from public high school in 1947, he enrolled in the prestigious Julliard School of music with dreams of becoming an arranger, or orchestrator. He soon shifted his interest, however, and enrolled in Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and began his lifelong involvement with literature and writing. By the time he had received his B.A. from Johns Hopkins in 1951, he was married and the father of a daughter.

Barth continued at Johns Hopkins and received his M.A. in creative writing in 1952. After the birth of his second child, he was forced for financial reasons to discontinue his doctoral work and accept a teaching position at Pennsylvania State University. After his first novel, *The Floating Opera,* was nominated for the National Book Award, he was promoted to the rank of assistant professor. Three novels later, in 1960, he was promoted to associate professor. He moved to Buffalo to become professor of English at the State University of New York in 1965, was divorced in 1969, and remarried in 1970. Finally, in 1973, Barth returned to his Maryland roots and became a professor of English and creative writing at Johns Hopkins. In 1990 he retired with the rank of Professor Emeritus, but has remained an active and productive writer. His latest novel, *The Tidewater Tales,* was published in 1997.

Three aspects of Barth's life have shaped and colored his remarkable literary career. The first is his early and sustained interest in music. Although he discontinued his formal study at Julliard, Barth has remained fascinated with playing the role of the arranger in his fiction. The second aspect of his life reflected in his work is the landscape and history of his native Maryland where he has lived for nearly all of his life and where much of his fiction is set. Finally, Barth's work is also informed by his long career in academia, where he was immersed in the influence of literary criticism and theory.

Plot Summary

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 during World War II. With Ambrose are his older brother Peter, their mother and father, their Uncle Karl, and a fourteen-year-old neighbor girl, Magda, to whom both Ambrose and Peter are attracted. Having learned that the beach is covered in oil and tar from the fleet off-shore, 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, has failed to see ''that to get through expeditiously was not the point.'' He realizes that he is too young to understand or engage in the sexual play associated with the funhouse's dark corners. More profoundly, however, he also realizes that he is constitutionally 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 and back hallways, he comes to some realizations about himself and about funhouses. Specifically, he understands that his crippling self-consciousness also comes with a gift, an extraordinary imagination. Recognizing that the artistic life brings alienation as well as satisfaction he resolves to ''construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are constructed.''

Ambrose's ill-fated visit to the funhouse, however, is only part of the story. A third person omniscient narrator, sometimes identified with Ambrose or with the author himself, constantly interrupts the story of Ambrose and his family's visit to the beach to comment on the story's own construction and to call the reader's attention to the way literary devices make meaning. The story itself becomes a funhouse of language through which the reader must find his or her way, but the narrative intrusions also point out what's real and what's reflection—or more accurately, that everything is a reflection—and how the hidden levers work behind the scenes.

Characters

Ambrose

Ambrose is the main character in the story and serves as the author's alter ego, or other self. At thirteen, he is ''at that awkward age,'' and in addition to the usual adolescent gawkiness, he is

exceptionally introspective and self-conscious. Ambrose is not only just becoming aware of his sexuality, he is experiencing the first inklings of his artistic temperament. In the narrator's words, ''There was some simple, radical difference about him; he hoped it was genius, feared it was madness, devoted himself to amiability and inconspicuousness.''

Father

That Ambrose's father wears glasses and is a principal at a grade school is essentially all the description the story provides. Later in the story, the narrator describes the boys' father as ''tall and thin, balding, fair-complexioned.'' At times he betrays a disgruntled nostalgia for the old days.

Fat May

Not technically a character, Fat May the Laughing Lady is a mechanical sign at the entrance to the funhouse whose laughter and bawdy gestures Ambrose feels are directed toward him.

Magda

At fourteen, Magda, a girl from the boys' neighborhood, is ''very well developed for her age.'' When she goes through the funhouse with Ambrose's older brother, Ambrose realizes how different he is from the ''lovers'' for whom the funhouse is fun. On an earlier occasion, she is the girl who provides Ambrose with his first (and unsatisfying) sexual experience as part of a game. She is the object of Ambrose's desire, and he likes to imagine himself married to her someday.

Mother

Ambrose and Peter's mother is a cheerful woman whom the narrator describes as ''pretty,'' but any additional details are withheld. She does not share Ambrose's brooding qualities. In fact, she likes to tease her sons because of their attention to Magda.

Peter

Peter, Ambrose's fifteen-year-old brother, possesses the physical grace and uncomplicated view of life that Ambrose lacks. Although Ambrose knows that his older brother is not as smart as he is (he won't be able to grasp the secret to being the first to spot the landmark Towers on the way to Ocean City, for example), he envies Peter's ability to understand the purpose of the funhouse and to find his way through it.

John Barth

Uncle Karl

Though the story never reveals whose brother Karl is, in physical appearance he is the father's opposite. Both Peter and Karl have ''dark hair and eyes, short, husky statures, deep voices.'' He works as a masonry contractor and likes to tease the boys and their mother.

Themes

Sex

Just as the funhouse poses mirrors in front of mirrors, tempting the viewer to mistake image for substance, ''Lost in the Funhouse'' seduces readers into believing the familiar literary truism that sex is a metaphor for language. What Ambrose learns in his journey through the three dimensional funhouse in Ocean City and the narrative funhouse of the story is that the opposite is true: language is just a metaphor for sex. Sex, in fact, is the ''whole point . . . Of the entire funhouse!'' Everywhere Ambrose hears the sound of sex, ''The shluppish whisper, continuous as seawash round the globe, tidelike falls and rises with the circuit of dawn and dusk.'' He imagines if he had ''X-ray eyes'' he would see that ''all that normally *showed,* like restaurants and

Topics for Further Study

- Although Barth abandoned his early formal study of music, he remains interested in it. In fact he said in an interview that as a writer he still thinks of himself as an arranger, ''a kind of re-orchestrator.'' What about ''Lost in the Funhouse'' strikes you as musical and why?
- Investigate the effects World War II had on the social and economic lives of Americans. How is the wartime setting significant to the story?
- What other characters from literature you have read remind you of Ambrose? How has Barth presented the old story in new ways?
- Barth has said that he believes that ''Lost in the Funhouse'' ''would lose part of [its] point in any except print form.'' Nevertheless, can you imagine a way that the story could be told on film, video, or the stage? What about a hypertext version for the computer?

dance halls and clothing and test-your strength machines was merely preparation and intermission.''

