
UNIT 1 THE POSTWAR AMERICAN NOVEL

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall see the whole phenomenon of the postwar American novel, the novel of the late 1940's and 1950's when a new set of writers with a distinct philosophy and fictional mode emerged on the American literary scene-Saul Bellow, Norman Mailor, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. Understanding Barth substantially requires understanding the intellectual and artistic phenomenon of the postwar fiction. Not that the phenomenon exhausts Barth's creativity but Barth's individualist response is a part of a broader response of the novelists in the late 1940's and 1950's to the impact of the second world war and to the emerging cultural scene in America. Hence, we begin with postwar American novel for a fuller understanding of John Barth and his novel, *The Floating Opera*.

1.1 THE POST SECOND WORLD WAR AMERICAN NOVEL

In a seminal essay called, "The Literature of Exhaustion", John Barth sums up the postwar literature as the literature of exhaustion. The genre is minimally American, for the postwar experience is largely Euro-American. The effective American participation in the war and the emergence of America as a cultural center for many of the refugee European writers enabled America to experience the war intellectually. The Europeanization of the American novel is simply its cultural expanse beyond its national boundaries. The catastrophe of the war brought a cynical disillusionment about the modernist values of liberal individualism. These values became particularly strong after the first world war with the enthusiastic American responsiveness to the European modernism. There was disillusionment with the first world war too, but that was more in the nature of a concern for the negation of human values in the war. The first world war did not bring in cynicism as did the second world war but intensified humanist concerns whereas the second world war, which was a sheer holocaust made humanist convictions almost impossible. The American novel in the aftermath of the war presented a new intellectual ambience vastly different from that of the predecessors. Saul Bellow, Norman Mailor, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth reshaped the American novel in

the postwar years. Theirs was a renaissance necessitated by the postwar cultural perspectives. Together, they heralded a new phase in the American fiction, a phase that became markedly clear not only in their writings but also among the novelists who came into prominence during the sixties and the subsequent decades. The significance of these writers is comparable to that of Mark Twain and Henry James who shaped the American fiction in the 19th century and to that of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne who constituted another phase in American fiction in the 19th century. More importantly, Bellow, Mailor, Pynchon and Barth present a contrastive tradition to the modern champions of American fiction in the early 20th century like Earnest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Scott Fitzgerald.

One understands the postwar fiction of Bellow, Mailor, Pynchon and Barth only if we see what the earlier postwar fiction of Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald was like and what Bellow and others were subsequently looking askance at that tradition in fiction.

1.2 THE AMERICAN NOVEL SINCE THE 1920'S

The twenties began a modern or modernist period in American literature. More than any other genre of art, novel received a powerful fillip from the European tidings of modernist thought and imagination. In the 19th century, Henry James laboured hard to give a European form and sophistication to the American novel. William Dean Howells' endeavours in the direction of literary realism/naturalism. Their efforts, among other things, brought a sea change to the literary scene in America at the turn of the century. The ethos of the ever expanding Frontier having ended by 1900, and America having grown into an industrial giant by 1920, America was particularly receptive to the European strain of literary realism/naturalism which appealed to the American imagination for its scientific temper and method, particularly because the American nation owed its economic boom in the early 20th century to the various advances in Science.

The American novel since the 1920's presented a new canon vastly different from the 19th century American novel of, essentially, rural and Frontier America. The early American novel of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser strove in the direction of perfecting realistic/naturalistic art.

There was another wave of modernist individualism, as opposed to modernist realism/naturalism cherishing the irrepressible human will and the infinite powers of human intellect and imagination. This was largely an inheritance from the 19th century rationality and individualism intensified with the keen modernist perceptions of the world, and an equally felt, modernist self-awareness. Consequently, one notices in the American fiction of the twenties a growing complexity of human character, unknown in the 19th century literature, at odds with the emerging socio-cultural situation and at odds with the traditional American morality of puritanism. This discomfort becomes conflictual with the invasion of Marxist ideology into the capitalist ethos of the American socio-economic situation and Freudian awareness of one's own sexuality into the realm of personal and social morality conditioned by puritanism.

The early twentieth century novel recognizes, as never before, the manifold challenges man faces in his situation and also asserts, for the first time, infinite human capacity to face up to the challenges. Furthermore, modernism posited a positive concern for the minutiae of everyday life.—the trivial and the actual is given a significance hitherto unknown. A Hemingway hero lives his life nonchalantly in the immediacy of experience unencumbered by any ideas or concepts. The only thing to do is to see what one could make of oneself in the given

situation. Faulkner believed in the little things of life "sublimating" what he called "the actual into the apocryphal"

The Postwar American Novel

The concern for the actual is realism but the heightened concern of the self-assertive human mind has tragic implications. In fact, the tragic predicament of the 20th century man, particularly the 20th century American lay in the growing modernization of his situation and the growing modernism of his mind. The American novel emphasized the human and the situational possibilities of tragedy. Tragedy in the 19th century European literature was the sheer pathos of the human situation. Man was a pitiable victim of his situation with no capacity either to challenge his situation or to assert his dignity.

The modern American novel is significant for the tragic affirmation of human dignity. Hemingway's characters are all losers but heroes of lost causes. As a Hemingway character puts it, "a man can be destroyed but not defeated". Hawthorne refused to accept "the end of man" and asserted that human will does not simply "endure" but would "prevail" itself against all failures. For Fitzgerald, tragedy is the very process of civilization, of its romance and realism and of its exuberance and irony.

More than the power of its realism and tragedy, Modern American novel acquires the strength of the genre. Under the realistic and naturalistic mode, it acquired a precision and compactness of form and simplicity, naturalness and directness of expression and emerges as a powerful medium of cultural statement and reflection.

As the American novel enters the thirties, the economic depression of the decade brought overwhelming Marxist perspectives of economic determinism overshadowing its human values. Marxist perspectives intensified naturalism in the novel and when Marxism is the overriding passion, naturalism took the shape of regionalism and ethnic literature. So much so, realism/naturalism became the predominant mode of American fiction either to present a slice of life or the repressive pathos of living in an age of machine or to assert the indefatigable human and its infinite promise.

1.3 THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON AMERICA

The second world war was catastrophic not only for the devastation it caused but for exploding the modernist edifice built in America from the twenties through the forties. The first world war created a humanist aversion for the destruction the war caused but did not stifle civilizational values. The second world war brought a cynical attitude towards the very process of civilization. The self-confident and vibrant modernism that explained the western world finds itself at the crossroads calling for a redefinition of human identity. The notion of man-made world gives way to an apprehension of a self-destructive human world. Though America came out unscathed in the second world war, the fact that the nation was the residence for many refugee intellectuals from Europe felicitated America's intellectual involvement in the war.

The war traumatised the European intellectuals to no end. In sheer desperation, they gave up all conventional modes of thinking and embraced a sort of intellectual and artistic iconoclasm. The successful American intervention in the war made the European context come irresistibly to the American thinking. The result was an emphatic response to the holocaust of the war and a weariness with its own cherished values which in the succeeding decades emerged as a critical reappraisal of its own cultural values.

1.4 AMERICA IN THE POSTWAR YEARS

The Europeanization of America was rather unprecedented for the nation in the postwar years. Rather suddenly, America looked uncomfortable at its own philosophy of individualism. The shift in national or cultural attitudes is not entirely due to the European factor. Quietly over the decades, America walks past the stage of an individualist industrial society and emerges as a postindustrial mass society. It was the socio-psychologist, David Reisman who pinpoints, for the first time a revision in the cultural format of the nation. America has become an "other-directed lonely crowd in the place of its traditional individualistic "inner direction". Several economists and anthropologists follow Reisman: the American has become an organizational man. And the nation an "affluent society" with "mass culture" or "mass leisure" The fifties came to be known as the gilded age in American history.

An affluent mass society is no unmixed blessing as America witnessed during the fifties and the sixties. Affluence notwithstanding, mass society puts a heavy premium on the creative and aesthetic instincts of man-"homogenization" of language and behaviour and their disjuncture from ideas and feelings. The fifties were incipiently explosive in America for what was a revolt against mass society begins in the fifties mainly as a rejection of representational/realistic values in art, a rejection that becomes explosive during the sixties. The fifties witnessed non-representational paintings of Jackson Pollock, Martha Graham's dance. Jack Kerouac, who coined the term, beat, a word that came to refer to a whole young generation which rejected all social values and preferred to live as nomads, begins the most unorthodox writing America witnessed. In a path-breaking fictional effort, *ON THE ROAD*(1957), he fashions out spontaneity in the place of order and control, as the artistic value. Writing, for Kerouac, should be an undisturbed flow in a wild form that would purify the mind and achieve a sort of orgasm for the writer. Kerouac finds a companion in Allen Ginsberg who believed that music and poetry based on nothing but chance and spontaneity would combat the sheer falsehood of homogenized culture.

1.5 THE POSTWAR AMERICAN NOVEL

The changing cultural patterns of the nation make the novelist in the post second world war period seek to bypass the culturally ingrained individualism and the established literary values of realism/naturalism. In fact, he inherits a singular task-combating what has become the modernist despair of the post war years. The post war fiction of the first and second world wars assumes a contrastive pattern. The novel in the aftermath of the first world war passionately sought modernist values whereas the novelists in the aftermath of the second world had to fight the despair these values have brought. One could still cherish modernism as Saul Bellow does while the world negates it in every possible way. Bellow held the last flicker of humanist hope.

1.6 SAUL BELLOW

Saul Bellow is the most outstanding of the postwar novelists who belongs, by his faith and commitment to the human values, to the prewar novelists like Hemingway and Faulkner but the frustrating experience with the everfailing civilizational values aligns him with Norman Mailor, John Barth and Pynchon. A Jewish moralist to the core, though does not write ethnically, Bellow sees a tendency to slip into a moral

abyss where it should be humanly possible to transcend the distraught postwar situation. Likewise, he holds on to the modernistic novel for all its realism and intellectuality instead of debunking it like his contemporaries as unrepresentative of the postwar situation.

Bellow's novels in the postwar period, *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1947) and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) present sheer despair of living in postwar America. His heroes, Joseph, Asa Leventhal, Augie March go about life with an intellectual and moral sensitivity but only to be continually frustrated and thwarted by the engulfing human chaos. With divisive and alienating contexts between man and man, humanism of the Enlightenment type or of the modern liberalism does not work. On the other hand, a positive unconcern for all these values appears to register success in the contemporary world. *Dangling Man* debates with his ironic spectator about joining the war into which he is listed, a war which is inauthentic in terms of its professed values. Jobless, living on wife's income and alienated from everyone around him, life doesn't offer any authenticity either. Finally, he joins the army as inauthentically as, he, otherwise, lives.

The significant thing about Bellow's earliest novel is the powerful modernist perspectives it throws on contemporary living- its immobility, inaction, purposelessness and waste. Joseph couldn't do anything other than a critical self-condemnation. Bellow's second novel, *The victim* moves into the realm of interpersonal relationship where well-meaning concern and compassion for others could be a premium on their lives, for the nature of contemporary living does not admit these qualities. The lot of Bellow's hero, Asa Leventhal has a tremendous sense of guilt for intending to better the lives of others, who succeed rather callously in life. Of course, they do not know why they succeed. In one of Bellow's best novels, *The Adventures of Augie March* the intellectual adventure into the realm of liberalist and romantic thought proceeds simultaneously with the growing immorality, a situational requirement of contemporary existence.

