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# *The Floating Opera* : A Nihilistic Comedy

**Syeda Waseemah**
Ph.D.Scholar
Department of English
Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur
syedawaseemah90@gmail.com
8837067839

**H.Subrata Singh**
Professsor, Department of English
Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur
haobamsubrata99@gmail.com
9862813972

**Abstract**

This paper examines John Barth's novel, *The Floating Opera* as nihilistic comedy. It demonstrates how Barth establishes his affinity with the nihilistic tradition in the novel. It explores how Todd Andrews, the narrator and protagonist of the novel passes through various preliminary stages in life arriving at a distinctively post-modern nihilism. It also explores the comic dimensions of philosophical questions related to nihilism. Barth himself planned this novel to be a "nihilistic comedy". He analyzes the life of an irresponsible bachelor, Todd Andrews, the protagonist who has been living constantly under the threat of imminent death. In order to escape the grim reality of life, he adopts three different masks _ a rake, a saint and a cynic expecting that this would solve his dilemma, struggle between life and threat of imminent death. But when he realizes that such masks can never hide him from the constant threatening death, he decides to commit suicide thinking that it will end his problems. Todd Andrews spends the entire novel contemplating and almost accomplishing his suicide. He contemplates suicide as a rational response to a world he perceives as meaningless where all values are revealed as relative and arbitrary rather than absolute. He concludes that since no action has inherent worth, he will commit suicide. However, he fails to kill himself, and later realizes that if there is no ultimate reason to continue living, there is also no final justification to end one's life.

**Keywords:** Meaningless life, Despair, Suicide, Relative values, Nihilistic comedy.

John Simmons Barth, popularly known as John Barth is one of the most versatile innovative American writers of the Post- Second World War era with many solid achievements to his credit. In one sense, he was responsible for initiating many new trends in the post- modern American fiction. As a teacher in a university, he had dealt with a large number of novels in his teaching. This made him launch into a career of fiction writing in

which he blended the realistic modes with some non-realistic modes of novel writing. Along with such innovations in technique, Barth also introduced many thematic experiments, particularly based on the nihilistic and existential philosophy which was the craze among the intellectuals of the Post- Second World War era. Throughout his fiction, Barth is primarily concerned with the question of whether individuals can transcend the innate absurdity of human existence.

John Barth was born on May 27, 1930 in Cambridge, Maryland, U.S. and died on April 2, 2024 at Bonita Springs, Florida, U.S. at the age of 93. He was an Alumni Centennial Professor of English and Creative Writing at Johns Hopkins from 1973 to 1991 and Professor Emeritus in 1991. He received numerous honours and awards, among them, an honorary Litt. D degree from the University of Maryland in 1969, National Book Award for fiction in 1973, Lannan Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award in 1998, etc.. John Barth has written 13 novels, namely ***The Floating Opera*** (1956), ***The End of the Road*** (1958), ***The Sot-Weed Factor*** (1960), ***Giles Goat-Boy***; or, ***The Revised New Syllabus*** (1966), ***Chimera*** (1972), ***Letters*** (Epistolatory Novel) (1979), ***Sabbatical: A Romance*** (1982), ***The Tidewater Tales: A Novel*** (1987), ***The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*** (1991), ***Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*** (1994), ***Coming Soon!***(A Narrative) (2001), ***When Three Roads Meet*** (2005), ***Every Third Thought: A Novel in Five Seasons*** (2011). Besides, he has also written a number of essays.

The nihilistic patterns of thought visible in the work of John Barth, particularly in his first novel, *The Floating Opera* provide a legitimate subject of research to any scholar interested in the changing trends of the American novel. The focus of Barth's criticism in recent years has been on his art rather than his thought. Barth's language, stylistic development, artistic technique and, above all, his development as a craftsman – all these aspects have been analysed with minuteness which one may at times find overpowering, but his thought, particularly his nihilistic patterns of thought which is unquestionably central to an understanding of his work has not received the attention it deserves. And yet the subject is of sufficient significance to call for exploration in depth and detail. Hence, a study of Barth's nihilistic patterns of thought will highlight his preferences of thought, illuminate major aspects of his thought, enrich and enhance the existing scholarship and thereby make Barth's work more comprehensible.