Ambrose's fascination with and fear of sex derives not just from his age, but also from his special temperament. He knows that the funhouse is fun for lovers and that he's not one of the lovers. Recalling the time when Magda initiated him into the world of sex during a childhood game, he remembers most poignantly not the passion or the physical pleasure, but the cognitive dimensions of the experience. Unable to ''forget the least detail of his life,'' Ambrose remembers ''standing beside himself with awed impersonality,'' cataloging the details of the scene in the woodshed, like the design of the label of a cigar box. Later he describes his ''odd detachment'' at that moment: ''Strive as he might to be transported, he heard his mind take notes upon the scene: *This is what they call* passion. *I am experiencing it.''*

Consciousness

One of the key elements in any funhouse is the hall of mirrors where visitors see images of images of themselves in strange and unfamiliar shapes. Of course, this awareness of self, or consciousness, is one of the distinguishing and most problematic features of humanness. Ambrose and his narrator alter ego are both marked by their exceptionally keen awareness of self. This is why they are drawn to the hidden levers of funhouses and are resigned to take pleasure in manipulating them rather than enjoying them.

Unlike lovers like Peter and Magda, Ambrose and the narrator are not capable of losing themselves in the play of reflection: ''In the funhouse mirror-room you can't see yourself go on forever, because not matter how you stand, your head gets in the way.'' The problem with consciousness, the story suggests, is not just the paralysis and alienation it engenders, but that one never knows which self is the real one and even if there is a real one. As Ambrose says, ''You think you're yourself, but there are other persons in you.'' After finally making his way back to the main part of the funhouse, Ambrose finds himself in the mirror-room, where ironically, surrounded by his own distorted reflections he sees ''more clearly than ever, how readily he deceived himself into supposing he was a person.''

Storytelling

Barth said in an interview in 1994 that ''Fiction has always been about fiction.'' Objecting to the critical term *metafiction* because he believes it has negative connotations, Barth explained: ''Fiction about fiction, stories about storytelling, have an ancient history, so much so that I am convinced that if the first story ever told began with the words 'Once upon a time,' probably the second story ever told began with the words 'Once upon a time there was a story that began Once upon a time.'''

''Lost in the Funhouse'' is one of those stories about stories. The narrator tries to tell the story of Ambrose's coming of age, but constantly interrupts the narrative to comment on its effectiveness and to call attention to the various literary devices he has in his tool box. Barth's point, however, is not to diminish the art of storytelling or to suggest that, in the words of critic Eric Walkiewicz, ''the possibilities of fiction have been exhausted and that he [Barth] has been reduced to making the most of what some . . . [critics] find to be an annoying self-indulgent brand of self-consciousness.'' Rather, the deliberate exposure of the usually hidden works of fiction is a form of play. The story is a funhouse for readers, and the narrator is the same kind of ''secret operator'' that Ambrose aspires to become in the story's last paragraph.

Style

Metaphor

Barth's use of metaphor in ''Lost in the Funhouse'' is anything but subtle. On several occasions the self-conscious narrator comments on the metaphoric and symbolic elements in the story. In the opening lines, for example, the narrator announces that Ambrose ''has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday, *the occasion of their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America.*'' This is an invitation to consider Ambrose's adolescent struggles as a move toward independence, from his family, from his paralyzing self-consciousness.

The dominant use of metaphor in the story, however, is the funhouse itself, an exceptionally rich and fertile device for Barth. According to critic Gerhard Joseph, ''The funhouse becomes the excruciatingly self-conscious symbol for the many distorted perspectives from which he [Ambrose] views his troubled psyche, a barely disguised reflection of the authorial narrator's own disintegrating self.'' Just as Ambrose envies Peter and Magda's unconscious ability to ''find the right exit'' the narrator laments his inability to lead us through the maze: ''We should be much farther along than we are: something has gone wrong; not much of this preliminary rambling seems relevant. Yet everyone begins in the same place; how is it that most go along without difficulty but a few lose their way?'' The narrator, like Ambrose, is lost in the funhouse. His sentences betray him and his plot ''winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires.'' The power of the funhouse as symbol for narrative is that it celebrates the playfulness and inventiveness of language while also acknowledging that everything is (just) representation, that storytelling is not a clear lens through which readers view reality, but one of many mirrors in which we see the play of a multitude of images.

Postmodernism

The term *postmodernism* on its most basic level defines the literary period that follows modernism. But this definition is also the least helpful. The term, which literary and cultural studies borrowed from the field of architecture, has come to dominate scholarly discussions about contemporary literature and culture since the 1980s. Some of the ambiguity of the term comes from a dispute about whether it signifies the end of modernism or modernism in a new phase. *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* says that postmodernism ''may be seen as a continuation of modernism's alienated mood and disorienting techniques and at the same as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world.'' In other words, the postmodern writer no longer expects a coherent pattern of images and meanings in the world, nor does he or she strive to give shape and meaning to the confusion. Instead, a writer such as Barth self-consciously plays with the disconnectedness that he inherits.

In addition to contributing many novels and short stories to the genre of postmodern fiction, Barth is also one of the movement's most articulate spokespersons. Even at the time he was writing ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' he had already begun to clarify his thoughts about the state of literature and published them in 1967 in a now famous essay called ''The Literature of Exhaustion.'' As he told an interviewer in 1994, he and some other writers of his generation ''share a feeling that the great project of modernism, the art and literature of the first half of the century, while an honorable project, has essentially done its job.'' He is interested, he goes on to explain, in ''shaking up bourgeois notions of linearity and consecutivity and ordinary, realistic description of character, ordinary psychological cause and effect.'' In a remarkably clear explanation of the practice of postmodern literature, Barth explains in the same interview that he and writers like him ''begin with the assumption that art is an artifice, that it has an element of artifice in it. And so far as wanting our reader to forget that they are reading a

novel, we are more inclined . . . to remind them from time to time that this is a story, not that this is only a story, but whatever else it is, it is a story. You're enthralled, you're spellbound, if we are doing our work right, by a storyteller, and do not confuse this with reality. Art ain't life.''

Historical Context

Literature of Exhaustion

In 1967, Barth published a now famous essay describing what he believed to be the state of literature at the time and sketching out some theories that he finished developing in a 1980 essay called ''The Literature of Replenishment.'' Because the essay was written at approximately the same time Barth was working on the volume that included ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' readers can assume a close relationship with the major theoretical points of the essay and the experimental form of the story.

The essay's main argument, according to critic Charles Harris, is that contemporary writers, facing what Barth called the ''used-upness of certain [narrative] forms and or possibilities,'' must (in Harris's words) ''successfully combine moral seriousness and technical virtuosity.'' What Harris calls ''passionate virtuosity,'' Barth had defined as the duty of the modern writer to use all his or her technical abilities, all the techniques, but still ''manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our still human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done.''