More than any other postwar novelist, Bellow dramatises the utter contrast between the modernist human tradition contemporary man continues to cherish the contemporary postwar situation that doesn't admit modernist or individualist perspectives. The agony lies in hoping for individualism in a mass society.

1.7 NORMAN MAILOR: WAR AS A CIVILIZATIONAL VALUE

Saul Bellow persists with human values, with a ray of hope, in the postwar situation that negates human values in every possible way. His contemporary, Norman Mailor deciphers war, besides being human catastrophe, as a civilizational value of war and domination of one over the other. For Mailor, war has not produced the state of dehumanization in the 1940's but itself a product of civilized society whose inherent sadism existed before and after the war. Mailor's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), possibly the first and the best of the postwar novels, chronicles the second world war both as a political fact of the American nation and a personal fact of the American character.

The Naked and the Dead presents the American invasion of a tiny Japanese island called Anapopei. The particular infantry regiment of the American army, that leads the attack on the Japanese island, consists of men who present a broad spectrum of human possibilities. At the one end is general Cummings who runs the power machine of the war.-power of decimating any number of people in or through war. Hoping for the war to bring totalitarian power and the historical condition of middle ages, Cummings sees a vision of "renaissance of real power in the post war period. Allied to him and partly used by Cummings as an instrument of his grandiose plans

for a brutal attack on the island is Sergeant Croft, who on account of a mishap in life, emerges as the cynical killer of the invading American army.

In the course of the invasion, war emerges not only at a physical level with the Japanese but psychologically manifests itself in the racial animosities of the American character. The Irish officer abuses the Jewish American soldier, Roth as a Jewish bastard making the latter feel that the target of war is turned inwards towards him. It was a moment of truth to Roth--- the war he is fighting belongs to human character rather than to the battling nations. In another inversion, rather a positive one, of the emotive relationship that should exist among the American soldiers, Sergeant Brown displays compassion for the dying Japanese soldier. Equally a moment of truth for Brown that the divisions made by war are arbitrary and superficial and do not simply exist at a purely human level.

That the war is fought not only physically with the Japanese but more inimically with American soldiers becomes clear in Cummings and Sergeant Croft's manipulating to send Lieutenant Heron, a liberal who hated Cummings and Croft's cynical pursuits of power, on the reconnaissance mission resulting in the latter's death. Cummings doesn't win the war but the victory comes unasked through Dalleson. Similarly, Croft has to withdraw the reconnaissance mission as his men rebel against the impossible task.

Roth, Brown and Hearn had moments of truth in the novel when they become targets of the hysterical animosity of the fellow American soldiers, for whom the enemy targets lie within their army though outwardly and physically they fight the Japanese.

The naked and the dead emerge as two clear cut categories in the novel. The liberal minded Ruth, Brown and Heron who had their moments of truth are the naked for they have seen the perversion of the war wherein the enemy is cynically killed or the power hungry officers target their soldiers for enmity. For the Generals and Sergeants who successfully lead the war machine are the dead. They remain stagnant or dead in the cynical pursuit of power and war is the only one context for the exercise of power. The prewar and the postwar are as warlike in the cynical pursuits of power games, nations and individual play.

Mailor's is a grim vision of the world as well as of the postwar America. The moments of truth or understanding that Mailor presents are minimal and contrastive to the overall deadness of human feeling and understanding that one finds in postwar America.

Unlike Bellow who presents the possibility of human transcendence in a desperate situation, Mailor presents a virulent critique of civilizational values implying that a resurgence of romanticism could alone correct the negation of human values.

1.8 JOHN BARTH

Among the novelists who ushered in the postwar novel, Bellow and Mailor, with different perspectives, may be called the novel's progenitors. John Barth and Thomas Pynchon are the formulators of the tradition of the postwar novel. Barth exploring the Bellowian concern for the inauthenticity of human existence and Pynchon carrying forward the mailoresque critique of civilizational values. Pynchon writes in the 1960's when the postwar novel assumes the form of an experimental novel. Barth is particularly significant in the postwar novel for he writes in the immediate postwar period-the fifties which offer crucial transition to the intensely reflective sixties that mark a stage in American literature like the twenties did earlier.

It fell to the lot of John Barth to formulate, in the first instance, the axioms literature has acquired by 1950s. As Barth sees it, literature has ceased to be creative having exhausted its perceptive and literary faculties. The cultural change necessitates new artistic and literary forms as the new cultural norms remain inaccessible to the traditional literary forms which could only present the outlived cultural norms. Barth calls it the literature of "exhausted possibility" or "the literature of exhaustion".

Barth's focus on the primacy of literary form in generating cultural reflection makes him, to a certain extent, theoretician of the new postwar literature. New modes of thinking break up conventional forms of art or the conventional forms of art block new modes of thinking. The literature of exhaustion points the "used upness" of certain forms of exhaustion of certain possibilities". Barth writes:

.....to be technically out of date is likely to be a genuine defect: Beethoven's Sixth Symphony or the Chartres Cathedral if executed today would be merely embarrassing. A good many current novelists write turn of the century type not only in more or less midcentury language about contemporary people and this topic makes them considerably less interesting.¹

A technically up-to-date writer, Barth feels, alone capture contemporary reality.

"An artist's mode or form", for Barth, is a "metaphor for his concerns ---- it is a paradigm or metaphor for itself. Not the form of the story but the fact of the story is symbolic; the medium is the message."

1.9 JOHN BARTH : THE EUROPEAN INSPIRATION

Barth views Jorge Luis Borges and Samuel Beckett as ideal literary artists who are technically up-to-date and in tune with the spirit of the times. In an age of "final solutions and felt ultimacies", Barth notes, they deal with "ultimacy both technically and thematically". Both Borges and Beckett write at a point of cultural and artistic history wherein creativity has reached a dead end and a creative writer has to turn upon the very used up cultural and literary artifacts and make the very used upness, quite ironically, into a powerful cultural and literary statement. In fact, Barth writes, as Borges and Beckett have proved, irony by itself produces great literature and originality in literature is quite often a myth. Barth writes:

An artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work- paradoxically because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his reputation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to have enabled to live, spiritually and physically in the finite world. Literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies and it may well be that the novel's time as a major art form is up, as the "times" of classical tragedy, grand opera, or the sonnet sequence came to be. No necessary cause for alarm in this at all, except perhaps to certain novelists, and one way to handle such a feeling might may be to write a novel about it.²

Borges, Barth observes, never admits that anyone has a claim to originality in literature-"all writers are more or less faithful of the spirit, translators and annotators of preexisting archetypes".³ A continual renewal of literary forms by way of reshaping the existing literary forms to meet the situational requirements of time becomes a greater literary effort than attempting something original at a time originality and creativity have reached a dead end.

1.9 JOHN BARTH: THE NOVELISTIC VISION

Barth embarked on his novelistic endeavours with a conviction that, in his literary efforts, he has to explore novel as self-conscious genre, for the artistic medium he uses itself is the message. Similarly, in the ambience of negated cultural values, he seeks life as self-consciously as he makes his literary endeavours-----“to acknowledge what I am doing while I am doing it is exactly the point”, as one of Barth’s characters puts it.

While ushering in the self-conscious tradition in novel, Barth recognizes the weight of modernist tradition. Frank D.MC Conell writes:

In Barth’s fiction, two complementary impulses are held in a precarious balance which, while it often creates dilemmas of vertiginous complexity, is also one of the truly original and valuable achievements of recent American writing. For Barth, this task means not simply to write stories which blatantly or cynically point out the fact that they are stories: rather it means to reclaim the humanizing power of literature, of story, in an age which appears in many to have lost its ability to feel that power. It is a self-consciousness which, like Bellow’s, insists upon the primacy of tradition, of the perennial myth of consciousness, over our daily lives: but which, at the same time, like Mailor’s, searches strenuously for the radical articulation of the individual mind, the outsider’s vision, which can at once corrode and refine the structures of the human tradition.⁴

However, as Barth shares the dominant concerns of Bellow and Mailor, he brings in a more acute awareness of the ability of the medium, than the cultural values shaping it, to offer self-critical reflection. Frank D Mccnell further writes:

To describe Barth’s universe in terms of Mailor’s or Bellow’s emphasis Barth’s central position within the mainstream of American fiction but in it can also distort the dimensions of his talent. The deepest “influences” upon his work are not Mailor, Bellow or indeed any American novelist of this century. Perhaps more than any writer of his age, he is a *literary* man: that is, a man for whom the tradition itself is a matter of the highest concern, delight and –may be- despair. The novel, for Barth, is not a distinct cultural or political mode of expression, not a form of self-testing and existential risk, but primarily a version of the most archaic and inexhaustible of human activities, story or myth. Barth’s fiction develops, quite logically, toward an exploration of the primal power of story telling itself, and a corresponding effort to return the forms of contemporary narrative to an approximation of the earliest, world creating power of myth, legend and epic.⁵

Barth is primarily interested in delineating the human situation. The changing parameters of human situation and concern is one aspect of Barth’s concern. More importantly, he is concerned with literature, particularly with the novel, its ability to mirror the whole spectrum of human concern and its ability to be an analogue to life in all its complexity.

1.10 SUMMING UP

The postwar American novel is a phenomenon by itself. It is self-conscious and self-explorative. It tries to shape up itself as a distinct genre that explore itself as much as it explores the cultural situation. It is modern but doesn’t carry the burden of the tradition of modernism. It is contemporary but continues tradition, though self-critically. More importantly, it is a product of the times and looks beyond its time and attempts to reshape and reformulate the intellectual and aesthetic norms of the times.

1.11 REFERENCES

1. John Barth "The Literature of Exhaustion" *The Atlantic Monthly* p.30 August 1967.
2. Ibid p.32
3. p.33
4. Frank d. mc Conell *Four Postwar american novelists. Bellow, maiolor, barth and pynchon.* The University of chicago press. Chicago 1977. P109.
5. Ibid Ibid p.109-10.

1.12 KEY WORDS

Apocryhal:	Something that is inauthentic and spurious. originally referred to religious writings considered inauthentic and unacceptable in terms of religious authority.
Canon:	a standardised discipline in thought, belief and genre or discipline. Originally referred to accepted biblical laws.
Genre:	Class or Category of artistic endeavors having a particular form, content or technique. Genre particularly means a distinct literary type.
Jorge Luis Borges:	A twentieth century Argentinian writer who influenced John Barth greatly.
Modern:	Attitudes based on the approaches of Scientific method, objectivity and rationality.
Modernism:	Modernism assumes a different stance from modenity or modernisation in that opposes the dehumanization of on account of techonological progress Modernism believes in believes in the validity of one's immediate situation as against the traditional values and the significance of a subjective response to the situation. The most important of modernist assumption is the belief that art is the best expression of human authenticity.
Realism/Naturalism:	Realism is a belief in objective and verifiable truth. Naturlism is the truth. Naturalism is the application of the perspectives of natural science of human nature and behaviour as aspects of modernism, realism and naturalism presented man as a victim of his instincts as well as a victim of technological and societal forces.

1.13 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the broad differences between the Post First World War American novel and the Post Second World War American novel.
2. Examine the process of the Europeanization of the American novel.
3. Critically examine the contribution of Saul Bellow and Norman Mailor to the evolution of the Post Second World War American novel.
4. Examine the centrality of John Barth in the American novel since the Second World War.

