The Barnum Museum Short Guide

The Barnum Museum by Steven Millhauser

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Characters

As Millhauser's fiction centers on the unknowability of reality, it also examines the unknowability of character. Most of his stories do not have distinctive characters.

In fact, the stories themselves attempt to show that character is a fiction, an illusion that can never be known or interpreted. In "Rain," the main character, Mr. Porter, gets caught in a sudden storm. He is characterized at the beginning of the story as precise and fussy, worried about his clothes and fretting about the weather ruining everything. However, as the story is told he becomes more and more indistinct. Trying to reach home, he is slowly melted and washed away by the downpour. As the story progresses, the scene is described as "wavy," "wavering," "floating," "blurred," "rippling," "smeary," "smudgy." While the prose is highly descriptive and precise in its imagery, the imagery is that of melting.

Millhauser writes: Everything was coming undone.. .. Everything was washing away. His cheeks were running, his eyeglasses were spilling down in bright crystal drops, flesh-colored streams fell from his shining fingertips, he was dissolving in the rain. In ripples of blue and flesh and tan and black he flowed into the shine of the tar.

For a moment on an empty parking lot a bright puddle gleamed, but then the rain washed it away.

Mr. Porter no longer exists by the end of the story; he melts away before we ever know him.

A character type used more frequently by Millhauser is the type of the artist. A character like Robert Herendeen, from "The Invention of Robert Herendeen," personifies the creative/destructive impulse. He is a Promethean figure, transgressing boundaries of knowledge; he seeks to be god-like in his creative power, and must be brought down. This is a type that echoes writings from the Renaissance, when concerns about good magic versus bad magic and the creation of illusions that were too close to the art of God were of paramount importance. Robert Herendeen sees himself as a genius whose gift can only be expressed in the creation of an actual human being through the sheer power of his mind. He says: I decided to invent a human being by means of the full and rigorous application of my powers of imagination. Instead of resorting to words, which merely obscured and distorted the crystalline clarity of my inner vision, I would employ the stuff of imagination itself. That is to say, I would mentally mold a being whose existence would be sustained by the detail and energy of my relentless dreaming. My ambition was to create not an actual human being or a mere work of art but rather a being who existed in a realm parallel to the other two—a third realm, obedient to the laws of physical bodies but utterly discarnate.

Like Pygmalion, Robert falls in love with his creation, Olivia, and like Frankenstein, he loses control of his creation.

Olivia is slowly erased, becoming nothing more than a dress mannequin as the destructive impulse of Robert's mind takes over. The "invention" of Robert Herendeen refers not only to his own invention, the creation of Olivia. It also refers to the invention of himself through his own creative process, and the emergence of his dark alter ego Orville who ultimately destroys everything. Finally, it refers to the invention of the character Robert Herendeen by the author, Steven Millhauser. The characters in the stories serve not only as characters but as comments on the artistic process, and the difficulties of creation.

Social Concerns

Despite the whimsical nature of Steven Millhauser's stories in The Barnum Museum, they address important issues concerning the role of the artist in society. As the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s escalated and the National Endowment for the Arts came under fire for funding controversial projects, the place of the artist in society became more and more embattled.

According to some reviewers of The Barnum Museum, Millhauser is speaking directly to those controversies.

The title story, "The Barnum Museum," and the final story in the collection, "Eisenheim the Illusionist," both concern themselves with the role of the artist in society, and the criticism of those who believe artistic expression does—and should not—come into conflict with the public good. In the allegorical "The Barnum Museum," a fanciful museum of wonders comes under attack for blurring the lines between illusion and reality, for leading visitors into a world of tricks and gimcracks disguised as magic.

The museum is described in the following passage: Even if, theoretically, we could walk through all the rooms of the Barnum Museum in a single day, from the pyramidal roof of the highest tower to the darkest cave of the third subterranean level, in practice it is impossible, for we inevitably come to a closed door, or a blue velvet rope stretching across a stairway, or a sawhorse in an open doorway before which sits a guard in a dark green uniform. This repeated experience of refused admittance, within the generally open expanses of the museum, only increases our sense of unexplored regions.