The present paper is a modest attempt to examine the first novel of John Barth, namely *The Floating Opera* as nihilistic comedy and shows how the protagonist and the narrator of the novel, Todd Andrews arrives at a distinctively postmodernist nihilism by passing through three preliminary stages in life _ those of the rake, the saint and the cynic. It explores how Barth establishes his affinity with the nihilistic tradition in the novel. It also explores the comic dimensions of philosophical questions related to nihilism.

With a view to understanding Barth's novels, particularly *The Floating Opera*, it is pertinent here to analyse the term "Nihilism". Nihilism is derived from the Latin word 'nihil' meaning 'nothing' and suffix- 'ism', indicating an ideology. Its literal meaning is 'ideology of nothing' or 'ideology of negation'. As a philosophic term, it "dates from the 12th century, and may be said to signify the sceptical attitude of mind which denies everything, even

existence" (*Everyman's Encyclopaedia* Special Edition 7). In the nineteenth century, however, nihilism came to stand for an amorphous body of social and political discontent which manifested itself among the Russian educated classes and which sought a social and political freedom for the individual through rejection of all forms of authority and traditional moral obligation. Its currency in Russian intellectual circles owed much to the Russian novelist, Ivan Turgenev who used the word "nihilist" to describe Bazarov, the hero of his famous novel, *Fathers and Sons* (1862). Bazarov, a young man under the influence of the "most advanced ideas" of his time recognises no tradition and authority, doubts every general principle and value, and accepts only scientifically demonstrable facts and utilitarian criteria; since then, use of the term 'nihilism' spread rapidly throughout Europe and the Americans. Nihilism, in contemporary usage, is a philosophy of negation, involving a rejection of traditional morality, order and authority, together with the feeling that no basis exists on which a new order can be erected. However, nihilism is completely without any end or purpose. It literally has only one truth to declare, namely ultimately the 'Nothingness' prevails and the world is meaningless. By extension, the adjective "nihilistic" has been applied rather loosely to various movements or attitudes in which the conventional moral principles of orthodox society are rejected or conviction is expressed that life itself is meaningless or absurd. In this sense, nihilism has a long history. Dadaists of the World War I period were nihilistic in that they flouted all conventional ideas and rules. Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre are representatives of the twentieth century philosophers who attack or reject all standards of reason. Existentialism is regarded as a kind of nihilism to the extent that it regards traditional values and beliefs as unfounded and all human life aimless, senseless and useless.

Barth designed *The Floating Opera* to be a "nihilistic comedy". While writing this novel in 1955, Barth was influenced by the existential and nihilistic discussion which dominated the American intellect stage of the 1950. Barth's plans were already clear in mind. He writes in a letter to the *Literary Journal*: *The Floating Opera* "will concern some sort of a bachelor, more or less irresponsible, who either rejects absolute values or encounters their rejection" (Morrell 13). Barth's irresponsible bachelor in *The Floating Opera* is Todd Andrews who observes: "Nothing has intrinsic value". And if nothing has value, "There's, no final 'reason' for living" (Barth 218, 223). The philosophical question of whether Todd should live or commit suicide is, therefore, of deep concern in *The Floating Opera*. "Todd spends the entire novel contemplating and almost accomplishing his suicide (Gross 31)". He concludes that since no action has inherent worth, he will commit suicide. But he fails to kill himself and later on realizes that if there is no ultimate reason to continue living, there is also no final justification to end one's life. However, much of the events depicted in the novel are humorous. There is the comic treatment of death. And the nihilism revealed in the novel is thus blended with comedy.

The narrator and protagonist of *The Floating Opera*, Todd Andrews, who is a fifty-four-year-old Maryland lawyer characterized mainly by his opinions, one day plays with those opinions until he reasons himself into attempting suicide. He searches through self-inquiry to find personal meaning with a perplexing and alienating universe. Having fought in

World War I and survived its atrocities, Todd grasps his own brutality but fails to comprehend the suicide of his father. These facts of existence, along with a heart condition, interfere with his relationships, so that his liaison with the wealthy, sophisticated Jane Mack and his friendship with her husband, Harrison, are governed by his physical weakness and negative opinion of human nature. Even his relationship with Jeanie Mack, possibly his daughter, cannot free him of such negativity. It is his negative philosophy that makes Todd decide to commit suicide.