1.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. John Barth "The Literature of Exhaustion" *The Atlantic Monthly* August 1967. Barth discusses how literature in Europe and America has reached the point of intellectual and aesthetic dead end by the time of Second World War.
2. Frank D. Mc Connell *Four Postwar American Novelists. Bellow, Mailor, Barth and Pynchon*. University of Chicago press. Chicago. 1977. Mc Connell discusses Saul Bellow and Norman Mailor, Barth and Pynchon as the early formulators of the tradition of post Second World War American Novel.
3. John O Stark *The literature of Exhaustion* Duke University press. Durham, Nc. 1974 Stark discusses the literature of Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov and John Barth as one particular phenomenon after the Second World War.
4. Charles B. Harris. *Contemporary American Novelists of The Absurd* College of University Press. New Haven. Conn. 1971. Harris discusses the fiction of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth as novelists of the Absurd.

UNIT 2 THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Metafiction
- 2.2 Aesthetics of Absurdity
- 2.3 Irony
- 2.4 Black Comedy
- 2.5 The Experimental Novel: Social Indirection & Individual Empowerment
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- 2.8 Key Words
- 2.9 Questions
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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The unit examines the phenomenon of the post second world war American novel in terms of its range of thematic and technical experimentation. The novel of this period is highly experimental in that it varied and diversified every postulate that characterized modern American fiction since the first world war. John Barth's fiction is highly characteristic of this experimental phenomenon in American fiction. Let us understand the various features of this experimental fiction.

2.1 METAFICTION

Metafiction, as the term indicates, is fiction that attempts to go beyond its own laws of existence. This is, of course, achieved by assaulting the accepted laws of fiction. The literary mode of fiction, instead of approximating or illusioning real life, becomes a construct about what life could be or would be. In the years to come. Metafiction chooses, basically, to be prophetic or apocalyptic rather than realistic in the accepted sense of the term. It is primarily intellectual than perceptive. Robert Scholes writes: Metafiction assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself..... metafiction must either lapse into a more fundamental mode of fiction or risk losing all fictional interest in order to maintain its intellectual perspectives.¹

John Barth sets out the metafictional task of a contemporary novelist in his novel, *Lost in a Funhouse*:

The boy protagonist, Ambrose is lost in a funhouse and Barth finds the funhouse a fictional equivalent for the contemporary man's existence which is no different from being lost in a funhouse. Barth's metafictional hero "envision[s] a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex, yet utterly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ".² For Barth, life and literary fiction it represents have a certain amorphousness ungratifying to the intellectual instincts of man--- hence the craving for a metafictional construct that betters both life and literary fiction. The dichotomy between life and fiction, on the one hand and fiction and metafiction, on the other hand, would have been unsatisfying a few years ago in terms of the given modernist values but for the contemporary man, who has taken leave of the artistic values of transcription, conformity and coherence, the chasm between life and its metafictional mode is enthusing in itself. He does not accept

rather than is modelled after it. Scholes sums up Because life is a rather badly made funhouse, the artist tries to imagine a better one. Because God was a realist, man must be a fabulator. The energizing power of Barth's universe is the tension between the imagination and the conditions of being which will prevail. *Lost in a Funhouse* is concerned with philosophical questions, but its metaphysics is inside its esthetics (life is bad art)³

Barth, in fact, explains the whole metafictional thrust of the postwar American novel that tends to create life rather than be created by it. The contemporary novelist is a "fabulator" for he seeks to forge a new reality in the postwar fiction. The need for fabulation arises, as Barth would say, from the fact that literature has exhausted itself of all the accepted perspectives and could only fabulate new ones. Jorge Luis Borges believed that literary possibilities symbolized by objects in the story are "used up" and imagination which has infinite possibilities can alone throw perspectives on reality. Vladimir Nabokov creates a world of metaphors and imagination, a world more carefully patterned than the realm usually called real. Donald Barthelme creates antinaturalistic slices, more in the manner of surreal juxtaposition of found pieces of junk. All these writers attempt to capture the fractured human consciousness in the contemporary times, a consciousness that has lost the kind of unified sensibility it always had. That sensibility could map up the world and the human reality reductively and functionally. The postwar situation renders this perceptivity impossible. Language which embodied human sensibility presented an effective correspondence between human thinking and the objective world, both communicatively and metaphorically, lost its representative ability and function. In fact, the whole edifice of traditional realism along with the realistic/naturalistic fictional mode stood eroded and in its place anti-realistic/antinaturalistic experimentation making fiction a fabulation or meta fiction groping for a reality beyond what is perceived as reality arose in the late 1950's and 1960's. The broad shift is from what is perceived as stable reality to a continually changing patterns of human thinking and behavior. Robert Scholes sums up the perspectives of experimental fiction.

The fiction of existence seeks to imitate not the forms of fiction but the forms of human behavior..... The novel is doubly involved in time: as fiction in the evolution of fictional forms, and as a report on changing patterns of behavior. In a sense, the continual development of material offers it a solution to the problem of formal change. If it succeeds in capturing changes, it will have succeeded in changing its form: discovery will have created its appropriate technique..... Notions like control of personality by angels and devils, by humours in the body, by abstract ruling passions by phenominological or physiognomical characteristics, by heredity, gifts and failings, by environmental shapings and twistings, by psychological needs- all these have been indispensable to the novelist as ways of making human behavior manageable. Tracing the history of novel, we trace the shift from religious perspectives of behavior through pseudo-scientific view toward a behavioral science which is perhaps close to achievement. at last.⁴

2.2 AESTHETIC OF ABSURDITY

Metafiction negates modernist novel, particularly the realistic/naturalistic fictional mode. The loss of faith in the modernist edifice of reality gave rise not only in the essential absurdity of the human world but also to a philosophical belief in the cosmic absurdity governing everything including the human world. Samuel Beckett heralds the Theater of the Absurd and the the absurdist novel in Europe during the 1950s which presented man as totally deracinated and psychologically denatured. Human life, as Beckett viewed, does not entail living but only a game to be played. *The game begets its own goals and vice versa.* Expectation is the process of life

existence and rates exhaustion in an inexhaustible way. The process partakes every aspect of human existence. Occasional attempts at lending meaning to life, as Beckett's characters, Estragon and Vladimir in his seminal play, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), attempt unsuccessfully. Beckett's notion of human and cosmic absurdity renders human existence a matter of trivialities like eating carrots, putting on boots, scratching the head and playing charades. Habit is the only unifying feature of human life. Only a passage of time, devoid of chronology and history but significant in its repetitive and unceasing patterns, gives a conceptual order, if there could be any. Beckett dispenses with the western notions of literary art based on the Aristotelian postulates like plot or narrative, characterization and linear progression etc. Beckett subjects the whole literary art to deliteralization and language, the vehicle of reason and communication is irrationalized. The dramatic and fictional narrative becomes a matter of ritual. The literary art is totally inverted and the inversion becomes the literary art. Beckett exercised a profound influence even on the writers in the 1950s and 1960s, who did not ascribe to the philosophy of Absurdity. The dissatisfaction with the modernist art made many writers, particularly in America, look up to an art style that would help them to present the disjointed sensibilities in the post war period. In characterizing literature in the postwar period as one of exhaustion, John Barth comes close to accepting Beckettian antistyle as the new literary canon. The other American writers like Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon accept the Beckettian anti-style or the aesthetic of absurdity to present their own disillusionment with the absurdities that have crept into the American society and values as a feature of their experimental novel.

The new anti-style or the aesthetic of absurdity notwithstanding, the perspectives of the American experimental writer are totally different from European absurdists like Samuel Beckett in that he is a more a rebel against the stultified and homogenized American value system than against them as such. The American writer in the postwar period has come to recognize that human reality has multiple forms and the earlier modernist sensibility was rather reductive. Charles Harris writes:

Life, these novelists believe, resists any impositions of order because its realities are multiple. Any attempt to order these meanings, unless done ironically, results in a falsification of reality. This view of a multiple reality reflects the influence of quantum physics. ...The multiple Vs in Pynchon's *V*, the multiple identities of Fausto in that same Novel, of Henry Burlingame in Barth's *The Sot Weed Factor* and of Harold Bray in *Giles Goat - Boy*, the doubt cast upon whether not characters like Doc Daneeka in Heller's *Catch 22*, Malcolm in Purdy's *Malcolm* and Jacob Horner in Barth's *The End of the Road* even have identities-- each of these suggests that truth is not ambiguous, but multiple; that it is not merely elusive, but, as quantum physics tells us, by its very existence uncertain.⁵

The aesthetic of absurdity for the American novelists has become a metaphor for their unease frustration with what they consider as the cultural stultification of America. The American novelist has not lost faith in the vitality of his culture but finds a chasm between its possibilities and actualities---- hence a style that does not reflect his faith but only his frustration. The aesthetic of absurdity for the Europeans presented their vision of life while for the Americans it is a protest against what he considers as the failure of his culture. In fact, the 1960's witnessed the rise of a new artistic style known as Camp which emphasized the values of unnaturalness, artifice, exaggeration, flamboyance and amorality.

2.3 IRONY

Irony becomes the chief literary mode for the experimental writer whose immediate target is not so much the absurd universe but the absurdity of the literary forms and conventions. Tracing the growth of literature in a creative use of parody by

Cervantes, Fielding and others, Barth believed that an ironic use of the exhausted literary forms alone would rejuvenate the stultified literary forms. While the original parodies did not parody the literary form as such but parodied the narrative action to give it its own perspectives,, experimental novelists choose to parody not so much the narrative action but the way human reality is represented in the fictional mode. Irony for the European absurdists was a metaphysical statement, whereas for the experimental novelists, it is a generic endeavour to map up the post war realities and absurdities. Writing about Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* that imitates *Tom Jones*, Charles Harris writes:

Barth reflects this view of an ordered universe ironically in *The Sot Weed factor*. Like *Tom Jones*, it possesses a highly structured plot, one carefully conceived. *The Sot Weed Factor* is a "formal farce" the order reflected in its highly structured plot becomes an object of parody rather than affirmation. The novel turns back upon itself, rejecting the very order reflected in its form.. By pushing the novel's "harmony of parts" in to the realm of farcical exaggeration, Barth suggests disorder by inversion. Moreover, since the novel's theme clearly concerns absurdity, an incongruity exists between the novel's form and its philosophy. Like the ironic structure, however this incongruity becomes functional, serving to reflect that incongruity which is a part of an absurd universe.⁶

Most of the experimental novels, besides those of Barth, of Heller, and Vonnegut offer a critical and creative parody of one literary form or the other. Irony becomes the literary mode itself, not the part of a comic or tragic denouement.

2.4 BLACK COMEDY

The new ironic mode of the experimental novel, like the theater of the absurd, blurs the generic divisions of comedy and tragedy. True comedy and its delightfulness and tragedy with its moral affirmation are not simply possible in a world that is perceived as an absurdity. The implications of comedy are horrifyingly tragic and that of tragedy, pathetically or grotesquely comic. The absence of order and rationality in the world is simultaneously comic and tragic and the experimental novelists, like the European absurdists, look up for humour in the very inversions of what is considered real, beautiful and delightful. The ironic fictional mode that the novelists use could only heighten the comic and tragic inversions. Black comedy or humour owes its origin to the European surrealists of the 1920s who attempted to break the traditional modes of perception by removing the traditional connotations and meanings of words and objects in order to enable them to reflect the unconscious strivings and the dream processes. The American experimental novelists do not go that far but use the concept of black humour or comedy as a part of their critical or creative ironic mode to illustrate the absurdities of American mass society.

