The Indian Uprising Study Guide

The Indian Uprising by Donald Barthelme

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Contents

Introduction

In Donald Barthelme's short story "The Indian Uprising," the unnamed narrator tells of a battle between his troops and a group referred to as "the Comanches." Interspersed between scenes of battle and the torture of a captured Comanche are the narrator's memories of past events and people, conversations with his girlfriend, Sylvia, and sessions with a teacher named Miss R. Ultimately, the narrator's soldiers find themselves overrun by the enemy; the narrator has been betrayed by Sylvia and fooled by Miss R., both of whom reveal that they have sided with the Comanches. At the story's end, the narrator is taken prisoner and presented to a "Clemency Committee," thanks to Miss R., with the Comanches in attendance.

Some critics and scholars have considered Barthelme a writer of metafiction; that is, writing that draws attention to the fact that it is an artifact, not naturally occurring, in order to bring up questions about reality and its relation to fiction. Critics have also called Barthelme a writer of postmodern fiction, which is variously defined as fiction written by anyone after 1945, fiction that blurs the line between high and popular culture, or fiction that questions previous literary forms (the definitions of postmodernism are multiple and often contradictory).

In this story, as in most of his work, Barthleme experiments with word usage, syntax, narrative flow, and time to create a collage of images rather than a traditionally structured tale. Very little is revealed about the action's location or the characters' backgrounds, but the images Barthelme paints are rich with the curious detail of everyday material items and popular culture. Some critics have noted that the story, written in the 1960s, reflects the televised terrors of the Vietnam War and its protesters, as well as the historical violence of the American West. Others have focused on the story's warlike representation of male-female relationships.

"The Indian Uprising" was one of Barthelme's earliest stories, first published in the *New Yorker*. In 1968, Barthleme included it in his collection of stories, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts.*

Author Biography

Donald Barthelme, considered one of the twentieth century's leading writers of experimental short fiction and novels, was born in Philadelphia on April 7, 1931. His parents—Donald Barthelme Sr., an architect, and Helen Bechtold Barthelme, a teacher — reared him and his four younger siblings in Houston, Texas. Three of his brothers (Frederick, Peter, and Steven) have also become writers.

Donald's studies at the University of Houston were interrupted in 1953, when he was drafted into the United States Army to serve in Korea and Japan. Upon his return, Barthelme worked as a reporter for the *Houston Post*. As he recounted in a 1982 *Partisan Review* interview with Larry McCaffrey, "it seemed clear that the way to become a writer was to work for a newspaper, as Hemingway had done." He also held various public relations jobs at the University of Houston. Between 1961 and 1962, Barthelme was the director of Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, after which he moved to New York City to become the editor of *Location* magazine. Once he began publishing and receiving awards for his writing, Barthleme taught at such universities as Johns Hopkins and City College of New York. He returned to the University of Houston in the early 1980s to teach in its writing program. Barthelme was married four times and had one daughter.

Barthelme published many of his early stories during the 1960s in various literary magazines. His short story "The Indian Uprising" first appeared in the *New Yorker*, and it opens Barthelme's second collection of stories, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, published in 1968. He won numerous awards for his work, including a Guggenheim fellowship in 1966 and a 1972 National Book Award for children's literature for *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine, or the Hithering Thithering Djinn*. He also received a PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for *Sixty Stories* in 1982. He died of cancer on July 23, 1989, in Houston.

Plot Summary

"The Indian Uprising" is told with a limited plot, consisting primarily of the observations, memories, and insights of an unnamed narrator involved in an urban battle against a group called the Comanches. Woven throughout the descriptions of the battle and other war-related events are the narrator's comments and memories of different women.

When the story opens, the narrator is describing the city as it looked during the battle with the Comanches, when he and his compatriots "defended the city as best we could." The city is barricaded and festooned with protective wire, and it features streets with such names as Rue Chester Nimitz and George C. Marshall Allée. The narrator's troops have captured a Comanche and are interrogating and torturing him.

After this, the narrator shifts to describe a variety of situations and details sometimes connected with the interrogation and sometimes unrelated. First, he remembers sitting with a woman named Sylvia and "getting drunker and drunker and more in love and more in love." The narrator also remembers that he has made some tables out of hollow-core doors (cheap doors, usually used for interior rather than exterior doors, that are made by fastening sheets of thin wood together, leaving a hollow space in the center of the door) and wonders about how a person he refers to as "you," most likely his film actress girlfriend Sylvia, felt while filming movie scenes naked. He remembers the tables made from hollow-core doors that he has built for the numerous women with whom he has lived.

He begins describing the barricades he and his fellow soldiers erected against the Comanches. The barricades consisted of numerous unrelated items, which the narrator lists: a bottle of red wine, ashtrays, plates, a poster, and a flute, for example. He mentions that he decided then that he "knew nothing."

The next scene begins in a hospital where the wounded received treatments, "the worth of which was not quite established." Again, the narrator mentions that he "knew nothing." His friends put him in touch with an "unorthodox" teacher, Miss R., who is "excellent with difficult cases." Miss R. is a sort of taskmaster, belittling the narrator and reminding him that he knows nothing. He wants to speak of a woman named Jane who has just been beaten up by a dwarf, but Miss R. will not let him.

As the next scene begins, the narrator is thinking of Sylvia. He remembers being with Sylvia and asking her to call off her "braves," indicating that she was with the other side in the battle. At that time, she ran down the Rue Chester Nimitz, "uttering shrill cries." As it turned out, the Comanches had infiltrated the ghetto of the city; however, the people living there welcomed them. In turn, the narrator's side "sent more heroin into the ghetto," addicting the residents, including Sylvia.

The narrator shifts the scene to Miss R.'s house, where they sat in chairs across from each other while people watched. He remembers his friend Block and their discussion about the progress of the battle. They spoke of Sylvia and a man named Kenneth who

owned a large coat that, at different times, had hidden both Sylvia and a knife-wielding Comanche. The narrator remembers asking Sylvia, "Which side are you on . . . after all?" after seeing her wear a muffler in the colors of his side. Miss R. belittled the narrator and said, "The only form of discourse of which I approve . . . is the litany." She explained how she organizes words while the narrator "sat in solemn silence."

After remembering a moment from the battle, the narrator returns to the Comanche who is being tortured. Under duress, the Comanche has admitted that his name is Gustave Aschenbach and that he was born in Silesia. Various memories and thoughts flood the narrator's mind, including those of a visit to Sweden and Jane's run-in with the dwarf. He remembers that he condemned Jane for having an affair with a man named Harold and then comments on the loose organization of the narrative, saying:

Strings of language extend in every direction to bind the world into a rushing, ribald whole.

The narrator notes that the Comanches "smashed our inner defenses on three sides." He remembers a variety of other moments, including one when he was in bed with someone, most likely Sylvia. They had a quarrel, and there were "white, raised scars" on her back.

The narrator says that his side killed many of the Comanches during the battle but discovered that they were mostly children and that many more were coming from all directions. Miss R. then informs him that he is in front of the "Clemency Committee" and that he must remove his belt and shoelaces. He does what she asks, and the story ends with him looking at the Comanches watching him with "their savage black eyes, paint, feathers, beads."

Summary

Indian Uprising opens amidst an attack by Comanches on the narrator's modern town. The narrative character flashes from recounting details of the attack and its defense to a conversation with Sylvia, his girlfriend. The narrator and an unnamed compatriot have taken a Comanches prisoner and torture him. The narrator makes a table out of a hollow-core door.

