

## **The Notion of *Différance* in Donald Bartheleme's Short Stories: “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” and “Sentence”**

**Shaghayegh Mohammadi**

MA in English Language and Literature  
Department of English Language and Literature, Tehran Central Branch  
Islamic Azad University  
Tehran, Iran.

**Zahra Bordbari**

PhD in English Language and Literature  
Department of English Language and Literature, Roodehen Branch  
Islamic Azad University  
Roodehen, Iran.

**Farid Parvaneh**

Assistant Professor  
Department of English Language and Literature, Qom Branch  
Islamic Azad University  
Qom, Iran.

### **Abstract**

*This essay is an attempt to apply the Derridan notion of *différance* to Bartheleme's two short stories entitled “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” (1987) and “Sentence” (2003). The research seeks to illustrate that everything is the victim of language plays. Accordingly, as long as *différance* is one of those plays, it is going to be deconstructed within the stories by its own *jeux*. Through “Nothing: A Preliminary Account”, the discussion is sought after making a threshold from which language could be seen as the major problem of our world. It does so by constructing the new world of nothing within its story. On the other hand, throughout “Sentence”, our beliefs about construction of any ideological system for defining anything are depicted as false and fake. As one sees the new definition of ‘sentence’ from Bartheleme's outlook, the essay provides the reader to see the arbitrariness of *différance* world construction from another angle. Furthermore, using deconstruction methodology creates ways to go beyond the world of words; it is like watching language from outer space. Although deconstruction is aware of being trapped within the labyrinthine made by language, it has no other way to use it. In fact, deconstruction cannot use language, but also it cannot not use it. Deconstruction in Bartheleme's stories constructs another world. It puts language under erasure, but at the same time invites the reader to go beyond its world.*

**Key words:** difference; Derrida; arbitrariness; labyrinth; language play;

### **Introduction**

The American writer Donald Bartheleme (April 7, 1931 – July 23, 1989) authored “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” (1987) and “Sentence” (2003), among many others. Known for his playful, postmodernist style of short fiction, he was not concerned with the usual methods of short story composition, for instance emphasizing on narrative continuity, thematic coherence, consistency of character, etc. Nevertheless, he is mostly interested in alternative methods like refusing to develop, or creating characters whose actions make sense according to ordinary bases of logic. His stories simply subvert inherited story conventions. It seems that a reflexive surrealism is created in the stories. Although apparently illogical and chaotic, the stories do have their own logic within their perceptible anarchism. Whereas the fictions are denying the traditional principles, they define their own set of compositional principles such as repetition of phrases, names, images in constantly revised contexts.

Juxtaposing of such images and phrases in startling ways often produce wildly funny effects and make the stories something other than a mixture of existing storytelling strategies. Alternatively, it is within this anarchy that new things get the chance to be born. Perhaps the most striking feature of Donald Barthelme's fiction is the number of things his fictions get along without. In Barthelme's fictive world, in fact, there appears to be no governing or shaping beliefs, no very significant physical experience, no transcendent ideals or intimations, no sense of place or community, no awareness on the part of his characters of any personal history or context of profession or family or, for the most part, personal relationships, no psychology of characters; indeed, no character is created in the usual sense of the term. At the level of incident, there is no guarantee of verisimilitude or of rational causality or of plot itself, no thickness of circumstantial detail which might make his world seem more densely realistic, and no considerable exploration of such themes as love, idealism, initiation, or death. Of course, there are exceptions, or apparent exceptions, to each of these rules but in fact there are no experiences which employ emotional pledge and commitment.

It might be more accurate to say that Barthelme's stories are not about fervor, idealism, and death, but the word about has a special, hardly focused meaning in Barthelme that makes his fiction unusually difficult to summarize. The style and legacy in Barthelme's short stories are often exceptionally compact. It is a form sometimes called short-short story, flash fiction, or sudden fiction, which are often focusing only on an incident rather than complete narratives. In other words, his style demands a new reading of his short stories and in this respect deconstructive reading might be appropriate to unlock the compact text.

