Reality Behind Absurdity: The Myth of American Dream

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Abstract
In the twenty-first century, American dream remains an important element of the nation's identity, and it has been proven to be amazingly elastic and durable for hundreds of years, transcending time, space, racial, and class lines. This paper explores the concept of American dream via interpreting postmodernist writer Donald Barthelme's *The Glass Mountain*. By briefly reviewing the evolution of American dream and drawing parallel between the reflection of American dream in the fairy tale, and in Donald Barthelme's *The Glass Mountain*, this paper argues that American dream becomes a myth when it is decoupled from common good, and reduced to merely material pursuit. It does not represent "a better, richer and fuller life" any longer. Instead, it is deformed by the harsh social reality and degenerated into material possession and the means to fulfill this dream cannot be justified sometimes. Exploring the reality behind absurdity via interpreting the postmodernist techniques employed by Barthelme, the paper reinforces its argument.

Keywords
Postmodernist, American dream, myth, reality, absurdity

American dream is the most enduring myth in American culture. It helps to shape the life of generations of Americans. Written in the era when American dream was undergoing “great recalibration” (Kamp 2009: 4), *The Glass Mountain* revealed the true color of American dream hiding behind the sound and fury of the 1960s. And it sounds prophetic for these times of financial and economic disorder. As a prominent figure among post-modernist writers, Donald Barthelme is seeking to debunk the myth of American dream in one hundred numbered sentences. Behind the absurdity created by typical postmodernist mechanism like intertextuality, collage, and autonomous association, careful reader will construct the nude reality about American dream.

AMERICAN DREAM AS A MYTH

*The Changing Faces of American Dream*

American dream began with the sailing to the New World. It was regarded as a new beginning, a second chance. When John Winthrop led a group of puritans sailing to the New World, he gave a sermon “A Model of Christian Charity”. On the ship Arbella, he described his vision of establishing a “City Upon a Hill”. He declared “For we must consider we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of

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all people are upon us”. And he continued “We shall be a story and a by-word through the world” (Winthrop 1630). So they set sail from England with a dream that their new nation would be a guiding light. It would be an example for the whole world. The Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution, the founding document of the United States of American guaranteed all Americans “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness”. This is believed to be the heart of American dream. From the early colonial period until the 1960s, even including the era of the Great Depression, working hard, thrift, and having faith in God was once firmly believed as the road to American dream. In the midst of industrialization and urbanization, many common Americans found solace in the tales of Horatio Alger, whose characters armed with the will of American dream overcame adversity through hard work, perseverance, self-reliance, and self-discipline. In the depths of the Great Depression, not many Americans discarded their dream. And it even became a “shared dream” when President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act of the 1935. There is no denying that there is always a material component to the American dream. But in the 1960s, it was translated into specific goals rather than pursuit of happiness. Consumerism tapped into the values of American dream and distorted it. In recent years, with the widening gap between rich and poor, with the gradual dwindling of traditional middle class in American society, it even changed the core value of American dreams.

In his book *The Epic of America*, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, James Truslow Adams provided the first and most quoted definition of the phrase: “It is a dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Truslow 1947). The success of generations after generations of great Americans, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Carnegie, and even President Barack Obama proved and enhanced the dream.

Conversely, their legendary “rags to riches” stories together with Horatio Alger’s dime novel characters also rendered the American dream a myth. “That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone” has promised opportunities for everyone to pursue their dreams, but the opportunity is conditioned within the bounds of the harsh social reality. “The reality is some people will realize the American dream more stupendously and significantly than others” (Kamp 2009: 3). While it is true for President Obama, “Only in America is my story possible”, it does not mean his legend can be repeated by anyone (Obama 2008).

**The Myth of American Dream**

Roland Barthes, a French philosopher, and linguist defines myth as “A construction which is created and maintained by those signs and value of a certain culture which are most dominant”. So American dream originated from the Puritan work ethic is the product of WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture. It emphasizes any one could succeed and achieve wealth if they work hard. To examine myth, Barthes means to understand its ideological function in perpetuating economic and political aims of the society. American dream as a myth is “a system of communication”, an ideological tool which helps to motivate generations of Americans to pursue, to climb up the social ladders, and to break new frontiers. German sociologist Max Weber observed how the Calvanist emphasizes on hard work and accumulation of wealth stimulated the growth of American capitalism. Barthes describes the function of ideology in this respect as “What the world supplies to myth is a historical reality defined... By the way in which men have produced and used it; what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality” (Barthes 1984: 155). Thus, according to Barthes, when American dream becomes a myth, it transforms the harsh reality of
common peoples’ self-improvement into something poetic and magical.