The Comanches storm barricades set up by the resistance made of such flimsy household items as window dummies, silk, wine, robes, a blanket, pillows, a Yugoslavian flute and ashtrays. The narrator tells himself that he knows nothing. Because he knows nothing, his friends put him in touch with Miss R., an unorthodox teacher, who is successful with difficult cases. The narrator hears that his friend, Jane, has been beaten up by a dwarf in a bar. Miss R. tells the narrator not to speak of it, for he knows nothing, feels nothing and is locked in a savage and terrible ignorance. Miss R. says she despises him, but still refers to him in loving terms: "my boy," "*mon cher*," "my heart." Miss R. tells him that he may attend, but that he must not attend now. He must attend later, a day or a week or an hour. To this the narrator responds that he "nonevaluated" these remarks as Korzybski instructed.

The Comanches pulled back into a feint near the river where they were rushed by a hastily-formed defense unit. The unit, however, was crushed later that afternoon. The narrator proclaims his desire for Sylvia, despite the onrush of the Comanches. When he is with her, he is happiest. It is for her that he makes the hollow-core door table. He tells her, "Call off your braves," ... "We have many years left to live." The narrator sees gutters filled with a yellow, filthy stream of muck. He sees a city that does not know what it has done to deserve baldness, errors and infidelity. Sylvia tells him that with luck he will survive until morning and runs off uttering shrill cries.

The narrator learns that the Comanches have infiltrated the ghetto and that the citizens of the ghetto, instead of resisting, have joined them. The line of defense swells and collapses. Heroin and hyacinths are sent into the ghetto. He looks at a map and describes "our" parts as blue and "their" parts green. He shows the map to Sylvia and tells her her parts are green. She responds that he first gave her heroin a year prior, and then, again, runs off shrieking.

The narrator returns to Miss R., who leads him to a large white room where people watched. Two chairs are in the room, one for him and one for Miss R. He is disappointed by her plainness and the bareness of the room, notably its absence of books. The narrator recalls that the girls of his quarter wore long blue mufflers (scarves) that reached to their knees. Sometimes they hid Comanches in their rooms, and the blue mufflers created a great blue fog.

The narrator's associate, Block, enters the story carrying weapons, flowers and loaves of bread. When asked about the situation, Block responds that the situation is liquid--that we hold the south quarter and they hold the north quarter. The rest is silence. When

Block is asked about Kenneth, he responds that the girl, Sylvia, is not in love with Kenneth, but, instead, she is in love with his coat. When she is not wearing it, she is huddling under it. The narrator responds that once he saw Kenneth's coat walking down the stairs, and inside was a Comanche, who thrust at his leg with a knife. The narrator's leg buckled, and he was tossed over the balustrade through a window and into another "situation." The narrator, not believing his body and spirit could return, angry and unstable as they were, states, "See the table?"

In Skinny Wainwright Square, green and blue battled. Blue gained, green recoiled. The narrator sees Sylvia in the square, wearing a yellow ribbon and long blue muffler. Which side are you on, he asked?

The narration flashes to Miss R., instructing the narrator that only God can satisfy the intense desire a woman instills in a man. The narrator tells Miss R. that he made a table for Nancy once. Miss R. sticks out her tongue at him. Block recalls that he once made such a table and that it is likely that every home in America has at least one table like the narrator's.

Miss R. tersely tells the narrator that the only form of discourse she approves is the litany, that which can be said. She recites a list: "pewter, snake, tea, Fad #6 sherry, serviette, fenestration, crown, blue," and tells him that she runs to liquids and colors, but cautions that he may run to something else. Miss R. tells him that young people run to more and more unpleasant combinations as they sense the nature of our society. Some people, she tells him, run to conceits or wisdom, Miss R. prefers the hard, brown, nutlike word. She tells him that there is enough aesthetic excitement to satisfy anyone but a damned fool.

The narrator proceeds to the post office where the Abraham Lincoln Brigade offered their last, exhausted letters, postcards and calendars. He opens a letter to find a Comanche's flint arrowhead in an elegant gold chain. This gold chain leads the narrator to recall Sylvia's earring rattling against his spectacles when he leaned forward to touch her ear. "Pack it in! Pack it in!" he says; those in charge of the uprising, however, would not listen.

Wires were attached to the testicles of the captured Comanche to torture him and force him to talk. The narrator sat, getting more and more drunk and more and more in love. When electricity charged the Comanche's testicles, he revealed his name to be Gustave Aschenbach.

The narrator tells Jane he has heard she was beaten by a dwarf but cannot believe it. He thinks she would have kicked him in the groin. He tells her that her affair with Harold is reprehensible because Harold is married to Nancy and Harold has two children.

The Comanches smashed the narrator's defenses on three sides. Block fired a grease gun from the upper floor of a building. The narrator says, "See the table?" and the response, from either Block or Kenneth, is "Oh, pack it in with your bloody table!" A great many Comanches were killed in the south with helicopters and rockets, but it was

later learned that they were children. More came from the north, from the east and from other places.

Miss R. is with the narrator in a white, yellow room where she introduces him to the Clemency Committee and instructs him to remove his belt and shoelaces. The narrator removes his shoelaces and belt and looks into their savage black eyes, paint, feathers and beads.

Analysis

Donald Barthelme's short story, *Indian Uprising* (1968), is best defined as experimental fiction similar to the work of Thomas Pynchon. Rather than relying upon formalities of plot and character development, this work is written as stream of consciousness. It is a dream sequence. The narrative character couches the description of an argument/break-up with his mate, Sylvia, in the framework of an invading band of Comanches storming a modern city. The narrator tries desperately to hold onto Sylvia but is losing the battle. This work is rife with symbolism, and it is through that symbolism that the story is interpreted and understood.

Sylvia has a hostile attitude against the narrator throughout the story. She attacks him repeatedly, as symbolized by the Comanches' attack on the town. The loud noise of the Comanches represents the screams of an upset Sylvia echoing throughout their apartment and off all its contents. As the Comanches attack, as Sylvia shouts, their clatter reverberate off "barricades" the narrator envisions: window dummies, pillows, bottles, ashtrays, a blanket, bottles of liquor, etc. The narrator may be trying to drown his sorrows of losing Sylvia in these "barricades:" the wine, the sherry, the cognac, the vodka, the gin, the sherry. The narrator decides he knows nothing. When the narrator refers to hospitals dusting wounds with questionable powders because all other supplies had been exhausted, he may be alluding to a switch to cocaine once the liquor ran dry.

The narrator tells Sylvia, amidst the uprising, that he wants her. He holds her by her bear claw necklace and tells her to call off her braves. He tells her they have many years left to live. She responds that, with luck, things will last until the morning. This paragraph links Sylvia and their relationship to the Comanche. He does not know what he has done to deserve baldness, errors and infidelity. The narrator is losing Sylvia because of those problems and can't understand why. He tries to make up with her with a peace offering of heroin, but she runs away shrieking once again. He does not know how to placate her and she leaves crying at his miscalculated attempts.

The narrator slaves over the hollow-core door table. The table, a household fixture, as it is initially contrasted to scenes of sex, symbolizes the narrator's attempt to build a solid relationship from a purely sexual liaison. He made them in the past for Nancy, Alice, Eunice and Marianne while he lived with them. The door used to make the table, however, is hollow at its core. He tries to make something solid, a table with iron legs, but he is using something hollow, not stable, as its fundamental base. Perhaps the

narrator knows that his efforts are insincere or ultimately doomed to fail. Perhaps that is why he has lived unsuccessfully with four different women in the past. This is also suggested later when the narrator recalls that the women of his past sometimes hid Comanches in their rooms. The symbol of the table/door is visited later when the narrator's friend, Block, tells him that he and people all over America have made such tables. Block is telling him that there is nothing special, glamorous, artistic or unusual about his attempt to stabilize the relationship through an artifice.