The Barnum Museum is a cabinet of wonders, of unfulfilled expectations, of yearnings which may never come true, painful yet still beautiful and uncertain. The imagination is the last mysterious place in a world that seems to offer no unexplored frontiers.

However, there are those who would attack the place of the imagination, of art, in society. Millhauser writes, The enemies of the Barnum Museum say that its exhibits are fraudulent; that its deceptions harm our children, who are turned away from the realm of the natural to a false realm of the monstrous and fantastic; that certain displays are provocative, erotic, and immoral; that this temple of so-called wonders draws us out of the sun, tempts us away from healthy pursuits, and renders us dissatisfied with our daily lives.

There are those who would attack the place of art in society. It forces people to look beyond the everyday, to question what is before them. Millhauser's response is that art and the imagination are all necessary.

At times Millhauser's critique extends to those who would exploit art for profit. He criticizes people who make art part of the cash nexus, who cheapen it by mechanical reproduction. The Barnum Museum has a gift shop; once the trinkets in the shop are

taken from the museum, they seem small, worthless: The toys and trinkets of the Barnum Museum amuse us and delight our children, but in our apartments and hallways, in air thick with the smells of boiling potatoes and furniture polish, the gifts quickly lose their charm, and soon lie neglected in dark corners of closets beside the eyeless Raggedy Ann doll and the dusty Cherokee headdress. Those who disapprove of the Barnum Museum do not spare the gift shops, which they say are dangerous. For they say it is here that the museum, which by its nature is contemptuous of our world, connects to that world by the act of buying and selling.

Art may have a place in the everyday world, but it cannot be bought or sold. Like Monet's water lilies, the stuff of the imagination is rendered meaningless when it becomes a commodity.

Millhauser's fiction addresses the postmodern concern that reality is an illusion. To some extent this is an academic concern; Millhauser himself is an academic fiction writer who teaches at Skidmore College in New York. However, growing concern about the effects of media on thought, culture, and relationships, about the need for censorship or media control, make Millhauser's fiction particularly resonant.

The story "Eisenheim the Illusionist" offers an explicit critique as well of a society that does not understand or appreciate the role of the artist. Much of Millhauser's fiction centers on those who find art dangerous.

"Eisenheim the Illusionist" tells the story of a magician who comes under attack for creating people—or the illusions of real people—with his mind, a trope also used in "The Invention of Robert Herendeen." However, while "The Invention of Robert Herendeen" is about a loner who lives entirely inside his own mind, "Eisenheim the Illusionist" moves the artist into public space, and forces him to deal with the public consequences of his art. This is clearly an issue of our time, as the public space for art is increasingly a contested space.

Ultimately, Eisenheim disappears as he is being condemned by the authorities, a figment of his own imagination.

Millhauser writes: The official reason given for the arrest of the Master, and the seizure of his theater, was the disturbance of public order....

What disturbed Herr Uhl was something else, something for which he had trouble finding a name. The phrase 'crossing of boundaries' occurs pejoratively more than once in his notebooks; by it he appears to mean that certain distinctions must be strictly maintained. Art and life constituted one such distinction; illusion and reality, another. Eisenheim deliberately crossed boundaries and therefore disturbed the essence of things.

The response to Eisenheim's illusions reflects not only a discomfort with the realm of art and potentially subversive artistic creation; it also reflects our own discomfort with ventures into the realm of the unknown. The individual who transgresses and

transforms the boundaries of accepted knowledge and suitable human endeavor must be controlled.

From the Garden of Eden to the controversy over cloning, an excess of human knowledge and discovery has been regarded as dangerous and disruptive. Millhauser's tales reflect our fear of our own knowledge and powers of creation. Yet they also demand a place in our public and private lives for mystery and illusion.

Techniques

As he tells his stories, Millhauser is commenting on the writing process itself. This use of metafiction and intertexruality is present in much of The Barnum Museum. The use of the movie theater, the museum (and the museum-as-circus), the labyrinth, the magic show—all are used as metaphors for the creative process and for writing.

Millhauser's process is most transparent when he is rewriting other texts. He does this in "The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad," "Klassik Komix #1," and "Alice, Falling."