*The Floating Opera* is the account of Todd who as an aging man relates the events of a day in 1937 when he decided to commit suicide and then chose not to. The date was June 21st or 22nd. His refusal to pinpoint the exact day is symptomatic of his inclination to preserve a certain amount of uncertainty in his account and not commit himself to the absoluteness of historical chronology. This is related to his own perception that no explanation can be final and conclusive. He found this out when he tried to explain the apparently inexplicable fact of his father's suicide in an *Inquiry*, a copious amassing of all the details of his father's life. It is an endless task since all the potentially relevant information can never be gathered in, and ultimately it is impossible to see causes, one can only infer them. *The Floating Opera* is intended to form a part of Todd's "self-inquiry", a study inextricably bound up with separate "inquiries" into his father's life and death, while also reviewing and assessing his own experiences and behaviour. His project is, in a sense, an effort to create a rational analogue to living.

Todd's decision to commit suicide is the result of his long effort to master the fact of his imminent death. Since 1919 he had lived with a diagnosis of subacute bacteriological endocarditis (i.e. heart trouble) which could kill him at any moment and his response to this fact had been a series of masks by which he hoped to hide the reality of his illness from himself. Three different masks were required from 1919 to 1937: "a rake, a saint and then a cynic. For when one mask no longer served its purpose of disguise, another had perforce to take its place at once". (Barth 219). "And one by one these masks failed. Todd passed from the hedonism of the rake to the self-restraint and renunciation of the saint to the disenchantment of the cynic – but a cynic who at least believed in the value of cynicism. Even this mask failed finally" (Noland 15). Since it was Todd's habit to justify on philosophical grounds his every attitude, he investigated the several reactions he could have to despair. And one morning in 1937, after a long night of despair over life's irrational nature, he decided to kill himself:

> Here is what I saw: that all my masks were half- conscious attempts to master the fact with which I had to live; that none had made me master of the fact; that where cynicism had failed, no further mask could succeed…. The conclusion that swallowed me (in its overwhelming despair) was this: *There is no way to master the fact with which I live* (Barth 221-222).

He went to sleep with that conclusion, woke up in the morning, splashed cold water on his face, and decided to kill himself. The next twelve hours he spent gathering philosophical support for his decision:

I. Nothing has intrinsic value.

II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational.
III. There is, therefore, no ultimate "reason" for valuing anything.
IV. Living is action. There's no final reason for action.
V. There's no final reason for living (Barth218, 223)

That closed his self-inquiry. All that remained was to close his life. But he did not succeed; otherwise he would not have been able to write about the attempt. And what he added to his premises afterward is the main point of the novel:

> To realize that nothing makes any final difference is overwhelming; but if one goes no farther and becomes a saint, a cynic, or a suicide on principle, one hasn't reasoned completely. The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including that truth and there is no more reason to commit suicide, say than not to, in the last analysis. Hamlet's question ("to be, or not to be") is, absolutely, meaningless. (Barth 246)

It is a logical dilemma that many existentialists run into. In the end, Todd elects to live, or at least to go on existing. He then "considered too whether, in the real absence of absolutes, values less than absolute mightn't be regarded as in no way inferior and even be lived by" (Barth 247). The corollary is that there are relative values. And so *The Floating Opera* comes to a stop, somewhat optimistically, as a thunderstorm in the distance breaks the heart that gathered in the day.

The nihilistic tendency of *The Floating Opera* is mainly caused by the paradox of suicide. On the one hand, since the health of Todd Andrews' father, Thomas Andrews is final, it appears to his son to have been predetermined. On the other hand, since Thomas Andrews committed suicide, it was apparently voluntary, that is, open to choice. Traumatised, the protagonist Todd is incapable of reconciling necessity and free will. When, for instance, the wife of his friend, Harrison Mack surprisingly offers to make love to him, his spontaneous reaction is compliance; but although triangular relationship of some constancy develops from this initial act of adultery – the Macks believe in sexual relationship – Todd Andrews is never capable of acknowledging his love for Jane. He feels the need to retain his freedom as a means to constantly defy his father, who by privileging his own free will, has forced his son to accept his death as an inexplicable necessity. Todd Andrews has become a lawyer in his hometown, Maryland, choosing a profession that bridges the gap between necessity and free will, concentrating in each case on the "accident" that will tip this balance in favour of the one or the other.