Miss R. is a stern, authoritative character. She is referred to as an unorthodox teacher, successful with the difficult cases. The narrator's friends send him to her. She is a psychiatrist. She has a large white office, starkly devoid of books and furnished with two chairs. He tries to tell her about a dream he had of a dwarf beating up his friend Jane, but she does not want to hear about it. She alternates stern rebukes, telling him he knows nothing, that he is ignorant and savage, that she despises him, with loving references-*mon cher*, my heart. She is trying to help him, but in a tough-love manner. She tells him to "attend," but that he must do it later, not now. She is telling him to wait, to wait to talk to Sylvia. Why? He must wait because he is not yet ready. The narrator segues to a vanquished, counter-attack against the Comanches. This likely equates to a premature attempt to reconcile with Sylvia.

Reference is further made to the problems between the narrator and Sylvia when Miss R. quotes Valery that "The ardor aroused in men by the beauty of women can only be satisfied by God." What she means is that the narrator has no control of the restless longings of the heart he feels. She cautions him to stick to the word. To be grounded in reality.

Block, the narrator's friend, is consulted about the situation. He brings the narrator weapons, flowers and loaves of bread. The weapons, of course, are symbolic of ammunition with which to fight Sylvia. The flowers and loaves of bread reflect peace offerings to present her in lieu of further argument. Block tells the narrator that Sylvia is not in love with Kenneth, presumably the subject of her infidelity. The narrator is quite troubled that she often wears Kenneth's coat. Having confronted her about it, an argument ensued. He was thrown for a loop, and all he could do was point to his table. The narrator wants Sylvia to acknowledge that he is working on a stable relationship and that her thoughts of another are not appropriate.

When the narrator goes to the post office and opens a letter to find a Comanche arrowhead in an elegant, gold chain, he is realizing that his relationship problems have entered every area of his life. He desperately tells Sylvia to "Pack it in! Pack it in!" She, as represented by the "men in charge of the Uprising," refuses to listen to reason or understand that he is not now what he once was.

That the Comanche tortured with wires attached to his testicles reveals his identity to be Gustave Aschenbach is of great significance. Gustave von Aschenbach was the main character in Thomas Mann's Death in Venice. Von Aschenbach was an aging novelist who was attracted to the beauty of an adolescent boy, despite never meeting him. The reference to von Aschenbach parallels the narrator's longings for Sylvia, who now

rebukes him, at least partly because of his old age and failing looks and her presumably young age and good looks.

As the Comanches begin their final conquest of the city, i.e., as the relationship is nearing its end, Block fires a grease gun from a roof attempting to help the narrator in his confrontation with Sylvia. Once again, the narrator points to his table. Block is unimpressed and tells him to pack in the bloody table. He is telling the narrator that his lame attempt at salvaging the relationship will not work. Instead, he must fight for Sylvia. As the narrator lies in bed with Sylvia, her back turned to him, he realizes the scars she has suffered.

The battle lost, Miss R. leads the narrator to the Clemency committee. He is asked to remove his belt and shoelaces. This is typical for someone under psychiatric care and suicide watch. Rain shatters his vision of neat rows of subdivision houses. He cries as he realizes that he has no domesticated, white picket fence future with Sylvia. He looks straight into her savage black eyes, paint, feathers and beads. He is confronting Sylvia with one last unlikely chance of clemency-of saving the relationship.

Characters

Block

Block is one of the narrator's fellow fighters in the battle; he enters the story carrying flowers, bread, and weapons. The narrator calls him "friendly, kind, [and] enthusiastic." Block shares information about the battle, noting that the narrator's troops hold various parts of the city but that the "situation is liquid." He also assures the narrator that Sylvia does not love Kenneth, only his coat.

Captured Comanche

After being tortured by the narrator's troops, the captured Comanche reveals that his name is Gustave Aschenbach. He was born at "L—, a country town in the province of Silesia," a region in Eastern Europe currently shared by Poland and the Czech Republic. His father was a judicial official and all of his relatives were government officials, according to the narrator.

Jane

Jane is one of the narrator's friends. Early in the story, the narrator hears that Jane has been beaten up by a dwarf in a bar, and later he comments that this event doesn't sound like something she would be involved in. On one occasion, the narrator reflects upon Jane's affair with a married man, Harold, and questions her "values." According to the narrator, Jane is attractive and desirable; he describes her leg as "tasty and nice-looking."

Kenneth

Kenneth is one of the narrator's compatriots in the war. He owns a large coat that Sylvia likes, but Block assures the narrator that this does not mean that she is in love with Kenneth. Kenneth mentions at one point that he would like be Jean-Luc Godard, a French film director who was prominent during the 1960s for his nontraditional and nonlinear approach to telling a story through film.

Narrator

The narrator, while never named in the story, is a leader of the troops trying to prevent the Comanches from taking over the city. He is in love with Sylvia but has lived with a large number of other women at various times in his life; he mentions Nancy, Alice, Eunice, and Marianne. There is a sense that he struggles in his relationships with women and may even have employed violence in these relationships; at the end of the

story, he says, "the sickness of the quarrel lay thick in the bed. I touched your back, the white raised scars." He is also involved in violence when he participates in torturing the captured Comanche.

His friends urge him to see Miss R. for instruction in an unspecified subject. He tries to remain impassive when she belittles him, but he admits that he finds it exciting when she pushes him into a room where he knows people will be watching the two of them during his instruction.

Miss R.

Miss R. is an "unorthodox" teacher, somewhat plain in appearance and abrupt in her language. Her office is sparsely furnished and has no books. The narrator's friends suggest that he seek out her services, as she is "successful with difficult cases." While it is not exactly clear what she is teaching the narrator, she treats him with disdain and physically pushes him around. She tells him that he knows "nothing" and dictates the topics he may discuss and how he may speak of them.

Miss R. appears to be on the same side of the battle as the narrator until the end of the story, when she reveals that she is with the Comanches. At this point she announces to the narrator, "This is the Clemency Committee," asks for his belt and his shoelaces, and makes him a prisoner of the Comanches.

Sylvia

Sylvia is the narrator's girlfriend and a film actress who has appeared naked in her films. The narrator loves Sylvia and desires her presence on a number of occasions during the battle.

Sylvia eventually betrays the narrator, running to the side of the Comanches during the battle. On one occasion, though, the narrator is confused when he sees Sylvia wearing a long, blue muffler, an accessory that typically signifies to the narrator "the girls of my quarter." He calls out to Sylvia, "What side are you on . . . after all?" Later, she mentions to the narrator that he gave her heroin "first a year ago." This is related to the fact that the narrator's side sent heroin into the ghettos when they found out that the residents were beginning to side with the Comanches.

Themes

Male-Female Relationships

There are no successful relationships between men and women in Barthelme's short story, even between the narrator and his girlfriend Sylvia. The ground between men and women in the story reflects the ongoing battle between the Comanches and the narrator's troops.

Twice the narrator indicates that he is "getting drunker and drunker and more in love and more in love," indicating a certain amount of pain surrounding his feelings for Sylvia. In another scene, Block quickly assures the narrator that Sylvia is not in love with Kenneth, highlighting the narrator's anxiety over his and Sylvia's relationship. Sylvia is shown, ultimately, as a deceptive woman, lying to him about which side in the battle she has chosen. When the narrator remembers lying in bed with her at the story's end, he winces over "the sickness of the quarrel" he has had with her, and his fingers touch "white, raised scars" on her back, calling up images of violence and pain.

The narrator's relationships with other women in the story are also failures. He has lived with a number of women—at least four in addition to Sylvia—indicating that he has had difficulty staying in a relationship. Even his relationship with Miss R. is fraught with pain and anxiety. When he seeks her out for help with an unnamed problem, she belittles and shames him. He responds with passivity and silence. In the end, Miss R. betrays him by assisting with his imprisonment.

Violence

The story opens and closes with impressions of violence achieved and violence to come, and throughout the text there are glimpses of brutality. The characters never remark upon or even notice the violence, as if it has become a normal way of life—possibly an authorial comment on the constant presence of violence in American society and the limited value words have against violence and in accurately describing violence. The war motif in the story has prompted critics to consider whether Barthelme's story refers to the violence of the Vietnam War, the antiwar demonstrations that were frequently turning American streets into battlegrounds, or the nation's long history of violence against Native Americans.