Heller's *Catch 22*, where irrational is the rational is an example of American black humour. *Catch 22* is the rule by which the military bureaucracy creates a chaotic world of its own power wherein reality has to yield to what it projects as reality. Charles B. Harris writes:

Should reality and official records clash, reality must yield? When McWatt, distraught over killing Kid Sampson, crashes his plane into the side of the mountain, Doc Daneeka, whose name appeared on the official flight list, is declared dead. Though obviously alive, Doc is treated from that moment on as if he doesn't exist. The records are absolute Mudd "the dead man in Yossarian's tent" receives similar treatment. Because he reported to the wrong tent upon his arrival at Pianosa, Mudd does not receive official credit for ever having reported to the squadron at all. He is killed two hours later over Orvieto but his name can not be from the official roster

since it was never officially added. Just as Doc Daneeka, still very much alive, is dead according to bureaucratic logic, so Mudd, quite dead, is denied death⁷

The Experimental Novel

Kurt Vonnegut considers schizophrenia as a boon to modern man for it is through intense psychic state alone, could he deal effectively the absurd world of contemporary mass society. Thomas Pynchon, similarly, presents a world of multiplicity and uncertainty where negation of humanness equips a person to deal with the world. In the place of human interaction, there is a fallback on a feverish psychic activity as a way of ordering the absurd world. John Barth calls it the cosmopsis, an excess of consciousness along with a lack of intrinsic values that characterize the protagonists in the postwar experimental novel. The novel does not offer any perspectives, literary or humanist other than presenting a sort of wry humour or wild comedy on what has become, afflictively, an obsessive reality.

2.5 THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL: SOCIAL INDIRECTION&INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT

The attempt to reject and transcend modernist notions of life and art is born of a frustration with social reality presenting modernist value system. Consequently, there was a tendency to internalize social problems to the extent of an inflexible self-awareness. A flight from social concerns or an evasion of social problems marks the thrust of the postwar experimental novel. Having come to believe in the incorrigible absurdity of the human world, these novelists sought a withdrawal from the social world as a superior attitude than any social concern and attempted survival strategies to cope with what they considered as the incorrigibly absurd world. It is to the credit of the experimental novel that it attempted to evolve fiction emerge from the cerebral power of man and relied on sheer artistic virtuosity to reflect the cerebral power of man. It was a paradigm shift from the social instincts of man as celebrated by the modernist novel. The reliance on cerebral power is a search for individual empowerment, the individual who hitherto felt victimized either by societal or technocratic power. There was a certain nobility in the suffering of the human individual as presented by the modernist novel but the new experimental novel focuses on a tendency to show the violence of the individual either towards himself or towards others as a way of empowering himself. The violence is more aggression and cruelty than physical. The protagonists of Barth, Heller, Pynchon and Vonnegut are the self-empowering individuals seeking to conquer the world through the stratagems of intellect.

2.6 SUMMING UP

The experimental novel, to sum up, transcends modernist notions of life and art. In seeking a literary form to reflect postwar realities, it becomes metafictional in its very approach to fiction. It accepts a philosophy of non-reason and an aesthetic of absurdity. It offers perspectives of a wild comedy on postwar situation. It internalizes the social concerns and deemphasizes the social man and focuses on the cerebral man.

2.7 REFERENCES

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7. Ibid pp 39-40.

2.8 KEY WORDS

Apocalyptic:

Revelatory of future. Apocalypse, originally, was the last book o of New *Testamen*, the book of Revelation.

Vladmir Nabokov:

A twentieth Russian writer who lived in America during the war.

2.9 QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between fiction and metafiction as illustrated in Barth's novel, *Lost in a Funhouse*
2. Explain how the Europeans and Americans use the aesthetic of absurdity.
3. What are the perspectives of black humour ?
4. Discuss the broad shift of focus in the experimental novel form the earlier tradition in the novel.

2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Robert Scholes *Fabulation and Metafiction* Chicago University of Illinois Press 1980 Discusses Postwar experimental fiction in America.
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UNIT 3 *THE FLOATING OPERA* : AN ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 An Approach to *The Floating Opera*
- 3.2 The Narrator Hero: Todd Andrews
- 3.3 The Suicide that never was
- 3.4 Love Triangle
- 3.5 Animality
- 3.6 The Lawyer
- 3.7 Masking the mind and the heart
- 3.8 Towards an Understanding of life
- 3.9 The Floating Opera
- 3.10 References
- 3.11 Key Words
- 3.12 Questions
- 3.13 Annotations

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit analyses the text of *The Floating Opera* in terms of the narrative and thematic content of the novel. The first person narrative through the protagonist is the basic design and structure of the novel. The focus of the analysis is both on the fragmentoriness and totality of human experience and attitudes. The novel has to be understood both as a compendium of human experiences and as a consistent view of life.

3.1 AN APPROACH TO *THE FLOATING OPERA* *Chapter 1*

Metaphoric titles are not uncommon. The writers sum up the quality of life in what they write through a metaphor. Barth, at once, likens the human story to that of a floating opera- a make-believe and a continually fluctuating world where credulity of any kind is a premium and a tentativeness of ideas, morals and action is the norm. One has to be constantly questioning the very *raison d'être* of life and living but the very act of questioning suffers from a similar lack of purpose or validity. Similarly, the very act of writing faces the problem of relevance. Even if the art of writing is to be relevant, how could it encompass the highly disjointed and fragmented world? Nevertheless, Barth keeps the art of writing alive just as we keep ourselves alive and keep alive the questions regarding the worth of things irrespective of whether questioning itself is worthwhile. -The floating opera is both floating and operatic or incredulous. The 'show boat' is an apt metaphor, for it sums up the fragmentariness of human reality in all its entirety. The narrative hero writes:

Why *The Floating Opera*? I could explain until Judgement Day, and still not explain completely. I think that to understand any one thing entirely, no matter how minute, requires the understanding of every other thing in the world. That's why I throw up my hands at the simplest things; That's why I throw I up my hands sometimes at the simplest things: It's also why I don't mind spending a lifetime getting ready to begin my *INQUIRY*.¹

The Floating Opera syndrome also operates at the level of human perception where a given reality in time and space keeps inspiring us. The narrator points out:

It always seemed a fine idea to me to build a showboat with just one big flat open deck on it, and to keep a play going continuously. The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along with both hands. They could catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past they'd have to wait until the tide ran back to catch another snatch of it, if they still happened to be sitting there. To fill in the gaps the tide they'd have use their imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbours, or hear the word passed along from upriver or down river. Most times they wouldn't understand what was going on at all, or they'd think they knew, when actually they didn't. Lots of times they'd be able to see the actors, but not hear them. I needn't explain that that's how much of life works: Our friends float past; we become involved with them: they float on, and we must rely on hearsay or lose track of them completely. They float back again, and we either renew our friendship- catch up to date- or find that they and we don't comprehend each other any more.²

The novelist has a different task on hand- requiring "artifice and craftsmanship required to build such a fictive vessel even as the image denigrates the role of fiction as the ideal mirror of reality"

And that's how this book will work, I'm sure. It's a floating opera, friend, fraught with curiosities, melodrama, spectacle, instruction and entertainment, but floats willy-nilly on the tide of my vagrant prose³

The reader's task is less strenuous:

You'll catch sight of it, lose it spy it again; and it may require the best efforts of your attention imagination-together- with some patience, if you are an average fellow- to keep track of the plot as it sails in out of view⁴

3.2 THE NARRATOR HERO: TODD ANDREWS CHAPTERS 1&2

The novel is a self-appraisal by the first person narrator, fifty-five year old Todd Andrews-a partner in the Law firm of Andrews, Bishop & Andrews in Cambridge. Though a successful lawyer, he was never a careerist.

I consider it no more my career than a hundred other things: sailing, drinking, walking the streets, writing my INQUIRY, staring at walls, hunting ducks and 'coons, reading playing, politics. I'm interested in any number of things, enthusiastic about nothing. I read often and unsystematically-that is, I have my own system, but it is unorthodox. I am in no hurry. In short, I live my life-or have lived it, atleast, since 1937.⁵

Todd lives rather ambivalently, neither enthusiastic nor non-chalant, partaking little of every possible attitude. Upsetting his attitude to life is his illness-deformity in fingers to begin with, Todd has been suffering from "subacute bacteriological endocarditis" with a tendency to myocardial infaction". The burden of the ailment is the possibility of death at any moment. In addition, there was the chronic infection of the prostate gland. Indifferent health and ambivalent living make Todd irectionless, a predicament he tries to avoid by an INQUIRY into his life which he shapes up as novel. The decision to write the novel comes on one night in June 1937. The day is significant for Todd in two ways: Firstly, he decides to put his life on perspective that

day whose happenings in terms of thoughts and actions have driven him to an inquiry into himself. Secondly, the day like any other day presents life in its totality. The job of recollecting, all that happened on that day, making sure nothing was left out, took 16 years. The vast reading, writing and editing have taught him an important lesson. Everything, is significant and nothing is finally important. The lesson has come from his inquiry and perspectives both his life and the novel he writes about it.

3.3 THE SUICIDE THAT NEVER WAS CHAPTERS 2&25

On the fateful day, June 21, 1937 at the Dorchester club, Todd wakes up to a realization of the problems bothering him over a period of time.

Momentous day! Inspiration, to have closed my eyes on the old problem; to have opened them on the new and last and only solution! Suicide⁶

What is a definite solution soon becomes an opinion

My opinion? My opinion? SUICIDE! Oh, light step, reader! Let me tell you: my whole life, at least a great part of it, has been directed toward the solution of a problem or a mastery of a fact. It is a matter of stances-of stances- of masks, if you wish, though term has a pejorativeness that I won't accept.. During my life I've assumed four or five such stances, based on certain conclusions, for I tend, I am afraid to attribute to abstract ideas a life-or-death significance. Each stance, it seemed to me at the time, represented the answer to my dilemma, the mastery of my fact; but always something would happen to demonstrate its inadequacy, or else the stance would lose its persuasiveness, imperceptibly, until suddenly it didn't work⁷

In fact, Todd indulges in death in life syndrome. His own name Todd, German root in Todd is almost death. Todd's stay at the hotel, Dorset begins with the suicide of his father in 1930 and the possible causes of the suicide present themselves continually as a possibility in his life.

Suicide is a family tradition for Todd. His father, Thomas Andrews committed suicide when he collapsed financially and was unable to face the creditors. Todd embarks on an INQUIRY into his father's life in order to understand the causes of his death. The INQUIRY begins with his intention to suicide on account of his heart problem. Todd wanted to explain to his father through a letter, to be delivered after his death, as to why he committed suicide. However, he could never write to his father. Communication with him was not possible, or imperfect, and the source of imperfection was himself. Todd found no adequate reason for his father to commit suicide, an assumption that qualifies his own intention to commit suicide several times.

The beginning of the affair with Jane warded off the possible attempt at suicide and the decision of Jane and Mack to sever the relationship with him, after the birth of a child, ignites the inclination to suicide but wouldn't like it become his response to Jane and Mack.

