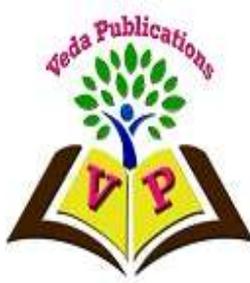


**THE MASKED REALITY IN JOHN BARTH'S *THE FLOATING OPERA***Soumy Syamchand¹, Dr. A. Selvaraj²^{1*}(Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram)²(Associate Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram.)Email: soumyasyamchand@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to discuss how John Barth represents the masked modern society in his novel *The Floating Opera*. The novel is realistic by premise however; the reality of an experience is curiously unconvincing. The novel is a comedy of existential absurdity. The uncertainties, the fears, the debilitating angst, and the pervasive temper of near nihilistic despair that the protagonist Todd experiences are the dominant dispiriting tensions of the century. Barth did not intend the rendition of Todd's free associations to be a sincere representation of a man's inner reality. In this novel, he wanted to illustrate the futility of asking the reason for living while acknowledging the futility of human existence.

Keywords: *Absurdity, Theatrum mundi, Psychological Trauma, Feeling of Paranoid***Citation:**

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John Barth is an eminent practitioner and theoretician of postmodern fiction. His first novel, *The Floating Opera*, is fairly representative of predominantly realistic fiction of the Fifties. The Novel is the story of Todd Andrew, a lawyer and bachelor who concludes that there is no meaning to his life, his life is fully masked since no one wants to explore the reality, and this leads him to think of committing suicide. He fails to make it and realizes that if there is no ultimate reason to continue living, there is also no final justification to end one's life. The novel is remarkably successful, written in a superbly subtle and yet invigorated style, replete with curious circumstances and equally curious characters, chief among which would have to be its narrator, Todd Andrews. Barth's early experiments in the realistic tradition exploit the tension between self-conscious artifice and the desire to represent human experience fully and accurately, and it is through this tension that the formal structures to establish their links with the informing principles of nihilism. Barth's work returns to the larger problem of the relationship between fiction and fictional realities. A unified understanding of *The Floating Opera*, then, must be based on a close examination of the relationship between its formal techniques and its thematic expression of Barth's early nihilism.

The Floating Opera is quite simply the first person narration by Todd Andrews of how he came about not to commit suicide one uncertain day in June, 1937. Such a perspective on the novel must focus on something amusing, something pathetic, vagaries and idiosyncrasies of an extremely interesting character. Depending upon one's mood of the moment, this narrative assessment could be seen as either tragic or comic, or even typical of that ambivalent but convenient amalgam known as Black Humor, wherein the comic invariably becomes comic, all because of the essential absurdity of life that seems to be the controlling premise of the novel. And it is such a dichotomous design which registers the characteristic mode of Todd's life, behavior, opinions, decisions, emotions, etc. More specifically, Todd Andrews, because of his intellectuality, apprehends the moment of his life as the resultant urgency of opposing tensions- life and death, order and chaos, the ephemeral and the eternal, tragedy and comedy,

the heart and the mind. Todd's consciousness imbues the narrative flow of the novel with a concomitant process and immediacy. This core fact about Todd's consciousness is especially appropriate, since Barth, by having Todd be born in 1900, is clearly signaling that Todd is a man of the Twentieth century. The uncertainties, the fears, the debilitating angst, and the pervasive temper of near nihilistic despair that Todd experiences are the dominant dispiriting tensions of the century. In one sense, Todd is a representative of the human condition, especially of the human condition as it has come to be described from the existentialist viewpoint. Perhaps the most momentous realization of modern intellectual is set of consequences he had been forced to accept from his acute awareness of the tenuous grasp he has on life. No longer having faith in an after-life, existential man finds that the life of the moment is the only life that can know. Yet, ironically, he also realizes that life is made absurd by the fact of death.

Todd describes how he decides and attempts to commit suicide but fails in doing so. His life with the possibility that he may die at any moment as a consequence of his heart condition: "a kind of subacute bacteriological endocarditis" with "a tendency to myocardial infarction" (FO 5). As Todd remarks, "my whole life, at least a great part of it, has been directed toward a solution of a problem, or mastery of a fact," and this fact, his awareness of his unpredictable heart, forces him ultimately to conclude that "There is no way to master the fact with which I live" (FO 16, 226). This realization provides an immediate cause for his attempted suicide and also represents his larger recognition of the limits of his ability to understand and to order his experience. Recalling his first sexual encounter, his adolescent seduction of Betty June Gunter on his seventeenth birthday, Todd comments, "Nothing, to me, is so consistently, profoundly, earth-shakingly funny as we animals in the act of mating" (FO 124). This provides Todd with the initial evidence for the absence of any ultimate rational basis for human values and actions, and his subsequent experience, "the second of two unforgettable demonstrations of my animality," only confirms this way (FO 124). During the battle of the Argonne Forest in World War



I, Todd is forced to spend the night in a shell crater with a German soldier. Though they initially struggle, they subsequently kiss, embrace, and engage each other in “a private armistice” (FO 66). As morning dawns, however, Todd begins to doubt his former enemy’s sincerity. When the German awakes, Todd slays him in a fit of panic. Despite the view of John C. Stubbs on this point: “it is fear which prompts Todd both to embrace the German and to bayonet him.” With his heart as a persistent reminder of the role of the arbitrary in his own life, Todd’s past experiences lead him to a resolute denial of the ultimate rational justification for moral values and actions. Todd responds to the assertion that life has no intrinsic value with the claim that “Nothing has intrinsic value” (FO 169). Though he himself subsequently rejects suicide, Todd never entirely repudiates his view of the absence of intrinsic value in human existence.

