



ISSN 1989 – 9572

DOI: 10.47750/jett.2022.13.04.038

## **Double Narrative in John Barth's *Sabbatical: A Romance* : A Postmodern Narrative**

**Dr. D. R. Edwin Christy**

**Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol. 13 (4)**

<https://jett.labosfor.com/>

Date of reception: 11 Apr 2022

Date of revision: 13 July 2022

Date of acceptance: 22 July 2022

**Dr.D.R.Edwin Christy (2022). Double Narrative in John Barth's *Sabbatical: A Romance* : A Postmodern Narrative *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*,Vol. 13(4). 285-288**

---

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor of English,St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University)  
Tiruchirappalli-620002,Tamil Nadu, India.



## **Double Narrative in John Barth's *Sabbatical: A Romance* : A Postmodern Narrative**

**Dr.D.R.Edwin Christy**

Assistant Professor of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University)

Tiruchirappalli-620002, Tamil Nadu, India.

Email: edichriseng@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

Postmodern texts are quite unique in their narrative style and structure. They provide a good scope for research in analysing the narrative style of the text. But the narrative styles of the postmodern texts embody a complex structure which makes it very difficult for the readers to understand and decipher the text. Hence they pose a great challenge and also a wide opportunity for researchers. John Barth's *Sabbatical: A Romance* is one such text which has a complex narrative style. This paper aims at identifying the narrative style of John Barth which makes his text a postmodern novel.

**Keywords:** Postmodern, Narrative Style, Double Narrative, Metafiction

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most prominent and leading contemporary American postmodern writer is John Barth. In his foreword to the novel *Sabbatical: A Romance*, he states that the novel was written between 1978 and 1981 and he had earlier planned to title it as *Sex Education and Sabbatical*. He got the idea for the story of this novel from the sudden disappearance and curious death of Mr. John Arthur Paisley, an early-retired high-ranking operative of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (3).

*Sabbatical: A Romance* is about the voyage made by Fenwick Scott Key Turner, who is a former Central Intelligence Agency employee and his wife Susan Allan Seckler, who is a Professor by profession. They have been married for seven years and they are returning home to Maryland after spending Susan's half-year of sabbatical in sailing the Caribbean and are deciding on their careers and family responsibilities. Fenwick is in the bad books of the CIA for publishing KUDOVE, because of exposing of their activities and plans to write another book and Susan plans to take up teaching position at Swarthmore. Both of them put all their experiences into a story. They write the story by recalling their adventures during sailing and sharing their own memories. In this process of recalling and sharing Susan tells about her twin sister Miriam who was on drugs and had faced torture in the hands of the SAVAK which is the internal-security of the Shah of Iran and was also a victim of gang rape. Fenn to his part shares about some events from his first marriage with Marilyn Marsh like how he met her and so on. They also talk about literature, the writing strategies, their love and families. They also include the case of John Arthur Paisely and the interesting story of 'The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket'.

### **The Narrative Structure**

*Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol.51* states that, "In *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982), Barth returns to conventional realistic narrative while adding a metafictional twist by depicting two characters who are in the process of writing the book as the reader pursues it" (19). These two characters are two narrators, Fenn and Susan, husband and wife, who share the narrative responsibility. Stan Fogel and Gordon Slethaug, in their book *Understanding John Barth*, observe that

...the narration changes from Susan/first-person singular to Fenn/first-person singular, and occasionally to Fenn-Susan/first-person plural. This handling of the narrative integrates both female and male perspectives, and its rhythm is especially interesting, since the style is not interrupted by quotation marks for attribution, and yet the two speakers are given equal time and value. (174)

An apt example which reveals the equal narrative responsibility of the two narrators, Fenn and Susan, are as follows and which Fogel and Slethaug have also quoted in their book,

I get to see my new man's competence, if not grace, under pressure. His patience, reasonableness, and high flapping point. His knowledgeable ability and range of experience, compared to mine. His knack for making almost anything work. His unaffectedness and general amiability. His good humor and spaciousness of heart. Plus, frequently, his penis.