At the story's start, the narrator is busy torturing a captured Comanche by tilting his head back and pouring water into his nostrils. In response, the Comanche's "body jerked, [and] he choked and wept." Later, the Comanche is forced to speak when the narrator's troops place electrodes on his genitals. During neither torture scene does the narrator, or anyone else, note what is happening. In fact, the narrator's mind habitually wanders off to another place and time.

When the narrator admits that his troops have killed children, he finishes the thought by noting that "more came from the north and from the east and from other places where there are children preparing to live." This flat and emotionless reference to the deaths of many children and to the fact that many more were coming to replace the dead reflects the narrator's lack of sorrow. The narrator nearly has an emotional response to a quarrel with Sylvia, but when he takes notice of the scars on her back, he does not express concern or explain their source. His casualness about the scars and the previous torture scenes suggest that the narrator is a man who lives comfortably with violence.

Deception

The world in Barthelme's story is filled with deception and lies, and the surface images of things and people often do not accurately reflect what lies beneath. This creates an atmosphere of disorder and confusion in the story and contributes to the story's plotless and nonlinear narrative. There are surprises around almost every corner, but they are surprises that disturb rather than delight.

Sylvia and Miss R. betray the narrator, and "girls hid Comanches in their rooms." When the captured Comanche is tortured, he says that his name is Gustave Aschenbach and that he is from a town in Silesia, a region spanning the Czech Republic and Poland—a rather odd name and origin for an American Indian. A friend's blue coat turns into a hiding place from which a Comanche jumps out and stabs the narrator's leg. A hospital uses a treatment "the worth of which was not quite established." Tables are actually hollow-core doors with wrought iron legs attached, barricades are made up of everyday items, such as a flute or a bottle of vodka, and a friend has an affair with a married man. The deception in the story creates a world in which most things have lost their normal meaning.

Style

Nonlinear Narrative

"The Indian Uprising" does not read like a traditional story in which there are characters with relatively well-defined roles and backgrounds who appear in a linear or chronological plot with a definable beginning and end. The story's lack of structure is echoed by the "destructuring" activity going in the story: the narrator is involved in a battle that is destroying his city while he witnesses the dissolution of his relationship with Sylvia.

Several times the narrator says to himself, "I decided that I knew nothing," indicating a deep sense of chaos and loss of meaning. This chaos is reflected in the continuous parade of unrelated objects and events that appear in the story. The barricades created to hold back the narrator's enemies are made up of the detritus of everyday life, such as a blanket, window dummies, ashtrays, pillows, a flute, corkscrews, and can openers. In the city, there is a dwarf who has attacked one of the narrator's friends, an "inexplicable shell money lying in the grass," a hundred thousand hyacinths sent to the ghetto, and "a sort of muck running in the gutters." This collage of images further enhances the story's sense of disorder.

Miss R. attempts to impose order when she states that "I believe our masters and teachers as well as plain citizens should confine themselves to what can safely be said." Her attempt, however, becomes farcical when she claims that a list of unrelated words she has organized into a hierarchical list holds some meaning. In Barthelme's story, only the illogical is meaningful.

Atypical Syntax

The story also features sentences that do not seem to make sense, paragraphs in which the sentences jump from one topic to the next, and sentences that do not use traditional punctuation. For example, after describing a Comanche knife attack, the narrator continues in the same paragraph with a sentence that does not follow typical standards of narration or punctuation:

Not believing that your body brilliant as it was and your fat, liquid spirit distinguished and angry as it was were stable quantities to which one could return on wires more than once, twice, or another number of times I said: "See the table?"

At times, Barthelme uses a word that does not seem to fit the occasion, as when he tells of receiving information about his friend Jane: "Jane! I heard via an International Distress Coupon that you were beaten up by a dwarf in a bar on Tenerife." A reader might typically expect the word "signal," "frequency," or "call" instead of "coupon." In this manner, Barthelme disrupts the expected flow of a sentence, creating tension, confusion, and questions.

Because of these constructions, only limited glimpses or snapshots of the action are available, and a mood of unease and apprehension quickly settles over the story. Instead of telling the reader about this mood, or having the characters talk about feeling this way, Barthelme uses unconventional syntax and language patterns to communicate the atmosphere he desires.

Historical Context

The Vietnam War During the 1960s

Barthelme wrote "The Indian Uprising" in the 1960s, during the Vietnam War, one of the longest wars in U.S. history. In fact, critics have argued that the battles against the Comanches in the story echo images of that war.

American involvement in Vietnam began in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the United States contributed resources to help the French create an anti-communist regime in their colonial territories of Indochina, as the region was then called. Eventually, the French gave up their control over Vietnam, and the country was partitioned into North Vietnam, led by Ho Chi Minh, a communist, and South Vietnam, ruled by a government somewhat friendly to the United States and Europe.

In an effort to stem what was seen as the rising tide of communism in the region, and to help South Vietnam defend itself against North Vietnam, President John F. Kennedy significantly increased U.S. support to South Vietnam in the early 1960s. By 1963, the United States had approximately sixteen thousand soldiers stationed in South Vietnam. A series of events led President Lyndon B. Johnson to authorize sending some eighty thousand troops to defend U.S. airbases in South Vietnam and to engage in limited fighting in April 1965. By the end of 1965, there were 185,000 American soldiers in South Vietnam; that number grew to 500,000 by the end of 1967.

Support for the war began to erode by 1966, with many Americans not fully confident that President Johnson was making progress in helping the South Vietnamese resist communism. President Richard M. Nixon further escalated the war after his election in 1968, much to the dismay of many Americans, provoking an increasing number of antiwar demonstrations. By January 1975, the American military had removed most of its troops; by April of that year, the North Vietnamese effectively took over South Vietnam.

The Vietnam War created deep and lasting divisions in American society and entirely changed the way the United States looked at committing its troops overseas. The war cost America much more than the $170 billion in material expenditures; more than 58,000 Americans died, and about 23,000 veterans of the war were permanently disabled.

Antiwar Protests During the 1960s

With its images of urban battles and barricades, Barthelme's short story evokes a period during which thousands of Americans took to the streets to protest the Vietnam War. In the mid-1960s, college students and others began organizing demonstrations to show their increasing displeasure with a U.S. government that looked to be supporting a corrupt government in South Vietnam and was sending their friends, brothers,

husbands, and sons to a faraway country to fight for a questionable cause. Most of these demonstrations were peaceful, but some erupted in violence.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was one of the most prominent groups organizing antiwar demonstrations during the 1960s. They began in 1960 when a group of students associated with the Socialist Party organized to support the civil rights movement. By 1964, prompted by increased American military activity in Vietnam, SDS began organizing campus demonstrations. At that time, all men between eighteen and twenty-five who were not enrolled in school were required to register for the military draft. SDS circulated a "We Won't Go" petition among men of draft age, encouraging them to resist induction into the military and to burn their draft cards.

Teach-ins also began on the nation's college campuses by the mid-1960s. During the teach-ins, faculty and students, often eschewing their regularly scheduled classes, held discussions and information sessions about the war. On March 24, 1965, more than 3,500 attended a teach-in at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, sparking similar events at college campuses across the nation that spring. These culminated on May 15 of that year when groups at 122 universities held the "National Teach-In."

Also in 1965, an SDS-sponsored demonstration brought more than twenty thousand antiwar protesters to Washington, D.C. Other major rallies against the Vietnam War occurred during this period, including the 1967 March on the Pentagon that attracted more than one hundred thousand, and a violent multi-day demonstration outside the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. By the late 1960s, even mainstream religious, labor, and professional organizations began voicing their opposition to the war.

Critical Overview

Critics have both lauded and condemned Barthelme for the way he used language and reordered the traditional structure of stories. While some have accused Barthelme of being lazy and careless and of intentionally subverting language, most have written of their delight when encountering his experiments with the written word, appreciating the challenge that exists within a Barthelme story.