I suddenly wavered in my resolution to die-was shaken, in fact, by reluctance. The reason was simply that my suicide would be interpreted as evidence that their move had crushed me: that I was unable to endure life after their rebuff..⁸

3.4 LOVE TRIANGLE

Life acts as a countervailing force to the sense of death. Sex dilutes Todd's sense of death. Though it comes to him in a triangle. Harrison Mack, a disenchanted Marxist takes such a strong liking to Todd that he enthusiastically and even proudly shares his wife, Jane with Todd. For the bachelor Todd, Jane offers a fulfilling sexual life. The "jubilant adultery" with Jane, Todd finds is offered to him by her husband, Harrison in a gesture of self-transcendence. Harrison loves his wife and in the heightening of love incites Jane to seek sexual fulfilment beyond marriage. He tells Todd that they are not stupid enough to be affected by things like jealousy and conventions.

You can have sexual attractions apart from love. We both enjoy love making... If I was attracted to any girl, Jane wouldn't be silly enough to object to me going to bed with her, because she knows there wouldn't be any love in it.⁹

The separation of love from sex eminently suits Todd.

"It's like playing Tennis" "Just for the fun and exercise. Some guys would get jealousy if their wife played tennis with another man, or danced with him"¹⁰

Though Harrison doesn't expect Todd to feel "obligated", he expects a sort of marital fidelity in the extramarital triangle. Later on, he was angry with Todd for being friendly with a Negro girl.

"You've been unfaithful to Jane and to me; You've defiled yourself and us in that black hussy"¹¹

Todd would not accept fidelity in a love triangle or friendship for, when it need not exist in marriage which could allow extramarital relationships, how could it exist in other relationships. The basic fact about all relationships is that they are ridiculous, simply a theatre of the absurd. We live in the moment. We cannot order life, for that implies a self-sustaining individuality. When death stalks man in every moment, he lives from moment to moment.

3.5 ANIMALITY CHAPTERS 7 & 23

At 17, Todd begins his sexual alliance with Betty Jane Gunter. It was an unusual alliance, for Betty Jane was unsuccessfully in love with Smitty Herrin and Todd was violently sympathetic. Unimpressive but intelligent, Betty provided a satisfying encounter with the opposite sex to Todd. Beginning with the loss of "Spiritual innocence", Todd-Betty relationship becomes desperately sexual when it is learnt that Smitty Herrin has married someone else. Sheer physicality of the relationship, when reflected in the mirror, turns Betty away for, the experience was a foregrounding in sheer cynicism. -that there was nothing but animality in what could be a romantic and emotional experience.

Todd recounts a second incident at Argonne forest during his army career. "Inadequate fighting material" that he was, Todd reacts hysterically when confronted with a German soldier. Todd cruelly beats him in what he thought was the duty cast on him. Having subjugated him, he was all-tender sharing rare moments of comradeship with the enemy. However, the friendship does not last long and Todd kills him in a fit of suspicion.

The incident disturbs Todd deeply for he experiences animality at the core of his being.

It is one thing to agree intellectually to the proposition that man is a of animal species : quite another to realize, thoroughly and for good, your personal animality to the extent that you are actually never able to oppose the terms man and animal, even in casual speech.¹²

3.6. THE LAWYER – Chapters 10 & 20

As a lawyer, Todd was choosy about the cases he would fight. He is not interested in what the law is but is curious about the things that the law can be made to do. Todd's test case was Harrison Mack Senior's will where the court had to decide as to which of the several wills is the right one to be executed. More than the change of circumstances, several of Harrison's foibles necessitated the wills. For the court too, what mattered was not the point of law but the nature of arguments and its own predilections. Courts in America, right up to the Supreme Court engage themselves with the sheer absurdities of Harrison's will. Todd wins the case by a cynical perception of where the absurdities lay and could use them. It is this understanding of law that makes his friend Harrison richer by 3 million dollars.

Morton vs. Butler's case presents another face of law –

Never did there exist such an unparalleled floating opera such as the law in its less efficient moments, and seldom had the law such inefficient moments as those during which it involved itself- nay, diffused, dissipated, lost itself- in Morton v. Butler. 13.

The cars Butler and Morton drive collide causing minor injuries to Mr. and Mrs. Morton. The matter goes to the court after a month mainly on account of the political actions to which Butler and Morton belong. For years together, the case doesn't come up for hearing on account of procedural wrangles. Todd gets procedural wrangles terminated at the Supreme Court after six nearly- legal wrangling explains law.

3.7 MASKING THE MIND AND HEART CHAPTER 25

Could one believe in anything or the beliefs, which are more in the nature of situational responses could explain the human individual with the medium of stability. Todd feels that several things that happened were masks. His early illness became more a mask than illness. When Marvin Rose found an infection in his prostate gland, he became a saint. His father's death makes him a cynic. None of the masks lasted beyond a period. They explain a schism between his mental and emotional life hiding his mind from his heart and his heart from the mind.

To be sure, each mask hid other things as well, as a false face hides identity and personality as well as the nose and mouth; but it was to hide my enigmatic heart that I became a rake, a saint, and then a cynic. For when one mask no longer served its purpose of disguise, another had to take its place at once all my masks were half-conscious attempts to master the fact with which I had to live; that none had made me master of the fact; that where cynicism had failed, no future mask could succeed; that, in short, my heart master of all the rest of me, even of my will. It was my heart that had

my masks, not my will. The conclusion that swallowed me was this. *There is no way to master the fact with which I live.*¹⁴

Only despair can not be a mask. Rather it is the end of masks as Todd realizes when Jane points out the deformity in finger. He lived in "mirth" through Betty June, "fear" in Argonne, frustration with his father. Each of them lasting until the next one is taken up. Only the last one could be faced or mastered with the idea of self-destruction.

There was no way of mastering the fact with which I lived; but I could master the fact of living with it by destroying myself, and the result was the same-I was the master. I choked back a snicker¹⁵

3.8 TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE

CHAPTER 5

There is no certainty in life about anything except death- hence the attempt to reach it as a way of mastering life. Life can not be mastered but could be understood.

Todd's basic approach to life, on account of several factors, is that "everyday he is renting another day from eternity...lea sing my bed on the chance I may live to sleep on it once more". However, "he doesn't want to live as though each day may be his last and needs... something to counterbalance the immediacy of one day-at a time existence, a life on the installment plan". Todd begins each day with a gesture of "cynicism" and closes it with a "gesture of faith."¹⁶

A gesture of temporality, a gesture of eternity. It is in the tension between these gestures that I have lived my adult life¹⁷

Amid this suspended living between temporality, and eternity, one has to live to realize that "nothing in life has intrinsic value". Secondly, "the reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational. There is, therefore, no ultimate reason for valuing anything"¹⁸

Todd arrives at an organized value system that negates all values. To look at life as valueless becomes a new value.

3.9 THE FLOATING OPERA CHAPTERS-7, 20& 27

The Floating opera is both a metaphor and a recurring preoccupation of Todd. Right from childhood, boat making was a passion with Todd. He experimented with several designs but never succeeded in building a boat with perfection. This was one of the things he wanted to explain to his father in the proposed letter. In fact boat making symbolised many of his failures-

I tell you this story because it's representative of a great many features of my boyhood. My daydreams, my conceptions of how things should be, were invariably grandiose and I labored at them prodigiously and always secretly. But my talent for doing correctly the small things that constitute the glorious whole was "defective"- I never mastered first principles-and so the finished product, while perhaps impressive to the untutored, was always mediocre to the knowledgeable.¹⁹

The wandering boat image comes back to him when he hears a "stream calliop" coming from a floating opera, *Adam's ORIGINAL & UNPARALLELED Floating Opera* having gone past Hambrooks Bar light and heading up to the channel to the bell buoy. The floating opera, at once, symbolises law in its chaotic and irrational moments.

Todd enters the show boat, the floating opera not only to bring an end to the utter artifice and chaos of his life but also to the artifice and chaos of the lives of 649 people on board – suicide combined with homicide. The relationship with Jane and its termination is definitely a factor in this effort. Its not just the heightening of cynicism but a cumulative accentuation of several things – deformity, illness, selfishness, valuelessness, existential chaos, artifice, amorality and immorality – whose logical or rational end is death. When death stalks life in every possible way, death rather than life is the rational fact.

Todd did not succeed in blowing up the travelling show boat as the acetylene gas he has freed fails to explode. He then considers drowning himself, but providence having failed him in the execution of his unwavering attempt at suicide and homicide, he loses the motivation to die, a motivation which for the first time lasted for a considerable time to become possible.

The tenuous distinction between life and death that existed all through making death constantly overwhelm life is finally lost – "why bother" either about life or death.

T

There is no final reason for living (or for suicide):²⁰

Life goes on floating like an opera as long as it could go on.

3.10 SUMMING UP

The Floating opera is the predicament of human life in the cross currents of mid-century America. The distinctions man has made between himself and animality, between morality and immorality, values and valuelessness, and life and death are all lost. The impulse to live or even to die are lost. Man simply exists- floating as there is nothing to anchor himself in life and operatically, for life divested of meaning and value is a show.

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20. Ibid P.250.

3.12 KEY WORDS

- Cynicism:** a contemptuous disbelief in human goodness and progress. A sect of Greek Philosophy which believed that goodness is not possible in society.
- Opera:** a dramatic work in which all or most of the words are sung to the accompaniment of music most popular form of entertainment.

3.13 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss how the narrator, Todd Andrews lends design and structure to *The Floating Opera*.
2. Discuss *The Floating Opera* as an episodic and reflective novel.
3. Barth's novel exhausts itself in its title, *The Floating Opera*. Discuss.
4. Discuss how *The Floating Opera* negates both existential euphoria and cynicism.

3.14 ANNOTATE THE FOLLOWING LINES

- a) A gesture of temporality, a gesture of eternity. It is in the tension between these gestures that I have lived my adult life..
- b) For when one mask no longer served its purpose of disguise, another had perforce to take its place.
- c) Living is action. There's no final reason for action. There's no final reason for living.
- d) There's no final reason for living (or for suicide)
- e) The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including that truth. Hamlet's question is, absolutely, meaningless.

UNIT 4 PHILOSOPHIC FORMULATIONS AND THE FARCE OF REASON

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 *The Floating Opera*: Philosophic Formulations
- 4.2 Nihilistic Comedy
- 4.3 The Farce of Reason
- 4.4 Comedy of Masked Games
- 4.5 Irony: Comic Vision
- 4.6 Summing Up
- 4.7 References
- 4.8 Key Words
- 4.9 Questions
- 4.10 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

John Barth called *The Floating Opera* a nihilistic comedy. This unit helps you to understand what a nihilistic comedy is and in what ways *The Floating Opera* is a nihilistic comedy. An attempt is made to see what exactly specifies a nihilistic comedy and how it is different from a nihilistic tragedy.

4.1 THE FLOATING OPERA: PHILOSOPHIC FORMULATIONS

For John Barth, the earliest of his two novels, *The Floating Opera* and *End of the Road* are exercises in formulating a philosophic view of life. He called *The Floating Opera* a "nihilistic comedy" and *End of the Road* a "nihilistic tragedy". Barth's nihilism was never absolute the way it was to the European absurdists like Samuel Beckett who envisioned a state of metaphysical stasis in the world. In Beckett's tragic-comical farce, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), human beings are presented totally deracinated and psychologically denatured. Life does not entail living but is only a game to be played. The games beget their own goals. Expectation is the process of life which generates exhaustion in an inexhaustible way. The process partakes of every aspect of human existence bringing forth an occasional attempt to lend meaning to life. Beckett's characters Estragon and Vladimir do not go beyond themselves as human efforts lead nowhere. Human existence, consequently, becomes a compilation of trivialities like eating carrots, putting on boots, scratching the head, playing the charades. Habit, "the great deadner" explains their life, for they have no other way of leading their lives other than living habitually.