**THE GLASS MOUNTAIN AND THE MYTH OF AMERICAN DREAM**

Donald Barthelme’s *The Glass Mountain* is a parody of the classic namesake fairytale collected in Andrew Lang’s *The Yellow Fairy Book*. According to the fairy tale, on top of *The Glass Mountain*, there stands a castle of pure gold, and in the castle, there is an enchanted princess of surpassing fairness and beauty. Many knights have come from afar to try their luck, but it was in vain. A school boy armed with lynx’s sharp claws starts the ascent. He endures the intense pain of eagle’s sharp claw into his flesh and seizes the bird’s two feet. He flies to the castle with the wings of the eagle and cuts off its feet while they come close to the castle, and then he drops onto the balcony. Finally, he marries the princess and owns her treasures. The blood of the eagle has restored all the dead climbers to life.

The fairy tale echoes perfectly with the rags to riches story of American dream. Some one who is brave and courageous seeks to make his dream come true. He endures the hardship and frustrations in the process. With perseverance and self-discipline, he finds happiness, wealth, and expanded opportunities to move forward. The happy ending of the story reminds the reader the first version of the American dream: “We shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of people are upon us”.

In the one hundred numbered sentences, Barthelme submitted his petition to discard the meta-narrative of American dream by debunking the myth:

As an avant-garde of postmodernism, Donald Barthelme wrote *The Glass Mountain* at a pregnant moment in intellectual and cultural history “When postmodernism emerged from the chrysalis of the anti-modern to establish itself as a cultural aesthetic in its own right” (Harvey 1990: 46). And it was the time that Foucault declared “Postmodernism signals the death of such meta-narratives whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a universal human history” (Harvey 1990: 46). This revolutionary shift echoed in almost all the works of Barthelme.

In the first place, he transferred *The Glass Mountain* from the frontier area to New York City, exactly speaking, “at the corner of Thirteen Street and Eighth Avenue” (Harvey 1990: 61). So, for Barthelme, the frontier is closed which means the end of individualistic, from rags to riches version of American dream even if John F. Kennedy appealed to Americans to conquer new frontier. He said at the Democratic Convention which nominated him as the Democratic presidential candidate, “We stand today on the edge of a new frontier—the frontier of 1960s, the frontier of unfulfilled hopes and dreams...” (Kennedy 1960). Then, he continued to talk about that American dream has decoupled from any concept of common good. American economist John Kenneth Galbraith also lamented, in his book *The Affluent Society* (1958), American had lost “a sense of their priority, focusing on consumerism at the expense of public-sector needs like parks, schools and infrastructure maintenance” (Galbraith 1998: 151). He pointed out, “In a community where public services have failed to keep abreast of private consumption”, it has created an “atmosphere of private opulence and public squalor” (Galbraith 1998: 191). Barthelme expressed the same concern: “The sidewalks were full of dogshit in brilliant color: ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder; and some had been apprehended cutting down trees, a row of elms broken-backed among the VWS and Valiants;
down with a power saw beyond a doubt” (Barthelme 1970: 63).

He moves farther to prove that American dream is reduced to merely material pursuit. “No one has ever climbed the mountain on behalf of science, or in search of celebrity, or because the mountain is a challenge” (Barthelme 1970: 64). Rather, a lot of people has lost faith in American dream and try to find comfort in drinking. “My acquaintances passed a brown bottle from hand to hand; better than a kick in the crotch; better than a pole in the eye with a sharp stick...”. What is worse, these who believe the dream is unattainable are trying to find the easy avenue to achieving success. And they do not bother to justify their means. “My acquaintances moved among the fallen knights, collecting rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies’ favors. My acquaintances were prising out the gold teeth of not-yet dead knights. My acquaintances were debating the question, which of them would get my apartment?” (Barthelme 1970: 65).

He discovered that the conventional symbol associated with American dream is challenged and people put a question mark in their mind about the true identity of American dream. “A number of nightingales with traffic lights tied to their legs flew past me”. Symbols are mixed with signs. Barthelme once said, “Signs are signs; some of them are lies” (Gillen 1972: 40). And he believes, a good reason to climb the Glass Mountain is to disenchant a symbol.