Soon after Barthelme's death in 1989, John Barth wrote an appreciation of the author in the *New York Times Book Review*, comparing him with another short-story writer, Raymond Carver. Barth wrote that Barthelme shared with Carver "an axis of rigorous literary craftsmanship, a preoccupation with the particulars of, shall we say, post-Eisenhower American life, and a late-modern conviction, felt to the bone, that less is more." According to Barth, Barthelme was "the thinking man's—and woman's—Minimalist," a proponent of a style of art and music originating in the 1960s that emphasized simplicity and straightforwardness. Francis Gillen, writing in *Twentieth Century Literature*, credits Barthelme for alerting modern man to the presence of a world abundant in many things that are, nonetheless, devoid of value and meaning. Gillen praises the author for exploring the "full impact of mass media pop culture on the consciousness of the individual who is so bombarded by canned happenings . . . that he can no longer distinguish the self from the surroundings."

"The Indian Uprising" has generally received high marks from most critics. Neil Schmitz, for example, writing in the *Minnesota Review*, calls "The Indian Uprising" a "brilliantly conceived collage." Schmitz praises Barthelme's use of nonlinear narrative as well as everyday objects to develop satire in his work. He notes that Barthelme has, "with the insane coolness of a TV commentator," created a "Vietnamized world lurching toward an apocalypse by juxtaposing in quick flashes all its profuse objects, events and language." Maclin Bocock calls Barthelme "an original and important writer" in *fiction international*. He is particularly interested in Barthelme's treatment of the malefemale relationship in his work, arguing that much of Barthelme's writing is concerned with "the failure of a man to achieve a satisfactory and lasting relationship with a woman." This theme is present in "The Indian Uprising," Bocock notes, even though it is "concealed by a cover of complicated language." The story, he asserts, is "an extended metaphor of war," meant to represent the painful breakup between the narrator and his girlfriend, Sylvia. The Comanches in the story therefore signify the words Sylvia uses to attack him; by the end of the story, the narrator is beaten down, and his "emasculation . . . is complete." According to Bocock, the hero as a failed lover is common theme in Barthelme's fiction.

Some critics do not take pleasure in Barthelme's experimental prose, however. While John W. Aldridge generally praises Barthelme's *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* in the *Atlantic Monthly*, he also has complaints about a few of the stories in it. Some of them, he argues, "strike one as exercises in free association and automatic writing or as descriptions of bad dreams jotted down . . . for the benefit of one's analyst." Walter Sullivan is not impressed by Barthelme's unique style, claiming in the *Sewanee Review*

that the author is "apparently devoid of ideas." This has forced Barthelme, he asserts, to use clichés and to write down "whatever ridiculous things occur to him."

Webster Schott agrees with Aldridge that Barthelme's writing is dreamlike, but he considers this a positive feature. Commenting in *Book World— The Washington Post*, Schott finds Barthelme to be "one of the half dozen truly interesting American writers" of the time as well as "original" and a "genuine artist." But he also acknowledges that the author's work can be "tedious, inflated, repetitious, and a bit depressing." Other critics have expressed similarly contradictory feelings about Barthelme's work. For example, Earl Shorris, reviewing Barthelme's 1972 short story collection *Sadness* for *Harper's*, enjoys the uniqueness of the author's writing but is also pained by the impact his words and sentences can have. According to Shorris, Barthelme has "located the square on which we are cowering, and he has assembled the comedy of our activities on that square, our lives, into an instrument of discomfort." On the other hand, he praises Barthelme for being able to "turn the most ordinary events into beautiful language; he is often a poet; he makes sculptures of words; art is alchemy."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sanderson examines Donald Barthelme's use of historical figures and events in his short story.

Numerous critics have noted that Donald Barthelme's stories are filled with the everyday bits and pieces of modern life. Tony Tanner summarizes this phenomenon well in his book *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970*, noting that Barthelme's writing is "packed with the detritus of modern life: it seems like an unbroken stream of the accumulations and appurtenances which we see around us" and that, somehow, Barthelme is able to turn these familiar collections into "strangeness."

Yet, in his short story "The Indian Uprising," Barthelme moves beyond this effort to expose the material garbage heap of our lives; he has his eye set on our accumulated history as contemporary Americans. According to Barthelme, we are the result of more than two hundred years of collected violence, wars, brutality, and generally rotten behavior toward one another. Thankfully, he delivers this accusation with a bit of black humor. The story presents a collection of historical wreckage gathered into a pile, holding as little meaning and substance as the material bits and pieces of modern life that litter the text. Barthelme's treatment of the references to history in "The Indian Uprising" call to mind the condemnation Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky leveled against his enemies in 1917: "You are pitiful isolated individuals: you are bankrupt; your role is played out. Go where you belong from now on—into the dustbin of history!"

The city in "The Indian Uprising" is portrayed as a heap of modern junk. Barricades made up of the small bits of everyday modern life—blankets, ashtrays, flutes, and liquor bottles—protect the city streets from the Comanches. There is even an "officer commanding the garbage dump;" indeed, Barthelme makes a number of allusions to the city's military past during this accumulation process. Streets are named for famous military men, and the whole atmosphere of the battle against the Comanches has a familiar cast to it, as if the battle had jumped from the pages of a slightly irregular textbook on the American West. Add to these textual features the fact that Barthelme wrote this story during a period when many Americans were demanding civil rights for African Americans and thousands of young men were leaving to fight in one of America's most controversial and unpopular conflicts, the Vietnam War, and it becomes clear that the author wishes his readers to consider the effects of history.

All of the streets in the story bear the name of a renowned military man who had an impact on American history. Boulevard Mark Clark is named for an American general who served in both World War II and the Korean conflict. In fact, Clark is noted for being the first U.S. commander at that time to sign documents ending a war that the United States did not win as well as for being a protégé of George C. Marshall, the inspiration for George C. Marshall Allée in the story. Marshall was a World War II general and the main force behind the Marshall Plan, which helped repair Europe's economy after the war. Skinny Wainwright Square in the story is named for Jonathan Wainwright, another

American general who served during World War II and spent more than three years in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. There are more similarly named streets, and by the time the story is over their names are more a humorous aside to the action than a memorial to a war hero. As he does with the story's accumulated material items, Barthelme succeeds in piling up the generals to such a degree that their conventionally historic meaning has been lost.

Barthelme uses the name of a tribe of Indians celebrated for their skills in war, the Comanches, as the narrator's foes in the story. In fact, the Comanches are said to have killed more white settlers in proportion to their own numbers than any other tribe during America's westward expansion. Eventually, though, continued wars with the settlers and the United States military destroyed their society. By giving the captured Comanche a European name and by having stereotypical Indian artifacts appear in unexpected and odd places in his prose—the narrator, for example, finds an arrowhead in a piece of mail and has his way to the post office lit by "fire arrows"—Barthelme twists this piece of American history in a darkly comic fashion that succeeds in erasing the actual role the Comanches held in history. The narrator of the story even states that the Comanches "had infiltrated our ghetto and the people of the ghetto instead of resisting had joined." At the story's conclusion, Barthelme pulls off the ultimate historical reversal by making the Comanches the winning side in the battle against those in charge in the city.

Barthelme published this story during a period of great upheaval in the United States: vocal opposition to the Vietnam War was increasing, and the civil rights movement had already staged a number of important demonstrations. Barthelme's battle descriptions in the story are evocative of the protests in many American cities during the mid-1960s. In the story, barricades, earthworks, and hedges "laced with sparkling wire" circled the city, "Patrols of paras and volunteers with armbands guarded the tall, flat buildings," and "Red men in waves like people scattering in a square startled by something tragic or sudden" filled the streets. These words echo the actual images of people in the streets during the 1960s, protesting the treatment of African Americans or demanding an explanation for America's involvement in an unpopular war.