#### ***Différance*** in "Nothing: A Preliminary Account" and "Sentence"

As the approach for analysing Barthelme's works in this essay, Derrida's notion of *différance* has been selected to be applied to the texts. Hence, it starts from Derrida who has coined the portmanteau term *différance*. He utilizes the spelling "ance" instead of the correct spelling to show a fusion of two senses of the French verb *différer*: to be different, and to defer: to be retarded. This double sense points to the phenomenon that, on the one hand, a text proffers the effect of having a significance that is the product of its difference (that we know things according to what they are not "cat is cat because it is not hat"). And it is this difference through which we can understand the meaning of any written or spoken utterance. On the other hand, "since this promised significance (transcendental signified as Derrida calls it) can never come to rest in an actual presence, its determinate specification is deferred from the linguistic interpretation to another in a movement or play" (Abrams 57) or as Derrida puts it in an endless regress (*en abîme*). Under this subheading, notion of *différance* and the reason for its inaccessibility protruding from Barthelme's two stories is going to be discussed. It is depicting the way such kinds of stories can deconstruct Derrida's notion of *différance* as well as deconstructing their own bases by such strategy of reading. Here *différance* is taken out from Donald Barthelme's two short stories to come out of the nothing world from which even this notion of *différance* is deconstructed as well.

Throughout "Nothing: A Preliminary Account" (1987), Barthelme draws ones attention to how meaning is gotten through. In this short story the aim is to understand what nothingness is. All one can do to approach nothing is to make a list of what nothing is not by a set of differentiations and exclusions. Accordingly, identifying nothingness is always at least partly defined through what it is not. In fact that is the differential system which produces meaning. In other words, a list of everything makes what nothing is. The story "is a ludicrous lyrical philosopher contemplating Sartrean absence for four pages" (Olsen 69). A list of everything to show what nothing is but if the list became complete, nothing would remain. Whereas, obviously it is impossible to achieve this:

And even if we were able, with much labor, to exhaust the possibilities, get it all inscribed, name everything nothing is not, down to the last rogue atom, the one that rolled behind the door, and had thoughtfully included ourselves, the makers of the list-the list itself would remain. Who's got a match? (Achilles 117)

'Nothing' as a sign is never accessible. If everything is named thoroughly in the list, the list and its maker still will remain; this is the same challenge which happens for *différance* as an unknown sign as well. What if *différance* has *différance* then where are the bases of our discussion founded? Seemingly, 'nothing' deferred its meaning by its differences to other words. This story never makes a center for its text to reveal its meaning. "The center is not the center" (Lodge 90) is tangibly depicted within the story. Could "nothing" be defined as a center? 'Nothing' could not be regarded as the center because it is "nothing"; that's why the meaning is deferred although we could recognize the difference toward what nothingness is not.

Basically, this text deconstructs what had been told about Derrida's notion of *différance* as well. To Derrida's view, then, it is difference that makes the meaning possible whose possibility (as a decidable meaning) is necessarily too difficult to be understood. As Derrida says in another of his coinages: "the meaning of any spoken or written utterance, by the action of opposing internal linguistic forces, is ineluctably disseminated- a term which includes, among its deliberately contradictory significations" (Abrams 57), that of having an effect of meaning (a "semantic" effect), of dispersing meanings among innumerable alternatives, and of negating any specific meaning. In the incessant play of difference, there is thus no ground that constitutes any language, for attributing a decidable meaning, or even a finite set of determinately multiple meanings to any utterance that we speak or write. As Derrida puts it in *Writing and Difference* (1987): "The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (280). This is the same dilemma that Barthelme, as a writer, struggles in his own fictions. Contrary to the search for nothing in "Nothing: A Preliminary Account" at the surface, Barthelme is, in fact, in search of new principles. Throughout the story all the structures are proved deceptive and false. "There are not substantial moral authorities or structural patterns on which life and art can be built. All that is found is trash. The search for something proves as hopeless as the search for nothing and yet it is the only task Barthelme regards as worth his while" (Achilles 117). It is obvious that it is insoluble "the task will remain always before us, like a meaning for our lives" (Barthelme 165). "Each individual story is only "A Preliminary Account" of the search for authority resulting in the negation of authority" (ibid.).

