



“Washing” and “Waiting”: The Allegory of Post-Industrial Labor and the Crisis of Subjectivity in Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*

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Abstract: Donald Barthelme’s postmodern novel *Snow White* reimagines and deconstructs the archetypal fairy tale of the same name, using its familiar narrative framework as a lens to diagnose the pervasive spiritual malaise afflicting post-war American society. This essay argues that the novel mobilizes two recurring core images — “washing buildings” and “hopeless waiting” — to construct a layered and powerful allegory that encapsulates the twin predicaments of labor alienation and existential emptiness in the post-industrial age. By dissecting three interconnected dimensions — the inherent meaninglessness of repetitive work processes, the paralysis of individual subjective action, and the self-perpetuating vicious cycle that binds these two phenomena — the paper reveals how, within a consumer-dominated social landscape where traditional productive value has dissolved and grand ideological narratives have collapsed, labor has devolved from a purposeful, identity-forging activity into a hollow ritual performance. This performative labor serves no higher end than maintaining the superficial operation of a dehumanized system, while trapping individuals in a state of passive, disoriented existence stripped of historical agency and existential purpose. Through his signature literary techniques — fragmented narrative structures, playful subversion of conventional plotlines, and incisive dark humor that juxtaposes absurdity with despair — Barthelme does more than merely diagnose the spiritual crisis of the postmodern subject; he delivers a searing literary critique of the capitalist cultural logic that underpins and perpetuates this crisis, forcing readers to confront the dehumanizing costs of a society that prioritizes systemic stability over individual flourishing.

Keywords: Donald Barthelme; *Snow White*; Marxist criticism; labor; alienation

1. Introduction

Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White* (1967) is widely recognized as a landmark of American postmodern fiction. It is not a simple retelling of the Grimm tale but a bizarre dissection that places “*Snow White*” and “the seven dwarfs” within a mid-century American landscape saturated with consumerist signs, existential anxiety, and cultural debris. While prior scholarship has often focused on its metafictional qualities, linguistic play, or parody of mass culture, beneath its seemingly casual collage of narrative lies a keen and pessimistic diagnosis of contemporary work ethics and the human condition. In the novel, “washing buildings” and “waiting” are not incidental details but form a potent metaphorical structure that points to the core dilemma of human activity in post-industrial society. This essay will employ the Marxist theory of alienated labor, alongside existentialist philosophy’s discussion of the “absurd” and “waiting,” and an examination of post-industrial social characteristics, to analyze how *Snow White* uses these two central images to allegorically present the death of labor’s meaning and a profound crisis of subjectivity. Thus, the novel transcends formal experimentation to become a profound literary testimony of life in late capitalism.

Karl Marx’s theory of labor alienation, first systematically elaborated in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, provides a critical framework for understanding the systemic estrangement of workers under capitalism. Central to Marx’s analysis is the premise that when labor is commodified into “labor power” and sold to the owners of the means of production, workers experience a multi-dimensional separation from their own existence. This alienation manifests first as a loss of ownership and control over the products of their labor, which confront workers as an independent, dominating force that enriches the capitalist while impoverishing the laborer. Furthermore, the very act of labor becomes external and coercive — a repetitive, forced activity stripped of creativity and reduced to a mere means of survival, thereby negating work as a sphere of self-realization. On a deeper level, this condition alienates individuals from their “species-being”[1], Marx’s term for the human essence defined by “free, conscious activity.”[1] Under capitalist production, this potential is stifled, and labor transforms from a fulfilling expression of human capacity into a dehumanizing burden. Finally, alienation extends to social relations, which are reconfigured into instrumental, competitive market exchanges, fostering isolation and reinforcing class antagonism between workers and capitalists. Collectively, these dimensions of alienation strip workers of autonomy and historical agency, effectively reducing them to functional components within the machinery of capital accumulation. For

Marx, the positive transcendence of this condition — and of the private property that underpins it — constitutes the core of the communist project, envisioned as the basis for the free and all-round development of the individual.