Barth, like many American writers of the 1950s and 1960s became disillusioned with American experience and easily yielded to nihilism presented by the European absurdists like Beckett. But nihilism and American experience, whatever be the cultural frustration are basically antagonistic. The Americans always look up to a vibrant and joyous cultural experience. The American Experience, as L.E. Chabrowe says, is "hopelessly idealistic" and the American feels his isolation to such an extent that he wants to belong in spite of himself. The hostility between him and the philistine Establishment is so sharp-edged that he usually writes as a wounded outsider trying to get in rather than (like most Europeans, at least, on the continent) as one who can have in or out as he pleases. But if the American artist feels this

hostility so acutely, it is probably because, without realizing it, he still has faith in the American democracy¹.

However, compelling is the tendency to nihilism, it has to be qualified for the sake of the irrepressible cultural euphoria. The absoluteness of nihilism has to make way to a relative and tentative value system. For the absurdists, the cultural experience is tragi-comic. In its sheer repetitiveness and meaninglessness, life is comic but the implications of comedy are horrifyingly tragic. Barth's focus in *The Floating Opera* is not on the tragic implications implicit in the mid-century American cultural experience. It is essentially on the comedy of American lives resulting from the loss of faith in their lives. The comedy is farcical for the valueless cultural experience exists at a physical level. For the average American, worse than the loss of value and the sheer physicality of living, life is a static entrapment in his person. Sheer comedy, as Barth sees it, for a nation or culture which believed itself to be the Chosen of God on earth for the human and spiritual regeneration of man.

4.2 NIHILISTIC COMEDY

Nihilistic comedy has to be defined as a genre. Nihilism, by itself, can not promote a comedy of jovial humour. A comedy would not entail a cynical view of life or of human nature nor does it entail any aesthetic or moral depravity. It presents a sympathetic view of human foibles. It is witty and satirical. It presents a pleasant irony inherent in human intentions and achievements. Comedy explains people's zest for life. It simply celebrates life in all vivacity. Only in its virulent form, it presents a sheer farce or burlesque ..

Barth's comedy is a farcicalization of life. Farce emerges from the depletion of human meaning or value in contemporary American experience.

- I. Nothing has intrinsic value II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational. III. There is, therefore, no ultimate "reason" for valuing anything.²

When one goes about life, as Todd does, with the attitude that there is nothing intrinsically valuable, it is so much irrationalized and that attributing value to anything does not stand to reason, life becomes a bare existentiality-life without a sense of it. Social ambitions, morality and aesthetics generate a value system and commitment to life. Bereft of values and commitment, one can hardly find a sense of life in living. This is Todd's problem. The rationality he banks on helps to dissect life rather than feel or "have" it. Todd, the name that indicates death, continually looks up to death, since one can not respond to life without values and feelings. But death is as valueless as life itself. -Hence the oscillation between life and death. One responds to life with ideas of death and responds to death with bare living.

Life as Barth sees it is a nihilist's or a cynic's game but for a fallback on life from its alternative, Death, it is a comedy. Falling back on life from an inclination to death is a dilution of nihilism and cynicism and relativisation of both the valueless life and death. Consequently, the very cynicism becomes valueless to an extent creating a psychological flux of total relativism. Barth explores a comedy of valuelessness that is partly the result of nihilism and partly the result of a valueless indirection. in life. John Stubbs writes:

Primarily, John Barth is a novelist of ideas. The situations in his comic works are always directed towards establishing his twin themes of the individual's quest for value and identity in a world of gratuitous events. Barth forces his hero to see the world without an absolute value, to see it in its most comically absurd, and then Barth leads him to accept and affirm such

a world Essentially, Barth and his contemporaries have such a romantic strain in their works. It is not that they honor man's dignity, for this they systematically strip from him; it is rather that they admire his persistent ability to pull together what relative value or what hope he can have in a world without order.³

For Jac Tharpe, "Barth is the completely intellectual comedian" who makes comedy of all things through the simple method of observing inconsistency, limitation, relativity, and paradox."⁴ Nevertheless, Barth does not parody or criticize. Tharpe writes:

... Barth avoids criticism of all kinds-not merely social criticism. He does not criticize; he records, even, his theory of farce may suggest fabulation and the unrealistic. What is unrealistic about Barth's novels is the art. What happens-what is recorded-is realistic, though, as a whole the effect is one of some fabulous and unreal universe. From the point of view of the cosmophilist which is Barth's term for the world lover, everything is wonderful. From the point of view of the nihilist, everything is ridiculous. All these elements go into Barth's concept of the universe.⁵

4.3 THE FARCE OF REASON

The comic absurdity of *The Floating Opera* emerges from the farcicalized belief in reason. When Todd falls into the company of a German soldier in a foxhole, he reasons love to him overcoming the enmity of the war. Though not warranted by any facts or reasons, the fear of the German soldier grips him and, in an act of unreason, kills the soldier. His faith in reason is so facile and tenuous, fear kills the reason instantly. Similarly, Morton vs Butler's case depends more on Morton's feelings about his wife's behaviour with Todd at a New Year's Party and on the public slight by President Roosevelt than on the nature of the automobile accident, the cause of the litigation. In the same way, Harrison Mack's inheritance case is decided against Harrison's mother by her failure to preserve the sanctity of 129 bottles of her deceased husband's feces. Law, the instrument of reason, is in practice in America is anything but a farce of reason...hence Todd the lawyer doesn't look into the legalities of a case but into all possible absurdities that would decide the case.

Todd's love triangle with Mack and Jane illustrates that reason is an excuse for one's physicality or animality. Harrison and Jane reason that love and sex should be independent of each other and feelings of jealousy and possessiveness in love are irrational. They soon prove that much of their rationalized sex relationship does not stand by itself but is rooted in feelings. Harrison and Jane betray jealousy and possessiveness in their attitude towards Todd when they find him being intimate with a Negro girl. Similarly, his sexual encounter with Betty Gunter results from his rationalized sexual needs and the latter's frustrated love but Todd's reason brings greater sense of absurdity when he looks at himself in the mirror during the act of copulation and Gunter feels the sheer horror of the sexual relationship as seen through the mirror.

From the beginning, Todd contemplates suicide as a rational answer to what he considers the irrationality of life but at every stage the suicidal tendency proves to be an instance of emotional despair and consequently a non-event. Todd does not commit suicide from the very reason he wanted to commit suicide- "Why bother either about life or death. Both emotion and reason have no final value or meaning. Both are essentially comic." Jac Tharpe writes:

...Barth does not write fantasy. As he says, he writes farce. He deals with the fantastic and the grotesque by observing them realistically. Satire and parody may be elements in the composition. The serious may be there too, as well as the ordinary and the realistic.⁶

The Floating Opera proves continuously that the exclusivity of reason in life could be only a sheer comedy. Richard W. Noland writes:

Todd is not completely paralyzed. But neither is he the man of reason he thinks he is. It is Todd, not Barth who thinks of himself in this way. To Barth, he is a man in whom reason and emotion run in separate directions. Without emotion, reason give him no purpose for living. It can not establish permanent value or affirm life. It can only determine that there are no absolutes.⁷

4.4 COMEDY OF MASKED GAMES

Todd Andrews as a protagonist in the novel is only a pretext for Todd's narrative of a nihilistic comedy. Nihilism creates the terror of existential vacuum and a sheer desparateness to fill the vacuum. The rational choice of suicide for a life of chronic illness and lack of intrinsic meaning and value is a non-event since the same lacks any reason or value. Living is an inexorable task requiring the performance of many functions or roles, but any role-playing or functionality requires investing the role or function with a value. When such an ascription of value is not forthcoming and, nonetheless, presents an existential performance, games or masked roles become the predicament of even the bare existentiality. Todd leads a masked life fully knowing that he is playing at living and the games he plays have no authenticity as games and the games themselves become masks. The game and the mask of it becomes a comedy on comedy rendering every attempt at living a double comedy. -the attempt as well as living become a comic foible on foible.

Todd's life has been a series of masks. When Dr. Frisbee looked up from his stethoscope, he became a "rake", the "first mask". When June Gunter "slashed" and Marvin Rose found his infection, he became a "saint". When he hanged himself, he became a "saint". For Todd, each of these masks was a "half-conscious attempt to master the fact" with which he had to live. When Jane points out the deformity in his fingers, he realizes that there could be no mask to hide the deformity. Self-destruction is the answer to his life as well as to its masks. Niverly Gross sums up the comedy of games in *The Floating Opera*.

Nihilism is merely a quirk of character in *The Floating Opera* and *End of the road*, it is not much more than a setting for comedy, a device for irony. All this talk about nihilism suggests the greatest paradox of all. Barth is the most immediately a humorist. For a novelist like Bellow, the comedy of life is a realization of the moral and emotional depth of life. The comedy of Barth is the mockery of emotions and moral values: What his characters feel and perceive is further grist for hilarity. The suicide issue of *The Floating Opera* is an existential put on; all issues in Barth's novels come down to some sort of game. And so does the emotional life of the characters. They love as they suffer: it is something they check in and check out. Love is simply a comic absurdity, another game⁸

Though Todd Andrews is the protagonist of *The Floating Opera*, it is Todd Andrews the narrator who lends meaning to the novel. However, the meaning is more in the nature of a suspensive irony, for what Todd presents by way of narrative is uncertain and ambiguous. Irony as a trope of intellectual reflection is a characteristic feature of great literature. Irony contrasts and alternates the narrative and the thematic force of a work of art and presents tragic perspectives. Todd's ironic narrative trivializes his own life story in a postmodern fashion. In trivializing the life story, Todd questions not only the absoluteness of his rationality but also presents the perverse direction it can take in the human mind. For the essential comedy of the novel, it is not simply a farce that Todd the narrator dramatises and at which the reader can merrily laugh over but rather a grotesque laughter on the part of the narrator evoking a similar response on the part of the narrator.

Todd's description of the mating of the crabbers and the reductive analogy of Plato's singular prototype of male and female is an example of sardonic irony on Todd's rationalized love triangle.

I laughed and made a mental note to make a physical note, for my *Inquiry*, of the similarity between the crabbers and Plato, and to remind Jane that there were creatures who took longer than I.⁹

Todd's point is not that his rationalized sex relationship has descended to the level of animals but that his mating lacks the resilience and duration that crabbers are capable of. Jac Tharpe writes:

Barth's genius lies in his awareness of magnificent ironies and his ability to dramatize paradox. He is able even to suggest that, since the universe operates consistently on paradox, the universe may to that extent in that respect actually be rational instead of absurd. The right approach to such a universe would be an appreciation of its paradoxes; which amounts to developing a transcendentalist view, cosmophily instead of Cosmopsis, with all the ironies implied in the tortured misuse of "transcendentalism". The result is *farce splendide*. outdo the universe with laughter and enthusiasm, realizing that in fact the universe seems out to get you and, with despair and death as methods, will get you. But you can laugh hilariously, and even genuinely, while you are being garroted.¹⁰

Similarly, Todd's first sexual encounter with Betty June for Todd the narrator is not that its "going at it like dogs" but the protagonist's aborted erection and June's life time condemnation to prostitution. The irony is horrifyingly absurdist in the Beckettian manner-everything fails-Todd's chance sexual encounter, Betty June's frustrated sexual response, the rationality and the Physicality of sex itself.