Then, to wrap up the discussion, it has been said that in language there are only differences. As Saussure argued in *Course in General Linguistics* "the object of study for linguistics is the underlying system of conventions (words and grammar) by virtue of which a sign (word) can 'mean'" (119). Language is a system of signs and the sign as the basic unit of meaning always comprises. The sign comprises a signifier and signified, the signifier is the 'word image' (visual or acoustic) and the signified the 'mental concept'. The first principle of Saussure's theory is that the sign is at this level conventional and man-made. The plurality of meaning arises by the text's weaves of signifiers. The concept of nothing becomes like a tissue made up of a woven fabric. On the level of the signifier in this story we have the signifier of 'Nothing' with the woven plurality of signifiers. In order to define this signifier according to the weave of other signifiers, the story recommends 'everything' to define 'nothing':

It's not the yellow curtains. Nor curtain rings. Nor is it bran in a bucket, not bran, nor is it the large, reddish farm animal eating the bran from the bucket, the man who placed the bran in the bucket, his wife or the raisin-faced banker who's about to foreclose on the farm. None of these is nothing. (Barthelme, *Nothing: a Preliminary Account* 239)

And at the level of signified we have this phrase:

'Nothing is what keeps us waiting (forever).' (Barthelme, *Nothing* 241)

Accordingly, such phrases indicate that this is the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, as Jacques Derrida puts it; "the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse-provided we can agree on this word-that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences; the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (Derrida 91). The consequence, in Derrida's view, is that in any instance of speech or writing a demonstrably fixed and decidable present meaning is never achieved. He asserts that "the differential play (*jeu*) of language may produce the "effect" of decidable meanings in an utterance or text, but asserts that these are merely effects and lack a ground that would justify certainty in interpretation" (Abrams 57).

According to structuralism, it is the difference which makes sense and sound out of signs. As Johnson has mentioned "Nothing: A Preliminary Account":

"sets itself in contrast to the nominalist contention that words are an illusory filling for empty time. For Barthelme words are a joy because they open up. Far from being an exercise in frustration, this offers the possibility for more life. Nothing may precede language; but language, as an interpretation of nothing, is not only something, but the basis for another something ad infinitum. All language, all life, may be ex nihilo; but for Barthelme this does not mean that nothingness is there waiting to engorge this pretended being once the noise stops. (Johnson 87)

It is not ‘nothing’ that is forever waiting, but ‘Nothing’ as a new world is the subject which keeps us waiting forever. As Johnson proves it;

Nothing dialectically calls forth its opposite and its opposite is the first word meant to interpret it. But Barthelme’s is no facile optimism; he sees the inescapably destructive character of language as clearly as anyone today using words. In fact each of his stories self-consciously acts out, in this sense, its own decreation. Nor does he, like some of his contemporaries, hold the ephemeral word up to catch the sun’s reflection, saying, “Look at it (dying); it’s all there is. Appreciate it while you can.” The word is nothing; it moves from and toward nothing. It is neither beautiful nor fruitful. But it will never arrive at its destination; for, as the last (self-subverted) sentences above make plain, once it arrives, the goal has moved forward. The ultimate joke on nothingness is that it makes the word both possible and necessary.” (Johnson 87)

