

CONTRIBUTION OF DONALD BARTHELME IN
FOLKLORE SYSTEM OF POSTMODERN LITERATURE

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Abstract. *This thesis explores the contribution of Donald Barthelme's short stories "The School" (1974) and "The Glass Mountain" (1970) to the transformation of folklore in postmodern literature. As one of the most innovative American postmodern writers, Barthelme reimagines traditional folklore through fragmentation, parody, irony, and intertextuality, demonstrating that folklore functions as a dynamic cultural system rather than a fixed body of inherited narratives. "The Glass Mountain" is a postmodern reworking of the European folktale motif of the hero who climbs an enchanted mountain to obtain a magical reward. While preserving recognizable folkloric elements such as the impossible quest, the heroic figure, and the symbolic princess, Barthelme deliberately subverts readers' expectations through fragmented narration, urban imagery, and an ironic ending. The traditional heroic journey is transformed into a critique of modern social values, suggesting that contemporary reality resists the moral certainty and narrative closure associated with classical folklore. Similarly, "The School" incorporates folkloric patterns related to the universal themes of life, death, renewal, and communal storytelling. Although the narrative is set in an ordinary classroom, the repeated cycle of death and rebirth evokes archetypal motifs commonly found in myths and oral traditions. Barthelme combines absurdity with philosophical reflection, inviting readers to interpret these recurring events as symbolic expressions of the human search for meaning in an unpredictable world.*

The story demonstrates how folklore can survive in modern fiction through symbolic structures rather than direct retellings of traditional tales. The paper argues that Barthelme's reinterpretation of folkloric motifs reflects one of the central principles of postmodernism: the continuous reconstruction of cultural narratives. His use of intertextuality and metafiction transforms folklore into an open system of meanings that encourages multiple interpretations instead of presenting universal truths. Consequently, Barthelme expands the literary function of folklore by integrating traditional motifs into experimental narrative forms that address contemporary cultural, philosophical, and existential concerns.

Keywords: Donald Barthelme, "The School", "The Glass Mountain", postmodern literature, folklore, intertextuality, metafiction, fairy-tale motifs.

Main body: Postmodern literature redefines folklore by treating it not as a fixed cultural heritage but as an open system of signs that can be reinterpreted according to contemporary social and cultural contexts.

Donald Barthelme occupies a significant place in this transformation through his innovative use of folkloric motifs, fragmented narrative structures, irony, and metafiction. His short stories “*The Glass Mountain*” and “*The School*” demonstrate how traditional folklore can be reconstructed to question conventional ideas about heroism, truth, identity, and human existence. “*The Glass Mountain*” is one of Barthelme's most explicit engagements with folklore.

The story draws upon the widespread folktale motif of the hero's impossible quest, particularly the European legend of climbing a magical glass mountain to rescue a princess or obtain a valuable reward. However, Barthelme deliberately dismantles the traditional structure of this narrative. Instead of presenting a noble hero whose perseverance leads to moral victory, he places the quest within a modern urban environment characterized by violence, alienation, and absurdity. The numbered fragments interrupt the continuity of the narrative, preventing readers from experiencing the linear progression typical of classical folktales. As a result, the familiar folkloric pattern becomes a vehicle for questioning the relevance of heroic ideals in contemporary society. In contrast, “*The School*” incorporates folklore in a less direct but equally significant manner.

The story presents a sequence of unexplained deaths involving plants, animals, and people within a classroom setting. These repetitive cycles evoke universal folkloric themes of mortality, renewal, and the continuity of life. Similar patterns appear in myths and oral traditions across cultures, where death is frequently followed by regeneration or transformation.

Barthelme does not offer supernatural explanations; instead, he combines ordinary reality with symbolic repetition, allowing readers to recognize archetypal structures beneath the surface of everyday events. The children's persistent questions about death and love function as a modern form of communal storytelling. Like traditional folklore, the dialogue seeks to explain experiences that remain beyond rational understanding. The teacher's inability to provide definitive answers reflects the postmodern rejection of absolute truth, while the story's conclusion emphasizes human connection rather than certainty. Consequently, folklore survives not through literal repetition of traditional tales but through recurring symbolic patterns that continue to shape collective experience. Barthelme's contribution to the folklore system of postmodern literature lies in his ability to preserve traditional motifs while simultaneously transforming their meanings. Through parody, intertextuality, fragmentation, and metafiction, he demonstrates that folklore remains an active cultural resource capable of addressing the intellectual and existential concerns of the modern world. His stories illustrate that folklore is not confined to the past but continues to evolve through creative reinterpretation, making it an essential component of postmodern literary discourse.

Conclusion: Donald Barthelme's “*The Glass Mountain*” and “*The School*” demonstrate how folklore can be transformed into a dynamic component of postmodern literary discourse.

Rather than reproducing traditional folktales in their original form, Barthelme reconstructs familiar folkloric motifs through fragmentation, irony, parody, and metafiction, thereby challenging conventional assumptions about narrative, truth, and cultural authority. The analysis reveals that Barthelme neither rejects folklore nor merely preserves it; instead, he redefines its aesthetic and ideological functions within postmodern fiction.

His works confirm that postmodern literature revitalizes folklore through reinterpretation rather than repetition. Therefore, Donald Barthelme's contribution to the folklore system of postmodern literature lies in his ability to transform inherited narratives into innovative artistic forms that encourage multiple interpretations and active reader engagement.

His fiction not only expands the possibilities of postmodern storytelling but also reaffirms the enduring relevance of folklore as a living and evolving element of contemporary literary culture. Future research may further examine how Barthelme's narrative strategies compare with those of other postmodern writers who similarly reinterpret folklore to address the cultural and intellectual challenges of the modern era.

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