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It’s All Metafictional

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Ceci n'est pas une pipe.
# Table of Contents

*Ceci n’est pas une Pipe* by René Magritte ................................................................. i

**Part 1: *Ceci n’est pas une Pipe*: An Examination of Metafiction**

- Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1
- Self-Consciousness .......................................................................................................... 4
- Frames, Intertextuality, and the Retelling of an Old Tale ............................................. 13
- The Reader-Writer Relationship ..................................................................................... 21
- Conclusion: What a Long Strange Trip It’s Been ......................................................... 28
- Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 30

**Part 2: Absodiculous: Five Metafictional Short Stories**

- Author’s Note .................................................................................................................. 33
- “Everyperson” .................................................................................................................. 34
- “Two Write a Two-Page Story” ...................................................................................... 39
- “An Occurrence in the Life of Dr. William Tade, Receptionist; D.D.S.” ......................... 41
- “Dialogue” ....................................................................................................................... 49
- “Metafictional Heroes” ................................................................................................... 53

**Part 3: What Does It All Mean?**

- An Essay Exploring the Metafiction Techniques In “Absodiculous” ......................... 64
Ceci n’est pas une Pipe:
An Examination of Metafiction
In 1929 the Belgian artist René Magritte painted a pipe. The pipe was painted in the middle of the canvas, accompanied only by the inscription, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, which translates into English “This is not a pipe.” The question that arises out of Magritte’s painting is “why is the picture not a pipe?” Though it looks like a pipe, the reason it is not a pipe is because it is a picture of a pipe. Magritte’s surrealist painting is expressing the difference between reality and perception, between what is real and what is a representation.

Magritte rejected the notion of being called a painter. Michel Foucault writes in his book on Magritte’s painting, also titled *Ceci n’est pas une Pipe*, that Magritte “preferred to be considered a thinker who communicated by means of paint,” and he explored the “relationship between words and things” as the theme of his paintings (2-3). While other artists adhered to the traditional schools of Western thought that focused on the pre-Saussurian concept that language could not be separated from objects, Magritte began to deconstruct the concept with paintings such as *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. Other artists that focused on the Western school of thought that words represent objects concerned themselves with realist depictions. But Magritte rejected the idea of the mimetic theory of language and that a pipe had to be a pipe when in fact it was not a pipe. The object painted, the symbol, is not a word or a thing, but rather it is a picture.

Magritte’s painting is not only art, but it is an analysis his art. It is an analysis of symbols and their meaning, as well as an illustration of words and meaning. Foucault writes that “Letters must remain points, sentences lines, paragraphs surfaces or masses
[...] The text must say nothing to this gazing subject who is a viewer, not a reader. As soon as he begins to read, in fact, shape dissipates" (Foucault 24). Foucault’s analysis of Magritte’s work notes how Magritte’s painting and its meaning are similar to the distortion of words and their meaning. Foucault further ties language and images together when he writes, “Magritte does everything necessary to re-construct (either by the permanence of a work of art or else by the truth of an object lesson) the space common to language and the image” (29). In re-constructing the space between language and images, Magritte is defining the meaning of that image. He is trying to give an image a definition through language. Like Magritte’s painting, metafiction is deconstructive in its approach to defining the meaning and the components of fiction.

In 1960 William Gass coined the term “metafiction” as a way to describe the up-and-coming fictions that were about fiction. However, Gass’s definition is rather vague and unsatisfactory. In the 1970s, Mark Currie writes that the definition of metafiction “was fiction with self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-knowledge, [and] ironic self-distance” (1). But this definition, too, is not sufficient. In fact, there is not one exact description of metafiction that can define the many varieties of metafiction. So rather than define metafiction, it would be better to discuss what determines a story to be metafictional and what constitutes the main tenets of metafiction.

Patricia Waugh writes, “Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact [sic] in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). Waugh’s definition is the closest to Foucault’s explanation of Magritte’s work, particularly when she says that metafiction “draws attention to its status as an artefact,” or in other words,
when metafiction is conscious of its fictionality, just as Magritte is conscious of his work being art. Though Magritte's painting questions the relationship between the image of the pipe and the inscription below it, metafiction questions the relationship between fiction and reality through the words of the metafictional novel. Also, just as Magritte's painting is a critique of symbols and words, as well as a painting, metafiction attempts to "simultaneously create a fiction and make a statement about the creation of fiction" (Waugh 6).

Waugh writes that metafiction is a celebration of the creative imagination. In this celebration the writer explores the limits of fiction and in some cases, breaks the limits, focusing on the "theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction" (2). As already mentioned, creating fiction and critiquing fiction, especially the traditional classification of fiction that focuses on concepts of plot, character development, conflict, and resolution, are the functions of metafiction. Some of the aspects of metafiction that are used as a creating tool and a critique tool are self-conscious language, intertextuality and framed stories, and explicit development of a reader-writer relationship. Though not every metafictional story utilizes all these tenets, they are still prominent characteristics of metafiction. John Barth's The Floating Opera and Chimera, and Italo Calvino's If on a Winter's Night a Traveler and Invisible Cities illustrate the usefulness of these three metafictional features and how the two different authors apply each feature to not only write their story, but to analyze their story also.
Self-Conscious Language

Magritte’s inscription under his painting is a reflection. It is a reflection that tells the reader that the pipe the viewer is looking is only a picture of pipe. Magritte’s interjection is an example of self-consciousness. His awareness that what he is doing is simply painting a picture of a pipe allows him to write the inscription. The self-consciousness Magritte uses to analyze his painting is the same self-consciousness used in metafiction.

According to Patricia Waugh, “Metafiction is a mode of writing within a broader cultural movement often referred to as post-modernism” (21). John Barth writes in his essay, “The Literature of Replenishment,” that the term post-modernism is “awkward and faintly epigonic, suggestive less of a vigorous or even interesting new direction in the old art of storytelling than of something anticlimactic, feebly following a very hard act to follow” (24). While Barth suggests that the post-modernists’ attempts to create a “new direction in the old art of storytelling” face a difficult challenge by having to compete with the traditional novels that have withstood time, metafiction, nevertheless, re-institutes the eighteenth century use of self-consciousness, and rejects the traditional belief that a writer must be disconnected with his or her work. T.S. Eliot wrote in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (2398). While many writers adhere to Eliot’s belief that an artist’s work must be separate from his or her personality, self-consciousness allows metafiction to reject the traditional ideas of a story and explore its own fictionality. Therefore making it impossible to separate the writer from the work.
because self-consciousness will not allow an artist to be impersonal with his or her work. In other words, a writer of metafiction is utilizing self-consciousness as a way to critique his or her act of writing fiction, while writing fiction.

In his book *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*, Robert Alter writes that some critics believe that “the novel today is in a grave state of decay, often draw[ing] evidence from the current popularity of self-conscious fiction, which they tend to see as a dwarfed offspring of the modernist giants” (224-5). However, Alter further writes that such a belief is foolish because the genius of metafiction is in the ability to “systematically flaunt its own condition of artifice,” unlike the modernist self-consciousness (Waugh x). This ability to “flaunt” comes from metafiction’s defining characteristic as a self-conscious genre. Self-consciousness allows metafiction to be a fiction that criticizes fiction, or a text that sees the “writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text” (Waugh 22).

So what is it that separates the discourse of a self-conscious novel from the discourse of traditional stories? The answer is the mimetic theory of language, which is the concept that a word in a text refers to an object in the real world. This is the realist way to constructing a novel—focusing on believable characters, realistic problems, and resolutions—while a writer of metafiction respects the arbitrary nature of language or Saussurian linguistics. The arbitrary nature of language, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, is the belief that a word does not equal an object, but rather a word is just a symbol that only has meaning if a person can interpret that symbol (81).

Because of the arbitrary nature of language, a self-conscious, self-reflexive metafictional novel develops into a self-criticism of language and fiction.
Marilyn Edelstein defines self-consciousness in a novel when she writes, “‘Self-consciousness’ can mean consciousness of a Self, or an ‘I,’ of a core unity, or it can refer to the consciousness of itself by an entity (a person, a novel)” (99). She goes on to say, “If a text flaunts its own artificiality, if its even provisional reality is constantly being undercut, if its author’s presence in and not just behind the text is constantly being emphasized, it is commonly called a ‘self-conscious’ text” (99). Self-consciousness allows a text to flaunt its artificiality, and to refer back to _Ceci n’est pas une pipe_, Magritte, just as Edelstein suggests, has written himself into his painting when he wrote the inscription “This is not a pipe.” He has written himself into the painting because his inscription becomes a self-conscious critique of his painting. No one but Magritte could have written the inscription and have the painting’s implied meaning be the same meaning as Magritte’s is trying to relate to the viewer. Therefore, since Magritte wrote himself into the painting and formulated a critique of his own work, he has given his art self-consciousness through a post-modern linguistical analysis. However, Magritte’s painting is just one form of self-conscious art.

The basic composition and construction of a piece of metafiction that analyzes fiction are similar to the constructions of a piece of traditional fiction that mimics reality. Waugh agrees with this analysis, writing, “for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one’s ‘reality’” (24). In Italo Calvino’s _If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler_, the construction of a reader’s reality is the analysis of how a novel is composed through self-conscious language. The use of self-conscious language allows for other aspects of metafiction to develop, such as the reader-writer relationship and framed stories within
stories, which separate metafiction from traditional fictions. The distinction between traditional fiction and metafiction is defined by metafiction’s extreme use of self-conscious language, and in Calvino’s novel, as well as Barth’s *The Floating Opera*, the use of self-conscious language focuses on the novel’s fictionality.