War protesters and civil rights marchers had one thing in common that would be important for Barthelme in writing this story: both groups rejected the status quo and demanded that, despite what had gone on before, life in America was going to change. Barthelme captures that feeling of disorder and reorder in this story by introducing a nonlinear narrative, chaotically listing material items, and disrupting sentence structure. But perhaps most important to Barthelme's process of reorganizing historical garbage is his success in removing the authority and power from historical events and figures.

By the story's end, the leaders of past wars whose names identify the city's avenues are almost forgotten, and traditional representations of authority have been toppled. "The city officials were tied to trees. Dusky warriors padded with their forest tread into the mouth of the mayor," the narrator notes. When he asks a fellow soldier who he wants to be, the answer is not one of the decorated historical figures whose names have appeared in the story but Jean-Luc Godard, the experimental French film director who became famous in 1959 when he made a movie showing only the beginnings and ends

of scenes. Godard was involved in the very same effort to disrupt traditional storytelling patterns that so engaged Barthelme. History had failed the characters in Barthelme's story and was of little use to them. Increasing numbers of Americans during the 1960s were feeling the same way.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on "The Indian Uprising," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition who writes about literature and culture for various publications. In this essay, Semansky considers Barthelme's technique.

Attempts to read Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising" as a conventional short story are doomed to failure and inevitably complicate an already challenging text. The most productive strategy for reading the piece is to focus on its medium rather than its message—to look at how it is put together instead of what it means. Barthelme was the consummate postmodernist who, like many postmodernists, believed that literature had exhausted itself, and that the role of the writer was to recreate it by literally destroying the foundation upon which it rests.

Barthelme's text is an attack on the notion that language *reflects* reality. However, rather than arguing against this notion or having one of his characters argue against it, Barthelme embodies the attack in his writing. Most fiction writers attempt to create a world that is recognizable to readers and resonates with their experience. Conventionally, stories include plots that may or may not unfold in chronological order, characters that interact with other characters and are largely driven by identifiable human desires, and details presented in a more or less coherent manner. In short, conventional fiction writers attempt to represent a plausible world and populate it with engaging characters. Barthelme exposes all of these conventions *as* fictions, suggesting that language is a closed circle, and the "real" world that words signify is first and foremost the world of language.

Barthelme foregrounds this statement on language by stitching together disparate word-elements, some from other people's writing, and by imitating the style of writers such as James Joyce in his liberal use of irony, wit, and verbal play. These techniques are called "collage" and "pastiche" respectively. By using them, Barthelme undermines the idea, popular in art and literature, that the primary ingredient for great work should be originality. One way Barthelme builds his text is by lifting bits and pieces of material straight from someone else's story. For example, the reference to Gustave Aschenbach during Comanche's torture session comes from German writer Thomas Mann's novella *Death In Venice*, for which Aschenbach is the emotionally tortured narrator. By having Comanche confess to being Aschenbach using Mann's own words, Barthelme satirizes both the idea that human beings have coherent identities and the idea that texts, especially "classics," exist beyond the pale of influence, historical or literary. The *way* in which Barthelme incorporates Mann's description is also very funny.

In art, "collage" often refers not only to the mixing of elements from different sources but the mixing of various media in a particular work. For example, a collagist might include paint, wood, metal, and photography to create a work. Barthelme literally cannot do this with words, but his narrator does reference various art forms in "The Indian Uprising," including painting, sculpture, music, woodworking, film, and architecture. This suggests a parodying of collage, the very technique he is using; parodies poke fun at a particular

style or author through imitation, and Barthelme pokes fun at his own reputation as a postmodernist throughout this piece.

Part of that poking fun is the narrator's references to the very techniques he is using in the text of "The Indian Uprising." For example, directly after passages in which he shifts from describing the torture of the captured Comanche to explaining how to touch a woman, to recounting the cheering of Swedish children over liver paste, to accusing Jane of bad behavior, the narrator writes, "Strings of language extend in every direction to bind the world into a rushing, ribald whole." Another time, he reports the words of a Miss R. who praises the form of the litany, using a litany as part of her praise. This relentless self-reflexivity further underscores the idea that the world "out there," the sensory world beyond language, the world of trees, and rocks, and blood, and bodies is never knowable except as it is mediated through language. Communication is always an act of representation and therefore always an interpretation, Barthelme's story seems to suggest. And if you do not believe that, just try to read his story *as* a story.

Inherent in communication is an audience or an addressee. Barthelme undermines this convention as well, as his narrator shifts addressees often, sometimes addressing an unnamed "you," sometimes Jane, and sometimes others. Not only does the audience shift but the tone of the writing does as well. One minute it is grave and the next comic. "What is the situation?" the narrator asks Block. "The situation is liquid," he replies, once again commenting on the composition of the text. The shifts in tone and audience are partly a result from other shifts, shifts brought about through liberal use of anachronisms and surrealist imagery. An anachronism is the representation of something outside of its appropriate time. For example, the narrator places Comanches, Native Americans who lived on the Southern Plains in the United States and were fierce warriors more than one hundred years ago, outside a French city, attacking its barricades. Rooted in the unconscious, this surrealist imagery is dreamlike and frequently juxtaposes unlike items. For example, take the narrator's report of Kenneth's response when asked who he want wants to be, "He said he wanted to be Jean-Luc Goddard but later when time permitted conversations in large, lighted rooms, whispering galleries with black-and-white Spanish rugs and problematic sculpture on calm, red catafalques." The seeming randomness of events, imagery, and discourse mimics a kind of dream logic in which the narrator is a helpless witness to himself rather than a master of his circumstances. In an interview with Larry McCaffery in *Partisan Review*, Barthelme discusses his writing process, commenting that he often looks for an "awkward" rather than a beautiful sentence with which to begin:

Then a process of accretion occurs, like barnacles growing on a wreck or a rock. I'd rather have a wreck than a ship that sails. Things attach themselves to wrecks; strange fish find your wreck or rock to be a good feeding ground. After a while you've got a situation with possibilities.

This is not to say that Barthelme's "wreck" is without unifying features. It has a first-person narrator throughout and uses repetition such as the phrase "I knew nothing" as a kind of thread to hold the wildly varying parts together. Some critics such as Maclin Bocock, in his essay, "'The Indian Uprising' or Donald Barthelme's Strange Object

Covered with Fur," even provide ingenious and coherent readings of the story. Bocock argues that ultimately "The Indian Uprising" is about the failure of romantic love, writing, "The narrator himself is the city under siege and the Indians are the words with which Sylvia is attacking him." By the end of the story, Babcock writes, "The hero descends a little lower until finally he touches bottom, defeated, no longer able to summon either memory or fantasy to sustain him."

In the end, "The Indian Uprising" says as much about the process of reading and creating meaning as it does about the process of writing. By subverting the conventions of stories in a mosaic of words, Barthelme creates a new code for new readers, a code that asks them to work harder and to be more aware of their participation in how language in general and stories in particular shape their desires and ideas.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Indian Uprising," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Evans views "The Indian Uprising" within the context and formula of the Western, asserting that, rather than reflecting on the genre, Barthelme instead "directs outward, at contemporary society."

Donald Barthelme's bizarre, innovative short story "The Indian Uprising" involves a group of sophisticates beseiged in some contemporary city by a band of wild redskins who finally triumph. How must we respond to the story? A historical interpretation might tempt many—one statement by the narrator could recall Viet Nam to some readers: "We hold the south quarter and they hold the north quarter." But Barthelme published the story in 1965 before antiwar materials were at all in vogue, and he's taken care not to limit the associations to any one conflict. Perhaps it's more generally a story of the haves versus the have-nots (those in the ghetto do join the Comanches). Perhaps the "red" men actually represent the Communists and Barthelme offers a Marxist (though certainly not a social realist) story of Western decadence and fall? Such possible readings seem to me too partial, too incomplete, hardly preferable to those which see all Barthelme's work as somehow subliterary. Maclin Bocock has provided the closest and most substantial reading of the story heretofore, discussing it in Freudian terms as a kind of phallic fantasy involving the narrator's personal failures with his girlfriend Sylvia. Bocock is the very first to treat the piece as truly serious fiction rather than as some sort of postmodern allegory or as a rather trivial jeu d'esprit. Her analysis seems to me limited, however, in considering the failed relationship as the story's central and single theme rather than as another contributing element to a more comprehensive theme.