Todd rationally calculates the crucial emotional experiences of his life as five in number: first, from his father's death he learns frustration; second from his experience in the First World War he learns fear; third, from his initiation into love he learns mirth, the sense that all human copulation is essentially ridiculous; fourth, from his only real love affair he learns surprise; and fifth, from his accumulated experience he learns despair.

Todd remains obsessed with his father's suicide, hanging himself on Ground-Hog Day, 1930 in the basement of the family home. The ostensible motive for the suicide was that his father had gone bankrupt in the crash of 1929 and could not face his creditors. But Todd

did not accept that as the actual reason, and so he began preparing to write an inquiry into the death of his father, a project that soon blossomed into a second inquiry, this one investigating the life of his father and the relationship between his father and himself. He had also a third inquiry to make, a self-inquiry that took the form of an autobiographical letter to his father. He had been drafting it since 1920, and even though his father was now dead, he still continued. In it he left out nothing of importance about himself. At any rate, *The Floating Opera* is a part of the self-inquiry.

Todd moved into his solitary room at the Hotel Dorset in Cambridge, Maryland, upon the event of his father's suicide in 1930, and he spent some part of every day in the intervening twenty-four years on his interminable works-in-progress – his inquiries into the possible causes of Thomas Andrews' self-hanging, into Todd's memories of the two of them as father and son, into the reasons for their imperfect communication. Although the first two inquiries seemingly concern the life and death of Todd's father, they are written as premises for the third and most difficult one, the inquiring into the reasons for the imperfect communication between the father and the son. He is sickened by the essential similarity between his father's corpse and a chicken his father slaughtered when Todd was a boy: "Dad put the feet in my hand – cold, hard, dirty, stingy, scaly, dead yellow feet. I was ill then, reader, and I think of those feet a minute longer. I shall be ill now". (Barth 180) Confronting the arbitrariness and finality of his father's death, Todd can still think, but neither logic nor "knowledge of the World" offers a sufficient basis for future action, and he seems disgusted that he is able to go on living in the absence of justification. The image of his father's body pendant from a basement floor joist is a constant reminder of human limitation and helplessness, contributing to a revulsion for and a revolt against things as they are. Yet, if "*Tod* is death", then "*Todd* is almost *Tod* – that is, almost death", (Barth 3) and Todd manages to go on functioning by turning death into "almost death" through gestures of faith and cynicism. His "inquiry" is, of course, the most obvious of these. Todd agrees with Hume that "Causation is never more than an inference; and any inference involves at some point the leap from what we see to what we cannot see". (Barth 214) This is a leap he is unwilling to make, just as he is unwilling to lay his "integrity on the altar of the word God" (Barth 222). Instead, his purpose is through logic and increasing "Knowledge of the World" to continue shortening "the gap between fact and opinion" (Barth 215), and to continue postponing the moment in which he must draw the line which is the limit of this self-defining activity. But, particularly given his occasional doubts about the sufficiency of logic and knowledge, his notion that the course of his "Inquiry" is asymptotic, bringing him ever closer to the truth, must itself be the product of either wilful self-deception or something very much akin to faith.

Todd's fixation on his father's death is but an aspect of his obsession with his own mortality. When he first introduces himself to the reader, he states somewhat defensively:

> Todd Andrews is my name . . . "*Tod* is German for death: perhaps the name is symbolic". I myself use two d's, partly in order to avoid that symbolism. But you see, . . . *Todd* is symbolic, too, and accurately so. *Todd* is death, and this book has

> not much to do with death; *Todd* is almost *Tod* – that is, almost death – and this book, if gets written, has very much to do with almost-death (Barth 3).

A bit later, after telling that he was diagnosed in 1919 by an Army doctor, Captain John Frisbee as having a "sick heart", he indicates:

> This fact – that having begun this sentence, I may not live to write its end; that having poured my drink, I may not live to taste it, or that it may pass a live man's tongue to burn a dead man's belly; that having slumbered, I may never wake, or having waked, may never living sleep – this for thirty-five years has been condition of my existence, the great fact of my life (Barth 49).