Social Change

The year that ''Lost in the Funhouse'' was published, 1967, was an especially tumultuous period in American social history, and Barth, as a writer and an intellectual with a faculty position, was right in the thick of it. As the Vietnam War escalated and domestic resistance to it stiffened, colleges and universities were often the site of angry student protest. These protests were primarily aimed at the nation's leaders, but students also had other revolutionary causes to fight for.

Many students were involved in, or were at least sympathetic to, the civil rights movement, which was galvanized after the assassination of its leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. The profound injustices and inequalities that the movement exposed inspired many young students to question their relatively privileged positions in the social order and to demand more relevance and accountability out of the educational institutions where they were enrolled.

These revolutionary impulses were certainly political, but they were also cultural and artistic. Young artists and writers sought new ways of expressing their ideas, ways that would reflect the fragmented and fraught world they lived in. Modernism's quest for order seemed to miss the point, as Barth argued in ''The Literature of Exhaustion,'' and much of the literature and art of the period reflects the writers' and artists' giddy sense that they could make-up new rules for themselves. As both a university professor and a writer of new kinds of fiction like ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' Barth could participate in the new kinds of creativity around him; but as a trained scholar, he also took on the more arduous task of analyzing the moment and laying down the beginnings of its theoretical foundation.

Critical Overview

The stories in the volume *Lost in the Funhouse* received mixed reviews when they appeared in 1968. This is not to suggest that individual reviewers were ambivalent or undecided about their assessment of the book. Early reviewers either loved it or hated it. Since then the book and its title story have taken their places in American literary history and are widely regarded as among the best of the genre. ''Lost in the Funhouse'' is frequently anthologized and still offers fresh challenges to readers and critics thirty years after its initial publication.

Writing in the *New York Times Book Review* in October 1968, Guy Davenport called Barth's book ''thoroughly confusing,'' and not ''quite like anything for which we have a name handy.'' By the end of the review, however, he recognizes what Barth is up to in writing about writing and says that he ''has served his readers as handsomely as the best of storytellers.'' R. V. Cassill, another early reviewer calls the book ''pure folly'' and ''blitheringly sophomoric,'' except for the final story, ''Anonymiad,''

The Ocean City Amusement Park, setting for ''Lost in the Funhouse.''

which he calls ''dazzling.'' On the other side of the critical divide, Walter Harding says the book's title story and a few others ''are outstanding . . . [and] have all the verve and hilarity'' of Barth's novels.

Several book-length studies of Barth's work appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, which raised his critical profile and gave readers some needed explanation. Two of these works, David Morell's *John Barth: An Introduction* and Charles Harris's *Passionate Virtuosity: The Fiction of John Barth,* remain essential reading today for any student of Barth's work. In general the critics of this period focused on careful explication of the texts. They helped connect Barth's scholarly and theoretical writings with his experiments in fiction. Morell, Harris and others from this period also identified other works in literature that were similar to the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse,* such as James Joyce's classic modernist novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

As postmodernism gains more currency in both critical and popular circles, Barth's famous story about the funhouse of language remains at the center of serious literary debate. ''Lost in the Funhouse'' has given another generation of readers and scholars the opportunity to work out their theories of language and storytelling.

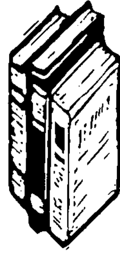
Criticism

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton teaches American literature and writing classes at the University of Texas. She writes frequently about the modern short story. In this essay she suggests that readers can enjoy the funhouse even if they are privy to its hidden works.

The narrator of Lost in the Funhouse asks a straightforward question in its opening lines: ''For whom is the funhouse fun?'' and then suggests a possible answer: ''Perhaps for lovers.'' One of the things the story will go on to do is test that hypothesis. Will it always be *a place of fear and confusion* for Ambrose, or will he learn to appreciate the pleasure of its apparent pointlessness? Are lovers the only ones who find it fun? The narrator is, like Ambrose, one who would ''rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed,'' but will settle for the more cerebral pleasure of being their ''secret operator.'' Readers, then, who enter Barth's funhouse of a story will have to answer the same question for themselves: lover or behind-the-scenes operator of the levers and trap doors that make Magda and Peter and the others squeal with delight? I argue that the

What Do I Read Next?



- *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1964) by Irish writer James Joyce is a classic coming of age story about a young man and is considered one of the benchmarks of modernism as well as one of the inspirations for Barth's Ambrose.
- ''The School,'' (1976) by Donald Barthelme, is a postmodern story in which dim-witted teachers are completely unable to understand reality while third graders speak like eloquent college professors.
- *Pale Fire* (1962) by Vladimir Nabokov is a unique work of satire about literary scholarship. The novel, an interesting experiment in narrative technique, includes a 999-line poem with accompanying exegesis.
- *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1988) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Latin American magic realism by one of Barth's favorite writers.

brilliance of Barth's justifiably famous story is that it imagines—even creates—a reader who can be both, who can find the funhouse fun even if he or she understands that it is all based on illusion.

Writers employ certain techniques to enhance the effect of their writing, the narrator explains, but ''as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means.'' Barth's narrator is like a magician who wants us to be amazed at his dexterity even if we can see the strings and wires. ''Description of physical appearance and mannerisms,'' he says, ''is one of the standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction.'' After explaining how ''It is also important to 'keep the senses operating','' by appealing to the reader's imagination, the narrator goes on to fail in his attempts to use this very technique: ''The brown hair on Ambrose's mother's forearms gleamed in the sun like,'' and ''The smell of Uncle Karl's cigar smoke reminded one of.'' These two aborted similes are forecasted by the narrator's lecture on the means of literary description, but the imagery is strangely effective anyway because our awareness is heightened. Having called attention to the ''used-upness'' of these kinds of narrative techniques, the narrator occasionally abandons his cynicism and offers stunningly precise and evocative descriptions. Here's how he describes Ambrose's view of Magda's back as she leans forward in the back seat of the car: ''Two sets of straps were discernible through the shoulders of her sun dress; the inside right one, a brassiere strap, was fastened or shortened with a small safety pin. The right armpit of her dress, presumably the left as well, was damp with perspiration.'' At moments like these in the text, readers experience the funhouse like lovers—they can simply enjoy the pleasures of it—but their pleasure is not diminished by knowing how the funhouse works. If anything, Barth is suggesting that for the right kind of reader the pleasures of the funhouse can be enhanced by having special knowledge of its inner works.

The narrator might also ask, ''For whom is the funhouse fun again and again?'' Certainly lovers like Peter and Magda understand that the point is not to remain upright in the tumbling barrel, is not, as Ambrose says, ''to go through expeditiously.'' But once they know how to ''find the right exits,'' will the funhouse be fun on repeat visits? Both Peter and Magda had been through it before, the narrator says, but perhaps they are seeking just to repeat the experience, not to have a new one. This will be Ambrose's first time through, and after getting lost behind the scenes he is resigned never to experience the real sensory delights of the funhouse. Barth's narrative funhouse, however, may offer another choice by presuming multiple readings, or visits.

