

# Interpretation of Donald Barthelme's "The Balloon" from the Perspective of Metafiction

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## Abstract

**The paper is an interpretation of Donald Barthelme's "The Balloon" from the perspective of metafiction. The balloon as a piece of postmodern writing, the narrator as the creator of art and the citizens as readers appreciating art are analyzed in detail in the body part. Through the analysis, readers can get a better understanding of the short story from the metafictional perspective.**

## Keywords

**"The Balloon", metafiction, Donald Barthelme.**

## 1. Introduction

A most avant-garde postmodern writer in his era, Donald Barthelme establishes his fame for his non-traditional novel *Snow White*. But his short stories are equally intriguing and innovative, one of them being "The Balloon". An anti-genre and anti-plot story, "The Balloon" might as well be interpreted as a highly metafictional piece of writing that concerns writing itself and the relationship between writers and readers, though it has been analyzed by critics from many other perspectives. To some extent, "The Balloon" can be considered as a postmodernist metaphor[1]. The paper tries to explore Barthelme's "The Balloon" by putting all the situations taking place in the short story in the context of art creation and appreciation in a bid to help readers better understand the story and postmodern writing as a whole.

## 2. Body

### 2.1. The Balloon as A Piece of Postmodern Writing

The balloon in the story is to the narrator what the title "The Balloon" is to the author. The narrator inflates over Manhattan an immense and irregular balloon whose shape keeps changing. The balloon in the story may be interpreted as any form of art, be it music, sculpture, poetry or fiction. If we assume that the balloon symbolizes a novel, then the novel tends to be a long one for its "immensity". And the novel is likely to have covered a large audience and exerted great influence as the balloon succeeds in attracting the attention of almost all citizens in the city. As the balloon is not round in shape but represents itself as irregular, the implied novel is not a traditional one with a decent plot and characterization. Rather, it is more likely to be a piece of avant-garde postmodern writing which is characterized by its indeterminacy and irrationality and defies any explanation and clarification. The ever-changing shape of the balloon possibly indicates that novel subtypes such as travel writing, realistic novels, sentimental novels, modern writing and postmodern writing coexist and in turn gain popularity among the readers and put themselves in the spotlight for readers' comments.

### 2.2. The Narrator as the Creator of Art

Just as the balloon in the short story is under complete control of the narrator, the author Barthelme takes full charge of his own writing. In the story, the narrator inflates the balloon for purely personal reasons despite the various guesses and responses from the citizens of all ages

and from all walks of life. Barthelme may also create "The Balloon" for purely personal reasons and out of his own will. It is up to Barthelme himself to start and stop his composition any time and to decide on the content of the story. Barthelme seems to play the game of hide and seek with his readers. The author manages to attract the attention of his readers just as the narrator attracts the attention of the citizens through his balloon. Barthelme purposefully discards the plot and characterization just as the balloon gives up his "normal" round shape. Perhaps it is just the distorted and awesome features of Barthelme's writing that make it the spotlight and a hit as well. Through the implied discussion of the relationship between the narrator and the balloon, Barthelme the author highlights the complete freedom of creation as a writer or as an artist to a larger extent.

Just as the narrator chooses to focus on the citizens' responses to the balloon, Barthelme chooses to focus on his readers' responses to his own creation of art. One of the issues that Barthelme truly concerns is the decline and deterioration of literature or the failure of language as an effective way to express meaning and reflect reality. Therefore, Barthelme chooses to elaborate on the problematic writing itself as his main ingredients for his writing content. In the story, Barthelme presents his finished product---the story itself in the form of a balloon. Barthelme does not provide much information about how the balloon comes into existence or how the story is created. Instead, he just presents it as it is, floating in the sky or being there for the readers. Barthelme reveals the fictionality of his writing as he controls the balloon, capable of making the balloon whatever shape it is and having a say as to when to start inflating the balloon and when to stop it.

### **2.3. The Citizens as Readers Appreciating Art**

Barthelme, who writes with the metafictional awareness, is constantly dealing with his readers through his writing. To a large extent, Barthelme's novels and short stories are all literary criticisms rather than literary creation. "The Balloon" is no exception. Through the balloon in the short story "The Balloon", Barthelme interacts with his readers, inducing their responses to and attitudes towards literary pieces. McCaffrey points out that readers are forced to ponder at a deeper level on art itself[2]. In the short story, we can see three types of readers pondering on art.