Edelstein’s definition that a self-conscious novel refers to the existence of a writer who is a part of the novel is fitting to Calvino’s work, since his story focuses around the reader, or at least a “reader character” who becomes a means to examine the fictionality of the novel. The novel opens with the sentences, “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade” (3). While the opening lines, and lines to come, are concerned with the “you” character or reader, this use of language is self-conscious because it critiques the concept that every book has a reader, a particular individual. Rather than ignore the notion of a reader being present, as some traditional novels do by beginning in *in medias res* or by having a narrator who simply speaks without identifying the reader continually, Calvino addresses the issue that the reader cannot be disregarded since he or she plays a critical role in the completion of the writer-reader-novel relationship, in which the writer speaks to the reader through the novel.

At the end of the first chapter, Calvino continues to use self-conscious language to analyze fiction:

So here you are now, ready to attack the first lines of the first page. You prepare to recognize the unmistakable tone of the author. No. You don’t recognize it all. But now that you think about it, who ever said this author had an unmistakable
On the contrary, he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. (9)

In these lines, Calvino has introduced himself as the narrator and, according to Edelstein, the passage is a prime example of self-consciousness. Also, while mentioning the author, Calvino is critiquing the fictional notion that a particular writer has a particular voice or “tone” when he or she writes. While traditional writers and would argue that a writer needs to have a voice that does not reflect the writer’s own emotions or opinions, metafictionalists and post-modernists believe that it is impossible to eliminate a personal voice in a story. However, Calvino further writes, “And in these very changes you recognize him as himself” (9). Though it seems that Calvino contradicts himself, he uses self-consciousness to critique how an author may think that he or she can write with an arbitrary or different voice that is not his or her own, yet it is impossible. Unlike Eliot, who insists that accounts of an author’s life and experiences should never be a part his or her art, Calvino states that a person cannot remove himself or herself from his or her art, even if it is a matter of using an arbitrary voice, because an author will always be a part his or her work. Though a writer may change voices, as Calvino writes, the author’s voice still remains his voice despite how many times he or she changes his or her voice.

Calvino’s entire novel continues to focus on analyzing fiction as the author takes the reader through the story, which consists of the beginnings of other novels that have mistakenly been printed in a counterfeit novel. Through his use of self-conscious language in the multiple stories that consists of only a beginning, Calvino supporting the idea that all novels come from one larger, over-arching novel, and that there is no such thing as a completely original novel that does not use other novels for ideas or
construction of concepts. Calvino illustrates this point with titles such as “A network of lines that enlace” and “A network of lines that intersect.” By giving the stories titles that allude to the connectiveness that exists between all stories, Calvino reaffirms that all stories are related to one another or that there is intertextuality to every story. Calvino is also stating that though a novel may be similar to, or related to another novel, there is still a level of originality that is based on the art of storytelling. By utilizing his construction of multiple beginnings, Calvino proves that an original story can still be told by taking stories that seem similar and retelling them in a new way through the use of self-conscious language that maintains a knowledge of its fictionality.

Though Calvino uses self-conscious language establish many different aspects of fiction, he is, of course, not the only post-modern author who uses self-conscious language. John Barth is another author of metafiction who has written a number of novels. In his first novel, *The Floating Opera*, Barth uses self-conscious language to make aspects of fiction obvious. Though Barth and Calvino both use self-consciousness in their novels, Barth uses a different story structure that is more like a traditional novel with a post-modern language.

In the beginning of *The Floating Opera*, Barth writes:

the hardest thing about the task at hand—viz., the explanation of a day in 1937 when I changed my mind—is getting into it. I’ve never tried my hand at this sort of thing before, but I know enough about myself to realize that once the ice is broken and the ink is flowing, the pages will follow all too easily, for I’m not naturally a reticent fellow, and the problem then will be to stick to the story, and finally shut myself up. (7)
In this passage, Barth uses self-conscious language to analyze the arbitrary nature of beginnings. By stating that the nature of a beginning can be an acknowledgement that a story has begun, since “the ink is flowing,” Barth is using self-conscious language to argue against the classical notion that a story should begin in *in medias res*. Waugh comments on the difference between the beginnings of a traditional novel and a metafictional novel, stating that it might seem that “metafiction has merely reduced the complex stylistic maneuvers of modernism to a set of crude statements about the relation of literary fictions” (26). However, Barth is not degrading the stylistic approach of traditional fiction; he is rather saying a story does not have to begin in one particular way. In fact, Barth shows that a story can begin simply by using self-conscious language and pointing out the beginning is the beginning because the writing has started.

Through self-conscious language, Barth also exploits certain aspects of the traditional novel that would not be mentioned as blatantly or as openly as in a metafictional novel. For example, when Todd Andrews, the story’s protagonist, decides that his affair with Jane Mack must end, he writes all the possible outcomes that will result from him ending the affair. This is much different from traditional stories because in a traditional story how often does the main character say—not allude to but actually say—what the outcome of an event might be? Though there are some traditional novels that have predictable endings, the writer never lets the ending be known ahead of time. However, even this proverbial unveiling at the end is not strictly adhered to in a metafictional story. Self-conscious language compels Barth to break the traditional rules and write what the outcomes of an event might be. Also, the fact that Todd’s outcomes are in an outline shows a self-consciousness of the story, since Barth is basically mapping
out a sequence of events that only sparks other events, such as a proposed “desire for adventure,” to Jane’s current reaction to the end of the affair, which Barth describes as “Moodiness at wife’s enjoyment of affair, and refusal to hear of canceling it” (45).

However, Barth continues with the outline, having his self-conscious character write down all the possible endings as to what will happen between Todd and the Macks, going so far as to rank them as possible, quite possible, and doubtful endings.

Though Todd’s outline is a good example of self-consciousness in a character, and self-consciousness of a story’s conventions, another aspect of self-conscious language is in the use of the reader-writer relationship. Every chapter of The Floating Opera concludes with Todd saying something directly to the reader. For example, at the end of chapter 17, Barth writes, “Literally, I repeat, she left nothing to be desired; since that last morning, the morning of the day at hand, when she last left my rented bed, I have desired nothing from women. She satisfied me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, reader, I shall sleep” (170). Todd addresses the reader directly on a much more continually connected lever, as opposed to the traditional approach in which the writer would just narrate with only little, if any, attention to the reader. By addressing the reader, Barth is acknowledging the reader-writer relationship and is using the narration as a form of dialogue, rather than simple commentary.

If metafiction were absent any genius or other impressive conventions of storytelling, at the very least, metafiction would have self-conscious language. Self-conscious language is necessary in order to ensure that a story is aware of its own fictionality. Self-consciousness also proves that an author is aware that he is crafting a story that is going to be read by an audience. Without self-conscious language, it would
be impossible to write a piece of fiction that is supposed to analyze fiction. This inability to comment on fiction is why novels such as Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* and Barth’s *The Floating Opera* are pristine examples of self-conscious novels. They both possess what Edelstein defines as a “flaunting of artificiality,” which allows other metafictional aspects such as framed storytelling and a reader-writer relationship to develop (99).
Frames, Intertextuality, and the Retelling of an Old Tale

In his essay on Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, Foucault defines the concept of two distinctly different realms of thought that a person approaching the painting has to consider. One realm consists of a viewer who looks at the work and interprets the meaning of the images. The other realm is that of a reader who reads the inscription below the painting and has to interpret the meaning of the words. These two worlds are separate, and yet they are both bound to the canvas as if the world of words and readers is inscribed in the world of images and viewers. While the relationship between the images and the words of Magritte’s work is important, the concept that one idea is framed inside another idea is a technique prominent in metafiction. Just as the picture of the pipe and the inscription are different realms, yet framed together, so are the stories within stories in metafiction.

In metafiction, the use of framed tales or stories within stories is unavoidable. By definition, a frame is a construction that can be used as a plan or a system, and metafiction, being aware of its own fictionality, is also aware of its constructiveness as a fictional tale. Therefore, since the frame is a necessity to any story, Waugh writes, “Modernism and post-modernism begin with the view that both the historical world and works of art are organized and perceived through such structures or ‘frames’”(28). She goes on to say that both modernism and post-modernism “recognize further that the distinction between ‘framed’ and ‘unframed’ cannot in the end be made”(28). The thought that nothing can be determined as “framed” or “unframed” and that everything is seen through a frame comes from the concept of an overarching, ever-expanding myth or
story that has given birth to all the stories ever written. This concept of a "monomythic" story comes from the ideas of an archetype in stories that every individual can identify. For example, Northrop Frye writes that there is a collective unconscious that all people (including every writer and reader) possess. From this collective unconscious we recall archetypal images that have a particular meaning or relevance, such as the hero. The fictional hero archetype usually has a miraculous birth, acquires a special weapon, kills a monster, and overcomes adversities (1453). These requirements of the hero archetype form fictional frames that fit inside the overall hero's story. The frames define a hero, and like archetypes, literature also has frames, or what Frye calls "patterns." These frames are used to tell a story, and in metafiction the frames are also used to criticize the art of fiction and explain what separates reality from fiction.