"The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad" reworks the Sinbad story in three texts threaded together simultaneously. The first text is the tale told in the third person, a lush story of adventure and romance. The second text is a scholarly gloss on the story, providing a textual study and possible interpretations, placing the story in literary history. The third text is told in the first person, from the point of view of Sinbad himself. It is a conversion narrative, a story of the journey towards God through hardship and suffering. Millhauser again plays with interpretation here, offering several possible ways of telling a very old story.

"Klassik Komix #1" is another revisioning of a "classic" text. This story rewrites T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as a series of descriptions of comic book panels. Using lines from the poems interwoven as mise en scene and dialogue, Millhauser plays with the poem, itself already fragmented, and tries to make it into a linear narrative. "Alice, Falling" takes Lewis Carroll's story Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and considers what would happen if Alice kept falling. This use of intertextuality allows Millhauser to play with texts, and to further his interrogation of the validity of interpretation and the possibility of coming to a "true" reading.

Themes

In the everyday world, reading people and situations can be difficult. The space between perception and reality can be a place of anxiety. Yet in The Barnum Museum, the boundary between illusion and reality is a liminal space, a space of possibility.

Unquestionable interpretation is itself a fiction; however, this leads not to anxiety but to a plethora of possible meanings. Life situations and attempts to understand others are always problematic and ultimately impossible. There is perpetual uncertainty of knowledge of surroundings, background, self and others. There are always different ways of telling a story.

Reading and understanding people in Millhauser's stories can be as difficult as interpreting texts. In "A Game of Clue," four people playing the game Clue try to figure out what is going on in each other's heads even as they try to solve the riddle of the game. The characters of the game seem to be going through their own anxieties; their thoughts and actions provide a counter-narrative to the story of the Ross family: Jacob, Marian, and David. The siblings, with Jacob's girlfriend Susan, study one another without speaking, each trying to "read" the other. The flesh-and-blood men and women are as much mysteries as the characters of the board game. The setting of the story and the board game itself is described hyperaccurately, as though the recording of each mundane detail will somehow provide clues to interpreting the situation, to solving the mystery of human emotion and motive. For example, each character imagines the ballroom on the board differently.

Jacob remembers a trip to Paris, then thinks of David: "Jacob is glad to be rid of adolescence; he worries about David, but doesn't know how to protect him." Marian imagines an abandoned bride dancing alone.

David sees his high school gym gussied up for a dance. For Susan, finally, "the BALLROOM remains unimagined: a gray rectangle on a board." We as readers are privileged to enter the minds of each character.

We receive the clues about Jacob, Marian, David, and Susan, vital clues to their characters. To each other, however, they remain mysteries. They interpret the game, they seek to interpret each other, yet they fail.

The game, and their understanding, remains incomplete, unresolved. We watch as remembrances of childhood, of arguments, of unspoken love, pass through the minds of the characters, and we watch the characters remain unaware in their yearning to understand.

To some extent, this difficulty in reading the world creates not anxiety in Millhauser's work, but freedom. This may be because for the most part, his work does not involve actual characters like the Ross family. The stories are populated by chimeras, often finally serving as allegory. The freedom lies in the distance of everyday life; "A Game of

Clue" is the only story characterized by the sadness of misunderstanding and desire, because it is the only story in which the effects of misunderstanding on people's emotional lives are explored. In many of the other stories, everyday life is made mysterious, constantly changing. Furthermore, this magical aspect of the mundane is necessary. Everyday objects are given new life in the stories; they are found and made strange.

Movies often serve as metaphors for the troublesome distinction between illusion and reality. It is as though the Wizard of Oz were behind a curtain creating magic with smoke and mirrors; we can never be sure if what we are seeing is true or false. Millhauser uses this metaphor in "Behind the Blue Curtain." The main character, a boy at the movies, ventures to look behind the curtain and discovers that the line between illusion and reality is blurry indeed. Every Saturday the boy goes to the movies with his father: Gravely my father had explained to me that the people on the screen were motionless photographs, passing quickly before my eyes. . . . My father was never wrong, but I felt he was trying to shield me from deeper knowledge. The beings behind the curtain had nothing to do with childish flip-books or the long strips of gray negatives hanging in the kitchen from silver clips.