Marx's theory of labor alienation provides a compelling lens for analyzing Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*. The novel's central image of the dwarfs engaged in the endless, purposeless task of "washing buildings" directly mirrors Marx's conception of alienated labor. Their work is stripped of creativity, ownership, and fulfillment, reducing it to a hollow ritual performed for its own sake. This reflects not only alienation from the product and process of labor but also from their essential human potential — what Marx termed "species-being." Furthermore, the characters' fragmented relationships and emotional isolation echo Marx's dimension of alienation from other humans. Barthelme transposes this critique into a post-industrial consumer society, showing how alienation persists when labor becomes symbolic and service-oriented. Thus, Marx's framework helps uncover the novel's deeper critique of how late capitalism empties work of meaning and traps individuals in passive, disembodied existence.

2. The Meaningless Cycle: "Washing" as the Ultimate Alienation of Labor

In classic Marxist terms, the alienation of labor manifests in the worker's separation from the product of labor, the labor process, their species-being, and from other people. Barthelme's portrayal of the occupation of "washing buildings" pushes this alienation to a post-industrial extreme, becoming a symbol of empty, cyclical, and utterly de-skilled labor.

First, "washing" is an activity that creates no substantive new value. The dwarfs' businesses — washing buildings and manufacturing Chinese baby food — belong essentially to the maintenance and service industries. Washing is particularly symbolic: it does not build or produce; it merely removes dirt to maintain a building's superficial appearance. The only "product" of this labor is the false, continued smooth functioning of the urban landscape; it adds no intrinsic value. As the dwarfs themselves dimly perceive: "Perhaps we should not be sitting here tending the vats and washing the buildings... Perhaps we should be doing something else entirely, with our lives. God knows what" [2]. This instinctive questioning of their work's meaning reveals that labor has become completely disconnected from any creative essence.

Second, the labor process is thoroughly ritualized and routinized. The novel describes washing scenes repeatedly, not to depict the work's specifics but to convey its absurd atmosphere. For instance, the dwarfs stand on high, swaying wooden platforms with "Tiparillos in our faces and heavy jangling belts around our waists," drinking beer for "a second breakfast" [2]. The tools of work, such as buckets and squeegees, mix with items of leisure — beer; the boundary between work and break blurs. Labor itself becomes an empty ritual, a chunk of time that must be filled. Their division of labor, procedures, and vague identification with their "professional identity" reduce work to a ritual for sustaining livelihood and self-labeling. This ritualized labor has been emptied of internal rhythm and meaning, leaving only external, mechanical repetition.

Furthermore, unlike the alienation of "manufacturing" goods in the industrial era, "washing" represents a more profound form of alienation in the post-industrial age. It signifies not only the worker's estrangement from the final product (since "cleanliness" itself is not a tangible, ownable product) but, more crucially, their estrangement from any potential creative meaning or skilled realization inherent in the labor process itself. Washing requires no complex skill; it is a simple, easily replaceable operation. The dwarfs show no passion or identification with their work; they simply do "what we do without thinking" [2]. This "de-skilling" of labor prevents the worker from deriving any sense of accomplishment or self-affirmation from the job. Work becomes purely an exhausting expenditure to obtain the means of survival. Henry complains after a day's work: "when one has been bending over a hot vat all day, one doesn't want to come home and hear a lot of hump..." [2]. Work no longer shapes the self; it consumes the self. This is the brutal spiritual manifestation of alienated labor.