Barth has crafted the narrative structure in ''Lost in the Funhouse'' to be deliberately recursive, or designed to be repeated. Just like the Moebius

strip, the story invites, even compels, re-reading. At one point, the narrator even gives readers a hint. Describing the scene in which Ambrose is exploring beneath the boardwalk and hears his family laughing above him, the narrator comments: ''If the joke had been beyond his understanding, he could have said: *'The laughter was over his head.'* And let the reader see the serious wordplay on the second reading.'' And later, the narrator interrupts Ambrose's musings about his life to comment on the stuttering progress of the story: ''And it's all too long and rambling, as if the author. For all a person knows the first time through, the end could he just around any corner; perhaps, *not impossibly,* it's been within reach any number of times. On the other hand he may be scarcely past the start, with everything yet to get through, an intolerable idea.'' On the first reading, this could be a comment on the literal funhouse on the boardwalk, the figurative funhouse of the story, or on the progress of Ambrose's adolescence itself. Unlike visitors to the ''real'' funhouse, however, Barth's readers don't have to chose correctly or risk the consequences by wandering off into the dark back hallways like Ambrose does.

All three of the possible interpretations of the passage will lead somewhere, and, Barth seems to suggest, visitors will be rewarded for exploring all the possibilities. After all, the ''point is not to go through expeditiously.'' Nor does Barth seem to endorse visitors/readers who, like the crude sailor and his girlfriends, ''get the point'' of the funhouse after the first time through and thus pay no more attention to its subtleties and reduce the experience to its basest level. While lost Ambrose says that ''In a perfect funhouse you'd be able to go only one way, like the divers off the highboard; getting lost would be impossible; the doors and halls would work like minnow traps or the valves in veins.'' But his own mind betrays him as he spins out several possible exit scenarios. Maybe he will find his way and meet his family just as the police arrive; maybe he'll meet up with another person in the dark and have heroic adventures. Maybe he even ''died telling stories to himself in the dark; years later, when that vast unsuspected area of the funhouse came to light, the first expedition found his skeleton in one of its labyrinthine corridors and mistook it for part of the entertainment.'' In this version of his story, Ambrose imagines a secret door in the narrative. Although he ''died of starvation telling himself stories in the dark,'' the story survives for readers today because ''unbeknownst unbeknownst to him, an assistant operator of the funhouse, happening to

Barth's narrator is like a magician who wants us to be amazed at his dexterity even if we can see the strings and wires."

overhear him, crouched just behind the plywood partition and wrote down every word.'' But then Ambrose gets a better idea for his story—since he is its ''secret operator''—the transcriber is not the assistant, but ''the operator's daughter, an exquisite young woman with a figure unusually well developed for her age,'' who, naturally falls in love with him through the partition and whose tears stain the page on which she has written his heroic story.

The story ends by answering the question posed by its beginning. Yes, the funhouse is fun for lovers, but it is also less a ''place of fear and confusion'' for Ambrose than it had seemed in the beginning. For readers the story has become a funhouse with almost infinite possibilites. Unlike lovers, readers' pleasure does not depend on willfully ignoring the artifice and machinery of the funhouse. On the contrary, the dark hallways and gears and levers through which Ambrose wanders, and their narrative equivalent, the narrator's asides and intrusions, are part of the funhouse, not its frightening and confusing opposite.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, Overview of ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999.

Thom Seymour

In the following excerpt, Seymour praises Barth's technical mastery of narration in ''Lost in the Funhouse.''

One of the most puzzling things about the John Barth short story ''Lost in the Funhouse'' is its apparent neglect. It has not been neglected by the reading public, presumably; after all, the story first appeared in a mass-market magazine and has since been included in a volume of Barth's short fiction (available in a paperback edition from a mass-market publisher), not to mention the current edition of *The American Tradition in Literature.* I

mean, rather, the neglect, in recent years, of commentators. When it first appeared, in 1968, the volume that contains ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' *Lost in the Funhouse,* received generally unfavorable reviews. Though perforce hastily conceived, these reviews were not entirely wrong, for there are a number of pieces in the book that strike us today, as they did then, as mere baubles, toys for and of an exhausted imagination. Indeed, this is the line of attack most reviewers took toward the work: you have circled back so fully on your own self-awareness, Mr. Barth, where can you go from here? But what the reviewers failed to see is that this question is largely answered by the book itself. For the two stories that were most frequently praised were ''Menelaid'' and ''Anonymiad,'' Barth's retelling of Greek myths, in which the telling not the tale is updated. Thus, these stories anticipate the brilliant novellas of *Chimera,* which in turn anticipate God-knows-what. It seems that Barth, if he wanted to, could go on in this vein forever.

Still, as good as ''Menelaid'' and ''Anonymiad'' are, the finest piece in *Lost in the Funhouse* must be the title story. Even admitting, as Gerhard Joseph does of *Giles Goatboy,* that ''one reader's imaginative profundity [may be] another's puerile shallowness and irresponsible navel-gazing,'' ''Lost in the Funhouse'' is still extraordinary, if only because of its perfect technical integration. From the baldest ''reality'' to the subtlest distortion to the most labored pedantry—the cutbacks, false turns, dead ends, and mirror images all reinforce each other on every level of the narrative. The story is extraordinary as well because it is what it says it is, a *fun*house. What sets this story apart from the sterility of so much ''experimental'' fiction, what makes it (and, indeed, most of Barth's writing) such a delight, is the sense of play, of pure fun-ness, that pervades it. For something which in outline is so serious, even sentimental, the tale is riddled with howlers, puns, silliness, and simple, small jokes, in all of which we too become lost, and like Fat May, the mechanical laugher on the boardwalk, are left wheezing and clutching our sides.

The Joke—

One of the smallest jokes in ''Lost in the Funhouse'' is an even smaller mystery. The joke is a throwaway, really, but one that involves both craftiness and craft. In the mode of phony *roman à clef* of preceding centuries, Barth refuses to give us either the last names of his characters or the year (even decade) of the story's events. Hard on the heels of this refusal, however, comes Barth's pedantic explanation that this is nothing more than a gimmick of fiction used to heighten the illusion of fact. Of course, by making such an admission, Barth obviously destroys any illusion of factuality in his own piece of fiction.