Waugh writes that the analysis of frames "is the analysis of the organization of experience. When applied to fiction it involves analysis of the formal conventional organization of novels" (30). In Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the organization of the novel is just one of the ways in which Calvino analyzes fiction. He begins the novel with Marco Polo just about to start telling Kublai Khan another story about the cities he has been to. Khan is skeptical of Polo's stories, but he desperately desires knowledge as to the status of his kingdom, particularly the parts of it he has never seen. From the very beginning, the reader has a stance in time. It is during the reign of Kublai Khan in Mongol China and Marco Polo has already made his journey east. In his essay, "*Invisible Cities,*" William Gass comments on Calvino's use of other texts, writing, "[*Invisible Cities*] borrows the shape of its contents from *The Travels of Marco Polo* and the material of its structure from Dante's *Inferno*" (37). This intertextuality makes a
transition from the reality of Marco Polo’s journey to the fiction of Calvino’s story, forming the base structure of Calvino’s new story and preparing the first frame from which more will develop.

Throughout the novel, Calvino constructs chapters filled with short depictions of cities Polo supposedly has traveled to in order to fulfill Khan’s request for knowledge of the land around his kingdom. Kathryn Hume writes that the cities are significant and original because,

In *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo creates his verbal cities to counter ignorance and disintegration. The ignorance is Kublai Khan’s; he wistfully hopes he may truly possess his empire by knowing it, and asks for these accounts. The disintegration is the empire’s. (72)

But Polo’s constructed cities are important outside the context of Polo and Khan, because the cities are a reflection of the difference between fiction and reality. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator writes, “Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions…” (5), and since these cities are each a new frame, the focus is centered on the use of frames as a convention of fiction, supporting Waugh’s claim that “Fiction is merely a different set of ‘frames,’ a different set of conventions and constructions” (100). Therefore, from an initial frame, set in history and the reality that Marco Polo did travel to China, fictional frames are spawned as an attempt to define the real world from the fictional world or suggest that fictional cities are metaphors for reality. An example is Khan’s ever-growing kingdom, which is a metaphor for the universe and its limitlessness. Like other conquerors, Khan wants to know of the limits of his land so he can have control of his
terroritory, believing that knowledge will ensure his control over his land. Unfortunately for Khan, Polo illustrates that like the universe, the limits of knowledge are endless, and all Polo has to do to prove this is to create a new city or tell a new frame of the tale.

Therefore, Calvino explores the difference between reality and fiction, illustrating that the difference between what is real and what is fictional is not easy to determine. Hume writes, “Invisible Cities, in sum, give us both material reality and fiction as a creative construction of data, brought into being in part by a desire for knowledge of reality” (73).

Though Polo’s stories are fictional, they are still real to him. For example, Polo says, “‘Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice’” (86). In other words, sometimes a fictional story is real and sometimes a real story is fictional. The reliability of the story is never certain and Khan’s knowledge about his kingdom is also uncertain because every story that Polo tells is from his perspective of what is real and what is fictional. It is difficult to determine if Polo is sure of the difference between reality and fiction himself, since every city he describes is framed in a contrast to his Venice: “To distinguish the other cities’ qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice” (86). Polo has to look to his memory of Venice in order to distinguish “other cities’ qualities,” but his memory of Venice is itself a story. So Polo relies on a frame as a true experience. Polo’s reality, based on his memory as a true story, is like the story called history, the story called geography, or the story called science that are accepted as truth, but are only frames in which another stories are told.

While Calvino illustrates the differences and similarities between fiction and reality, through the use of frames, Barth uses frames to show the ambiguity of beginnings and ends in stories. Through frames, Barth is pointing out that a story does not always
have to begin and end in a particular way because of a rule or regulation of storytelling. In fact, the use of frames can help to link one story to the next. Just as Calvino used city after city as connecting frames to build his story of Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, Barth uses frames to illustrate the flexibility of language and storytelling in his book *Chimera*.

Barth’s *Chimera* is a novel consisting of three novellas: “Dunyazadiad,” “Perseid,” and “Bellerphoniad,” and each novella has a framed structure with one story inside another that is inside another, forming a Chinese box structure. Barth’s novellas begin as a statement about the manner in which novels are written. Unlike *Invisible Cities*, the novellas do not begin with a historical frame, but rather a mythic reference. For example, “Dunyazadiad” is the first novella and it is based on the *1001 Nights* tale of Arabia. “Dunyazadiad” begins with a focus on Scheherazade: “‘At this point I interrupted my sister as usual to say, ‘You have a way with words, Scheherazade’” (3). However, by the time the reader starts the second chapter, it becomes apparent that the first chapter was a retelling of a story by Dunyazade: “‘That’s the end of your story?’ Dunyazade nodded” (38). By starting the novella as a story being told by one of the characters, Barth is using frames to show the many ways in which a story can begin. Of course, the beginning is an example of *in medias res*, but it is a variation of the classical storytelling technique, because it is past experience being recounted in a current situation, which explains the numerous quotation marks in the first chapter of the novella. Waugh comments on the flexibility of metafictional frames, writing, “Modernist texts begin by plunging in *in medias res* and end with the sense that nothing is finished, that life flows on. Metafictional novels often begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings […]” (29). Though the actual beginning of the story is in the second chapter,
and even that starts *in medias res*, the arbitrary experimental beginning is in the frames Barth uses. Unless the reader pays strict attention to the use of quotation marks, he or she would not know about the framework of the story till the second chapter.

Following “Dunyazadiad” is “Perseid,” the second novella of the novel. This story, like “Dunyazadiad” begins unconventionally because it starts with a very casual “Good evening.” spoken by Perseus, the Greek mythic hero who killed Medusa and saved Andromeda. Perseus is no longer the great hero of the past. In fact, he is now a man who is going through a midlife crisis and is living with a beautiful woman who worships him, literally, like a god. While living with this beautiful woman, Perseus sees framed pictures on the wall depicting the scenes of his life. The older Perseus gets, the bigger the picture. The increasing pictures are an analysis that all stories consist of frames within a larger overarching fictional story. Of course, this is not the end of the frames because throughout the whole time that Perseus is telling his story about the framed pictures and his life, there are little interjections that make no sense in the story. However, the interjections become clear at the end of the story when the reader discovers that Perseus and Medusa, who are now constellations, are telling the story. They are the basis of stories, since they are constellations, and they are also the storytellers. This illustrates that metafictional writers or storytellers are also analyzers of their stories.

Though “Perseid” consists of a number of frames critiquing the way a story is formed, the novella also uses frames to illustrate the difference between the realities of an average man’s life, from the fictional life of a mythic hero. Similar to Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Barth’s framed stories within each other, especially in “Perseid,” work as metaphors of reality and how instances in a person’s life all interlink to the overarching life. For
example, the framed pictures that Perseus talks about are hanging in a place that is a
"grand spiral like the triton-shell," which symbolizes the universe or the galaxies that
make up constellations (74).

The frames within the "Perseid" continue, however, into the next novella
"Bellerophoniad," where the Greek hero Bellerophon has just finished reading "Persied."
At this point in the novel, Barth continues to use frames to critique the manner in which a
story begins. This novella and its referral to "Perseid" at the beginning illustrates the idea
that no one story stands alone, but rather all stories come from one larger story rooted
inside the writer and the reader, the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Also, there
is a metaphorical link between Calvino’s cities that are only fragments of a larger city, or
stories of a larger story, and Barth’s "Perseid," which becomes the beginning of
"Bellerophoniad." Bellerophoniad ends the collection of novellas with a simple stop.
The story comes to a close in the middle of Bellerophon’s sentence, since he and a shape
shifter have been thrown off Mount Olympus and the shape shifter has estimated how
many words can be said before they hit the ground, and this abrupt ending is a statement
that stories can have ambiguous endings just as they can have ambiguous beginnings. It
is also a statement that stories are never over and that they are related to one another,
because where one ends another begins.

Frames are not only a useful component to writing original metafiction, such as
the trans-novella action between "Perseid" and "Bellerophoniad," but frames are useful to
metafiction because they allow for an analysis of fiction and how stories are told. Self-
conscious language also analyzes a story, but frames show how a story is structured and
not the language used to tell the tale. Though other traditional novels also use frames,
Metafictional frames are usually more outrageous and more extensive, pushing the boundaries of fiction to the limits, as well as show that fiction does not have to adhere to the rules of traditional storytelling, which are focused on plot, conflict, and resolution. Metafictional frames, like self-conscious language, show that storytelling can be done in a number of ways, through a number of means, and certain constructions or rules of traditional fiction do not have to govern all stories.
The Reader-Writer Relationship

When looking at Magritte’s painting, the viewer is interpreting what the painter is trying to say through his artwork. Using the painting and the inscription as the medium, the artist has told the viewer that what he or she is looking at is not a pipe because it is a picture of a pipe. Through the painting the artist has made a connection to the viewer. Similar to this connection between an artist and a viewer, through the medium of a painting, is the connection between the author and the reader through a text. Many readers feel that they form a connection with the text they are reading, understanding what the author is saying, but this connection between the author and the reader is not only more explicit in metafiction, it is a part of the metafictional structure and the self-consciousness of the novel.

While not every form of metafiction is direct in exposing the relationship between the reader and the author, two examples of metafiction that are explicit in establishing this relationship are Italo Calvino’s If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller and John Barth’s The Floating Opera. In both novels, the author, through the text, forms a bridge to connect with an imagined reader. Some critics claim that a connection between the reader and the author is impossible because of the arbitrary nature of language, and though this comment is valid, metafiction shows that it is possible to have a reader-author relationship because of self-conscious language. However, Roland Barthes, a supporter of the claim that an author and a reader never connect, writes that a text “is not a dialogue” and that “there is not behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object” (16). Barthes also
reaffirms this position in his essay “The Death of the Author.” He writes, “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the identity of the body of writing” (221). Barthes’s believes that an author does not relate to the reader because “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (224). Therefore, according to Barthes, the reader and the author can never coexist and a relationship can never be solidified, only alluded to. This concept that an author and a reader are always separated by a gap is a valid theory, but some metafictions, as mentioned before, are self-conscious and can bridge the gap between the author and the reader through engaging the reader in the text. Though traditional fictions also engage the reader, metafiction does so to a greater extent in which the author continually refers to the reader and builds the relationship between the him/her and the reader.