The key to the story seems to me the elements of Western parody. Parody, however, may be the wrong term. Barthelme himself carefully distinguishes between parody and short story and if parody means simply to mock or ridicule elements of a formula, then "The Indian Uprising" depends on parody of the Western no more than Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" depends on parody of the spy formula or *Lolita* depends on parody of a murderer's legal deposition. The Western formula offers a vehicle, not an object, for Barthelme's critical commentary. The Western provides a convenient nexus of themes and values which Barthelme directs outward, at contemporary society, not backward to reflect on the genre itself. Extended allusion might better describe the relationship, but in fact it might be most accurate to describe the story as a postmodern Western and let it go at that.

Certainly a full understanding of the story demands a full understanding of the formula it participates in. The finest and most complete analysis of the Western as formula appears in John Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Cawelti points out that "there are three central roles in the Western: the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes who are above all 'men in the middle,' that is, they possess many qualities and skills of the savages, but are fundamentally committed to the townspeople."

The first of Cawelti's fundamental elements is the town, which "offers love, domesticity, and order as well as the opportunity for personal achievement and the creation of a family, but it requires the repression of spontaneous passion." In this regard the story's opening sentence reverberates powerfully and clearly: "We defended the city as best we could." It is not love, domesticity, and family, not wives, children, even themselves that the narrator and his circle focus on defending, but "the city." And here "the city" represents the hyperbolic extremes Western civilization has reached in luxurious material superfluity, effete sensuality.

In the opening paragraph Barthelme rhetorically offers as the narrator's conception of the "good life" allusions not to religion, ethics, duty, family, love, the sorts of things that make the town valuable in Westerns, but allusions to pleasant private experiences in which the self-oriented narrator may privately indulge himself: "apples, books, long-playing records." Barthelme loads the rest of his story with sophisticated, self-indulgent luxuries. He describes, for example, some typical "barricades" erected against savagery, i.e. against the red men. These barricades consist of "window dummies, silk, thoughtfully planned job descriptions (including scales for the orderly progress of other colors [racial minorities?]), wine in demijohns, and robes." Another "barricade" contains, among other materials, "two-litre bottles of red wine; threequarterlitre bottles of Black & White, aquavit, cognac, vodka, gin, Fad #6 sherry; a hollow-core door in birch veneer on black wrought-iron legs," and so on.

To these "civilized" materials of sensual indulgence, of material sophistication, Barthelme intimately relates esthetic-intellectual sophistication. The narrator's people, mediating all through their highly cultivated minds, react even to an Indian uprising by "trying to understand." At the height of the uprising they discuss Gabriel Faur's "Dolly," the narrator "nonevaluates" remarks "as Korzybski instructed," they quote Valéry, listen to concerts of "Gabrieli, Albinoni, Marcello, Vivaldi, Boccherini," converse with a tortured Indian who identifies himself as Gustave Aschenbach (protagonist of the thematically quite relevant *Death in Venice*), and so on. Surely a more sophisticated, more "civilized" group never faced hostile Comanches.

What is the effect (one might almost say the purpose or function) of civilization or sophistication in the material, sensual, intellectual terms with which Barthelme here identifies it all? Certainly one effect, for Barthelme's story the chief effect, involves muting genuine and spontaneous emotion, limiting and controlling and ordering once perhaps strong but now depleted subterranean forces. Cawelti describes the second of the "three central roles in the Western" in terms which Barthelme's story heartily endorses: "The savage symbolizes the violence, brutality, and ignorance which civilized society seeks to control and eliminate, but he also commonly stands for certain positive values which are restricted or destroyed by advancing civilization."

In the opening paragraph the narrator responds to (or defends against) the violent uprising by seeking to initiate a calm discussion. When denizens of the ghetto join the uprising the civilized forces initiate a quite characteristic attempt to quell this new threat by calming, by drugging the emotions: "We sent more heroin into the ghetto, and hyacinths, ordering another hundred thousand of the pale, delicate flowers."

Cawelti observes that in the Western, the town or civilization "requires the repression of spontaneous passion." The narrator unemotionally mentions participating in torturing at least one, perhaps two captured Comanches; he relates to torture not with warm emotions of either disgust or pleasure, but coolly, with a distanced intellect. A little later, with a friend, the narrator relates "a little of the history of torture, reviewing the technical literature quoting the best modern sources." He consistently relates to the world intellectually rather than emotionally. Even at the height of a crisis he describes his companion dispassionately: "Block was firing a greasegun from the upper floor of a building designed by Emery Roth & Sons." Completely devoid of any emotion, lacking passion, fear, excitement, the narrator here again drifts into intellectualization, identifying an architect. When captured, the narrator and his friends react characteristically; either lacking emotions or still repressing them, they revert to tired intellectual games: "'Who do you want to be?' I asked Kenneth and he said he wanted to be Jean-Luc Godard." Godard, of course, is an "artist" who "intellectualizes" revolution.

What effect has this subversion of emotion? One effect, that which seems most to interest Barthelme, is a corruption of values. The narrator's disinterested use of torture on the Comanche foreshadows a late, neutral report on an ineffective campaign:

We killed a great many in the south suddenly with helicopters and rockets, but we found that those we had killed were children and more came from the north and from the east and from other places where there are children preparing to live.

Significantly, Barthelme never associates the redskins with the savagery and brutality of the citizens; indeed, at the conclusion the narrator and his friends are neither killed nor tortured (as they so richly deserve), but turned over to the Clemency Committee.

The narrator recalls his Sylvia performing in a movie which, to me at least, sounds pornographic:

And when they shot the scene in the bed I wondered how you felt under the eyes of the cameramen, grips, juicers, men in the mixing booth: excited? stimulated? And when they shot the scene in the shower I sanded a hollow-core door working carefully against the illustrations in texts and whispered instructions from one who had already solved the problem. I had made after all other tables, one while living with Nancy, one while living with Alice, one while living with Eunice, one while living with Marianne.

Of course the narrator can make a table from a door while men film Sylvia in the shower; he has made lots of doors for lots of women and understands the technique. The implicit question is, How could he do it? The implicit answer focuses on knowledge of technique, not on any moral or emotional dimension. Like the door, the narrator has a hollow core; only the surface finish matters.

The narrator's moral values explicitly appear in the story only once. Near the end the narrator addresses a lane in the second person: "Your affair with Harold is reprehensible, you know that, don't you, Jane?" Harold is married and has children. "I

think your values are peculiar, Jane!" Barthelme here intends, it seems, for us to add an egocentric hypocrisy to the narrator's faults. When are the narrator's values ever superior? Apparently the narrator himself seeks to renew a liaison with Jane; earlier he addresses an unnamed someone in the second person (here employed with Jane): "it is you I want now . . . It is when I am with you that I am happiest . . . "

Is the narrator capable of such an emotion as love? He claims so in the second paragraph, sitting with Sylvia while the city's forces defend against the Comanches: "And I sat there getting drunker and drunker and more in love and more in love." Later essentially the same sentence reappears; Barthelme makes certain no reader can take the statement at face value. It is only nine lines later than the first of these statements that the narrator remembers fashioning at least his fifth hollow-core door/table for his fifth woman while this same Sylvia is in the shower for a pornographic film.