Consumerism, especially easy consumer credit deprives American dream of its fundamental principles like working hard, thrift, perseverance, and self-discipline. Many people believe striking rich and luck. And the increasingly huge gap between the rich and poor distorted the true color of American dream. Barthelme sounds the prophetic wake up call at the end of the story. “I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess. I threw the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain to my acquaintances”. To read the story against the backdrop of today’s American society where the conservatives in the Congress refuse to tax the rich and try to overthrow the healthcare policy which has extended health care to the vulnerable middle and low income families, where a lot of people never contain their outsized purchasing and where lingering racial issues still exist, it is easy to understand why Barthelme ends his story in this way. She is not a princess who can bring wealth, happiness, and sense of achievement to dream seekers. She does not represent “a better, richer, and fuller life” any longer. Instead, she is deformed by the harsh reality and degenerated into a poker-faced material girl.

REALITY BEHIND ABSURDITY

Absurdity is the hallmark of postmodernist writers. And absurdity is proved to be the effective weapon. Barthelme used to debunk the myth of American dream and subvert its meta-narrative in The Glass Mountain. He skillfully takes advantage of such postmodernist techniques as intertextuality, fragmentation, and collage to establish an atmosphere of absurdity, but careful reader can always construct the reality behind the sound and the fury.

The Intertextuality

The term intertextuality is coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva. For Kristeva, the meaning is not directly transferred from writer to reader, but is mediated through, or filtered by codes imparted to the writer and reader by other texts.

It is a way of accounting for the role of literary and extra-literary materials without recourse to traditional notions of authorship. It subverts the concept of the text as self-sufficient, hermetic totality, foregrounding, in its stead, the fact that all literary production takes place in the presence of other texts; they are, in effect, palimpsests (Zhang 2008: 74).

According to the theory of intertextuality, codes,
forms, and systems of culture serve as guidance to the meaning of a text. Reading is like traveling between different texts. Meaning is something constructed by the reader while shuttling among texts and what they refer to and relate to. Text thus becomes intertext.

In *The Glass Mountain*, the castle of pure gold, the knights, the eagle, the way to climb up the mountain, and the princess are all codes imparted to writer and readers. Decoding them in term of traditional value preached by the fairy tale and the context of New York City, readers will autonomously stuff the 100 sentences, fill all the gaps, and gain their own understanding and insights.

*The Glass Mountain* becomes a glass coated modern skyscraper. “Touching the side of the mountain, one feels coolness; peering into mountain, one sees sparkling blue-white depths; the mountain towers over that part of Eighth Avenue like some splendid, immense office building” (Barthelme 1970: 61).

The princess does not represent the perfect image of American dream any longer, and she has changed into a material girl. In the fairy tale, “She gave him all her treasure, and the youth became a rich and mighty ruler”. But in Barthelme’s story, “I approached the symbol, with layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess” (Barthelme 1970: 65).

**Collage**

Barthelme once wrote, “The principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the 20th century in all media” (Olsen 1986: 71). And *The Glass Mountain* is often referred to as his representative work of collage. In the story, he puts different, sometimes even conflicting images onto the same canvas, “A mountain, Eighth Avenue of New York City, a number of nightingales, traffic lights, a knight in pale pink armor and different groups of noisy street people” (Barthelme 1970: 61-64). Besides, in the process of telling story, he inserts parts of the fairy tale which his story is based on. Question and answers mix with and are frequently interrupted by the flow of narrative. Misplaced quotations are used to animate the story. No wonder film and literary critic Richard Schickel comments in his article, titled Freak Out on Barthelme, “Almost all his stories, and in particular the later ones, are collages. Thus if you come away from his works confused, terribly aware of it as a jumble of images and ideas, you’ll have caught his basic drift” (Johnson 1976: 88).

By collage, Barthelme presents what Foucault described as “heterotopia” (Foucault 1986). The juxtaposition of different scenes breaks the linear narrative sequence and what has been excluded from it is then offered an opportunity to divert the totality of capitalist space, namely “the Utopia (of American dream) constructed by the rational American modernism” (Arentsen 2004: 5).

Thus, collage helps to create the effect of an exhibition hall in which the evolution of American dream is presented. And reality is suddenly revealed to the readers at the end of their visit that American dream is actually a myth. That is why it was thrown headfirst down by the climber.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In *The Glass Mountain*, Donald Barthelme presents an absurd, collage-like world, in which there are avenues lead readers to better understanding the true nature of some dominant, authoritative concepts. This paper believes it targets at the American dream, and it contends that as a parody of the classic fairy tale, the one hundred fragmented sentences actually showcase the changing faces of American dream and how does it become a myth.

**References**


Giroux.

**Bio**

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