The narrator, Todd's key phrase "imperfect communication" explains the metaphor of the floating opera. The floating opera is not the quality of the protagonist, Todd's life. Barth's ironic vision is not basically tragic, may be tragic concomitantly or cumulatively. *The Floating Opera* is only a "side show for a human life in imperfect communication with itself." Like all else, Todd the narrator presents, the floating opera is also a presentation-elusive and indefinite and unrealisable., Barth does not attempt, or at least succeed, in seeking the tragic; for, it is beyond Todd's elusive narrative. It is a self-seeking comedy of life and living which does lend itself to any statement or meaning but presents suspensive irony characteristic of contemporary postmodern situation.

4.6 SUMMING UP

Thus, *The Floating Opera* presents a new genre-nihilistic Comedy- unknown earlier. It is a product of the postwar intellectual climate which eroded the generic distinction between tragedy and comedy. It is closer to tragedy in its presentation of the gloomy view of human situation and closer to comedy in its presentation of a comically pathetic predicament of man in his situation. *The Floating Opera* evolves a new genre which chooses to present human situation cynically and nihilistically but finds human activity essentially comic-man sees no hope for himself and yet looks up for excitement and pleasure :

4.7 REFERENCES

1. L.E Chabrowe "The pains of Being Demystified", *Kenyon Review* 25.1. Winter, 1963, P. 145
2. John Barth *The Floating Opera* p.223
3. John Stubbs" John Barth The Novelist of Ideas: The Theme of Value and Identity"- *Critique Studies in Modern Fiction*. 1966 p.101
4. Jac Tharpe John Barth *The Comic Sublimity of Paradox* Carbondale and Edwardsville Southern Illinois University press p 1974.
5. Ibid p.11.
6. Ibid P.113
7. Portard w. Noland "John Barth and the novel of comic nihilism" *Wisconsin Studies* VII ,3 p.243
8. Niverly Gross "The Antinovels of John Barth" *Chicago Review* 20.1 pp 96-7
9. John Barth. *The Floating Opera* p 55.
10. Jac Tharpe John Barth *The comic Sublimity of Padox* p.114

4.8 KEY WORDS

Samuel Beckett:

The British playwright in the 1950s who is credited with anihilistic philosophy of life wherein he considers the human world as a theatre of the absurd. His epoch making play, *Waiting for Godot* presents this view of the world as a theatre of the absurd

4.9 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss John Barth's Philosophy of life as presented in *The Floating Opera*.
2. Define *nihilistic* comedy and show how it differs from the genres of tragedy, comedy and nihilistic tragedy.
3. Discuss how personality masks build up the comic environment in *The Floating Opera*.
4. Examine how Todd the protagonist and Todd the narrator give a dual structure to *The Floating Opera*.
5. Examine how irony structures the novel, *The Floating opera*.

4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Jac Tharpe John Barth *The Comic Sublimity of Paradox* Carbondale Southern Illinois University Press 1974 pp 133. Discusses John Barth's novels as intellectual comedies.
2. Partard W. Noland "John Barth and the Novel of Comic Nihilism" *Wisconsin Studies*, 3 pp240-57 Noland discusses *The Floating Opera* and *End of the Road* as nihilistic comedy and tragedy respectively.
3. Niverly Gross "The Antinovels of John Barth" *Chicago Review* 20, I pp95-109. Discusses the nihilism of John Barth's novels as an existential "put on".

UNIT 5 FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 John Barth: The Modern in a Postmodern Age
- 5.2 *The Floating Opera* as a modern novel
- 5.3 Todd Andrews: The failed Modernist
- 5.4 From Modernity to Postmodernity
- 5.5 The Floating Opera: The postmodern narrative
- 5.6 The Floating Opera: The postmodern Writer, narrative and the Reader
- 5.7 Summing Up
- 5.8 References
- 5.9 Key Words
- 5.10 Questions
- 5.11 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall discuss *The floating Opera* both in the modernist tradition as well as in the emerging tradition of postmodern narrative. Barth inherits the modernist tradition in the novel that has shown a sense of sheer exhaustion by 1950s. He believed in contemporizing the tradition in a truly modern way. He foregrounds several postmodern notions of a writer, narrative and the reader. Further, in a substantial departure from the essential realism and integrity of the modern novel, Barth brings in the postmodern reflexivity, uncertainty, tentativeness and multiplicity or intertextuality of the text into the writing of a novel.

5.1 JOHN BARTH :. THE MODERN IN A POSTMODERN AGE

Very few writers present a binary of crosscurrents of the times they live in as John Barth does. Like Bellow and Mailor, Barth is preeminently a modern writer against the rising tide of postmodernism during the 1950s. The postmodern stance that Barth eventually takes results from his own modernist agenda. Modernists believed in the primacy and the specificity of the literary form as a significant intellectual value. Barth resisted the cultural diffusion and amorphousness that characterizes contemporary literature. Barth emphasized literary values over and above everything. He never allowed of any intensity of cultural attitude dilute literary vigor. Literature in the hands of Barth is an independent and effective medium of cultural reflection, not a byproduct of cultural activity.

Modernism contemporizes literary form and concern. Barth felt that the modern literature itself requires to be contemporized. By 1950s, Barth observed that the western literature became a literature of exhaustion both in terms of form and concern. No writer, for Barth could disregard the failure of modernist values such as individualism, aestheticism, emotional authenticity and the artistic values of realism and naturalism. The literature in the postwar years could not help present tides of anti-intellectualism, amorality and various forms cultural dystopia. Modernity, for a writer as Barth views, lay in responding to these predilections. Only a technically up-to-date writer, Barth argues, can capture contemporary reality. In fact, for the

modern writer, his literary mode or form is a metaphor for his concerns. The diversification or dispensing with many of the modernist literary values is not a rejection of modernism *per se* but an assertion of modernist spirit in historicizing literary form and concern. John Barth presents a modern understanding of all that has ceased to be modern.

5.2 THE FLOATING OPERA AS A MODERN NOVEL

The *Floating Opera* is a rational inquiry by the protagonist, Todd Andrews into his life. The inquiry takes the shape of a realistic and linear presentation, beginning with his childhood. Todd analyzes every one of the major events of his life. Similarly, he analyzes every one of his attitudes and opinions. What is apparently a self-trial, becomes an examination of various issues like sex, love, friendship, enmity, socio-political institutions like law are examined clinically in their functioning.

The most crucial issue of the novel is Todd's neurotic inclination to commit suicide. The obsessional neurosis is inspired by a continual upsurge of nihilism. But reason dominates eventually and aborts the planned suicide. Todd's whole life is rationally organized to the minutest detail. The room at the Dorchester Explorer's club is well organized. He leaves at the same time, attends the office regularly and does the same kind of work everyday. He floats above his life instead of "having it, classifying, categorizing and quantifying" his work and experiences.

The well ordered emotionless life suffers a psychic trauma whenever he faces an adverse situation. When he learns that his heart is weak, he becomes a rake. The experience with Betty June makes him a saint. His father's suicide makes him a cynic. Basically, the psychic reaction to the experiences is the burden of modernist angst one faces in the contemporary world. The aesthetic, intellectual and moral correlation that existed between man and the external world is seriously ruptured on account of the materialism that describes the contemporary world. The result is a schizophrenic state of mind, a deep sense of existential vacuum and the attendant dread.

Todd's problem is that he is not able to intellectually master his life. The failure, particularly with his given ability to critically reflect on his life and effectively deal with several of its absurdities terrifies him. He is a modern intellectual unable to accept any challenge to his chosen order of rationality. Situations and emotions impinge on him but can not engulf him for his irrepressible intellect fights back with cynicism. The attempt at suicide is the assertion of intellect against his person. Similarly, the failure to commit suicide is his inability to dispense with an intellect that the suicide implies.

5.3 TODD ANDREWS :A FAILED MODERNIST

In a way, Todd's disinclination to live and failure to die asserts his rationality. However, he is a failed rationalist who does not go about his life with the foresight of reason but would rather think "after the fact" made by way of "effect of circumstances". Todd's rational analysis is often contradicted by his actions. The killing of German soldier, Todd maintains, cured him of day dreaming but he continued to do so. Feelings become a mask against his own ideas. Todd's rationality becomes a victim of his masked personality. The mask of indifference "Why bother", that Todd adopts against his own rationally arrived decision to commit suicide, though positive in itself, lacks strength. What stands out at the end of the novel is Todd's inability to remain an individual in terms of his organized system of

5.4 FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY

The postwar intellectual situation brings about a shift from the modernist literary values such as order, rationality, realism, linearity and individualism. The focus shifted to the biodiversity of the individual from his intellectuality. Similarly, total personal reflexivity replaces cultural concern. Further, the literary form becomes diffuse in postmodern orientation. At times, sheer formlessness becomes the form. The modernist focus on the structural center of a work of art gives way to a shift to the margins. In fact, the postmodern thinking views structural center as a conceptual violence.

Artifice, elusiveness, extravaganza and sheer virtuosity explain the postmodern temper.

5.5 THE FLOATING OPERA: THE POSTMODERN NARRATIVE

Notwithstanding his masked life, the protagonist, Todd Andrews is a credible rationalist. However, Todd as first person narrator lacks credibility. Barth brings about a disjuncture between the protagonist and his narrative. A reductive modern thinker, Todd creates a narrative of "outrageous artifices", "virtuosity" and "idiosyncrasy". Barth meant the narrative to be a metaphor not only for the "form" of the story but also for the "fact" of the story Thomas Le Clair says:

.....The floating Opera fully and skillfully exploits its narrative mode-radically unreliable first person narration-and one of Barth's favorite aesthetic-thematic devices-the multiplying replications of the regressus in infinitum..."¹

Todd's account of his life is more a construct than an account. The need for the construct emerges from his growing failure to integrate his person and experiences with his essential rationality. Todd sets out the problem for his novelistic presentation of life.

Good heavens, how does one write a novel! I mean, how can anybody stick to the story, if he's at all sensitive to the significances of things? As for me, I see already that storytelling isn't my cup of tea: every new sentence I set down is full of figures and implications that I'd love nothing better than to chase to their dens with you, but such a chasing would involve new figures and chases, so that I'm sure we'd never get the story started, much less ended, if I let my inclinations run unleashed²

Todd imagines that there is a strong death instinct in his bio-social situation.