Yet the joke is just beginning. For imbedded in the matrix of the narrative are all the clues we need to come up with the exact date (more accurately, the exact day in one of two possible years) on which the events of the story take place. Early on, we are told that it is ''*Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America,*'' in the year 19__. July fourth it is, but what of the decade? The principals travel to Ocean City in a ''black 1936 LaSalle sedan,'' so it is at least the late thirties. But we know further, from numerous small references, that it is wartime. There are references to matchbook covers advertising ''U.S. War Bonds and Stamps'' or ''warning that A Slip of the Lip Can Sink a Ship''; there is a scarcity of tobacco; there is talk of ''tankers torpedoed offshore''; there are the prizes in the digger machines in the penny arcade, prizes ''made now in USA''; there is mention of a ''brown-out'': ''on account of German U-boats, . . . streetlights were shaded on the seaward side.'' The examples go on and on. So we know that it is World War II—July 4th, 1942, at the earliest; the U.S. was not in the war on any Independence Day before that. On the other hand, because of the fear of German U-boats, it cannot be as late as 1945; the war in Europe was over before July of that year. The story must take place on July 4th, 1942, 43, or 44. Yet even one of these years can be eliminated. Nineteen forty-two is out once we are told that ''some of the [digger] machines wouldn't work on white pennies.'' During the war, to save precious copper, the U.S. government minted a penny with a greatly reduced copper content. This coin, with its zinc and steel coating, was called a gray or white penny. However, this penny was minted only in 1943. So, granting even that white pennies were in wide circulation in Maryland by July of that year, the events of the story could have happened only on July 4th of 1943 or (more likely) 1944.

But what is the point of all this? There isn't any. That's the point. Needless to say, the exact date of the story's events matters not at all. And that, of course, is part of the joke; that Barth would go to such trouble to conceal from us, yet provide all the clues to the discovery of, an essentially meaningless fact. After all our careful groping down this one dark passage in the funhouse of this fiction, we

come upon just one more dead end, and must turn around and stumble back and start over again.

The Paragraph—

Gerhard Joseph has said that ''*Lost in the Funhouse* provides ample evidence that, aside from all questions of aesthetic success, [Barth] is one of the two or three most aware, most technically experimental writers of acknowledged power at work in America today.'' As goes the book, so goes the story. ''Lost in the Funhouse'' is a technical *tour de force.* Barth molds together in this tale so many aspects of the technique of fiction, and yet does it so brilliantly and with such seeming ease, that all questions of aesthetic success are definitely not aside. Barth can crack jokes, offer asides, rewrite, question the validity of his characters, question the worth of his story, question the worth of himself as a storyteller, while at the same time he can keep what narrative there is going, and keep the reader interested in it and in the jokes, asides, etc. And this is to say nothing of Barth's dazzling manipulation of language itself.

''Trust the tale not the teller'' is, with ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' a foolish admonition, for the tale amounts to little more than this: a pubescent boy, his family and would-be girlfriend, take the family's usual Independence Day outing to Ocean City, Maryland's answer to Atlantic City. After one or two minor adventures on and under the boardwalk, the boy gets lost in the funhouse, from which he presumably escapes or gets rescued, though we never find out (another of the story's small jokes). All the while, he attempts to come to terms with his budding, befuddling sexual cravings and his increasing sense of alienation from those around him and from the world in general. It is, in short, one version of the classic modern tale of the outsider, the sensitive, grown-up child with powerful gifts of observation and rumination who must inevitably settle for the oyster of art since the pearl of love apparently will forever elude him. The character is, of course, cliché and sentimental, as is the whole story. But this is hardly a concern. There is so much else going on here that the shabbiness of the story's impetus is neither readily apparent, nor, once discerned, of any import. As with much contemporary fiction, we are not really expected to learn of ''life'' from the story, to be instructed by the author in the ways of the world. The ''message,'' we know now, is not the enduring quality of any piece of fiction. More important, many contemporary writers know it as well. Therefore they (and Barth is a good example) have become increasingly uninterested in preaching at the reader or in convincing him that that which he is reading is ''real.'' They have become, in other words, story*tellers* instead of *story*teller. ''Lost in the Funhouse'' is a product of this shift in emphasis; the tale itself counts for very little, so the telling—if not the teller—is all.

It is, in short, one version of the classic modern tale of the outsider, the sensitive, grown-up child with powerful gifts of observation and rumination who must inevitably settle for the oyster of art since the pearl of love apparently will forever elude him."

It is not possible to get at, briefly, all or even most of the ways in which ''Lost in the Funhouse'' works. Nor does such an analysis seem quite appropriate. A close textual analysis of the entire story would prove most boring, and for that reason, if for no other, would violate both the ''beingness'' of the story and its appeal. But ''Lost in the Funhouse'' clearly merits careful consideration, and to that end the synecdochic approach should suffice, with one paragraph selected to stand for the whole.

> But though he had breathed heavily, groaned as if ecstatic, what he'd really felt throughout was an odd detachment, as though someone else were Master. Strive as he might to be transported, he heard his mind take notes upon the scene: *This is what they call* passion. *I am experiencing it.* Many of the digger machines were out of order in the penny arcades and could not be repaired or replaced for the duration. Moreover the prizes, made now in USA, were less interesting than formerly, pasteboard items for the most part, and some of the machines wouldn't work on white pennies. The gypsy fortuneteller machine might have provided a foreshadowing of the climax of this story if Ambrose had operated it. It was even dilapidateder than most: the silver coating was worn off the brown metal handles, the glass windows around the dummy were cracked and taped, her kerchiefs and silks long-faded. If a man lived by

> himself, he could take a department-story mannequin with flexible joints and modify her in certain ways. *However*: by the time he was that old he'd have a real woman. There was a machine that stamped your name around a white-metal coin with a star in the middle: A______. His son would be the second, and when the lad reached thirteen or so he would put a strong arm around his shoulder and tell him calmly: ''It is perfectly normal. We have all been through it. It will not last forever.'' Nobody knew how to be what they were right. He'd smoke a pipe, teach his son how to fish and softcrab, assure him he needn't worry about himself. Magda would certainly give, Magda would certainly yield a great deal of milk, although guilty of occasional solecisms. It don't taste so bad. What if the lights came on now!

Apart from the simple story line, there are at least four major aspects to the narrative of ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' all of which, in varying degrees, are evidenced in this paragraph. One of the most obvious aspects involves comments by the author on the story in progress, comments directed sometimes to the reader, sometimes to himself, frequently to both. The sixth sentence, the one that begins, ''The gypsy fortuneteller machine, . . .'' is obviously an example of this. These comments are inserted not just for humor, but also to push the reader back from the story. They keep him reminded of the fact that the story is indeed a fiction, an artifact, a creation from experience, not experience itself.