In *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, Calvino’s opening lines make the reader aware of the “you” character. Though the reader may want to think that the “you” character is himself or herself, the truth of the matter is that the “you” character is not the reader. Also, the reader may think that the narrator is Calvino, since the story begins with a narrator telling the “you” character what to do with the novel, but this too is incorrect. In the actual world, Calvino is only the author and we are the reader, not the “you” character. So how is a relationship between the author and the reader constructed?

It would be easy to say that the relationship of a reader and author is simply a matter of supply and demand: authors need readers, and readers need authors. But this simplicity would not explain the relationship between an author and a reader in Calvino’s story. C. Nella Cotrupi writes that the narration in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* is
directed to "a reader who is implicit, absent, and outside the actual world..." (284). She continues to say that though the second-person narrative tends to make the reader more present, assuming the role of the "you" character, yet this is only a "guise of verbal description" (284). Since the "you" character is not the reader, the story becomes a "humorous display of the ontological distance that separates the verbally constructed world of fiction and its fictitious reader from the actual world with its actual readers" (285). Though the previous question has not been answered, it can be deepened: If the story only describes the fictitious world, with the implied reader-character and a false narrator, how does an actual reader connect with the author through the text? The answer to this question is through the metafictional concept of play.

Calvino takes a stand, noting the gap between the writer and the reader, the fictitious and the actual, when the narrator says to the "you" character, "There is a boundary line: on one side are those who make books, on the other side those who read them" (93). In this statement, Calvino alludes to a relationship between the author and the reader, but there is a division between the writer and the reader. Of course, the text can be the bridge that crosses the gap between the author and the reader, and through the concept of play in metafiction, the gap can be crossed between the actual and the fictional. In the novel, the "you" character has been taken on a ludicrous journey through fictional towns and settings. It is after the "you" character has traveled many miles chasing down counterfeit novels in these fictional towns that the narrator finally asks, "Is this still your story, Reader?" (Calvino 215). Through Cotrupi's perspective, this is not actually an open-ended question because the answer is obviously no. Since the question is directed to a fictitious "you" character, a false character, the answer is that the story is
false and that this is not the reader’s story, it is the “you” character’s story. But, through the metafictional concept of play, the story can become the actual reader’s story. According to Waugh, “All art is ‘play’ in its creation of other symbolic worlds…” and “it can be argued not only that literary fiction is a form of play (if a very sophisticated form) but that play is an important and necessary aspect of human society” (34). She goes on to say that “metafiction sets out to make this explicit: that play is a relatively autonomous activity, but has a definite value in the real world” (35). Through metafictional play with the text, the actual reader in the actual world chooses, consciously or unconsciously, to assume the role of the fictitious character without having to assume a different personality, or assume a new name, as in traditional novels. In the case of If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler, Calvino uses self-conscious language and self-criticism to analyze the concept of play. The second person voice and the constant referral to the “you” character are affirming the necessity of play in a metafictional novel, as well as allowing the reader the opportunity to assume the role of the “you” character. The reader is also given the chance to “play” that the narrator, who dictates what happens to the “you” character and his story, is the author. Melissa Watts comments on this concept stating that Calvino has “written us into a well-specified position in the text, and explicitly instructed us in our reading of his novel, the author is clearly not dead” (714). Therefore, through the metafictional concept of play the reader and the author have a relationship that is fictitious and yet real.

While the metafictional concept of play allows the reader to assume the role of the “you” character in the novel, play is also important in allowing a fictional narrator to address an actual narratee, or to allow the writer to communicate to the reader. Though
the metafictional concept of play allows the reader to assume the “you” character in Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s night a Traveler*, John Barth’s *The Floating Opera*, uses play as a means to allow the reader to become the narratee who interacts with the narrator through a conversational tone that, therefore, links the author to the reader. Though Calvino’s novel also addresses the reader directly, the narrator gives commands to the reader on what the “you” character does. In *The Floating Opera*, Barth uses a conversational narrative that not only tells the reader the narrator’s story, but also includes the reader as the narratee, or the receiver of the story that Todd is telling.

In an interview, Barth commented on people’s desire to play with a novel, saying, “[we] still imagine ourselves to be characters, and our lives are influenced by other people around us whom we see as characters and our relations to whom we perceive in a dramatic, in a dramatical, way” (Edelstein 100). Barth initiates the reader’s opportunity to assume a narratee role in the beginning of *The Floating Opera* when Todd comments on how he has already begun writing his story: “For example, I’ve got this book started now, and though we’re probably a good way from the story yet, we’re headed toward it” (8). Barth writes, “we’re” twice in this small passage, which illustrates that the narrator is referring to the reader and himself. Therefore, this suggests a communication between the narrator and reader, or the writer and the reader, since the author dictates what the narrator is saying. Barth uses this conversational narrative once again when he says to the reader,

Are you so curious as to follow me down the hall to the men’s room? If you aren’t—if your sensitivity is such as to leave you in my room while I go (I shall
only be a minute), then read while you wait the story of my resumption of the affair with Jane Mack. (161)

This quote illustrates that a conversation is taking place between the author and the narratee or imagined reader who the actual reader can play as. It is not a command of active discourse, as in Calvino’s novel, but it is a conversational style discourse, which revolves around what Barth writes.

However, this idea of a functional narrative communication is met with contention. Maurice Couturier writes in his essay “From Displacement to Compactness: John Barth’s The Floating Opera,” that the conversational narrative is only a naïve belief that writing is conversation and that though the reader and the writer “desperately want to make contact with each other,” they are “unable to communicate and exchange satisfactorily” (13). While the argument is well founded, if the reader wishes to play with the metafictional novel and believe that a conversation is taking place between the author and the reader, then, as Waugh writes, the novelist as a conversationalist has an identity because the reader is willing to participate in the novel (26). And the novelist’s identity outside the story is simply another story. So if the author is dead, it is because he or she never existed as something other than a fiction in the mind of the reader.

Of course, this concept brings up an important question: if the reader is in a conversation with the author through the text and the metafictional concept of play, how does the reader respond to what the author is saying? According to Wolfgang Iser, it is difficult for the writer and the reader to interact since they are not “face-to-face,” but if the author shares in the game of imagination by writing an interesting story, then the reader will respond by continuing to read (108). Iser also writes that the “reader’s
enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play" (108). It is here where the communication is completed. After the communicative narrative has been relayed to the reader from the author, the reader responds with interest in participating in the story and by continuing to read the story. If the communicative narrative is uninteresting to the reader, the reader then puts down the book and the communication is broken.

Though both Calvino and Barth use the concept of play to initiate the reader-author relationship in their metafictional novels, Calvino uses play as a way to engage the reader as a character in the story, while Barth uses play to interact with the reader as a narratee or someone who is an active listener of the narrator’s story. While both author’s techniques are different, their initiation of a reader-writer relationship through play is different from traditional novels because the reader is referred to as himself or herself to a greater degree throughout the metafictional novel. Like a viewer of Magritte’s painting and having an inviting connection with the artist, a reader has an inviting connection with the author that adds to the aesthetic of a metafictional novel. The enjoyment and understanding of the work as a philosophical or critical fiction is heightened when the reader has a connection with the author. Though it is possible for a reader to form a connection with a more traditional story such a connection is rare, and even when present is not as explicit or as engaging as a relationship that is formed between a reader and an author through the concept of play and the self-awareness of metafiction.
Conclusion: What a Long Strange Trip It’s Been

Metafiction remains a form of post-modernism that some critics and authors believe will be the death of fiction. However, metafiction is not the death of fiction, but rather the harvesting of ideas of traditional fiction in order to make a new form of storytelling. Through self-conscious language, life is given to concepts such as frames that transcend the physical boundaries of a book and reader-writer relationships that can connect the author with the reader. It is not the purpose of metafiction, nor the purpose of authors of metafiction, to murder fiction, but rather to prove that the ideas and concepts that have existed for so long in traditional novels are not the eternal rules to writing fiction.

The goal of metafiction is to tell a story, fully aware that only a story and not a depiction of reality is being told. Therefore, in telling the story with self-consciousness, metafiction proves that fiction is flexible and that the arbitrary nature of language and the words that make up a language allow for considerable bending. By analyzing fiction while writing fiction, metafiction is showing that there is logical reason and proof that a story can be told in many different ways, yet still entertaining. Realism is not the focus. Metafiction wants to illustrate to the reader the art of writing a story. It wants to show the way in which a story is created through language, while at the same time providing an example.

Like Magritte, who took it upon himself to create paintings that spoke to viewers both through images and words, writers of metafiction like Calvino and Barth are writing fiction to show what goes into making fiction. The concepts of fiction are rarely stated
explicitly; after all these authors are not writing textbooks, but the concepts of fiction are buried in the fiction. Authors of metafiction are the philosophers of fiction. They are the individuals who are making a statement about fiction, while also stepping up to the task of writing fiction.

