

**Writing as a Means to Transcend Death: An Analysis of *Every Third Thought*:
A Novel in Five Seasons**

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Abstract

The theme of the novel is about 'how' a text is produced and what techniques are used in its construction. However, in the field of narrative studies, the art of writing has not attracted much attention of the critics and scholars. The research paper tries to come to terms with the ontology of the art of writing, the way a tissue of the text is made, simultaneously remaining rooted in the traditions of the past. The research article is an attempt to unravel how writing is used by John Barth as a metaphor for life. Like the narrator in the novel who is also a writer, human beings also create and believe in mythical/fictional narratives as a means to postpone death, meaninglessness and annihilation.

Keywords: author, death, metafiction, narratology, writing

Introduction

The novel, *Every Third Thought: A Novel in Five Seasons* by American writer John Barth, is a story of retired creative writing professor George Newett, writer and narrated by him. He lives with his wife Amanda Todd who is a poet. In the story of the novel, the two live in a cramped rental house and discuss about their Heron Bay Estates home that has been destroyed now, as depicted in John Barth's previous book, *The Development*. It is not easy to read Barth without seeing what constitutes his texts and their content. The novel is, in a sense, continuation of the story of earlier work. Newett, after he hits his head, experiences memories from the whole of the past. He rather experiences them as if they are his first time realistic experiences. The reader,

then, loses the sense of past and present. This is what the whole text becomes, an interspersed tissues of memories and experiences wrought together without any separate identity. But, at times the narrator is aware of the fact that he is repeatedly participating in the stories and narratives of his past and he cannot escape the inevitability such a destiny. No matter how much he tries to escape the past, he ends up repeating what has already been said and done. The novel, at regular intervals makes a number of self-conscious references to itself, the other works by J. Barth himself and other writers, from classical to the present times. It also deliberately imitates the works and the writers of the past in terms of the content, styles and structures of writing and storytelling. Even the title of the novel is from *The Tempest*. Like Prospero in Shakespeare's play, Newett also weaves the magic web of narratives doing nothing but imitating all the previous styles of writing from the time of *Genesis* till date. Towards the end of the novel, the writer hints that he cannot escape deferring death through writing until he is mortal.

J. Barth excels in devising new style of writing in the face stagnation of traditional styles of writing. For doing this, he employs the technique of metafiction to narrate and wrestling with existential issues in his personal cum fictional life. He travels less traveled roads in the use of style and techniques of writing, immortalizing himself and his art while relishing and celebrating the death, end of the art of storytelling and writing. He writes in an age which is post-realistic where all existing perceptions beliefs are discredited as part of meta-narratives. In the similar context, Ronald Sukenick writes about such a world where absolutism has become utterly problematic. In such a decentered world, there is no such thing as reality, time and God who "was the omniscient author, but he died; now, no one knows the plot and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. (qtd. in Klinkowitz xvi–xvii)

Rather than looking for meaning and definition of time, God and reality, John Barth refers to a Hindu concept of conquering 'Time' by moving beyond it:

George Irving Newett, just beginning to imagine that he might after all escape any further fallout from that fall beyond a small scar in mid-forehead like a Hindu caste-mark, experienced the first of what has turned out to be (thus far, at least, as afore-feared) five serial, seasonal, vertiginous, and extended...visions. (5)

There is an attempt on the part of the narrator to transcend the world of reality as it is through the use of visions, hallucinations that also mirror the writing of the text. In the narrative of the novel, there is a recurrence of daily failures, hopelessness and suffocation trails and tribulation called as 'falls'. These 'falls' in the life of George Newett and Amanda Todd with illustrate the recurrence of "The Fall" of *The Bible* which brought mortality and death. The cycle of the world is no more functional, life and death are mere figments of imagination and hence lack conviction and there is an inherent and tacit desire to transgress the both life through the means of writing to annihilate the annihilation itself. Continuing with the vogue of annihilation, there is a constant denial by George Newett and Amanda Todd to have sex and children to continue life further. They, rather, look for newer means of continual of life, i.e., writing, thinking, imagining and hallucinating etc. They seem to regain the Eden-like world by not materializing sexual act, the way Adam and Eve did. There is a constant denial by Newett and Todd to have children which symbolically- or which is their unconscious effort to defeat death by not actually materializing sexual act the way Adam and Eve did. The narrative treats human history is sexual history, claiming that Newett and Todd tried to stop history and time by not having procreated, "With an intention to regain the paradise- "season less/ timeless Paradise" (Barth 4). Almost all the characters experience that they are repeatedly living the same reality from the ancient most history till date. Befuddled by such a revelation, they prefer having imaginary/fictional children and are conscious that these children don't exist in reality but they go on believing and deceiving themselves endlessly. To add to it, they call their writings as their progenies. They do this to defeat death and transgress time, history, body and sex and also seek to transcend human history from the times of the very beginning:

What's more, that primordial couple's "fall" occurred in the springtime of their lives, so to speak, and *began* both their sexual history and human history in general" (4).

The novel further reads that George Irving Newett began to "imagine that he might after all escape any further fallout from that fall beyond a small scar in mid-forehead like a Hindu caste-mark" (5). James Frazer in his book *The Golden Bough* has talked about primordial images that exist in the 'collective unconscious' and which determine our actions at the conscious level. These primordial images are beyond the reach of man or they cannot be reached at as James Frazer claims. In the light of Frazer's argument, the novel teaches us how to read it by associating the "falls" in the life of Newett and Todd with "The Fall" of Adam and Eve which

brought mortality and death. The central characters in the novel are writers by nature, hobby and profession, who participate in the act of writing stories by imitating the narratives and styles of writers from of past to illustrate the fact that their existence is a type of participation in the tradition of living, writing and telling as a means to defer death and forgetfulness.

Through his way of writing, Barth experiments with what Nietzsche once called as 'will to power' (30) and narrativizes almost everything in way of narrating and writing. Nietzsche writes: "There is nothing on earth which can have any value, if it have not a modicum of power – granted, of course, that life itself is the will to power" (30). John Barth is egged upon to prove Roland Barth false in his views about the death of the author. J. Barth asserts his identity and value as an author of the novel and character of the story at the same time. He sounds mostly like M. H. Abrams who, in his "Deconstructive Angel", also refuted the claims made in the essay "Death of the Author" and acknowledged the personality and self of the author. J Barth does not take anything at its face value rather goes deeper into its way of being and renders it personal through his fiction. He immortalizes himself through the written word and in almost all his novels there is a trace of Barth himself moving in and out of the fictional world, interacting with the characters and sharing their concerns. He does all this with blatant sense of self-consciousness which remains the main focus of the text. We cannot call his novel entirely as fiction because they are more than that. The theme of the novel is self-consciousness and an awareness of the processes of its own construction also highlighting the importance of the constructor, the author or the narrator. By adopting such a strange style of writing, John Barth resists pan post-structuralist narrative of the 'death of the author' and constantly reminds the readers about the indelibility, impossibility of the suppression of the self as is also envisaged by T.S. Eliot and John Keats through their theories of impersonality. The ontology of his writing is a proof that the author is never dead.

This stark and blatant self-reflexive knowledge of nothingness fills the experiences of characters, in the novel, with a desire to transcend the empty void. Like Derridian trace, the characters keep grappling with their sense of self and identity which "appears and disappears" (Abrams 430), is incessantly deferred and delayed. In this world of

meaninglessness, there is nothing to confirm to and the 'absence of an ultimate signified that extends the domain and play of signification to infinity' (431) and makes multiple narratives and voices possible. The act of writing keeps the hopes of characters' survival afloat from falling into the abyss of zero, the Unknown, a silence, a divine 'Mute'.

Conclusion

The archetypal fear of death and the strategies of survival make the writer (who is embodiment of several characters in the novel) write which he calls as 'scribblings': his substitute for sexual act and the act of procreation. The writer gets married and prefers not to have children, and for him, scribbling (writing) is similar to procreating, prolonging life and constantly defying death. In the moments of 'writing' we exist even if it is on the pages of books. The novel is a study in how writers and likewise human beings, though metonymically, create and believe in mythical/fictional narratives as a means to postpone death, meaninglessness and annihilation.

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