



Disaster and Redemption: A Study of John Barth's *The Floating Opera*

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ABSTRACT

John Barth, the American postmodern writer, along with Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme, is responsible for the redefinition of fiction in America that has taken place in the last sixty years. His novel, *The Floating Opera*, explores the life of the protagonist, Todd Andrews, and his race between death and survival, and his struggle to escape from this nightmarish fact of life. This article focuses on the protagonist's life as an oscillation between disaster and damnation and how he triumphs over the disasters of his life and attains redemption.

John Barth is one among the most elusive writers of the twentieth century postmodern fiction. He is generally recognized as a novelist, who deals frankly with ideas in his fiction. In each of his works, he creates a new fictional universe where his characters embark upon a voyage of thought and passion. The goal of his protagonists is to discover the real self, the real experience in the underlying fiction, in which, they are imprisoned. Barth stands out among such great writers as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut and Vladimir Nabokov in his treatment of the contemporary man's eternal struggle against death and strategies of survival, which his fictional characters adopt in order to defy the diminishing of the self. It is the very essential fact of survival and sustainability that they aim at.

Disaster is a sudden or slow happening of a physical or mental havoc wreaked on the external environment or internal consciousness of a person. Disaster brings in physical or mental destruction and damage, sometimes both, beyond repair. Despair and destruction overtake the individual internally

and the damages caused will have long-standing impact. Redemption, from the havoc caused by disaster, can be attained at great efforts and cost only. First of all, forces of redemption should act upon the person and a happy reversal to good future or conditions should be evoked.

Amidst disaster, man yearns for redemption. If disaster is a negative and debilitating force, redemption is a positive and stabilizing force. Human beings crave for redemption when they find no hope for life. When life turns to be a burden and a self-negating dilemma, redemption becomes necessary and wished for. When human beings are deprived of prosperity, progeny, health and comforts of life, they become desolate and helpless and look for redemption.

Barth, in his novel, *The Floating Opera*, explores the life of the protagonist, Todd Andrews, who has been living constantly under the threat of imminent death – the final disaster to his life. In order to escape from the nightmarish fact of life, he adopts different masks or roles, hoping that this would solve his dilemma, struggle between life and ever-threatening death. But when he realizes that such masks can never hide him from the throbbing reality of death, he decides to commit suicide for it will put an end to his problems. And then, he reverts his decision to survive and to bring about redemption to himself – by becoming a writer. The novel is an account of Todd's narration of his escape from impending disaster and attaining redemption.

Todd Andrews, the Barthian protagonist, is a victim of the postmodern chaotic world, undergoing a sense of loss, alienation, fragmentation, confusion, futility, pointlessness and disjunction. Though left with a diminishing sense of



selfhood and self-assertion, deferring his disappearance into nothingness, which is death – he succeeds in finding an ultimate urge of redeeming himself at a critical juncture of his life by achieving his own existence as a writer.

Constant threat of death is the central focus of the novel and it is this centrality that shapes the character of the protagonist. Death is the worst disaster that can befall a person or his existence. He associates his own existence and identity with death even in the beginning of the novel, as he confides: “So. Todd Andrews is my name. You can spell it with one or two d’s; I get letters addressed either way. I almost warned you against the single-d spelling, for fear you’d say, “Tod is German for death: perhaps the name is symbolic.” PI myself use two d’s, partly in order to avoid that symbolism. But you see, I ended by not warning you at all, and that’s because it just occurred to me that the double-d Todd is symbolic, too, and accurately so. Tod is death, and this book hasn’t much to do with death; Todd is almost Tod-that is, almost death- and this book, if it gets written, has very much to do with almost-death”. (FO 3)

Todd’s discovery of his heart ailment and prostate infection makes him recognize his own vulnerability towards mortality. He lives with subacute bacteriological endocarditis with a tendency toward myocardial infarction - a heart disease, of which he could fall dead of heart failure at any moment. This is the foremost disaster of his life, a disaster that would obliterate him from the face of earth. A disaster caused by the onslaught of disease. This instinct of threat within him drives him towards dejection of life and loss of values. This makes him assume the mask of a rake, who is in pursuit of whatever pleasures available. This pursuit ends drastically when he is almost killed by a prostitute, who was once his girl friend and with whom he had lost his virginity. His impotence due to his prostate infection is another reason for his abnormal attitude towards people, even with his close friends Harrison Mach and Jane. This leads him to the role of a saint with a detachedness where he “renounced the world of human endeavor and delight . . . having no more to do with my fellow man and values that I had to” (20).

When Todd witnessed his father’s suicide because of bankruptcy in the Market Crash in 1929, his role changes to that of a cynic, who believes that “nothing has intrinsic value . . . Nothing absolutely, made any difference” (209). When all his masks fail

him one after the other, he comes to the conclusion that he can neither cope with a senseless life nor play a role in order to escape from the ever-present threat of sudden death. He believes that only suicide can put an end to all his problems. The mental and physical disasters that he suffers compel him into the greatest of damnations – suicide:

If nothing has intrinsic value. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational. There is, therefore, no ultimate “reason” for valuing any-thing. (223) There was no mastering the fact with which I lived; but I could master the fact of my living with it by destroying myself, and the result was the same- I was the master. I choked back a snicker. “For crying out loud!”

III. There is, therefore, no ultimate “reason” for valuing anything. “Now I added including life, and at once the next preposition was clear: IV. Living is action. There’s no final reason for action. V. There’s no final reason for living.” (227)

After his final decision, Todd feels free from the burden of shielding himself with masks from all the disasters that threaten to destroy him. Till that final decisive moment, the impending disaster of death looms large on Todd Andrews throughout the novel.

Even death fails Todd contrary to his plans. His plans of committing suicide by blowing up the boat “Original & Unparalleled The Floating Opera”, end up in failure. It is at this critical juncture he comes to the realization that “nothing makes any final difference is overwhelming; but if one goes on farther and becomes a saint, a cynic, or a suicide on principle, one hasn’t reasoned completely. The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including truth.” (251). He discovers a justification for living. He seeks redemption. Death is not the end for Todd; it is rather the cause, the motivational factor that pushes him forward towards redemption. This is clear with his new mask, i.e. , of a story teller. He compromises with the reality of life by becoming a writer. His act of writing and story-telling gives him a renewed defence against hopelessness, and the act saves/redeems him from disaster.

Todd creates a new fictional universe addressing his own life story. He, the existential solitary being, finds a new companion of readers with whom he can confide his tide of emotions. His



new role as a writer gives him the courage to withstand his insecurities and face the reality. His new-found reality and negotiation with nothingness help him in having harmony with life. Thus, the fluctuation of Todd's life from disaster to redemption is beautifully portrayed in the novel *The Floating Opera*.

PRIMARY SOURCE

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