Todd is death, and this book hasn't much to do with death; Todd is almost - Todd-that is almost death- and this book, if it gets written, has very much to do with almost-death³

The 'almost death' concept is a strategem to capture a grip on his living. In fact, the obsessive neurosis of suicide is directly proportionate to his zest for life. The more he talks of suicide, the more he betrays a charm for his life-"Todd is the absurd man, but the continual confuting of his expectations suggests his absurdity lies in the innocent belief that the world should respond to reason."⁴

Todd himself is aware of the absurdity. He saves Haecker from suicide, having rationalized committing suicide. He would not accept Haecker's reasons for committing suicide. Todd's attitude towards himself and his life, as he would say is one of "irresponsibility", "basic" and "ultimate". The whole metaphor of the floating opera structures the unreliability of the narrative. Thomas Clair sums up:

... the work Todd has entitled *The Floating Opera* is a narrative about his experiences on Adam's *Floating Opera* which itself mirrors Todd's work as a lawyer and the work of which it is a part. Todd's account is also the product of a man who used the floating opera as a metaphor for his aesthetic principle. However, the ideal floating opera, as he defines it early in the novel- a show with an order paralleling that of life and therefore difficult to follow. It is not the floating opera principle at work in the novel. The real floating principle, as revealed by Todd's statements about the law, his association with the nature of Adams's opera, denies man's responsibility to the integrity of fact and what the mundane world would seriously call truth and affirms his right to manipulate given conventions for his protection and interest. For the holder of this principle, fact can be evaded by its inclusion in artifact. Life is a fiction to be created. The book (and the life behind the book) has, then, a purely an aesthetic order. This hidden aesthetic order, not the expository order Todd claims is the rationale behind *The Floating Opera*.... The mind is purely aesthetic, has no use for the integrity of fact on which personal relations, intellectual systems (including the autobiography) and the world in general are erected⁵

The essential realism of the novel is "epistemological first and valiative second". However, Barth does not allow nihilism to creep into the craft of fiction. Thomas Clair writes:

The nihilism of the novel is not complete, however, for it does not extend to the aesthetic act, which ignores the fact for the willful creation of an imagined "reality" more satisfactory to the creator. This is the mode of action by which Todd lives and constructs his book. Todd is, in one respect, the modern man who constructs illusions by which he can live, but he is also the novelist at work. Todd, as devious fictionist, serves up an illusion of reality-a portion of his autobiography- for the sake of truth but recognizing any truth is illusive, he builds into his illusion its own destruction. In Barth's work, constructs-intellectual or aesthetic-falsify reality, whatever it is. The more naïve or elaborate that construct or form, the more comic is its failure. That the illusion is necessary makes the comedy black.⁶

Thus, the postmodern narrative begins with a modernist premise, debunks its credibility and ushers in a postmodern unreliability of contemporary man and his existence. The only silver lining is the integrity of the aesthetic that remains pure and undilutable. Without the integrity of the aesthetic act, a response to life fictively and aesthetically is not possible.

5.6 THE POSTMODERN WRITER, NARRATIVE AND THE READER

Though haltingly, but surely, John Barth makes a conscious departure from the perspectives of modernist novel. He does not leave the novel to shape itself, nor the characters become independent from him as is the wont in the postmodern literature. He is not going to let those scoundrels take over. I am in charge.⁷ Barth wouldn't allow his characters to become independent of him in any way. They have to be his creations whether the character is the protagonist or the first person narrator

distancing himself from the protagonist. In fact, Barth creates the duality between the rationalist protagonist and the cynical narrative for, he is writing at a time modernist values are declining and the new postmodern perspectives are becoming necessary for a writer. Todd the narrator is Barth's surrogate discharging novelistic responsibilities in explaining new cultural and fictional possibilities. Having realized that literature has reached a dead end in mid 20th century, Barth could not help looking at fictional tasks as, essentially, non-writing since the old dictum that art is the best expression of human life gives way to an assumption that art is life in all its desultoriness and chaos. Consequently, the writer is not, need not be a literary craftsman.. Barth, through Todd Andrews, attempts to promote the postmodern stance right at the beginning of the novel.

To someone like myself, whose literary activities have been confined since 1920 mainly to legal briefs and INQUIRY-writing, the hardest thing about the task at hand-Viz., the explanation of a day in 1937 when I changed my mind-is getting into it. I've never tried my hand at this sort of a thing before, but I know enough about myself to realize that once the ice is broken the pages will flow all too easily.⁷

Todd erases the distinction in his person between the "existential subject" and the "writing subject". He feels that he could be a writer effortlessly. He looks up to the complicity of the reader in his literary task in a marked departure from the traditional role of the reader to understand the story and its thematic and the axiomatic burden in the rigors of the narrative logic, Todd bypasses the normative fiction and invites the reader to participate lightheartedly in his reflections on his life or inquiry he makes into it

... It has always seemed to me, in the novels that I've read now and then, that those authors are asking great deal of their readers, who start their stories furiously, in the middle of things, rather than backing or sliding slowly into them. Such a plunge into someone else's life and world, like a plunge into the Choptank River in Mid March, has, seems to me, little of pleasure in it. No, come along with me, reader, don't fear for weak heart. I've one myself, and know the value of inserting first a toe, then a foot, next a leg, very slowly your lips and stomach and finally your whole self into my story, and taking a good long time to do it. This is after all, a pleasure-dip I am inviting you to, not a baptism.⁸

The reader is not simply evoked as a matter of duty but sought through out the novel as a literary companion in the act of writing the novel. Further, the continual companionship of the reader in the making of fictional art has given a fictionalizing role to the writing of a novel.

...I've got this book started now, and though we're probably a good way from the story yet, at least we're headed toward it, and I for one have learned to content myself with that. Perhaps when I've finished describing that particular day I mentioned before-I believe it was about June 21, 1937-perhaps when I reach the bed time of that day, if ever, I'll come back and destroy these pages of piano-tuning ⁹

Todd writes self-consciously and Barth definitely intends him to do so. Modernism posited impersonality of the writer, writing and of the readership as well. The artistic impersonality foregrounded values based on art and life. Since, as Todd would say, nothing has intrinsic value, the writer, the writing and the reader have to partake an existentiality which exhausts in itself and leaves nothing beyond itself. The human experience doesn't have to be related to anything-no signifier to the signified. Literary experience is a continual process of signification. There is no closure, thematic or artistic. The process of signification is simultaneous to the writer and the

reader. The modern writer and the reader are unchained by the erosion of the novelistic closure. Maurice Couturie writes:

Modernity to Post Modernity

The novelist must unburden himself of the "original curse" under which he is laboring-writing and the printing press- that have imposed a giddy distance between author and the reader and fostered the development of countless counterfeit stand-ins: the narrator, the narratee, the implied, the ideal reader, the implied author... The truly modern novelist, from Joyce to Kafka, Beckett Nabakov, Pynchon, and Barth passionately struggles to anneal these print born fictions, while seemingly creating more and more of them. By saturating the reader's imagination with endless plot lines, multilayered texts, some of them belonging to previous books, these novelists break the linearity and the closure of the story.¹⁰

Mauric Couturie writes:

Print gradually produced the illusion that the linear and closed story was the ideal representation of reality, that it was reality that made the text. Such contemporary novelists as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, or Nabokov explode this myth and to show that text is a text is a text and not a reflection of anything else¹¹

The multiplicity of the author, narrator and the reader and the dualities of the text postmodernize the novelistic craft: The intertextual connotations make *The Floating Opera* a recurring tale in a postmodern narrative. First, there is the "autopsy" of modern novel when the narrator questions the form, "beginning in the middle of things" The narrative of the novel becomes an intertext or a critique of a modern novel. The love triangle in the novel becomes a repetition of their love triangle in Virginia Wolf's *Mrs.Dalloway*. Todd, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, wants to develop an occult communication with his father. The significance of a single day in the life of the protagonist takes us back to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs.Dalloway*.

5.7 SUMMING UP

If we were to ask what is *The Floating Opera* in terms of the intellectual and literary currents of 20 the century, the answer is — *The Floating Opera* is a modern novel with a tremendous postmodern reach. Even much of the postmodernity of the novel reflects the restless modern spirit to contemporarize itself both intellectually and artistically. Intensely modern in upholding the primacy of literary art in understanding the human situation. *The Floating Opera*, nonetheless, initiates authorial presence ,diluting his textual absence, self-conscious, tentative, multivocal and reader centric writing *The Floating opera* is truly a turning point in the history of the American novel .

5.8 REFERENCES

1. Thomas Le Clair "John Barth's The Floating Opera:Death and the craft of fiction" TEXAS QUARTERLY 14,1972 p711.
2. John Barth The Floating Opera P2
3. Ibid .P.3
4. Thomas Le Clair "John Barth's The Floating Opera:Death and craft of Fiction"TEXAS QUATERLY 14,1972 P.714 .719-20
5. Ibid P.719
6. Ibid.P.720

7. John Barth. An Interview *Contemporary Literature* 6.1.1988 p.9.
8. Ibid P.2
9. Ibid.P.1-2
10. Maurice Couturiek "From Displacement to Compactness:John Barth's The Floating Opera" *CRITIQUE* 33,1,19
11. 91 p19/
12. Ibid p.20

5.9 KEY WORDS

Postmodern:

A broad term to explain the intellectual temper in the west since the Second World War. On the one hand, postmodernism reflects disillusionment with modernist self-consciousness and its realist/naturalist perspectives and, on the other hand, it runs through several contemporary ideas like self-conscious and tentative art, poststructuralism, Deconstruction reader response, reader-response studies and New Historicism. The most important difference between from modernism to postmodernism is the shift of focus from the primacy of human mind to the primacy of the human person.

5.10. QUESTIONS

1. Briefly discuss the philosophic formulations underlying *The Floating Opera*.
2. Decline of the modernist literary values explains the postmodern novel. Discuss.
3. Discuss how *The Floating opera* presents a response to what John Barth calls The Literature of Exhaustion.
4. Discuss the broad features of the postmodern narrative.

5.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Maurice Couturier . "From Displacement to Compactness: John Barth's *The Floating Opera*" *Critique* 33,1,1991 pp 3-20.Discusses *The Floating Opera* as a postmodern novel.
2. Thomas LeClair. "John Barth's *The Floating opera*: Death and the craft of fiction" *Texas Quarterly* 14,1972 pp713-30. Discusses *The Floating Opera* as a postmodern narrative.

BLOCK CONCLUSION

As you have gone through these units scanning the history of 20 the century American novel upto the late fifties and examining Barth's novel, *The Floating opera* from several perspectives, you would have seen the essential nature of the Postsecond world war American novel which defines the contemporary American novel as on to day. Barth's first novel defines the genre of American novel in the second part of the 20th century. Like *The Floating opera*. the genre continues to be experimental seeking both ideational and artistic innovation. The novel does not present life's positive struggles as its counterpart did in the first part of the decade. It presents a cynical and, evens a nihilistic, view of life. In a way, what is presented is a reversal of modernity, its intellectuality, positivism, morality and aesthetics, not so much by way of rejecting modernity but by way of postmodernization, an attempt to go beyond modernist values.

More importantly, for the craft of fiction, *The Floating opera* introduces dynamism in the art of writing a novel. Gone are the days when writing a novel was a discipline. So also was reading a novel. Writing the novel is writing anything. So also reading a novel. One could go about both the tasks as one goes about any other task in life. In fact, life itself does not exist as a concept. It is living. Writing and reading are just like living.

Still more important, *The Floating Opera* introduces another feature of contemporary novel - The impersonality of the writer and the writing along with the authenticity of what is written is dispensed with. The writer and the writing are multivocal and not amenable to any singular perception.

Lastly, *The Floating Opera* brings in a sense of the reader. Contemporary novel is not the singular effort of the writer, it is written along with a sense of a companionship with the reader. The possible reader response, not any Muse, Inspires the reader.

The Floating Opera will help you to understand the essential rhythms of contemporary American fiction Good Luck!