3. Suspended Existence: "Waiting" as the Paralysis of Subjectivity

Juxtaposed with the active behavior of "washing" is the pervasive state of "waiting" in the novel. The "waiting" in Barthelme's text is far from the hopeful "anticipation" of classical narratives; it is an existential suspension of the postmodern subject after the collapse of meaning systems. This state is rooted in the thoroughly deconstructed narrative structure of the novel. As Li Huihong points out, Barthelme dissolves the linear plot and causal logic of the traditional fairy tale through "collage and fragmentation," depriving the characters of a complete narrative framework for action [3]. What *Snow White* performs is precisely an emptied-out template of a traditional narrative — "waiting for the prince." However, in a world whose tone is precisely the "absence of the hero" and "anti-fairy tale nature" [3], as Bai states that, "the object of her wait, the prince, and the meaning of the action — being saved — are fundamentally void" [4]. Thus, her "waiting" becomes a form of "bad faith," a habitual attachment of the subject to hollow signifiers (like the "princess" identity) in the face of a disintegrated narrative structure, an attempt to evade "the nothingness of present responsibilities".

Simultaneously, the absurdity of this "waiting" is magnified and mocked through the black humorous play of language.

Yang Shan's analysis indicates that Barthelme uses techniques like "fragmentation, collage, and wordplay" to "expose the cruel social reality of America" and the absurdity of the world [5]. The passage where *Snow White* mechanically lists princes' names in her mind is a typical case of "meaningless accumulation of fragments"[3]. This listing does not express genuine desire; instead, its repetitiveness and arbitrariness produce a strong ironic effect. Like the "puzzling text" collage Yang discusses, its purpose is to "break traditional reading methods and subvert conventional thinking patterns" [5]. The playfulness of language deconstructs the solemnity of "waiting," exposing its inherent emptiness and ridiculousness.

Ultimately, "waiting" and its seemingly opposite counterpart — "action" (like the dwarfs "washing buildings") — constitute two sides of the same postmodern dilemma. From a deconstructionist perspective, all traditional modes of action (heroic rescue, meaningful work) have lost efficacy. Whether it is *Snow White*'s passive waiting, the dwarfs' repetitive, alienated labor, or Paul's escapist retreat to a monastery, they are all different symptoms of the subject's inability to find a fulcrum for effective action in the postmodern context of "uncertainty"[3]. Together, they depict a Camusian picture of the "absurd": characters are thrown into a world that has lost its ultimate frame of reference, and any attempt to impose a coherent narrative and purpose on life appears futile and "absurd." By juxtaposing these states, Barthelme profoundly reveals the widespread spiritual dilemma of the postmodern individual — paralysis of agency and the void of meaning — following the collapse of cultural values.

4. The Synthesis of the Allegory: The Vicious Cycle of Washing and Waiting

In *Snow White*, "washing" and "waiting" are not isolated phenomena but form a vicious cycle of mutual cause and effect, jointly outlining a closed system of post-industrial existence.

On the one hand, "washing", the archetypal dwarfs' cottage labor is transformed into a metaphor for postmodern work. Their primary activities — washing buildings and manufacturing baby food — are stripped of any craft, purpose, or connection to human needs. This is not the purposeful toil of folklore but "empty, energy-draining work that exhausts the mental energy characters might use to construct meaning" [2]. As Yang Xueying's dissertation argues, Barthelme's postmodern tales dismantle traditional narratives to expose "the absurdity and irrationality of the world and the pain and meaninglessness of life" through innovative stylistic strategies [6]. The "washing" embodies this absurdity. It is a pure, repetitive signifier of labor divorced from a valuable signified, mirroring the linguistic breakdown Barthelme often employs.

This meaningless labor directly produces the existential condition of "waiting." *Snow White*, reduced to the parodic role of a "horsewife" — a deliberate misspelling of "housewife", performs domestic duties only to be left in a state of melancholic contemplation [2]. Her work concludes not in satisfaction or progress but in the passive anticipation of a prince — a cliché from a narrative schema she intuitively relies upon but which the novel renders absurd and inaccessible. The dissertation highlights that Barthelme uses familiar fairy tales to attract readers, only to "change the solidified traditional cognition of readers through the experience of deconstruction and reconstruction"[6]. Here, the "Prince Charming" trope is deconstructed into an empty object of waiting, highlighting how the exhaustion from hollow labor cripples the agency required to seek authentic change, leaving only a "fantastical waiting")[6].