Besides the parody of *nihilism*, Barth parodies the twentieth century society in *The Floating Opera.* Todd's sick heart symbolizes the sick twentieth century society on the brink of death. The possibility of Todd's death at any moment stands for the possibility of the doom of the world at any moment by an atomic or nuclear holocaust. A press of a button could as well destroy the whole world as the floating opera. Later, after telling that he was diagnosed in 1919 as having a sick heart, he confesses that he would not live to write its end. The trivial manner in which Todd narrates about this enigmatic heart again expresses the *comic nihilistic patterns* in the book. If one ignores, for the moment, the possible further implications of the doctor's diagnosis, then Todd's condition is no different from one's own. What is, perhaps, unusual is his compulsion not only to avoid confronting the terms of his existence but also to "master" them.

What Todd balks at is not simply the death sentence he lives under but all human limitations, the general absurdity of being forced. to exist as a creature that can conceive of absolutes and infinite chains of causality yet must die and reproduce like an animal. He recalls two unforgettable demonstrations of his "animality" which are the two crucial emotional experiences of his life. The first episode he relates is his experience in the First World War from which he learns fear. It occurred when, hiding at night in a shell hole in the Argonne he was totally overcome by fear and turned in a "shocked, drooling animal" when he befouled himself, hugged and kissed a German soldier and bayoneted him. What was most disturbing to him was his loss of rational control: "There was no cowardice involved; in fact, my mind wasn't engaged at all - either I was thinking of something else or, more probably, I was just stupefied. Cowardice involves choice, but fear is independent of choice" (Barth 62). The other demonstration or crucial emotional experience of his life is his initiation into love from which he learns mirth. It had taken place on the occasion of Todd's initial sexual encounter. Coupling with Betty June Gunter in his bedroom he happened to catch their images reflected in the mirror on his dresser: "Betty June's face buried in the pillow, her scrawny little buttocks thrust skywards; me gangly as a whippet and braying like an ass. I exploded with laughter!" (Barth 120) Since the physical aspect of the act is to him intrinsically ludicrous, Todd concludes that to ascribe other dimensions to it is to engage in self-deception.

Another important crucial emotional experience of Todd's life is his only real love affair with Jane Mack, wife of his best friend. And he learns surprise from this love affair rather than love, first because Jane suddenly and without warning offered herself to him one day; and second, because he later discovers that she did so because Harrison wanted her to. In

fact, both Jane and Harrison wanted the affair. They wanted it, they say, out of love for Todd. They wanted no silly jealousy, no guilt, no recriminations. Richard Schickel considers this episode Barth's commentary on "liberal morality, both political and sexual....”; (Schickel 58) political because of Harrison's leftwing sympathies, sexual because of the curious and self-conscious, almost ideological, nature of the affair itself. The Macks, in other words, attempted to order their lives too rationally, too abstractly as Todd did with his masks. They lived by theory, not genuine feeling. They did what any good liberal couple should. Todd is convinced that his affair with Jane was initiated by Harrison and that it was carefully planned and anticipated with pleasure, not only as a novelty but also as a means of gaining power over him: "I'm sure they'd worked out every detail, savouring the deed before it was committed, imagining my surprise and pleasure, and my gratitude. (Barth 32)

Todd's efforts to master even the microcosm defined by the triangle, however, were frustrated when his suspension of disbelief in his own fiction was challenged by chance and by his characters' insubordinate attempts to demonstrate their own free will. Following what proved to be a temporary break with the Macks brought about by his confrontation with Harrison, Todd had produced an outline charting the possible future courses of their relationship. Like all of his experiments in applying logic to human behaviour, the outline was invalidated by the world's arbitrariness when he resumed his affair with Jane as a result of two consequences of human animality he could not "reasonably have been expected to predict” (Barth 149) Jane’s pregnancy and the death of Harrison's father. Todd found himself capable of accepting this development, perhaps because, as the Macks' solicitor and the presumed father of Jane's child, he discerned in both chance and occurrences the means of reasserting his control. What he could not dismiss so easily, however, was the Macks revelation, on the day of his proposed suicide, of their intent to drop out of the game, permanently terminate the affair, an insult compounded by Jane's suggesting that they, not he, had devised the game to fulfil their own needs. Realizing that his suicide "would be interpreted by the Macks as evidence that their move had "crushed" him, Todd found himself gripped by "an entirely unexpected emotion," was shaken, in fact, by reluctance", and he was able to recover his resolve only by falling back on his skills as a logical contortionist:

> What difference did it make to me how they interpreted my death? Nothing, absolutely, made any difference. And sane again, I was able to see a nice attraction in the idea that at least partly by my own choosing, that last act would be robbed of its significance, would be interpreted in every way but the way I intended(Barth209).