Though every author of metafiction writes his or her stories differently, the three aspects of metafiction that were in this essay are some of the most useful tenets in exploring, critiquing, and writing metafiction. They are three tenets that both Calvino and Barth use to write entertaining works of fiction, while pointing out some of the conventions of fiction that are normally never revealed in a traditional story. They are also three tenets that separate metafiction from other fictions, helping to define, overall, what metafiction is. Unfortunately, due to the flexible nature of metafiction, a sufficient definition can never be created, only alluded to.
Works Cited

Primary Texts


Secondary Texts


Absodiculous:

Five Metafictional Short Stories
Author’s Note: The following stories are not only to provide entertainment, but they are to serve as examples of metafiction. Each story uses one or more of the aspects of metafiction that were mentioned in the first part of this thesis. So sit back and enjoy, unless of course you do not wish to enjoy, and in that case sit back and do whatever it is you would like to do.
Disclaimer: This is a story derived from the morality play *Everyman*. Being a male feminist, I felt that *Everyman* was dated and needed revision so that "every person" was included in the play. Not only is it the politically correct action, it is a task that should have been undertaken long ago.

Further Noted: It has occurred to me that I have just mentioned that I am a male feminist. Yes, it is true. I am a male, I have a penis, but I also feel that women have suffered many injustices in the world and though we say equal rights for all, we are far from equality. *Everyman*, I mean every person should take it into their own hands to fight the discrimination that women have suffered for years.

Just In Case: For those of you who are not familiar with the morality play *Everyman*, it is a medieval play that is about a man who is visited by Death. The main character, *Everyman*, is not prepared for Death's arrival. After pleading with Death, *Everyman* is granted a certain amount of time to go and find anyone who will go with him. So *Everyman* asks a bunch of different personified traits such as Goods, Kindred, Cousin, and Beauty. While many of these personified traits cannot or will not go with *Everyman*, the one who does go with him is Good Deeds. So the moral of the morality play is death comes for *everyman* and all we can take with us is our good deeds. As you can see, the sexism and lack of religious equality is thick. For one thing, death comes for everyone, not just men. For another thing, some people's belief is not that of a Judoc-Christiano tradition, and yet death will come for them also. So, as I have already stated, I will make it my crusade to ensure that *everyone* knows that death is coming for him or her despite age, sex, race, or religion. Maybe then we can unite and rejoice as a singular whole, knowing that death is coming for us all.
Please disregard: The dark ring on this page is not a representation of the world at large. I accidentally set my coffee mug on my paper and it left a brown ring stain on the page. I was afraid that after mentioning the changes that the world needed to make that the circle would have been mistaken as an illustration.

Bare in mind: This is a revision of a play, as mentioned before, and it does not have any illustrations. This is a book of literature, if you wanted pictures maybe you should have bought a “Where’s Waldo” book instead. I am sorry if the idea was implied that there would be any illustrations when I said that the dark ring on the previous page was not a representation of the world. So to clarify, there are no illustrations. This is strictly literature. No pictures, only words.

To clarify further: Though I said that this is a play, as well as literature, it was not complied by myself. I said that I derived Everyperson from Everyman, and I did, but I did not create the play solely on my own, nor did I change the main focus of the play. As you will discover, I changed some of the terms and rearranged the sentence structure, so that the passive voice was eliminated and the words were more gender friendly.

Also: Not only did I make the words gender friendly, I made them more ethnically aware, breaking the chain and forging a new path away from the WASP. I am stating that I am not only a male feminist, but I am an unprejudiced male feminist who took a stand to change the language usage of some of the classics. This revamp of the great old works of literature is the first of many to come.

Should be said: WASP is an acronym that means White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant.

It has come to my attention: I have just received a note from my editor stating that the publishing house, which I will refer to as Assholes Inc., has decided to cut the
funding for my project of changing the classics to fit into a more P.C. world. My editor specifically told me that, “The classics are classic because they don’t need to be changed.” So I said to my editor, who I will call Mr. Richard Cranium, “What do you mean they don’t need to be changed?” Mr. Cranium told me, “Stop ripping people off and write your own damn stories.” So since I am publishing this story on my own now, I do want to stress the point that *Everyperson*, though adapted from a classic work, is still worth reading and necessary to changing the world.

**Notice of reclamation:** In having to publish this book myself, I had to take out a second mortgage. My wife has left me for a plumber named Bob, who, she says, gives her the attention she has been longing for ever since I started this book. My kid thinks that I am a loser and has decided to tell me that he is running off with his girlfriend, George. Having missed the last two payments on my car, repo men are, right now as I am writing, taking my car. I have been resorted to eating only macaroni and cheese, smoking GPC’s, and drinking Thunderbird, a lot of Thunderbird. Though I have run into a few problems, the crusade to get this book published continues.

**Dedication:** I would like to thank my parents, who sent me money so that I could keep trying to publish the book. Unfortunately, in my moment of bliss, because I actually had cash in my pocket, I ran down to the Drunken Sailor, where I got drunk, stumbled out of the bar, hit my head on a stop sign, and in a mind that was swimming like a fish in a bowl, proceeded to be robbed by two midget hookers. At least I think they were midgets, but maybe they were short clowns. It was dark and they wore a lot of make-up. After being robbed, I have been wondering if this book will ever get published, but one has to overcome great adversities in order to achieve great accomplishments.

**Excommunicated:** In writing *Everyperson*, and in trying to keep the issue of morality slight so not to offend the people who may not believe in a Judo-Christian God, I have been excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church. By changing the role of the deity to a creator who may not exist, therefore rejecting the idea of a god, the Pontiff thought it best to banned me from the church. Also, I have about two hundred Christians
picketing outside my home asking for the banning of my book. They have been
marching around, trampling down my grass, holding up signs that say, "Everyperson is
for no one." It makes it very hard to get anything published with all the picketers and the
rotten fruits and vegetables that they continually decorate any window I walk by with.
Though every time I walk outside my house I get pelted with tomatoes, I am continuing
with the printing, and adding new disclaimers everyday. Don’t worry, once you get
through all of the disclaimers the story is worth wild. Or so I tell myself. I have to duck
out and buy some more T-bird.

**Absolute Desperation:** I have been forced to give blood three times a week in
order to buy more T-bird and cigarettes. Ming’s Chinese Stop and Louis’ Pizza have been
providing me with food. Both their dumpsters are next to one another and Mr. Ming has
a habit of throwing out vegetables that have only just started to rot. Also, good fortune is
shining down on me. Since I have continued with my battle, karma has blessed me with
a new coat that Larry, a bum that has staked out a claim behind Louis’, gave me after
seeing me rummage through the trash. He said “Here,” handing me the coat. “You need
this a hell of a lot more than I do.” I was so touched by the gift that I invited Larry to
move in with me. He was a little leery to do so, having lived in the dirty ally for so long,
but after he saw where I was living he simply said, “I no longer fear hell for it is a one
bedroom house that smells of dog piss and rotten tomatoes.” He then moved back to the
ally.

**Another Dedication:** I would like to thank Larry the bum who gave a coat when
I was naked, literally.

**Foreclosure:** Well they finally did it. I have tried to maintain good spirits
throughout this whole mess, but those blood-sucking bastards at Western Financial
finally took my house. I have no money, no wife, a son who just got married in Hawaii
to his fiancé George, I have no house, I have been excommunicated, my dog is dead.
(because Mr. Ming wouldn’t allow me to dumpster dive anymore), and all I am left with
is a taste for T-bird, which I was told to give up because have a drinking problem, and a
few copies of Everyperson. This goddamn book is an albatross. It is weighing me down
and sinking me to the bottom of the ocean, as if I had tied a battleship anchor around my
waist. Hell, this isn’t a great piece of literature. It’s a piece of shit. I didn’t do anything
major or warranting of a Pulitzer Prize. All I did was comb through Everyman and
change the “man” to “person.” I have no idea why anyone would buy this book. It isn’t
going to save the world. It isn’t going to change the way we act towards one another. It
is a scam: a way for me to make a quick buck and by more T-bird. Jesus, I don’t even
give a damn if you read this or not, but if you by chance come across a copy and wish to
send me money for T-bird, I live in a refrigerator box behind down the ally from the Post
Office. If I am not home, just leave a message with Larry.

Oh, and enjoy the book. God knows it ruined by life.
To Write a Two Page Story

Let’s see-e-e-e-e-e-e-e. I have two pages to write in. Well we need a main character. I remember that I heard once that characters are more important than the plot. Maybe that was as important as the plot. I guess I can’t remember as well as I thought. Anyways, a main character is very important as long as he or she is believable. So, a character. How about Bob? Everyone knows a Bob. Bob is your dentist or your mechanic or a person you could have hit with your car. Bob it is. So...Bob, Bob Smith is the character.

Bob Smith was...

Wait a minute. Bob was or is or had been. What tense do I want to use? Oh to hell with this right now. Just write.

Bob Smith was walking...

Hold the phone. If he was walking, where was he walking from? He had to leave from some place and he had to be going to some place but from where and to where? (I’m thinking intently right now). Ooh, he was walking from his house to the store to buy some cigarettes. No, wait. He was going to the store to buy some toilet paper. No, cigarettes are better. Well, not better for Bob’s health, but for the story. Besides, I might want Bob knocking on death’s door and then have him miraculously bounce back. My two-page story, my two-page story rules.

Bob Smith was walking from his house one day...

Hello, Captain Obvious, of course it was a day. You can’t do something without it being a day, but which day to choose. I have seven choices, so how about Saturday. That way he wouldn’t be at work, if he does work, and could afford to take a leisurely stroll to the store to buy cigarettes. However, I guess he could only afford cigarettes if he was employed, so lets say he works for the American Heart and Lung Association. Oh Shit! That won’t work. He’s a plumber.