Todd persists in attempting both to impose a rational cause for a single human action. This latter endeavour is represented in his inquiry into the causes of his father’s suicide. Recognizing that “there is no will-o-the-wisp as elusive as the cause of any human act,” Todd justifies his pursuit by maintaining that “It doesn’t follow that because a goal is unattainable, one shouldn’t work toward its attainment” (FO 218- 219). In the same spirit, he adheres to a principle of “limited inconsistency” in his daily habits (FO 125). To the extent that Todd’s unorthodox behavior reflects, in his words, “a philosophical position of mine, or at least a general practice,” it is based on his understanding that there is no ultimate rational justification for these habits (FO 57). But his adherence to “the habit of habit-breaking” is also an assertion of strength and freedom in demonstrating his ability to impose a rational order on his existence through self-control and discipline (FO 125). In a similar vein, Todd adopts a series of what he terms “masks” to govern his life. These are overall attitudes or stances designed, as he later realizes, “to hide my heart from my mind, and my mind from my heart” (FO 223). Consistent with his tendency “to attribute to abstract ideas a life-or-death significance,” Todd wears each mask sincerely: “And each time, it did not take me long to come to believe that my current attitude was not only best for

me, because it put me on some kind of terms with my heart, but best in itself , absolutely”(FO 224). When his final mask, that of cynicism, collapses, his awareness of the absence of any ultimate rational justification for moral actions and values presses in on him, and he decides to commit suicide.

Ironically, it is rigorous only through the rigorous application of philosophical insight that Todd subsequently able to reject suicide. His original plan is to blow up the visiting showboat, Captain Adam’s Original and Unparalleled Floating Opera, with its entire cast and audience aboard. As his name aptly suggests, Captain Jacob Adam fulfills a patriarchal role in presiding over a metaphorical image of life and the world. But the theatrum mundi of his patriarchy, a heavily clichéd and conventional minstrel show, teaches Todd only to remain detached from his masks. It is significant, of course, that Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy and Jacque’s enumeration of the seven ages of man in *As You Like It* are part of the performance. The importance of these speeches however is belittled by the audience’s hostile reaction to T. Wallace Whittaker, “one of the best Shakespearian actors in the U.S.A.!”(FO 234). After accepting the world as a stage and human action as merely a series of roles, Todd appropriates the theatrum mundi as a felicitous metaphor to substantiate his assertion that “Hamlet’s question is, absolutely, meaningless (FO 251). Todd’s overall view is perhaps best expressed in Lionel Trilling’s comments on the relationship between the idea of sincerity and the use of masks:

If ‘the whole’ is seen as ‘confused’ rather than as orderly and rational, as, in George Eliot’s words, peremptory and absolute, the human relation to it need not be fixed and categorical; it can be mercurial and improvisational

Perceiving his masks are simply roles that are no more justifiable than other more values or actions. Todd is able to avert suicide. As McConnell observes, Todd’s continued existence is dependent upon “a kind of gamesmanship which denies any human authenticity” . But the self-consciousness that guides Todd toward this understanding effectively denies the validity of any action. As Frank Lentricchia remarks in another context, “this type of



self-consciousness can lead only to paralysis and despair" (p. 57). Todd reopens his inquiry and comments of his own future:

It occurred to me, for example, that faced with an infinitude of possible directions and having no ultimate reason to choose one over another, I would in all probability, though not at all necessarily, go on behaving much as I had thitherto, as a rabbit shot on the run keeps running in the same direction until (p.)

However, it is obvious that Barth is most unlikely to seek the human salvation in a religious belief even as the last resort. In fact, his basic philosophical stand seems akin to Sartrean existentialism, which takes the absence of God as the basic premise of human existence. Then, if Barth was only concerned with demonstrating his philosophical belief of the meaninglessness of human existence in a contingent world, it must have been more effective to deploy a more straightforward method which tends to facilitate the reader's emotional identification with the characters involved. The final conclusion of Todd's inquiry seems to support this conjecture about Barth's intention in writing *The Floating Opera*. "There's no final reason for living (or for suicide)" It is a conclusion that expresses not only the futility of human existence but also the futility of such an inquiry as Todd attempts. In fact, how close Todd's inquiry into the meaning of life is to the cul-de-sac rhetoric, why not, which we often use in our daily life when we want to do certain things without any rational reason. We remember an episode in the novel in which Jeannine asserted her desire to have one more ice-cream cone although she was unable to say why she wanted it. Barth is actually affirming human existence itself, though in a peculiarly oblique manner. In this novel he wanted to illustrate the futility of asking the reason for living while acknowledging the futility of human existence. Such a position of Barth resembles that of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who asserts the tragic affirmation of human existence. It is indeed a kind of heroism to affirm the existence which is full of suffering while knowing that existence itself is ultimately meaningless.

Todd's final position is highly equivocal, and his consideration of "values less than absolute" is postponed at the end of *The Floating Opera*: "But that's another enquiry and another story" (FO 252). The moral indifference that accompanies Todd's insincerity thus goes unchallenged. The tension in which Todd lives but also gives his life harmony and balance in the manner of the Heraclitean harmony of opposites. Todd puts himself in order, harmonizes discordant elements. Contradictions operate as wheels within wheels. Within the larger gestures of temporality and eternity, there is the conflict between the mirrors and the masks, the tension between irrational force and rational order and form which constitute his identity; and within the mirrors and masks themselves, still other conflicting opposites; The reality beneath the masks a self that is ludicrous and destructive but also one capable of deep emotional experience and total communication with another; the masks, on the other hand, disguise, by keeping in check, the ludicrous and destructive animal but also inhibit.

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