On the other hand, "waiting" in the novel is not an active or hopeful pause but a state of spiritual paralysis and subjective "involution." It signifies the depletion of the inner resources needed for critique or imagination. The dwarfs exemplify this. They are aware of the emptiness of their lives — lamenting "the increased complexity of life" — but their reflexive response is not rebellion but deeper entrenchment in their routines [2]. Their occasional reflections lead to nihilism, as seen in Bill, who retreats from his desire to "make a powerful statement" into cynicism, "listening to what people say, and thinking what pamby it is" [2].

This paralysis is the psychological bedrock that sustains the alienating system. As the analysis states, "The paralysis of subjectivity becomes the psychological foundation that maintains the existing, irrational system" [2]. The characters' inability to envision or enact an alternative future — a consequence of their existential "waiting" — ensures the perpetual continuation of the "washing" cycle. They become compliant cogs, not because the system is overtly coercive, but because their capacity for resistance has been eroded from within. This aligns with the dissertation's observation that Barthelme's work reflects on "postmodern social problems," including the way systems colonize individual consciousness [6].

The "washing-waiting" dynamic is a closed, self-perpetuating loop. Meaningless labor produces spiritual emptiness, which in turn disables the critical subjectivity required to transform the conditions of that labor. *Snow White* and the dwarfs are "not exceptions but common products of this postmodern work-life system" [2]. Their personal crises are microcosms of a broader social crisis in "both material production and spiritual reproduction."

Barthelme externalizes the gaze of this system through the enigmatic, ever-present "President," who observes and "worries" about the characters [2]. This figure can be interpreted as the personification of the system's cold, managerial

logic — a power that monitors but does not intervene, ensuring the cycle’s continuity. The novel thus performs the critical function Yang ascribes to Barthelme’s postmodern reconstructions: it uses the dismantled fragments of a familiar story to “reconstruct postmodern fairy tales that can reflect the social reality,” forcing a confrontation with the “absurd and irrational” truths of contemporary existence [6].

In conclusion, the “washing-waiting” cycle in *Snow White* is a profound literary articulation of postmodern alienation. Through deconstructing the fairy tale’s symbolic economy, Barthelme maps how irrational work structures (“washing”) corrode the inner life, leading to passive existence (“waiting”), which then fortifies the very system that caused the corrosion. This vicious cycle effectively traps the individual, rendering them a “symptom” of a societal malady, and stands as a core example of how Barthelme’s “postmodern fairy-tale reconstruction” serves as a vehicle for incisive social and existential critique.

5. Beyond Allegory: Self-Reflexivity and Critical Dimensions of the Text

Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*, the novel’s depth emerges not merely from its portrayal of a cultural and existential impasse — embodied in the cyclical rituals of “washing and waiting” — but also from its conscious deployment of postmodern narrative techniques that implicate the text itself in exposing and critiquing this very condition. This dual engagement — thematic and formal — aligns closely with the observations made in “The Fragmented Sexual Identity in Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*,” which examines how *Snow White*’s unresolved sexual relationships mirror a broader crisis of meaning and identity in a consumer-driven, media-saturated society.

First, the novel is saturated with “blague,” lists, academic jargon, and advertising clichés that reflect the hollow, repetitive routines of the characters. This linguistic saturation parallels what the thesis describes as *Snow White*’s “fragmented sexual identity” — a state in which desire is endlessly circulated but never satisfied. The language of the novel, much like *Snow White*’s sexual experiences, becomes “empty, interchangeable, and consumable signs” [7]. This reification of language echoes the reification of labor; both processes drain meaning from human activity. Larry McCaffery’s observation that Barthelme’s prose is “created out of a hodge-podge of styles, modulating rapidly between specific literary parodies, current slang, academic cliché, and advertising jargon” [8] underscores how the text’s fragmented style performs the very cultural fragmentation it depicts. Dan’s extended monologue on linguistic “stuffing” and “trash” [2] exemplifies this: his speech enacts the inflationary logic of a culture where words, like desires, are accumulated but never truly communicate genuine experience.