I get to see my new woman's logistical good sense; her cheerfulness in adverse circumstances; her culinary resourcefulness and skill; the way she learns things fast and doesn't forget them; her enjoyment of all kinds of people and situations, and her canny assessment of them; her general pluckiness — I'd even say courage. Her spaciousness of heart. The number and variety of her passions. And lots of her skin. (196)

John Barth has done justice to the double narrative technique by assigning due weightage to both of the fictional narrators in the novel.

Apart from this double narrative, the novel is divided into three parts 'The Cove', 'Sailing Up the Chesapeake, Sailing Up the Chesapeake, Sailing Up the Chesapeake Bay' and 'The Fork'. E.P. Walkiewicz, in his book titled *John Barth*, opines that, "its regnant visual image is that of three waterways, passages, or courses of action meeting in a point; like many of Barth's works it is informed by a biological conceit, in this case two eggs travelling down the two fallopian tubes on their way toward encountering a spermatozoon" (140). Walkiewicz seems to have borrowed the idea for this image from the 'Foreword' of the novel by John Barth which states

I had in mind an odd Siamese twin of a book comprising a fantastical play script (about a postmodern romance between a sceptical spermatozoon and a comparably wary ovum) followed by a realistic novel involving a middle-aged male Homo sapiens, recently retired from the CIA, and his somewhat younger professional wife, newly pregnant with, perhaps, the consummation of that play script romance — which she may decide to abort. (3)

The first part of the novel, 'The Cove', begins with Fenwick's narration of their story in which their sabbatical voyage was interrupted for two nights and a day by a storm at sea. Fenn and Susan lose an important navigational chart and what follows forms the rest of their adventure in this novel. It also deals with Fenn and Susan's ancestry — Fenn is a descendant of Francis Scott Key and Susan is that of Edgar Allan Poe, some events related to Fenn's first marriage with Marilyn Marsh whom Fenn married in 1950 and got divorced in 1970. This part also exposes the complex relationship existing in their family, for example, Manfred Herman Turner, who is Fenn's fraternal twin has married Susan's mother Carmen B. Seckler and hence is Susan's brother-in-law as well as stepfather and likewise Carmen is Fenn's mother-in-law as well as sister-in-law. It also introduces Orrin Marsh Turner, son of Fenwick and Marilyn Marsh who is pursuing his post-doctoral research in molecular biology in Boston. It exclusively deals with Miriam Leah Poe Seckler who is Susan's twin sister, "a college dropout and Peace Corps alumna once briefly imprisoned in Tabriz and Teheran by SAVAK, the then Shah's secret police, and by them briefly tortured with not one but two electrical devices — perhaps the only U.S. citizen to have experienced that misfortune" (27). Susan narrates the multiple rape on Miriam, the tortures she underwent in the hands of the rapists in detail. The second part of the novel titled "Sailing Up the Chesapeake, Sailing Up the Chesapeake, Sailing Up the Chesapeake Bay" gives a quick glimpse of the mysterious Key Island in Chesapeake Bay, that does not appear on any of the maps. This part mainly presents the "THE STRANGE TRUE CASE OF JOHN ARTHUR PAISELY" (86) but more as a report than a narration. John Barth presents the "excerpts from the reports published in the Baltimore Sun in 1978 and 1979 (except for the last, from January 1980), most of them written by two of that newspaper's investigative reporters, Mr. Tom Nugent and Mr. Steve Parks" (86). Apart from Fenn and Susan's discussion on Arthur Paisely's case, this part of the novel also presents Fenn's notes, for his story, of an imaginary dialogue with Susan on the subject 'THE LITERALLY MARVELOUS', where they talk about the possibility of infusing the element of fantastic in their story by including a sea monster. Fenn meets Dugald Taylor, who was a student of literature before he went to law school and gravitated into the CIA way of wartime duty with the Office of Strategies Services. After his meeting with Dugald Taylor, Fenn describes his second ordeal of heart attack, which is quite a minor one which helps him survive the attack. Susan too shares her part of ordeal that she faces in the hands of her twin sister Miriam and her children. Part three of the novel tells more about Fenn and Susan's ancestry, their passionate love, the narrative viewpoint of their story and also about the minor characters Alexis and Andrew. Fenn and Susan discuss the possible cause for the death of Manfred could be having caught in a mudbank. Susan pictures the possibility of Manfred's death which is as follows:

We have more than once considered this scenario vis-à-vis Manfred, a less expert and more reckless sailor, who, despite Fenn's cautionary retelling of this tale, might just possibly have gone aground last spring, neglected in his haste to log the circumstance or secure himself with a lifeline, pushed Pokey free from underwater, and found himself stuck like a submerged piling, suddenly four feet tall in five feet of water, until blue crabs picked his naked corpse clean and storm-waves dispersed his bones. (246)

They also give an account of Miriam's irresponsible life and drugs, her sexual life and her children's birth. Next, Margot Scourby, a Boston Lecture agent wants to book Fenn on the campus circuit. She enquires Fenn about KUDOVE and about its translations and reprint editions. Once again Fenn meets Marilyn Marsh Turner, who is forty-nine now and he has not seen her, his ex-wife, for five years since Orrin and Julie's wedding and he narrates that Marilyn along with Marcus Henry takes him in a car and he believes that he is going to be interrogated. But he is relieved to find out that he has been brought to the memorial service of John Arthur Paisley, Manfred Turner and Dugald Taylor. After the memorial service Marcus and Marilyn try to convince Fenn to become a CIA agent once again to which he strongly declines. Fenn and Susan have flash forward, dream about their future, which is full of horrible things. During their last sailing of the day "through Kent

Island Narrows and down Prospect and Eastern bays to Wye River” (332), Susan tells Fenn about the abortion of her twins and Fenn discloses his heart attack on the bus after meeting Dugald Taylor. Towards the end of their sea voyage, they encounter a legendary sea monster and they even name it Chessie. Walkiewicz tells about the ending of the novel as “After all of their soul-searching, Fenwick and Susan determine to “swing with the tides and winds, take what comes,” “do” their “work” and “savor” their “pleasures and each other, while” they “may,” offering what little they can to the world, and hoping for “the best” ” (143)

## CONCLUSION

John Barth has adopted a double narrative technique through the fictional narrators, Fenn and Susan. These narrators use first person singular and also at times use first person plural in their narration. It is very evident from the story that it is a work of metafiction since both the narrators are involved in the process of writing a story as the readers read it. This novel is very complex in its narrative structure as it involves too many subplots like the story of Miriam and her multiple rapes, the case of John Arthur Paisley, Fenn’s marriage with Marilyn Marsh, mystery behind the death of Manfred Herman Turner and also that of Dugald Taylor, story of Carmen B. Seckler etc. apart from the main plot that is Fenn and Susan’s sabbatical voyage, their love, marriage, passion, sex, their process of writing their story and their plans for their future life and career. Too many incidents and the detailing of the voyage make the story appear as if caught in a thunderstorm and tossed to and fro in its high waves of narrative structure which is non-linear and presented in fragments. The mixing up of history, mystery, dreams and magical element gives a labyrinthine texture to the novel. All these complex narrative structure, which are the traits of postmodern narrative style, makes John Barth’s *Sabbatical: A Romance* a postmodern novel.

## REFERENCES

1. Barth, John. *Sabbatical: A Romance*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1996.
2. Fogel, Stan, and Gordon Slethaug. *Understanding John Barth*. Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1990.
3. Marowski, Daniel G. and Roger Matuz, editors. "John (Simmons) Barth." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 51, 1989, p. 19.
4. Walkiewicz, E.P. *John Barth*. Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1986.
5. Barth, John. "Postmodernism Visited: A Professional Novelist's Amateur Review." *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 90, 2000.
6. Bolling, Doug. "Minors from Majors: 'Sabbatical'." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 27, 1984.
7. Bowen, Zack. *A Reader's Guide to John Barth*. Westport Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1994.
8. Lemon, Lee. "John Barth and the Common Reader." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 214, 2006.
9. Renner, Charlotte. " 'in a review of ' Sabbatical: A Romance." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 27, 1984.