This nothing is the spark within Barthelme’s fictions to introduce the newly born world named ‘nothing’ which is totally different from its supposed absurd version; paradoxically this ‘nothing’ is full of everything. “Nothing” like language is structured but off-centered and without closure. It has the paradoxical idea of structure: a system with neither center nor closure. The same procedure has happened in Barthelme’s another story named “Sentence”. The “Sentence” discusses what it is doing while it does it. Thus the “vehicle” proves to be its own author as well as its own subject:

A long sentence moving at a certain pace down the page aiming for the bottom-if not the bottom of this page then of some other page-where it can rest, or stop for a moment to think about the questions raised by its own (temporary) existence, which ends when the page is turned, or the sentence falls out of the mind that holds it (temporarily) in some kind of embrace, not necessarily at ardent one . . . (Barthelme, *Sentence* 147)

When the sentence includes within itself a comment on how it is structured itself, it becomes self-consciousness to the second degree to author-sentence referred to in the third person. In this sense the author is conscience of himself as a writer, as writing and as being written about by himself. Such a consciousness becomes self-generating (as well as self-negating):

In our young manhood we were taught that short, punchy sentences were best (but what did he mean? Doesn’t “punchy” mean punch-drink? I think he probably intended to say “short, punching sentences,” meaning sentences that lashed out at you, bloodying your brain if possible, and looking up the word just now I came across the nearby “punkah,” which is a large fan suspended from the ceiling in India, operated by an attendant pulling a rope- that is what I want for my sentence, to keep it cool!). . . . (Barthelme, *Sentence* 149)

However, this ever-intertwined gyre seems to run contrary to what one character suggests as a principal end of language: “Strings of language extend in every direction to bind the world into a rushing ribald whole” (Barthelme, 1987; 107). However in this format closing the text becomes difficult for Barthelme. The problems of identification or interpretation are more severe since the reader is thereby allowed to surrender his response to a particular syntax and let that formal system decide for him. At the end of this story the fact that language is a man-made and arbitrary system is protruding from the text and therefore the system lets its limitation to come up. The text reminds that the sentence itself is an arbitrary object and it is a construction of man, a structure that is based on arbitrariness of the words which constructed it. As Larry McCaffery has mentioned;

This passage . . . also emphasizes what so many contemporary writers have used as a starting point in their fiction: that stories made of words and sentences can never escape their purely constructed, fictive nature, and that, far from being a source of despair for the author, the awareness of this condition can actually serve to free the writer to take full advantage of the treasures of language. (78-9)

In “Sentence,” however, the narrator does admit that words are the ones that have to work with, the only means for recording their fantasies, of preserving their “souvenirs,” which might “someday merge, blur-cohere is the word, maybe into something meaningful” (Bocock 138). As a word image we have sentence text as a signifier but as a signified that sentence in the text has *différance*. It means that it could never reach to its stable position that could be called a concept or a center as a meaningful structure for defining what it had brought as “Sentence”.

This process is the same as what Derrida mentioned in his essay “*Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*”. It is the story of sentence and about sentence that paradoxically within and outside the structure of a sentence. It defines how to get form but simultaneously negate itself. This is where multiplicity of centers is working within the text.

The function of this sentence was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure of making a sentence so that one cannot conceive of an unorganized structure (by using the story’s title) but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. Regarding the form, the story never uses the punctuations except commas for pausing to put an end to its structurality; it just lets the sentence to be followed with no end. In fact the story tries to depict the plays which have been made with sentence as signifier. This signifier is different from what one has fixed in mind, it makes its own uniqueness and at the same time defers or delays reaching to its signified (its structurality). It is just like a play that the signified is running and the story could not reach it as a concept. Because of this deferral the story has end and makes the reader stay in an undecidable and uncertain position by shifting from one subject to another with no punctuation marks and with no definite position or better to say with no definite center. Barthelme’s story becomes boring for some readers because of this format. The fact is that the readers could not make a center according to the structure of their own knowledge and that leads them to produce understanding contradiction. However this could be the pure form of sentence which could ever be defined or the one we could find in living.