Second, the famous “questionnaire” [2] disrupts the narrative flow and directly interrogates the reader, forcing a confrontation with one’s own expectations and consumption habits. This metafictional strategy can be read in light of the thesis’s claim that *Snow White*’s “sexual dissatisfaction” leads her to constant, unfulfilling engagements [7]. The questionnaire — with questions like “Do you like the story so far?” and “Would you like more emotion or less emotion?” — challenges the reader’s passive “waiting” for narrative gratification, much as *Snow White* passively waits for a prince who never arrives. As Linda Hutcheon argues, postmodern parody “offers a pluralist vision of the world through multiple voices” and “rejects any authoritarian and unified vision of reality” [9]. The questionnaire embodies this rejection of authoritative meaning, inviting — or compelling — the reader to become an active, critical participant rather than a passive consumer of pre-packaged narratives.

Finally, the novel’s open ending — where *Snow White* does not unite with the prince, Bill is executed, Hogo moves in, and “the heroes depart in search of a new principle” [2] — refuses the fairy-tale closure that would neatly resolve the cycle of “washing and waiting.” This formal openness corresponds to the thesis’s conclusion that *Snow White*’s “fragmented sexual identity” remains unresolved, leaving her in a state of “confusion, frustration, and identity crisis” [7]. The ironic gesture of “searching for a new principle” offers no concrete solution but suggests that the first step toward change is to recognize and name the predicament. As Jeffrey T. Nealon observes, the reader of *Snow White* takes away not a singular moral or plot, but “a revelation: the revelation that the ironic perspective is the one best suited to the contemporary situation” [10]. This ironic perspective is precisely what the novel cultivates through its disjointed structure, its parody of clichés, and its refusal of closure.

Thus, through its accumulation of depleted discourse, its metafictional interruptions, and its resistant openness, *Snow White* does not merely describe a world of reified routines and vacant expectations; it performs a critique of that world by making the reader experience the very linguistic and narrative structures that sustain it. The novel’s formal strategies — its collage of discourses, its self-reflexive questionnaires, its open ending — are not just stylistic experiments but integral to its critique of a culture in which both language and desire have become commodified, fragmented, and endlessly deferred.

6. Conclusion

Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* uses the two potent metaphors of "washing" and "waiting" to successfully translate socio-philosophical diagnoses of the post-industrial era into a universally resonant literary allegory. "Washing buildings" symbolizes how labor in late capitalist society is stripped of creativity and purpose, reduced to an empty ritual maintaining the system's operation. "Waiting" reveals how, after the failure of grand narratives, individuals fall into a vacuum of meaning, lose their capacity for action, and become passive spectators hoping for salvation. The vicious cycle they form paints an absurd portrait of postmodern human existence.

Written in the 1960s, the novel's critical prescience feels increasingly acute today. When we confront contemporary issues like "lying flat," "involution," "professional burnout," or "bullshit jobs", the world of *Snow White* seems a precise prophecy. With literature's unique sensitivity, Barthelme captured and named one of our era's most fundamental perplexities: when work loses its sanctity, when waiting becomes the norm, when meaning is obscured by consumption and signs, where are the coordinates for being human? The value of *Snow White* lies not only in its avant-garde narrative form but also in its enduring potency as an instrument of cultural critique, continually piercing the veil of consumer society to remind us of the subjectivity and life possibilities being eroded by alienated labor and suspended existence. It is thus not merely a postmodern literary classic but an enduring cautionary allegory about modern life itself.

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