EDUCATION

The School By Donald Barthelme

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Introduction: Why "The School" Still Matters

Donald Barthelme's short story "The School," first published in The New Yorker in 1974, is one of those rare works of fiction that manages to be simultaneously hilarious, heartbreaking, and philosophically profound in less than four pages. In it, Barthelme presents a first-person narrator—a teacher at a progressive school—who reports on a series of tragic events that befall the school's classroom pets and, eventually, the adults themselves. What begins as a darkly comic litany of death (snails, fish, a puppy, a salamander, trees, and finally people) escalates into a strange, tender conversation about love, theodicy, and what it means to be human in a world that seems determined to remind us of our own fragility.

For readers encountering Barthelme for the first time, "The School" serves as a perfect gateway into postmodern fiction. For longtime admirers, it remains a masterclass in compression, tonal control, and the power of an unreliable narrator who is trying very hard to keep things together. In this comprehensive guide, we will explore the story's plot, its major themes, its literary techniques, its place in postmodern literature, and why its questions about death and love continue to resonate with readers today.

Plot Summary: A School Year of Unrelenting Loss

The story is structured as a report from a teacher who is explaining to a colleague (or perhaps an administrator) what has happened at the school over the course of the school year. It begins with the death of a snail—the first of many classroom pets that do not survive their educational purpose. The teacher narrates this sequence of losses in a flat, almost clinical tone, which creates a striking contrast with the absurdity of the events.

The pets die in rapid succession: the snail, then some fish, then a number of mice. The teacher and the children react with appropriate sadness at first, but as the deaths accumulate, the emotional register begins to shift. The children, and even the teacher, become desensitized. When a puppy dies after being touched by the children, the teacher tries to comfort them with a small speech about the earth's capacity for renewal. But the speech rings hollow, even to him.

The death toll expands beyond the animal kingdom. The school's trees die. The students' own pets, brought in for a show-and-tell event, also die. Then the adults begin to die: the principal drops dead in the cafeteria. A Korean orphan the students "adopt" through a charity organization dies before they can even meet him. Even the gerbil the children bury with full funeral rites does not stay dead—it is later found alive, which raises strange questions about grief and the nature of death itself.

The story culminates in a remarkable scene where the children, having witnessed so much death, ask the teacher a series of direct, existential questions: Why is there death? What is the point of loving anything if it will eventually die? The teacher, caught off guard, does not have satisfying answers. He fumbles, offering platitudes, and then, in a moment of raw honesty, he tells the children that love is what they have instead of answers. The story ends with the children and the teacher joining hands and kissing one another, an act of communal tenderness that feels both deeply earned and profoundly ambiguous.

Themes and Deeper Meanings

The Absurdity of Death and the Collapse of Narrative Comfort

Barthelme is often associated with the Theater of the Absurd, and "The School" is a textbook example of how absurdist techniques can be used to address serious philosophical questions. The sheer accumulation of deaths—snails, fish, puppy, salamander, puppy again, trees, principal, orphan—becomes so ridiculous that the reader is forced to laugh. But this laughter is uneasy. Barthelme is using the absurd to show that our conventional stories about death (religious comfort, scientific explanation, the idea that "everything happens for a reason") are woefully inadequate.

The school is a place where we teach children how to make sense of the world. But the world in this story refuses to cooperate. The teacher's attempts to frame each death in a meaningful narrative (the snail had a "good life," the trees will be replaced with "hardier varieties") fail precisely because the sheer number of deaths overwhelms the capacity of any narrative to contain them. Barthelme is pointing to the limits of storytelling itself when faced with the brute fact of mortality.

Love as a Response to Mortality

If there is a "thesis" in "The School," it is that love is the only adequate response to a world defined by loss. When the children finally ask the teacher, "What is the point of loving if everything dies?" the teacher does not offer a theological or philosophical answer. Instead, he tells them that love is what we have. The scene in which the students and the teacher embrace and kiss is startling because it is so physically and emotionally direct. Barthelme seems to be saying that in the face of death, the only meaningful action is to turn toward each other with tenderness.

This is not a sentimental conclusion. Barthelme undercuts any easy comfort by having the children, even as they kiss the teacher, continue to ask the same relentless questions: "Is there something wrong with us?" The love is real, but it does not resolve anything. It is a gesture in the face of the abyss.

The Failure of Language and Institutions

The school itself is an institution that is supposed to provide order and explanation. But the teacher is clearly failing at his job. He cannot explain the deaths. He cannot produce a coherent narrative that will satisfy the children. His language becomes increasingly halting and uncertain. In one of the story's most telling lines, the teacher says, "I sad, I sad that the puppy died." The repetition of "I sad" (instead of "I said") is a small but significant error—a kind of verbal stumble that reveals his emotional state. Language, the primary tool of teaching, is breaking down.