They led their exalted lives beyond mine, in some other realm entirely, shining, desirable, impenetrable.

The boy recognizes that the images on the screen are not simply illusions, but are beyond real. They exist beyond the mundane, beyond the purely mechanical. Again, as in "The Barnum Museum," Millhauser questions our faith in the mechanical. He interrogates whether that which is magical and mysterious in our world can be reduced simply to machines and mirrors. The fantastic is something that exists. There is something behind the curtain, and it is as real as the everyday.

For Millhauser, the fantastic is a finger that touches the most mundane of objects.

His stories take place in attics and shops filled with stuff, found objects that are impossibly commonplace and impossibly mysterious. In "The Sepia Postcard," a man suffering through a troubled relationship escapes to the small seaside town of Broome.

He finds a used bookshop, Plumshaw's Rare Books. Inside is a Victorian toy theater, a stereoscope, dolls, candy, engravings, 78s, a rocking horse, lamps, armchairs ...

and postcards. The protagonist selects a card depicting a man and a woman sitting by water; he purchases it and brings it back to his dreary hotel room. Over the course of the next day he watches as the postcard's image changes. The woman grows more afraid and the man grows more angry, until finally the protagonist sees a tiny rock in the threatening hand of the man. Here a mundane object is imbued with mystery as it comes to reflect the inner workings of its owner's mind. The image—the illusion—is a counterpoint to the protagonist's personal problems—the reality. Once again, illusion

and reality are difficult to distinguish as the everyday world is defamiliarized.

Thus, the world of the imagination in Millhauser's fiction is a potentially dangerous place, but exciting and necessary. The imagination is a crucial part of everyday experience, and being unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality is not in itself bad.

Key Questions

Steven Millhauser's fiction is a commentary itself on the writing process. The Barnum Museum questions the boundaries between illusion and reality, and how those boundaries become blurred in art. Art itself renders the distinction between illusion and reality problematic. Once that boundary is questioned, interpretation and truth become that much more difficult. For Millhauser, this questioning is troublesome, but ultimately in some senses freeing, because it allows for mystery and magic to enter into our everyday lives.

1. Some commentators argue that the stories in The Barnum Museum are flawed because they are too similar, too onedimensional. It is clear that Millhauser has a point to make in these stories. Does that point weaken the stories?

Are they less effective as literature because they are trying to make a point?

3. Consider how effective a forum literature is for discussing the nature of literature itself.

2. The creative impulse in humans has always been problematic. For centuries some have argued that creation puts us too close to God. How does Millhauser seem to feel about this? How has this attitude changed since the Renaissance? Since the Romantic period?

4. Our perceptions of reality and illusion have changed with changing media. It is impossible to view reality the same way people did before movies and television. How is this shift in perception reflected in Millhauser's fiction?

5. To what extent is Millhauser offering a critique of the place of the artist in our society? Where does he see the artist? What role does he see the artist as playing?

Literary Precedents

Steven Millhauser's most immediate precedents include the short fiction of Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover. These authors also create a fun-house world of play and illusion; the stories in The Barnum Museum are clearly heirs. For example, Robert Coover's short story "The Babysitter" offers an account—or, rather, several conflicting, simultaneous accounts—of what happens to a babysitter and her charges over the course of an evening. This story, too, shows the impossibility of interpretation and of ever getting to the truth.

However, Millhauser's precedents go further back than the American postmodern writers of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the same themes may be seen in the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, particularly in "Rappaccini's Daughter." Rappaccini's overwhelming desire for knowledge, and his use of that knowledge to tamper with nature, is echoed in "The Invention of Robert Herendeen," as is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

Another precedent may be found in the tales of E. T. A. Hoffman, especially "The Sandman," in which a man tries to create a living thing and is ultimately destroyed.

Millhauser's interrogation of the boundaries between illusion and reality, and the dangerous nature of art and knowledge, find echoes and parallels in many other works spanning centuries.

Related Titles

Steven Millhauser's novel Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer (1972) shares many of the same themes as the stories in The Barnum Museum. The novel is a mock biography of a prodigy novelist, as well as a satire on literary production and biography. Both books examine the writing process, and problems and dangers that lie in that process.

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