### **Deconstruction of Ideology**

As far as words have the meaning of what powerful people want them to mean, it seems futile to believe in words or their ability in order to fill the chasm of loneliness. However, words have always been abused by the privileged. The things are done or are not done is the way of the world. That is how we penetrate into this mess and thoughtless action. As far as we forget the arbitrariness of the words or better to say the signs, they start playing as such that they seem real. However, at this moment even that illusionary reality loses the sense of its uniqueness and originality as a sign. Everything is organized within our mind as structure. With no system of calculating, we could never understand the signs. We all assume that a sentence is a group of words forming complete statement, command, question or any other action but it is never envisaged as a concrete being. The story makes this dictionary definition tangible by illustrating its image in a vacuumed position.

This story deconstructs the ideological system which is fixed in every human being’s mind about a sentence or about its any definition, about what the sentence is and actually could be. Before considering the customary fixed meaning in vogue, the story depicts the sentence from another outlook. It tries to sketch it in a vacuum world without any discrimination. It takes us back to the beginning of creation, a world full of transcendental signified and the world of pure words images (signifiers) with no intercessor for communication in between. As the story’s title suggests, the story takes the form of a single sentence of approximately twenty-five hundred words and manages to combine the brevity, open-endedness, and formal innovation that together serve as the hallmarks of Barthelme’s idiosyncratic art. The subject of “Sentence” is the sentence itself: its progress and process. Beginning with one of Barthelme’s favourite words, “or”, the story proceeds by means of accretion and ends (if a work without any terminal punctuation can be said to end) as much an anxious object as any of those works of modern art. Although it pursues its own meandering, self-regarding, seemingly non-referential way down the page, “Sentence” remains mindful of its reader, no less susceptible to distraction than the sentence itself and lured on by whatever promises the sentence holds out yet also feeling threatened by the sentence’s failure to be played by the rules.

As the narrator sums up within the story, “Sentence” is “a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones.” (Barthelme 153) Earlier in “Sentence”, Barthelme alludes to the Rosetta Stone that Champollion used to decipher the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Barthelme’s fiction, although written in a familiar language, proves more resistant to decoding. As long as all the touchstones have been broken, there is no touchstone for evaluation even for that of *différance* itself. Barthelme uses the past as he uses the present, but neither offers anything approaching an interpretive touchstone, only the raw material, the bits and bytes out of which he constructs his oddly shaped but nevertheless aesthetically crafted “archaeological slices.”

## Conclusion

To sum up the discussion about *différance*, language plays another *jeu* but this time it plays with the notion by which the stories are analyzed (*différance*). The status of *différance* like other signs is in an unstable position as well. In appearance, *différance* is different from difference because of using ‘a’ instead of ‘e’ in its written form so it differs. Accordingly in another level, like any other signs its meaning is never accessible just the same as the stories transcendental signifieds so it defers. Then, as far as it is not trustworthy based on its own supposition, how could it be considered as a criterion to analyze other different texts. It is not the right choice for analyzing these stories or for being analyzed itself by such postmodern stories. This is the same process like the story of nothing, a list of “what nothing is not” could be made but at last the list itself remains which could not be considered as nothing or everything. That is the point at which either ‘nothing’ or ‘everything’ gives way to both ‘nothing’ and ‘everything’. This yearning for any unique transcendental signified is null for it progresses in an endless regress.