What he fails to emphasize in his account of the day is that his determination was probably also strengthened by the fact that his plan to destroy himself by blowing up the floating opera would, if successfully implemented, have permitted him to take the Macks with him.

The possibility of making the last move in his game with the Macks, however, was but one of the factors compelling Todd to respond to the "attractiveness of desolation, the charm of the abyss” (Barth 201). Failing through other gestures of faith and cynicism to alter the arbitrariness and finality of things as they are, he turned to suicide as a final cure for his condition, a final expression of freedom of choice: "There was no mastering the fact with which I lived; but I could master the fact of my living with it by destroying myself, and the result was the same – I was the master. I chocked back a snicker” (Barth 223). Yet Todd's affair with Jane succeeded for a number of years indeed, until 1937, when, on the night

before the morning of his decision to commit suicide, Todd was embarrassed by Jane's attention to his clubbed fingers (a clinical sign of bacterial endocarditis, and so a reminder of mortality) and then found himself impotent with her. Another mask, the last, crumbles, and he is left with the fifth of his crucial emotional experiences, complete despair.

Todd himself admits that the rational basis for his decision was the product, again, of rationalization after the fact, and his account suggests the possibility that, in accordance with his own deductions, his reasons for killing himself may have been in fact irrational. On the night preceding his assault on *Adam's Original and Unparalleled Floating Opera*, he had experienced strong emotion or only the fifth time in his life, "learned *despair*, utter despair, a despair beyond wailing" (Barth 220) as a result of Jane Mack's off-handed comments about the ugliness of his fingers. Whereas his reason had in the past made him a murderer and a potential victim, it was in the condition created by this emotion (which may or may not have been despair), that he devised his plan to annihilate himself and the world by blowing up the showboat. It is this that represents perhaps the darkest expression of nihilism in Barth's novel- that it was not, or not solely, Todd's intellectual illness, his inhuman rationality, but his "sick heart", his inhuman weakness, which brought him to a state in which he could coldly anticipate the obliteration of his acquaintances and the child who may be his daughter:

> Calmly too I heard somewhere the squeal of an overexcited child, too young to be up so late not impossibly Jeannine. I considered a small body, formed perhaps from my own and flawless Jane's, black, cracked, smoking. Colonel Morton, Bill Butler, Old Mr. and Mrs. Bishop - it made no difference, absolutely (Barth239).

Since *The Floating Opera* is nihilistic comedy, Todd was saved from destroying himself and six hundred and ninety-nine of his townspeople not, as he would like to think, because he changed his mind but because the unforeseen actions of an outside agent foiled his plan, preserving him and the members of his community. It was rationalisation after the fact, once again, that led him to amend the fifth proposition of his deductions: "V. There's no final reason for living (or for suicide)" (Barth 245). Thwarted by chance in another of his efforts to create a scenario for experience, he responded, once more, with a gesture of cynicism – "The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including that truth. Hamlet's question is, absolutely, meaningless" – and a gesture of faith – "I considered too whether, in the real absence of absolutes, values less than absolute mightn't be regarded as in no way inferior and even be lived by" (Barth 246, 247). It was in this frame of mind that Todd, acknowledging his inability to escape the tension in which he lives, to resist the inertia acquired by living, concluded that he "would *in all probability*. though not at all necessarily, go on behaving much as" he had hitherto, as a rabbit shot on the run keeps running in the same direction until death overtakes him" (Barth 246-247). In short, Todd has come to accept truth as relative, inter-subjective, endlessly interlocking. and without a definite cause or purpose; if there are no absolute values, there are at least relative values.