Bob Smith, a plumber, was walking from his house one Saturday to the store to buy some cigarettes. He was crossing the intersection when...

Wait, wait, wait. Two problems have occurred: 1) What next? What is Bob going to do? 2) The intersection is a crossroad. Not only an actual crossroad where two roads intersect, but also a metaphorical crossroad in which Bob is finding himself in the middle of some dilemma.
So, let's say Bob had just divorced his cheating wife and he is finding himself to be a new man. There that settles the crossroads problem. As for what happens to him next, well he's going to cross the road.

Bob Smith, a plumber, was walking from his house one Saturday to the store to buy some cigarettes. He was crossing the intersection when he remembered that today was the day that he was a new man. He had just divorced his wife and was now ready to start a new life. He had just crossed the street when a black Tahoe jumped the curb of the street and smashed into Bob...

What the hell am I doing? I didn't think about that before I wrote it. It sounds good, but I didn't think before I wrote. Who was in the Tahoe? Why did the driver jump the curb to specifically hit Bob? Did the driver specifically hit Bob or did the driver have a heart attack and it was an accident, like that guy in the newspaper. What the hell is his ex-wife's name? She needs a name. Bob didn't marry her and divorce her without knowing her name. Besides, her name is a perfect opportunity for conscious description. Despite what Shakespeare has to say, there is a lot in a name. If his ex-wife's name is Jane, well then that is a rather ordinary name for a white American woman. If her name is Cleopatra, the reader might think she is exotic and seductive. If her name is Rainbow-Sapphire, the reader might think she had some crazy hippie parents who raised her in free love and hemp. If her name is Bitchface, well the reader might think that the divorce was a good thing. That was quite the tangent. I think I will call her Kelly after my cat that was hit by a car. Now, about the driver. Who is the driver and why did they jump the—oh I got it.

Bob Smith, a plumber, was walking from his house one day to the store to buy some cigarettes. He was crossing the intersection when he remembered that today was the day that he was a new man. He had just divorced his wife and was now ready to start a new life. He had just crossed the street when a black Tahoe jumped the curb of the street and smashed into Bob. A person saw the incident and ran over to check if Bob was alive. He was...

Wait, so this person is a man, but he has no name? Oh, well that can be fixed, but the whole story is written in explication. There isn't any description or anything that needs to be inferred on the reader's own behalf. It is simply spelled out for the reader. I remember another thing I was once told. Writers should tell, not show. No, wait that's show, don't tell. It is more important to show than explain. Description good. Explication Bad. Also, does Bob live or not, and what if Bob is Jewish? I'm not sure he could walk to the store on a Saturday because isn't that the Jewish day of rest? Maybe he should just be agnostic so we don't step on any toes. Agnostic is safe because you don't know if there is a God, but you are not about to write off the idea that there might be.

Bob Smith, a agnostic plumber who was about 5'9'' and well built, was walking from his house one day to the store to buy some cigarettes. He was whistling a happy tune and seemed to walk as if he was stepping from one cloud to another. He was crossing the intersection when he remembered that today was the day that he was a new man. He had just divorced his wife, who was rather abusive and always calling Bob a non-confrontational dwarf, and was now ready to start a new life. He had just crossed the street, still whistling his happy tune, when a familiar flat black Tahoe jumped the curb of the street and smashed into Bob. The driver was Bob's ex-wife Kelly, who remained sitting in the driver's seat with a pair of ice blue eyes. Since Bob got everything in the divorce, because Kelly was cheating on him, she was pissed-off and decided to take control of the situation. She saw Bob crossing the street and jumped the curb, smashing into him. He flew fifty feet from the point of impact and landed on his back. The sound of chalk shattering on a tile floor resounded in the air, as all of Bob's bones were broken. A person that that was just leaving the store saw what happened and ran to Bob's aid. He checked for vitals: listening, looking and feeling. But he heard nothing, saw nothing, and felt nothing. Bob's eyes were closed and his body was limp. He was dead, but smiling.

Holy shit! What the hell just happened? I killed the hero. I killed Bob. I know it is typical that a hero lives a tragic life and usually dies at the end of the story, but how did I kill Bob so quickly? Is this even the same story that I started writing? I don't know how things changed so quickly? I guess at least Bob died happy, I mean that is why I had him die smiling, isn't it?
An Occurrence in the Life of
Dr. William Tade, Receptionist, D.D.S.

Thinking back on the night that Mr. Montuchu came to visit me at the Westside Cemetary, which I referred to as my receptionist office, I cannot recall if my current client was a man or a woman (though I regularly took notice), because he/she had been placed in his/her eternal resting place five days earlier than scheduled. I was away in London attending to another client who had been born a bit cheeky on the backside, which made him a prize specimen for an upcoming proctologist. I wish at times I could be more respectful and recall, at the very least, the sex of my many different clients, but unfortunately, clients at my receptionist job only come in two varieties: male and female, and even this tends to blend together with time, making for a monotonous living.

Please forgive the tangent; it tends to happen from time to time. Now, reader, I was speaking about Mr. Montuchu who had a most unfortunate toothache. I would like to describe him to you but as I have already stated, I have the inability to pay attention to particular details when it comes to humans. You will just have you imagine him as you deem fit. Personally, it would be best to consider Mr. Montuchu as a large man with a healthy appetite. Also I would recommend that you think of him as having only a few hairs on his head, so few in fact that you could count them on your hands, and they are all gray. The rest of his head should be seen as being a highly polished bald with decorative liver spots. Though this is in fact far from the truth of the matter, it will serve as a fitting description.

Now reader, you should know that I am not a dentist first and a receptionist second. On the contrary, I was a receptionist during dental school, learning the trade
from two of my professors who told me it was a lucrative way to acquire funds. Of course the first night they took me with them to the cemetery, they made certain that I made no reference to resurrectionism or grave robbing. I can even now recall Dr. Mort Riga telling me, “Now William, remember that what we are doing, though illegal, is necessary. A receptionist’s job is never over until he, too, is dug up from his grave.” So that was how I became a receptionist, and being a man of a prominent and orderly-structured mind, I find it best to adhere to chronology and not love or desire when categorizing careers, titles, hobbies, or passions.

I hope by now it is clear that I refer to grave robbing or resurrectionism, which is just another term for grave robbing, as my receptionist job. I do enjoy being a receptionist, most certainly, and to refer to it as a job may be misinforming. Perhaps it would be better to call it my hobbyhorse. However, if you are going to think of it as my hobbyhorse, please pay me the respect of not mentally seeing a horse made of wood with a child teetering on its back. No, I would prefer that you envision a hobbyhorse made of hard, calcium deposited bone with flaking patches of muscle tissue and rough hide with bits of coarse hair sprouting upward. Once again please forgive the tangent. So, one evening, while I was riding my decomposing hobbyhorse, Mr. Montuchu came to find me at my office, the Westside Cemetery, to ask me about the throbbing pain in his tooth.

“Dr. Tade, it hurts so much. Every pulse is a nauseatingly horrid pain. I am sure Satan has cursed my tooth with one of his demons from hell, if my tooth is not hell itself,” said Mr. Montuchu after we exchanged greetings and I enquired as to why he would be out so late at Westside, though I had a good idea seeing his right hand cradling the lower right portion of his jaw.
“Mr. Montuchu,” I said. “I assure you, sir, you do not have a demon in your tooth, nor is it hell. I would be able to recognize my own home.” We both laughed heartily, Mr. Montuchu expressing both pain and joy at my comment. Mr. Montuchu has met Mrs. Tade, and therefore he fully understood why I continually work late nights as a receptionist. The adage “He that makes wife mad at day will get no rest at night” is very true. Of course, my wife is mad both day and night, and rest is only a very distant memory to my pre-nuptial days.

I said to Mr. Montuchu in my most professional manner, “Please, open you mouth as wide as you can for me.” The light of the full moon shimmered off all of Mr. Montuchu’s teeth, except for one black molar on the right side of his lower jaw, as I am sure you have already deduced. The infected tooth was the only one that did not light up from the soft-white glow of the moonlight. It was like a black hole or a sunspot; it was absent of light and absorbed all light that shown upon it. I found it truly fascinating, having a love for medical oddities, but I also empathized with Mr. Montuchu. I said, “Mr. Montuchu, I can see the infected tooth and the best way to cure you of any more pain would be to remove the tooth. If you come by my dental office tomorrow morning, I will assure you that your mouth will be the first I look into.”

Mr. Montuchu closed his mouth and continued rubbing the infected side of his jaw, saying, “Dr. Tade, I don’t believe I could wait another night. It is the time of the Judgment and it will either be me or my devil plagued tooth that will do away with the other.”
“So Mr. Montuchu, are you suggesting that we take care of the tooth now? I must tell you that I don’t have any of my proper instruments for the procedure?” Which was the honest truth since I try not to mix my two professions.

“I don’t care how you take care of it, Dr. Tade, just send the tooth back to hell.”

Looking around the cemetery surroundings and taking note of anything that could be used as make shift implements, the only object I found that would have been useful, and able to separate the strong roots of the molar from the rest of his mouth, was my shovel. But using the shovel would involve me having to hit him along the side of the face and it probably would not be effective, though it would surely rid him of pain, rendering him unconscious. After pondering the task, I came up with an idea. Though it was far from a typical and sanitary method, Mr. Montuchu did not care so long as I could relieve his pain. I told Mr. Montuchu to just sit down on the cool grass and enjoy the sights of a beautiful full moon night over the cemetery while I prepared to extract his tooth with a strange series of minor events.