Barthelme is interested in how institutions (schools, families, religions) attempt to manage the reality of death and how they invariably fail. The school curriculum does not include a course on how to handle the death of a Korean orphan before you even meet him. The teacher is improvising, and he is not doing a great job.

Literary Techniques and Style

The Cumulative Structure

The most striking technical feature of "The School" is its cumulative structure. The list of deaths grows throughout the story, and the repetition creates a rhythm that is both comic and numbing. Each new death is presented in the same flat, declarative style, which has the effect of normalizing the abnormal. By the time we get to the death of the principal, the reader is almost prepared for it. Barthelme is using this structure to mimic the way trauma can become normalized over time.

Tone: The Art of Flatness

Barthelme's prose is famously flat. He avoids emotional adjectives and adverbs. The sentences are simple, often declarative, and they do not reach for pathos. This flatness is essential to the story's effect. If the teacher were weeping or overemoting, the story would become maudlin. Instead, the emotional weight is carried by the gap between the flatness of the narration and the enormity of what is being narrated. The reader is invited to feel what the narrator cannot or will not express.

The Unreliable Narrator

The teacher is not deliberately lying, but he is an unreliable narrator in the sense that he is not fully in touch with his own emotions. He keeps trying to "move on" and "get back to the curriculum," even as the world around him collapses. This emotional repression is itself a kind unreliability. The reader understands more about the situation than the narrator does, which creates a powerful dramatic irony.

Dialogue as Philosophical Inquiry

The final exchange between the teacher and the children is structured as a kind of philosophical dialogue. The children ask a series of questions that are variations on the problem of evil: Why does God allow suffering? What is the point of loving if everything dies? Are we cursed? The teacher's answers are weak and evasive, but the children persist. This dialogue recalls the biblical Book of Job, as well as the philosophical tradition of theodicy—the attempt to justify God's goodness in the face of evil.

Historical and Literary Context

Postmodernism and the Short Story

Donald Barthelme is one of the central figures of American postmodern literature. Along with writers like John Barth, Robert Coover, and William Gass, he was part of a generation that rejected the conventions of literary realism in favor of experiments with form, metafiction, and irony. "The School" is postmodern in its use of a simple, almost childlike structure to address complex philosophical issues, and in its refusal to provide a neat resolution.

Barthelme was also deeply influenced by the visual arts (he was an art critic and museum director), and his stories often have the quality of collage—elements are assembled in unexpected ways that create new meanings. In "The School," the collage effect comes from the juxtaposition of the mundane (classroom pets) and the cosmic (questions about love and death).

The Story's Publication and Reception

"The School" was published in *The New Yorker* on January 6, 1975, and later collected in Barthelme's 1976 collection *Amateurs*. It has since become one of his most widely anthologized stories and is often taught in college literature courses. The story's brevity and depth make it a favorite for instructors who want to introduce students to postmodern fiction without overwhelming them.

Critics have praised the story for its economy and its emotional power. Some have read it as a commentary on the Vietnam War era (a time when death was a daily presence on the evening news), while others have seen it as a more universal meditation on mortality. The story's refusal to settle on a single interpretation is part of its enduring appeal.

Why "The School" Works: A Reader's Reflection

What makes "The School" so effective is the way it combines the absurd with the genuinely moving. The deaths of the snails and fish are funny because they are so trivial and so numerous. But the death of the Korean orphan is not funny at all. The story moves from humor to pathos so seamlessly that the reader hardly notices the shift. By

the time the children are asking their final questions, the humor has drained away entirely, replaced by a raw, almost unbearable tenderness.

The story also works because it does not pretend to have answers. The teacher's final "answer" is not really an answer at all—it is an invitation to love in the absence of certainty. This is a deeply human response, and it is one that readers of all backgrounds can recognize. Barthelme does not offer theology or philosophy; he offers the contact of skin and breath.

Finally, the story works because of its magnificent compression. In just over 1,500 words, Barthelme covers the entire arc of human experience: birth, death, love, grief, and the search for meaning. There is not a wasted word. Every sentence pulls its weight. It is a model of what the short story can do at its very best.

Conclusion: The Enduring Gift of Barthelme's Masterpiece

Donald Barthelme's "The School" is a small story with large ambitions. It uses the death of classroom pets to ask the biggest questions we can ask about life and love and loss. It is absurd and heartbreaking and strangely hopeful all at once. For new readers, it offers a perfect introduction to the pleasures of postmodern fiction. For seasoned readers, it remains a touchstone—a story that rewards re-reading and that seems to grow deeper with each encounter.

In a world that often feels as chaotic and death-filled as the school in the story, Barthelme's strange little tale offers something precious: permission to feel confused, to love anyway, and to keep asking questions even when there are no answers. That is no small gift. That is the gift of literature at its most humane.

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