By this strategy, language plays with the medium by which it proves its existence named words or signs. Now this is the language which deconstructs the text and its analyzer. It is by the medium of language that a self can claim that the smallest part of language, ‘words’, have *différance* or not. All the things, even the relationship between the critic and the text, are taken out of language. Furthermore, in the process of discovering meaning in a text, deconstructors declare that criticism of a text is just as valuable as the text being read; thereby, inverting the text/criticism hierarchy, the definition of *différance* is also deconstructed by the language rules within the texts which are criticized by deconstruction reading strategy. We have nothing on one side of binaries and on the other side we have everything (multiplicity of signifiers). The same process happens for the concept of *différance* (both as signifier and signified). The concept of *différance* is far from reaching then how a critic could define it and claim that the other texts are ready to be read by this unstable strategy which is still vague and indefinite itself. Reaching to a definite aim is always unattainable; *différance* is in ad infinitum position like the stories. It is stuck between two definitions “to differ” and “to defer” as well. *Différance* is in the position of unprogrammable decision. That is the position where the plurality of meaning and *undecidability* happens for the notion of *différance*. *Différance* has no more its own unique assumption of two meaning ‘differ’ and ‘defer’.

Although that is where deconstruction as well gets stuck within its own traps, deconstruction is always aware of being deconstructed by the problems rose from language. Whether spoken or written, Derrida is fully aware that the language is subject to *différance* but here in the texts *différance* is subject to language specifically in “Nothing: A Preliminary Account”. Derrida knows that language by its countless connotations always has the centering effects from which he cannot escape. In order to communicate, even the most radical critiques of language have to make use of this medium that they criticize. The critique undermines the language or in other word, the medium which he uses to communicate, but that language, because of its centering effects, simultaneously undermines the critique as well as the text. Everything is subject to *différance* and Derrida’s language itself is not an exception. Even Derrida himself is aware of not being able to escape the centering effects that language for the reason of multiplicity of connotations always has. This is the nature of language to hide its identity behind the plays goes around the concept of centering. Nevertheless, the most radical critiques of language have to make use of the medium they criticize in order to communicate.

So language has centering effects which makes the critics unable to de-centre it. Language is never deconstructed for it is the medium which deconstruct everything in order to hide its being. All the things are the victims of language plays even the plays themselves. However, this is what happened for *différance* itself as well. It is the production of language and because of its calculable centering effect has to be de-centered. This is originated from the fact that in order to be understood, everything has to build a center. Therefore, *différance* notion is also the victim of deconstruction by the means of texts language rules and plays. Deconstruction is a strategy to make us free ourselves from the limitations made by language. It lets us go beyond this world of word, although there is an awareness of being trapped within the labyrinthine made by language. Nevertheless, deconstruction has to criticize language with the medium which is put under question to force us get free from these limitations. The creation of new world of nothing is the only way by which we could stand at threshold of language to be put language under question by the medium of that newly created world out of this postmodern and poststructuralist’s anarchy.

**References**

- Abrams, M.H et al. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Heinle & Heinle, 1999.
- Achilles, Jochen. "Donald Barthelme's Aesthetic of Inversion: Caligari's Come-Back as Caligari's Leave-Taking". *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, No. 2, Spring 1982. 105-20.
- Barthelme, Donald, and Others. "A Symposium on Fiction." *Shenadoah* XXVII, No. 2 Winter 1976. 3-31.
- Barthelme, Donald. *Forty Stories*. New York: penguin group (USA) Inc., 2003.
- . *The Dead Father*, New York, Farrar, Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1975.
- . *Sixty Stories*, New York, Penguin Group (USA), 1987.
- . *Snow White*. New York, Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996.
- Barthelme, Helen Moore. *Donald Barthelme: the Genesis of the Cool Sound*. Texas, A&M University Press College Station, 2001.
- Bocock, Maclin. "The Indian Uprising' or Donald Barthelme's Strange Object Covered with Fur". *fiction international*, No. 415, 1975. 134-45.
- Bressler, Charles E. *Literary Criticism: an introduction to theory and practice*, New Jersey, Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.
- Bertens, Hans. *Literary theory: The Basics*. New York, Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. London-New York, Routledge, 1978. Print.
- de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. 1916. Trans. Roy Harris. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965. Print.
- Olsen, Lance. "Linguistic Pratfall in Barthelme". *South Atlantic Review*, Vol.51, No. 4, Nov., 1986. 69-77. Print.