In the opening paragraph, describing the uprising, Barthelme's narrator tells us: "People were trying to understand." Shortly thereafter he twice in four lines repeats the phrase: "I decided I knew nothing." When, on the advice of others, he consults the teacher, Miss R. (who wears a "blue dress containing a red figure" [an Indian?]; is she Miss Redskin?), her response seems quite unironic: "'You know nothing,' she said, 'you feel nothing, you are locked in a most savage and terrible ignorance, I despise you.'"

Miss R.'s speech should lead us to see that the narrator knows nothing *because* he feels nothing. He is "locked in a most savage and terrible ignorance" because his sophistication has locked him away from natural, genuine, spontaneous emotion. In seeking to "know" intellectually he locks himself (a hollow-core door with a shiny veneer) further and further from the emotional key. With tremendous irony, Barthelme uses this "savage and terrible ignorance" to identify the narrator with the negative aspects of—at the same time it distances him from valuable dimensions of—the cliché redskins. Cawelti's analysis of the Western formula clearly outlines the terms and conditions of the protagonist's failure:

In the simplest Westerns, the townspeople and the savages represent a basic moral opposition between good and evil. In most examples of the formula, however, the opposition is a more complex one, a dialectic of contrasting ways of life or psychic states. The resolution of this opposition is the work of the hero. Thus, the most basic definition of the hero role in the Western is as the figure who resolves the conflict between pioneers and savages . . . the hero is a more complex figure because he has internalized the conflict between savagery and civilization. His inner conflict . . . tends to overshadow the clash between savages and townspeople.

Barthelme's narrator fails as hero precisely because he remains unable, for himself or for the city, to mediate between the extremes as the Western formula demands. The narrator's ignorance, and Barthelme's condemnation, persist through the conclusion. The last words describe the protagonist still failing to relate to the Comanches with any emotion; his conclusive response, watching them, is an emotionless (though the Indians have emotions) catalog of material phenomena; he looks into "their savage black eyes, paint, feathers, beads."

Barthelme compels us to condemn the artificial world, so clever a distortion of our own, which he reflects. The narrator's initial doubts as to whether theirs is a good life or not provokes Sylvia's unambiguous response: "No." Nothing in the pages which follow the introductory paragraph's indictment modifies that condemnation.

Cawelti's comments on the contemporary Western bear special relevance:

. . . from the point of view of social ritual, the meaning of the Western formula's pattern of plot and character is that of offering the hero a choice between civilization and its ideals of progress and success and anarchistic savagery with its spontaneity and freedom.

Though the Western remains officially on the side of progress and success, shifting formula patterns in the twentieth century reflect an increasing disillusionment with these ideals . . . as we approach the present, the ritualistic affirmation of progress and success becomes more and more ambiguous and strained . . . it seems that we have come to a point where it is increasingly difficult to imagine a synthesis between the honor and independence of the Western hero and the imperatives of progress and success. In such a pattern, the ritual action reaffirms the inevitability of progress, but suggests increasing disillusionment and uncertainty about its consequences.

In Barthelme's world, as in many modern Westerns, "civilization" has gone too far. Emotion, energy, spontaneity too long and too forcefully repressed rise up to reassert their place in the human scheme of things. It is this "uprising" which provides the story's subject. In the final sentence Barthelme describes a purely natural phenomenon, rain (often, Frye reminds us, a symbol for the life force): "shattering from a great height the prospects of silence and clear, neat rows of houses in the subdivisions."

Source: Walter Evans, "Comanches and Civilization in Donald Barthelme's 'The Indian Uprising,'" in *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Spring 1986, pp. 45-52.

Topics for Further Study

Donald Barthelme does not provide extensive backgrounds for the characters in his story. Choose two characters from the story and create past and future lives for them. Where are they from? What kind of education do they have? What kinds of jobs did they hold before the battle? What are their families like? What will happen to them after the battle is over?

Critics have considered whether the Vietnam War, the antiwar protests, and the history and legends of America's West might have influenced Barthelme's writing of this story. Research the history of one of these events or periods and write a brief persuasive essay on whether it contributed to the story, supporting your argument with examples.

There are two scenes of torture in the story. Investigate which countries are believed to use torture to interrogate prisoners and what international organizations, such as the United Nations, have to say about what constitutes torture.

Some critics have argued that Barthelme's story is about the tensions between men and women and their struggles to maintain successful relationships with each other. Investigate the most recent psychological findings and theories on male-female relationships, and present them in a short essay with references.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The United States military drafts about 1.8 million young men to serve as soldiers during the Vietnam War. A man can qualify for a student deferment from the draft if he is a fulltime student and able to show satisfactory progress toward a degree.

Today: The United States no longer relies on the draft but fills the ranks of its military with volunteers of both genders. However, men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five must still register with the Selective Service System in case of a national military emergency.

1960s: About 80 percent of those fighting in the Vietnam War are from working-class or poor backgrounds. There are disproportionately high numbers of African Americans serving as combat troops.

Today: In the all-volunteer Unites States military, minorities account for nearly 35% of the personnel, and African Americans account for 20%.

1960s: On April 15, 1967, more than 200,000 protesters gather in New York City and San Francisco to register their displeasure with American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Today: While protesters against the war in Afghanistan are less numerous and vocal than their 1960s antiwar antecedents, they do exist. Scattered demonstrations erupt in October and November of 2002 after the United States begins a military offensive against the al-Qaeda organization in Afghanistan.

What Do I Read Next?

Barthelme's first novel, *Snow White* (1967), is a satiric and humorous retelling of the famous fairy tale, complete with dwarves and set in New York City's Greenwich Village neighborhood.

John Barth's writing has been described as similar to Barthelme's in that Barth, too, pursues uncommon ways of telling a story and using language. In 1968, Barth published a collection of short stories entitled *Lost in the Fun House: Fiction for Tape, Print, Live Voice*, considered by many to be a major work of experimental fiction.

Robert Coover is another writer who experiments with the content and structure of fiction. In his 1997 novel *Briar Rose*, Coover deconstructs and retells the story of Sleeping Beauty from the heroine's point of view. Coover plays with language and narrative and also offers readers a parody of literary scholarship.

Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology (1997), edited by Paula Geyh, Fred G. Leebron, and Andrew Levy, covers five decades of postmodern American fiction—a term which typically denotes writing that rejects the traditional narrative format. The volume includes sixtyeight stories, novel excerpts, creative nonfiction pieces, cartoons, and other experimental forms of writing.

Thomas Pynchon is another experimental writer whose books feature black humor and wild flights of imagination. His 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow* is a story set during World War II involving rocket scientists and American soldiers; it won the 1973 National Book Award.

Further Study

Barthelme, Donald, *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme*, edited by Kim Herzinger, Vintage Books, 1999.

Originally published in 1997, this book includes essays written by Barthelme and interviews with him on such topics as his and others' writings, art and architecture, music, film.

Barthelme, Helen Moore, *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound*, Texas A&M University Press, 2001.

Helen Moore Barthelme is an English professor at Texas A&M University, but between 1956 and 1965, she was the writer's wife. In this memoir, she offers personal insights into the writer's early writings and a description of their life together in Houston.

Friedman, Ellen G., and Miriam Fuchs, eds., *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, Princeton University Press, 1989.

This book features nineteen essays devoted to exploring postmodern fiction written by women. The writers discussed include Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and Joyce Carol Oates.

Hudgens, Michael Thomas, *Donald Barthelme: Postmodernist American Writer*, Studies in American Literature, No. 43, Edwin Mellon Press, 2001.

This scholarly book covers Barthelme and his role in postmodern literature. The author relates Barthelme's work to examples of other postmodern literature and art.

Powell, James N., *Postmodernism for Beginners*, Writers & Readers, 1998.

This book posits that postmodernism "is not a bunch of meaningless intellectual mind games" but a reaction to the failure of the philosophy of the nineteenth century. The book is written using text matched with graphics and comic book-like features.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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