Leaving Mr. Montuchu gazing at the night, I took my flat-bladed shovel and propped up the residence of my current client. Normally, I refrain from taking the entire coffin out of the ground, but the circumstances had far exceeded any of my usual receptionist duties. While I used the shovel as a lever, I called Mr. Montuchu for assistance in tying a rope I had around the middle of the coffin. He did so, fixing a strong knot he said he learned while serving in His Majesty’s Royal Navy, and then threw the other end of the rope over a strong branch of a nearby English Oak. The Westside Cemetery was know for its gorgeous array of oak trees that also made grave robbing an easier task, providing camouflage from any Bobbies that might be passing by. It was at
this moment that I climbed out of the hole and we both began to heave and hoist the coffin out of the ground, using the makeshift pulley. In sequence, Mr. Montuchu and I pulled right hand, left hand, right hand, left hand, saying this out loud so we would not miss a proceeding movement that would cause the coffin to fall. Mr. Montuchu was exasperating sighs and cries of pain as he exerted himself. Though I know this was a painful experience for him, the end result would be most beneficial.

As the coffin final came to ground level, I instructed Mr. Montuchu to walk around the trunk of the English Oak three or four times, releasing some of the tension he would have to bear while I performed the next necessary step of our plan for oral extraction. He did so very quickly asking, “Dr. Tade, should I tie the rope off at the tree as well?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Montuchu that you must tolerate the weight of the heavy load alone, but tying the rope off will only delay my plan. Patience kind sir, for it will only be matter of minutes till your tooth will no longer harbor any demons, and your jaw will be set free to paradise.”

Mr. Montuchu nodded in agreement, trusting fully in my ability, while I walked over to the coffin and pulled it to the side of the hole. As it hovered over the grass, I was holding the coffin by one of the bearers’ handles as if I was stopping the pendulum of a grandfather clock. I then reached down with my free hand and picked up my shovel. I slammed the blade down into the ground till the earth reached the wood handle. I then pulled the coffin over towards the shovel and instructed Mr. Montuchu to lower the coffin slowly, while I guided it onto the end of the shovel handle. He did this with precision and while the head of the coffin rested gently on the handle of the shovel, the
foot of it was set on the grass. Though it teetered on the handle of the shovel, I assured Mr. Montuchu that the coffin would not fall until it was the proper time. He said to me, “Dr. Tade, I do not wish to offend your intelligence, but I am failing to see how this morbid example of still art is suppose to rid me of this hellish tooth.”

I replied, “You have been most loyal to me Mr. Montuchu, in having not questioned my methods thus far, and I do hate to leave you in suspense, but if you would only wait a mere minute, all will be revealed, including your poisoned tooth.”

With this said, I calmly removed my thin leather shoe lace from my right shoe, briefly noting Mr. Montuchu’s puzzled expression, and tied one end of the shoe lace to the end of the rope Mr. Montuchu had let dangle loosely down from the sturdy oak branch, since the weight of the coffin was now upon the shovel. “Mr. Montuchu,” I said. “Would you be so kind as to lie down right here on the grass once more sir, and please open wide.” He accommodated my request with the slightest uneasiness, lying down right where I was pointing with my index finger. I then took the thin shoelace and tied it around his tooth, classifying it as the right tooth because of its absence of light. I examined my contraption, playing every moment in my mind and checking if I might have forgotten anything. Satisfied with my results, I knelt down next to Mr. Montuchu’s head, sweat was beginning to run from his pores. I said to him, “Do not worry, Mr. Montuchu. It will be over soon and it should be relatively painless, or I think it should be.” He did not respond for obvious reasons, but I knew that my words comforted him very little as his eyes were wide open with fright and shady confidence.

It was now time. I stood up, Mr. Montuchu’s eyes widened as if asking where I was going, and I said, “Okay, tooth to shoelace, to rope, to pulley/branch, to coffin on
shovel. Everything looks tiptop. Here goes.” I then kicked the side of the coffin with all my might, causing the coffin to fall off of its teetering position on the shovel handle and into the hole. The falling coffin pulled on the tightened rope, which in turn yanked on the shoelace and ripped Mr. Montuchu’s tooth right out of his head with only a minor amount of blood trailing behind the airborne tooth. Mr. Montuchu gave out a dreadful scream that startled an owl out of a neighboring oak.

But then he leaped up saying, “Oh thank God and heaven and damn that tooth back to hell, I’m cured! Thank you, Dr. Tade. May God bless you with all the graces in the world. Bless you, sir. Bless you.”

I graciously replied, “It was not a problem, Mr. Montuchu. I was glad to have been of some service. I am sorry that I do not have a replacement for your lost tooth at this moment, but I will be sure to notify you if I happen to come across one.”

“Oh never mind that now, sir,” he said “I am just happy to be rid of that black devil tooth. Thank you.” He then grabbed my hand and emphatically shook it till I thought my arm might disconnect from my shoulder.

“You’re quite welcome, Mr. Montuchu. Now, I do not mean to be rude, but I have a client I must tend to before the sun is up and I have to retire from my receptionist duties.”

“Oh, yes of course. I do not mean to be any more of a bother than I already have been. I just want to say thank you once more. If there is anything I can do, please just let me know.”

“I will be sure to do that, Mr. Montuchu. Now if you will excuse me…”
“Yes, thank you and good night. Well good morning too.” Mr. Montuchu stopped shaking my hand, turned around and walked back into the night from whence he came, whistling a tune of freedom. I shook my head slightly with a grin on my face seeing his sudden turn from anguish to merriment. I was happy to see him so relieved, but I did have work to finish. I turned around to inspect the damage to my client, and apparently, the fall that the coffin suffered had caused the lid to break free from its hinges and there was the semi-decomposed body, half in and half out of its housing facility. The head of my client was lying on a small mound of dirt, tilted backwards, with the mouth gaping wide open as if my client had fallen asleep in a chair. There staring at me from my client’s mouth was a back molar crest in the finest gold I had ever seen. It sparkled and gleamed with such brilliance that it was as if that tooth had been smithened by God and placed here for me to find.

Now some might say that it was only coincidence that I had found a false tooth to replace the very one that I had taken out for Mr. Montuchu, but those people never saw how brilliant it shown. The next day I put the golden tooth in Mr. Montuchu’s mouth and a week later I was out at the cemetery, performing my receptionist duties, on my dear friend Mr. Montuchu. It was intriguing how sudden everything had happened. I take a tooth out, I put a new golden gem of a tooth in, and a week later he dies of a fever. Though it is somewhat nerve racking to have to dig up one’s friend, that tooth was captivating and a prize for a number of my dental patients who are looking for a replacement.
Dialogue

“She sells seashells down by the sea shore.”

“Really?”

“Sure. She used to sell car parts, but you really don’t find your target market at the beach. So two years ago she switched to seashells.”

“How’s her business now?”

“ ‘bout the same. Why would someone buy seashells at the beach if you can walk on the sand and find them for yourself? At least that makes them free.”

“Good point. So is she going to do something else?”

“What do you mean, like quit her job on the beach?”

“No. I mean is she going to change what she sells?”

“Oh, I see. I think she was going to start a photo copy stand.”

“A photo copy stand? In the middle of the beach?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Huh. Why doesn’t she do something more practical, like a soda stand or a drink stand, or a drink and sandwich stand?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think she said she didn’t want to do that because every beach has a bunch of them.”

“That’s because they are a good business on the beach.”

“So are surfboard rentals.”

“Why doesn’t she do surfboard rentals?”
"I already told you."

"Because they’re a good business?"

"No, because every beach has one."

"If not more."

"Exactly."

"So how is she going to power the copiers?"

"Copiers?"

"The copiers for her photo copy shop. How is she going to power them?"

"Oh, I think she said she was going to hand copy the photos."

"You must be joking?"

"Of course I am. She said she was going to get a generator."

"A generator?"

"Yep. Diesel I think."

"Instead of gas?"

"Instead of gas."

"Well, I guess that would work."

"I guess so."

"Is she aware of the rising cost of diesel?"

"You know, it hadn’t occurred to me to ask her if she was aware of the rising cost."

"Well does she know how noisy diesel generators can be?"

"I did tell her that. But apparently she got a really good deal on the generator."

"How good?"
"Really good."

"No, how really good was the deal? Specifically how really good was the deal?"

"I think she said that the guy wanted a thousand dollars."

"That's the good deal?"

"No, I wasn't done talking."

"Oh, sorry."

"Anyway, the guy wanted a thousand dollars for some old used generator. Diesel mind you."

"I figured as much."

"And she said that she could not afford to pay that much because all she does is sell seashells down by the seashore."

"So what did the guy say?"

"Well, it turns out that the guy is an avid collector of seashells. Has a whole garage full of seashells that have been categorized by type and size and weight."

"Oh, I see. So she gives him all the seashells that she has down by the seashore shop and he gives her the generator."

"Exactly."

"It's funny how things work out the way they do, don't you think?"

"Yah. Just when I think the world can't get any smaller, it does."

"What do mean? Is the world shrinking?"

"No. I mean it is small world. You know, like when two strangers find a mutual acquaintance or friend or common ground. It makes it a small world."

"I just think it makes it a crazy place."
“Perhaps you’re right.”

“You said he collects shells?”

“The generator guy?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what she said. She said that he collects seashells.”

“And categorizes them?”

“Yep.”

“By weight?”

“Type and size, too.”

“Well how many types of seashells are there? I only know of a conch shell and that is because I read about one in a book and my mom used to keep one on the toilet tank at our house.”

“Why did she keep a conch shell on the toilet tank?”