Aligned with this is the second major aspect, the sense of the story as unfinished, a rough draft, perhaps, full of uncompleted thoughts, false starts, and options expressed but not exercised. This has much the same effect as the author's running commentary, for it too forces the reader to remember that a fiction is a made object, that regardless of how inevitable a story seems when finished, it is shaped and directed from the outset. The third from last sentence is a perfect example of the literal ''rough draftness'' of the story: whether Magda ''gives'' or ''yields'' her milk will have to be decided during a later revision.

Related to this, but somewhat more subtle, is the third major aspect, the illogicality of the narration. Throughout the story, and clearly in this paragraph, sentence frequently follows sentence as a total *non sequitur.* How exactly, for example, we get from the experiencing of sexual passion to a discussion of the condition of the digger machines in the penny arcades is not at all clear. What we have here is a form of stream-of-consciousness. However, it is not a character's stream flowing by, but the author's. In other words, we are taken back to an earlier stage in the manufacture of a story, back to the point before the story itself and the author's fabrication of it have been separated.

Finally, one of the most intriguing of these narrative aspects is Barth's handling of the distinction between author/narrator and protagonist. Barth cunningly refuses either to maintain the distinction steadfastly or to collapse it entirely. At one point he even asks (who? the reader? himself?), ''Is there really such a person as Ambrose, or is he a figment of the author's imagination?'' And in the paragraph quoted above, for example, we begin inside the protagonist's thoughts: ''he heard his mind take notes upon the scene: *This is what they call* passion. *I am experiencing it.*'' The comments that follow on digger machines and their worsening prizes are clearly those of the narrator. So far so good. But what of this: ''If a man lived by himself, he could take a department-store mannequin with flexible joints and modify her in certain ways''? Or this: ''Suppose the lights came on now''? Whose notions are these, and how can we tell? The point is, of course, that not only can we not tell, but that it does not matter. More properly, it matters that we *not* be able to distinguish here between the narrator and the protagonist. For by blurring the distinction between the two, Barth is able, subtly, to raise questions about the relationship between biography and fiction, reality and imagination—questions important not only to this particular story, but to much contemporary fiction, if not, indeed, to all fiction of all times everywhere.

In sum, the whole of ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' on every level, from title to tag, is very, very artfully managed. The apparent off-handed handling of the story's immense technical problems is in itself simply stunning. But to approach the story on that level alone—technical problems invented, technical problems solved—is surely a mistake, for that takes much of the fun out of the funhouse. Barth himself insists that technique is the means not the ends. On the dust jacket of *Lost in the Funhouse,* he is quoted as saying, ''My feeling about technique in art is that it has about the same value as technique in love-making. That is to say, heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and so does heartless skill; but what you want is passionate virtuosity.'' Still, the story's concerns with technical questions cannot and should not be avoided. ''Lost in the Funhouse'' does seem to be more of an artifact than, say, something by I. B. Singer. And the major thrust of its technical investigation comes in the area of authorial self-awareness. One hates to use the inverted logic of

some modern criticism (more in the plastic arts than in literature) which suggest that a difficult and obscure work is in fact a simplification, a return to basics. But that is really what we have here: a case of new being old, complication simplicity, and obfuscation ingenuousness. For the question of the writer's self-awareness—and the reader's consequent awareness of him as well—so integral a part of ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' emphasizes the (generally unacknowledged) *sine qua non* of any piece of fiction: the author and the words. We have always discussed plot and theme, mood and character as if they existed on their own, as if their creation existed independent of their creator. If Barth does nothing else in ''Lost in the Funhouse,'' at least he moves us a step closer to a realization of this error in our ways. And if we can thank Barth for nothing else, we can thank him for having the honesty to report, on his return from the literary wars, that he has met the enemy and found, as did Pogo, that it is he.

Source: Thom Seymour, ''One Small Joke and a Packed Paragraph in John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse','' in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 16, No. 3, Summer, 1979 , pp. 189-194.

Edgar H. Knapp

In the following essay Knapp examines Barth's story in light of its use of ''myth, masque, cinema, and symposium.''

Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence
—W. B. Yeats

After John Barth's ''Lost in the Funhouse'' appeared in *The Atlantic* of November, 1967, common men had a taste of terror, the mad felt a twinge of sympathy, and a faint and tweedy generation of English professors found themselves in the mirror maze of a new fiction.

Warning. You cannot read ''Lost in the Funhouse'' simply for the fun of it. Read it three times: once, to get knocked off your feet; again to regain your balance; and then to be knocked down again. Perhaps a fourth time . . . for the fun of it.

The story adheres to the archetypal pattern of passage through difficult ways, and the hero seems to be a thirteen-year-old boy on a family outing to Ocean City, Maryland, during World War II. The story line is straight. It's the how of the tale that upends one. Its mixture of myth, masque, cinema, and symposium makes ''Lost in the Funhouse'' one of the oldest and freshest of stories.

Warning. You cannot read 'Lost in the Funhouse' simply for the fun of it. Read it three times: once, to get knocked off your feet; again to regain your balance; and then to be knocked down again. Perhaps a fourth time . . . for the fun of it."

Myth

The setting of Barth's story is intensely true to the texture of life in tidewater Maryland, 1943. Lucky Strike's green has gone to war; V——— (Vienna) is the halfway point of the trip to the shore; at the end of the boardwalk is an inlet the Hurricane of '33 had cut to Sinepuxent Bay (which the author can't bear to leave as Assawoman). Nevertheless, the setting has another dimension: it is an ironic garden. At the Ocean City amusement park the roller coaster, rumored to be condemned in 1916, still runs; many machines are broken and the prizes are made of pasteboard (in the USA). Everyone except Ambrose M——— and his father exudes and ingests the carnival spirit—on Independence Day in a time of national crisis. Barth ruminates: ''In a short-story about Ocean City, Maryland, during World War II the author could make use of the image of sailors on leave in the penny arcades and shooting-galleries, sighting through the cross hairs of toy machine-guns at swastika'd subs, while out in the black Atlantic a U-boat skipper squints through his periscope at real ships outlined by the glow of penny arcades.'' In a slight variation on the independence theme, Ambrose recalls that, five years before, the kids played ''Niggers and Masters'' in the backyard. And on the day of the story, even the sensitive hero is uncomfortable to think that a colored boy might help him through the funhouse. The boardwalk is a begrimed paradise to which there is no return: ''Already quaint and

seedy: the draperied ladies on the frieze of the carousel are his father's father's mooncheeked dreams; if he thinks of it more he will vomit his apple-on-a-stick.''