The citizens representing readers have vastly different interpretations about the same balloon floating in sky, indicating their different interpretations about the same story. Kids regard the balloon as something that can give them much fun and simply accept for what it is. Kids here may represent the types of adult readers who refuse to over-interpret any writing. Instead, they try to enjoy the piece of writing to the fullest, accepting the theory of "art for art's sake". For them, the most important thing of reading is to get fun, satisfaction, inspiration, courage, enlightenment etc. or is just for killing time. They are not interested in seeking for meanings. The writer Barthelme in the depth of his heart may be against the bombardment of various literary criticisms. Perhaps in Barthelme's eyes, these comments from critics are not only futile and misleading but also funny and ironic. For him, an apple is an apple, and it may be not intended by the writer as a symbol of love or something else. What Barthelme intends to create is a new reality, a reality that is independent of the outer reality. The reality created is just itself, existing as it is and refusing any interpretation.

Some adult citizens who represent readers or critics strive to get insights into the sudden appearance of the giant balloon, but in vain. There have been heated discussions as to the significance of the balloon, but over time people's interest and enthusiasm in such discussions fade away. Since the balloon symbolizes literary works, Barthelme is likely to indicate that the wax and wane of literary trends, especially postmodern trend is quite common. At first, critics and readers may be shocked at postmodern writing, and show their very interest in reading and studying the fashionable trend. But after some time, they get used to the somewhat clichéd

comments from other readers and critics. So for them, postmodern writing has turned to nothing but “trash”. Accordingly, they stop appreciating postmodern works and eulogizing them as great innovations of historic significance. Postmodern works, like the balloon, lose their charm concerning the readers who have been accustomed to all the stereotypes of postmodern writing.

In the story, adults observing the balloon all agree that it is futile to clarify the meaning of the balloon, because the location of the definite meaning of it is by no means possible. People’s reluctance to pursue the meaning of the balloon reflects in reality some readers and critics’ opposition to seek meaning through the exploration of postmodern texts. “.....we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena.” [3] In the modern era, most people have given up spiritual pursuits and focused on material ones that can ensure their survival and better living conditions. Sometimes some people’s spiritual pursuits are intended for material comforts and achievements. The majority of the citizens turn to more practical and more meaningful activities such as “hanging green and blue paper lanterns from the warm gray underside, in certain streets, or seized the occasion to write messages on the surface, announcing their availability for the performance of unnatural acts, or the availability of acquaintances” [3].

The government officials are at a loss what to do about the balloon. Actually, they show their very tolerance about the balloon for two reasons. “First, secret tests conducted by night that convinced them that little or nothing could be done in the way of removing or destroying the balloon, and, secondly, a public warmth that arose (not uncolored by touches of the aforementioned hostility) toward the balloon, from ordinary citizens.”[3] Here Barthelme may be discussing the relationship between literature and politics. In Barthelme’s view, politics is always likely to interfere with literary creation and literary reviews. But for this immense balloon or the postmodern writing in the figurative sense, the political force is not powerful enough to control and exert its influence upon it. The political force has tried under the table various ways to “remove” or “destroy” the balloon, but in vain, so it has to face and accept its existence. Also, the balloon appeals a lot to the ordinary citizens, which influences the decisions of those in power and in turn equally contributes to the intactness of it.

### 3. Conclusion

The paper discusses the metafictional feature of Barthelme’s short story “The Balloon” from the perspective of the balloon as a piece of postmodern writing, the narrator as the creator of art and the citizens as readers appreciating art. The balloon resembles postmodern writing for its irregular shape and people’s initial enthusiasm for it and their gradual loss of interest. The narrator resembles the creator as both have complete freedom and absolute say concerning art creation. The citizens resemble readers appreciating art. The kids’ response to the balloon indicates adult readers’ sheer appreciation of art; some adults’ response to the balloon indicates some readers and critics’ ineffective efforts to seek deeper meanings through art; the government officials’ response shows the interference of politics in literature and its seeming tolerance towards it for its inability to get rid of it. Through the detailed analysis, readers get a deeper understanding of Barthelme’s “The Balloon” from the perspective of metafiction.

### References

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- [3] <https://www.douban.com/note/434593608/>.