Besides, Barth called *The Floating Opera* a comedy. If only that day in 1937 is examined, it is hard to see why broodings over death do not have much hilarity in them. There is comedy in the book, however, – in the wealth of secondary narratives that Todd supplies. He thinks that everything is related to everything else, and he structures the novel accordingly. One detail frequently suggests another to him and then another and then he sets aside the main story to take up small associated ones. Three wild comic episodes stand out in

*The Floating Opera*. One is the legal case of Harrison Mack, Sr., The Dill Pickle King. It involves seventeen wills, each leaving the estate, which includes three million dollars as well as one hundred twenty-nine pickle jars in which Mack preserved his excreta, in a different spiteful combination. Todd eventually wins the money for Harrison and Jane by his discovery that the widow had misapplied, on her Zinnia beds, the less desirable part of the bequest. The second is Todd's reencounter with Betty June in a Baltimore brothel seven years after he laughed at her: she resourcefully tries to dismember him with a broken bottle. The third is Todd's courtship by the richest man in Cambridge, Col. Morton of Morton's Marvellous Tomatoes, which turns into another sort of courtship by the Colonel's lady.

But not all extra stories are so comic; some in fact are serious and horrid. The five times Todd felt strong emotion illustrate both extremes: his mirth when he made love for the first time to Betty June Gunter; his fear in the First World War, his frustration when he could not understand why his father had hanged himself, his surprise when Jane seduced him, and his despair when he could no longer be cynical about his heart condition. The list is a fair sample of how different sorts of incident are juxtaposed in *The Floating Opera*.

Barth arranges the plot of *The Floating Opera* to reflect two conclusions Todd has drawn from his *Inquiry* that "to understand any one thing entirely, no matter how minute, requires the understanding of every other thing in the world" (Barth 6) and that no bridge can be made between cause and effect we can only narrow the deep chasm separating them. As Hume points out, "causation is never more than an inference; and any inference involves at some point the leap from what we can to what we can't see" (Barth 214). The Traditional, Aristotlean plot, with its beginning, with its middle, and end necessarily implies a causality among events. To adopt such a plot, therefore, would be inconsistent with Todd's conclusion. Barth prefers, instead, simply to place before the reader the important events of Todd's life and to allow him to sense for himself how they impinge upon one another. Besides allowing the author to include a wide variety of incidents and thus demonstrate how casually unrelated incidents may take place their meaning from one another, this technique also permits Barth to espouse essentially nihilistic themes while maintaining a comic environment. This comic environment, in fact, alters the nature of nihilism. Since the nihilistic sentiments acquire a certain comic vitality from their placement besides the humorous events, this vitality, in fact, becomes Barth's answer to the nihilistic situation. In short, all these demonstrate that *The Floating Opera* can be called a "nihilistic comedy".

To conclude, in the foregoing paragraphs the present study has demonstrated ample evidence to justify that there are comic nihilistic patterns of thought in John Barth's novel *The Floating Opera*. It has explored how Barth establishes his affinity with the nihilistic tradition in the novel. The darkness of the novel increases due to the dominance of death and death-wish. And the novel is an account of Todd's decision to kill himself and the reversal of the decision. Moreover, this study has also explored that much of the events depicted in the novel are humorous. *The Floating Opera* is supremely comic novel because of its brilliant scenes of humour and laughter. However, deep below this laughter lies the grim reality of the closeness of death and the meaningless of life. There is the comic treatment of death. The nihilism revealed in the novel is thus blended with comedy. The paper has highlighted how the protagonist and the narrator of the novel, Todd Andrews arrives at a distinctively postmodernist nihilism by passing through three preliminary stages in life – those of the rake,

the saint and the cynic. In the novel Todd Andrews convinces himself that nothing has intrinsic value including life, hence that suicide is the only logically valid act. But when he fails to kill himself, he rethinks his notions and finally decides that if there is no reason to stay alive, there is no reason to commit suicide either. He then realises that since nothing has intrinsic worth, since a thing's worth is always given to it from outside, the only values that have any validity are relative ones. This is what Todd Andrews at last believes. At this point of discussion, it may be highly relevant to raise the question why Barth has so brilliantly made use of comic nihilistic patterns of thought in *The Floating Opera*. Here it is worth mentioning that the twentieth century man's desperate condition and his despondency when he faces odds, the helplessness felt by man in the face of hostile circumstances, and the moral and physical inertia to which man is pushed – all these are the main factors that made Barth present *The Floating Opera* as nihilistic comedy.

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