Ambrose at thirteen suffers from undescended identity. He has experienced two initiation ceremonies which left him cold: one sexual, in a tool shed at the age of eight; another religious, at his own belated baptism during the year of the story. (Each involved kneeling and the forgiveness of a master.) Ideally, such acts as these betoken man's communion with his own kind and with his God, but to the aggravation of his sense of loss, Ambrose ''felt nothing.'' He feigned passion, he feigned tears. From time to time he even pretends to be a real person. And so it is his identity he seeks in a funhouse world where nothing is as it seems.

The dark passageways of the funhouse increase his sense of isolation. Still he must find his way out himself. Peeping through a crack in a plywood wall, Ambrose sees the lonely, old funhouse operator (God?) asleep at the switch. An ironic epiphany. Especially as we interpret the funhouse as world (and the world as funhouse), the mythic structure becomes more visible. Ambrose's adventures are like heroic suffering, death, and resurrection (if indeed one sees him as out of the funhouse at the story's end). The witchlike ticket-seller calls him a marked man. And we recall the tumble of unconscious formulation which follows his brush with life in the raw (''*an astonishing coincidence*'') under the boardwalk: ''Magda clung to his trouserleg; he alone knew the maze's secret. 'He gave his life that we might live,' said Uncle Karl with a scowl of pain, as he.'' These words relate to a subsequent dream scene in the funhouse when a Magda-like assistant operator transcribes the hero's inspirational message, the more beautiful for his ''lone dark dying.'' Mention of the Ambrose Lightship, beacon to lost seafarers, and the meaning of *Ambrose* (divine) and echoes of *ambrosia* (that bee-belabored stuff of immortality) reinforce the mythic overtones of his characterization.

Masque

This Ambrose seems clearly to be the protagonist but in another sense he is not. The ''quaint and seedy'' sextet may be the hero—each aspects of generalized man. Ambrose and father, both thin, fair-skinned, and bespectacled, combine as soulful tenors; brother Peter and Uncle Karl, both squat and swarthy, thump out a basso counterpoint, with which the two women harmonize as one voice—a sexy alto, limited in range. (They complement each other, appearing to be an at-once-sinister-and-dexterous female unit, the reflections of one another.)

Perceived as aspects of the same personality, Ambrose and his father represent acute awareness of experience and artistic intuition. Unlike his lustful, mesomorphic brother and uncle, Ambrose is seized by ''terrifying transports'': ''The grass was alive! The town, the river, himself, were not imaginary; time roared in his ears like wind; the world was *going on!*'' Peter and Uncle Karl represent ''the withness of the body,'' Whitehead's phrase, which Delmore Schwartz uses as an epigraph to his poem ''The Heavy Bear.''

> That heavy bear who sleeps with me
> Howls in his sleep for a world of sugar,
>
> * * * *
>
> Stretches to embrace the very dear
> With whom I would walk without him near,
> Touches her grossly, although a word
> Would bare my heart and make me clear.

Womankind is the honey that keeps the heavy bear ''lumbering.'' (The women held the syrup-coated popcorn.) Also, the naming within the party of the flesh is symbolic: *Magda* for Mary Magdalene, sinful woman; *Peter,* meaning rock; *Karl,* man of the common people, who is coincidentally a stone mason and an inveterate cigar smoker. (He kept his stone-cutting chisels in an empty cigar box.)

The sextet enacts a masque-like drama symbolic of the inner transactions which result in human behavior. Members of the ''heavy bear'' quartet communicate by tactile and kinaesthetic means—playful shoves, tugs, punches, and slaps. Prufrock-like, Ambrose recoils from physical contact: the brown hair on his mother's forearms gleams in the sun; he sees perspiration patches at Magda's armpits. (He even gets to play the crab scuttling across the turning funhouse floors.) In the car he removes his hand ''in the nick of time,'' and later in the funhouse he fails to embrace Magda in keeping with his vision.

Additional support to the sextet theory: the two males of each generation, although their actions contrast, share the same woman without deceit or suspicion. Nor is there conflict between corresponding members of the different generations. Although communication is strained between the separate selves, still they gravitate toward one another in

artificial ways. For instance, at poolside Ambrose feigns interest in the diving; Magda, disinterest. ("'He's a *master* diver,' Ambrose said. . . . 'You really have to *slave* away at it to get that good.'" [Italics mine]). These oscillations toward and away from members of the same generation create what may be termed *synchronic resonance.* Given the anachronistic setting, the mirrored manners and adherence to the same routines from one generation to the next have special implications in this Barth story. And particularly the reveries in which Ambrose sees himself, standing before Fat May, with Ambrose the Third. ("Magda would yield a great deal of milk although guilty of occasional solecisms.") By flicking images of generation-to-generation resemblance on the reader's screen, Barth effects a *diachronic resonance.*

Cinema

Whereas the action of the story is mythic and its characterization is related to archetypal masque, its scenic values—its choreography—derive from cinematic techniques. The scenic splicing is suggestive—and not only in a ribald sense. The interstitching of dream and action supports the basic theme of the merging of illusion and reality. Other splices create abrupt switches, with utter absence of transition, from narrative flow to textbook exposition, reminding us that not even the story is real. The action is suspended—reminiscent of the lights dimming and the actors freezing at intervals in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*—and then the motion picture resumes. Another and more conventional sort of juxtaposition is used, as when Fat May's canned laughter sounds ironically over images of war and death.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Barth's scenic art is his use of symbolic ballet. Reinforcing the masque-like characterization, the physical interrelationships in the "blocking" of particular scenes are allegorical. For instance, the story opens and closes with the thematically loaded formation of the older generation in the front seat—the woman between the competing interests of the spirit and the flesh—reflected by the younger generation behind. Barth avoids perfect symmetry by contrasting the arm position of the sexually mature mother with that of the sexually maturing Magda (from B——— Street), who has her arms down, but "at the ready."

The theme is only slightly varied as the *sex*tet swings down the boardwalk to the swimming pool, the heavy bears next to the syrup-coated popcorn. The mirror motif is intensified at the pool: Peter grasps one ankle of the squirming Magda; Uncle Karl goes for the other ankle. Had either looked up he would have seen his reflection! The communion motif, as well, is reflected in the choreography, being subtly varied from the sexual to the religious: first by the child kneeling in sin in the tool shed and later by the fallen woman clutching her savior in supplication in the funhouse.

Not only scenic arrangement but also the varied sensory appeals of Barth's imagery support the illusion-reality theme. Paint peels from the hotels—themselves facades, within which lovers may pretend passion. Not only do the mirrors within the funhouse distort and confuse but also the sounds of fumbling bees and lapping wavelets re-echo in Amby's ears. He suffers from vertigo, if not labyrinthitis. And "candied apples-on-a-stick, delicious-looking, [were] disappointing to eat."

Symposium

And so we have a significant human experience imaginatively presented in structure and textures organically related to the whole. But the story has one more funhouse dimension which is most puzzling—its point of view. Although Barth's story is spun from the consciousness of the protagonist, a precocious adolescent, in the telling at least six distinct bands of mental formulation seem to be randomly mixed: (1) report of the action proper, (2) recollection of past experience, (3) conscious contrivance of a reasonable future, (4) uncontrolled swings into a fantastic future, (5) consciousness of problems of composition, and (6) recollection of sections from a handbook for creative writers. (After a while the reader can visualize the author seated before a console, gleefully pushing buttons according to the sprung rhythm of his whim.) The first four bands on the list qualify as spritely narrative; the last two, as the conscience of an author not completely free from the shackles of conventional fiction. The relationship which is generated between these technical obtrusions and the rest of the story is that of a symposium. We have a running Platonic dialogue between the experimental Barth and the tradition out of which his work has grown. The dialectic is undeniable, but what is the artistic reason for it? It obtrudes upon the illusion of reality. And it has to be Barth's strategy—similar to Pirandello's and Wilder's experiments in the theatre—to remind the reader continually of the contrivance of literature, the fact that a story is the semblance of lived-experi-

ence, not experience. The frequent italicized phrases are likewise reminders of the artificiality of fiction. One purpose could be to wean us from the particular in time and place so that we will appreciate the universality of Amby's fate, that he is also ourselves, and that we have our opportunities for heroism.

But wait; we're not out of the funhouse yet. Could it be that Barth's story, and not Barth himself, is playing the bright, young heterosexual Phaedrus to a tired, old Socrates, who is in fact the 19th century short story? (Peruse Barth's essay ''The Literature of Exhaustion'' in *The Atlantic* of August, 1967, and you have to believe it.) This doesn't vitiate other interpretations of the story-within-the-story; it is merely an additional crown to the apple-within-an-apple nest of ''Lost in the Funhouse.''

Granted this detachment and accepting the universality of the human experience represented by the M——— family's journey, an allegory of the flesh and the spirit, we are in position to appreciate one more tantalizing suggestion: that one generation of the M——— family is symbolic not only of essential M-a-n but also of essential M-y-t-h—the attempt in story form to help man find his way in the non-human world. The earliest of these fictions portrayed gods as the main strugglers. Hence, the divine characteristics of Ambrose, which set him apart from the common man; his wanderings in a strange dark underworld; his yearning to discover his identity.

When we see a generation of the M——— family as a story, the reappearance of the old structure and dynamics in later generations takes on fresh significance. As every man is like his father, every story bears a likeness to its archetype. The diachronic resonance in the characterization suggests the relationships within literary genres. As Northrop Frye points out, individual works of literature reveal ''family likenesses resembling the species, genera, and phyla of biology.''

Fiction as we have known it, Barth implies, is at the water's edge. The myth-carrying vehicles have not changed radically (train, car, autogiro), and these recurring outings of the monomyth are distastefully decked with anachronistic trappings. Mention of ''the draperied ladies on the frieze of the carousel [seen as] his father's father's mooncheeked dreams'' is a comment on ''the literature of exhausted possibility,'' as critic John Barth has labeled it.

And so in a central room of the funhouse, the maze of mirrors, we have the eye. We trust it, as we have learned to, and its imperfect perception goes to a bleary brain: a flickering of self-knowledge (Ambrose did find his name coin there—symbolic of himself.) But with it the *aw*ful chain of reflection cast backward and forward, in space and time. Outside is the funhouse of a lifetime. Beyond that, the history of humanity and the extension of its possibilities. And encompassing that, the marvelous funhouse of imaginative conception, which can project images, construct funhouses, *et cetera et cetera et cetera.* And we can come to the chimerical conclusion that the eye in the funhouse—yours and mine—is at once that of reader, author, character, god, and story. (The hero is amb——— ''O brightening glance . . .'' Could six characters be in search of an author?) Selfhood is not easy. Best be a common man and not think about it.

But I'm still worried about Ambrose. Did he make it out of the funhouse? If I can still be worried about him after peering down and up these other echoing funhouse corridors, then I consider the story to be a really good one. I tend to believe the dissembling narrator when he says, ''The family's going home. Mother sits between Father and Uncle Karl who tease him [Ambrose] . . .'' and I say he's out of the Ocean City funhouse, though still in his funhouse world, as much ''a place of fear and confusion'' as it was. The voice of convention, nevertheless, has reminded us that the climax will be reached when the protagonist is out. But Ambrose doesn't have climaxes and he will expire in his funhouse world. Lost as he is, he can find purpose in life—at least make ''a stay against confusion'' (and have a fighting chance for one sort of immortality)—through imaginative design. The Whiffenpoofs are lost too, but ''the magic of their singing'' makes it a joy to be lost with them. And from another angle, we know that when the operator of our funhouse sets the tumbling-barrel turning, struggle for equilibrium does beget fresh intellectual and/or intuitive formulation. And so the funhouse for *man thinking* is a womb of possibility from which he may be reborn. I ruminate: if in one house of fiction we discover that we are lost and toppled and we regain our equilibrium, even to our knees, the author will have found us and so saved himself, according to the terrible and wonderful necessity which only he can know.

Source: Edgar H. Knapp, ''Found in the Barthhouse: Novelist As Savior,'' in *Modern Fiction Studies,* Vol. XIV, No. 4, Winter, 1968-1969, pp. 446-51.

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Fogel, Stanley. *Understanding John Barth,* University of South Carolina Press, 1990.

Another updated introductory critical text that contains an excellent bibliography and index.

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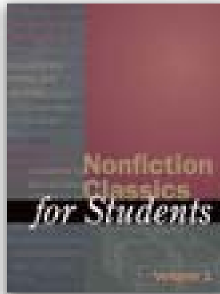

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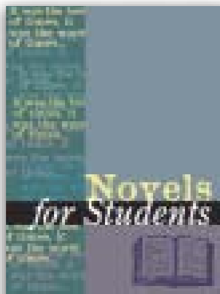

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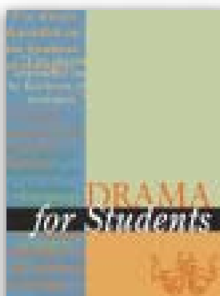

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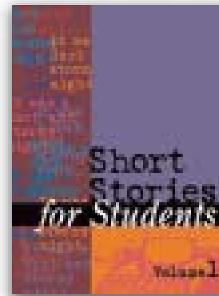

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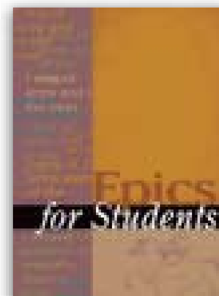

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