“I don’t know. I think it was so people, when they were taking a piss, would think of the beach and the water and the crashing waves and have to pee. You know, one of the psycho-somatic things.”

“Not for me. I went to the bathroom because I already had to pee. The psycho-somatic connection I had with the shell was sometimes I got constipated and thought that I had sand in my crack.”

“Well like you said, it is a crazy world.”
Metafictional Heroes

This is a tribute to my heroes who have entertained me and who have shown me a form of writing that seems as comfortable and as soothing as a warm bath. From them I have learned to embrace my madness as if it were my kin.

It was 5:15 on a Tuesday. I think it was Tuesday, February 17th or it might have been Tuesday, February 24th. I can’t really be sure since every Tuesday looks the same, but I am sure that it was 5:15 on Tuesday and I, Italo, and Barth (most people called him John but he always seemed to me to have one of those last names that you refer to someone with, like Graaff or Connell) we’re watching the five o’clock news at 5:15. Though I can’t remember all the details as to what it was that the victim had done, it was obvious that he had gone too far. I mean, you really can’t do something like that and expect to get away with it. Someone is going to do something about it, and apparently someone did. The victim’s name was Colby and despite the reported threats on his life, no one did anything to prevent his hanging. Even Bill Carl Bill, a local lumberyard owner who had his business in the town that Colby lived in, said to the reporter that was interviewing him, “Yeah, these guys came by the yard. Want’d know what pine would cost ‘em. I said how much pine. They said enough to build one of ‘em dang fangled contraptions you use to hang people with. You know what I me, with the drop floor and all that crap. So I tell ‘em about $5,000. I was thinking I’d shoot high to see if they pay kind of cash. They then asked how much for some rope. So I sold them some rope. So much depends on good lumber and good rope, you know.”

Well sure enough the rope was all they needed. Whoever it was that was threatening Colby decided that instead of a “dang fangled contraption,” a tree was just as
good. However, they did get Colby a band for his sending off and they did get a fully
stocked bar and catering service. As Barth, Italo, and me sat on the old brown couch with
broken springs and an armrest piece that slid out of place from time to time, we stared at
the blue illuminating screen of the TV. We continued to watch the reporter reporting
about the Colby incident, when Barth said, “I like Colby. It isn’t too pungent. It isn’t too
mild. Really.” He then took off his beret and scratched his bald head.

With little regard to what Barth had just said, Italo said, in Italian, “I can’t believe
that they could get a fully stocked bar with caterers to come all the way out into a swamp.
We can’t even get Bert to hurry up and get here.”

“I’m sure he is going as fast as he can. Of course his ‘fast as he can’ could be a
little faster,” I replied trying to disregard Italo’s easily triggered temper.

“Oh please. You know he’s off dick’n around. Where was he coming from
anyway?” questioned Italo.

“Originally?” I asked.

“Of course originally.” said Italo irritated with my obvious need for details.

“I don’t know, his mother, Mrs. Eco?” I replied.

“Not that originally,” said Italo.

“He was coming from his house.”

“Well what the hell is taking him so long?”

“Well maybe he’s having car trouble.”

“He’s right you know. His car has been acting up,” said Barth.

“Come on, Barth. Your not going to support his claim are you? Give me a break.
He doesn’t have half the talent we do and you’re going to support his claim?”
Rather irate, I stood up, literally and figuratively, to Italo’s remark. “So now it finally comes out. You’re not pissed off at Bert. You’re pissed off because I put you here, in this situation, and you have to put up with me. You have to be my friend for a few minutes, or at least the amount of time it takes a person to read a short story, and it torques your lug nut. Confess.”

Standing up and facing me, eye to eye, Italo’s large Romanesque nose that looked like he stole it from a bust of Julius Caesar was touching the tip of my nose. He then said in a calm but stern voice, as if he was speaking with God’s approval, “All right, I will confess. I will confess that you are a wonderful individual and I have enjoyed your presence.”

“Oh, well thank you Italo.”

“That isn’t what I meant to say. You’re putting words into my mouth. How dare you do that! Just who the hell do you think you are?”

“I’m the writer.”

Barth chimed in, “He does make a good point, Italo. After all, how do we know that any of the things we have been saying, or the manner in which we have said them, are in fact our own words?”

Not willing to lose the battle, Italo simply said, “Fine. Then I will let him have his way, but I will not like it, unless of course you would like to impose your opinion as to what I like and dislike?”

“No. You may have your thoughts. Italo?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks for being here.”
“You’re welcome. I think”

Just as we had finished our debate as to why Italo was here and why he had to be, the telephone rang. Barth, being the closest to the phone, picked up the receiver. “Yes? Hey Bert, where the hell are you? Your car broke down? Sure, I’ll come get you.” Barth hung up the phone and looked at me with a facial expression of approval. Italo, shaking his head in disgust, quietly said, “You cocky sonofabitch.”

Barth got up from the couch leaving an indent where he had been sitting. “I’m going to go get Bert. He’s broke down, at least his car is.”

I said to Barth, “Don’t forget your keys, because the key to the car is not the car despite what you think about automobiles.”

“Jesus, how corny is that joke. You were doing pretty well up until that turd fell from your mouth. Besides, I doubt many will even get that joke.”

Through my own laughter I told Barth, “It doesn’t matter. It’s my tribute and if people do get it, well it can only add to the story. It really can’t take much away. At least I don’t think so.”

Barth opened the screen door and let it slam shut behind him. He then came back inside, almost immediately, patting his pockets and saying “Okay, asshole, where are my keys?” Italo reached over to the wood photo-finished coffee table that was in front of us and picked up Barth’s keys. “Here,” he said as he tossed the keys into the air. Barth caught them with one hand, and as he turned towards the door to leave again, he said, “I think that I am thinking that this is getting out of hand.” He then walked outside, down the sidewalk, got in his car and drove off.
Italo, as he was sitting down, said to me, “I think he is right. This is getting a little out of hand.”

“Italo, my friend. It was never in the hand, only in the mind. Besides, I made Barth say that.”

Italo just looked at me and rolled his eyes as he let his head fall backwards on the back of the couch and released a sigh. I sat back down on the far side of the couch and resumed my former position of slouching and falling into the illuminating trance of the TV that eventually put me to sleep.

Though the clock told me that an hour and a half worth’s of time had passed, it seemed like only a small blank space to me. I woke up to the sound of people walking into the house and talking about something that I prefer not to waste time in describing, especially since it was an unimportant conversation and more of a tool used to wake me up. As I rubbed my eyes and wiped the drool that had migrated from my mouth to my neck, I peered at the door to see who was here. I knew one of the individuals was Barth, and therefore Bert had to being following, but who was with them?

“Hey, wake up. Rise and shine.”

Italo sluggishly lifted his eyes, saying, “It’s about time, Bert.”

“It wasn’t my fault that my car broke down. I don’t control the universe.”

“No you don’t; some other asshole has that job.”

“You know Italo, hypertension is a killer. Perhaps you should relax,” I said. “So, Bert, who’s your friend?”

“Oh, hell I’m sorry. Guys, Pat Couture. Pat Couture, guys.”
“Nice to meet you,” said the voice of a five foot nine inch white man, who looked to be about 22, but would probably lie to you and tell you that he was really 23 according to the Chinese method of counting age. He had brown hair and blue eyes that were hidden behind round-framed glasses, similar to Barth’s. I could not help but think that the only reason he had the glasses was because they looked like a pair Barth would wear. Though I didn’t really know the guy, I knew this Pat was not going to be good for the story, especially since I didn’t know how he got here, in the story, in the first place. I looked at him and said, “So, Pat. Where did you find Bert?”

“I was waiting next to the side of the road, sitting on the curb, right where Bert’s car broke down.”

“Sure enough,” interrupted Bert. “He was waiting at the exact spot where my car came to a halt. Well not the exact spot, but a little in front of it. But while I was waiting for Barth, Pat and I started talking about books and I asked him he wanted to come over.”

“And I said ‘yes’ so I’m here.”

“Yes you’re here. I don’t know how, but you’re here,” I said with a slight smug tone, hoping that Pat would get the hint that he was not welcome, since I didn’t bring him here. But unfortunately he’s one of those arrogant, smug, dense bastards that you have to beat over the head with a keep out sign before they get the point that they should leave. In a desperate hope to rid myself of this Pat character, I decided to eliminate him immediately with a heart attack. I thought that I would even have him shit himself for an added touch of technique, but right as I finished planning my plot, nothing happened. It was strange and my lack of control caused me to panic, but I didn’t want to alert the
others. I tried again, but he was still there, taking a drink of his beer. He didn’t even choke when he took his swig. He just continued to laugh and joke with all the others.

Something was seriously wrong and I had no idea what it was because I had lost all control. I attempted other things, simple things, like taking a bite of pizza, or standing up, but I was paralyzed. Though I was nervous and borderline scared, I wasn’t even sweating. I didn’t feel that ‘I got to pee’ sensation or anything. I tried to shout. I wanted to say, “Hey, what the fuck is going on?” but I couldn’t open my mouth, I couldn’t blink an eye. Everything was out of control.

During my panic that went unnoticed by everyone else, I heard Barth say to Pat, “So, Pat. Obviously if you were talking to Bert about books, you read, but do you like to write also?”

In his obnoxious voice I heard Pat reply, “Yes I do enjoy writing. I like it very much in fact.”

“Well, what is it about writing that you enjoy so much?”

“I thought you were going to ask that next. I like the way that an author can manipulate the characters. Though the author may try to let his or her characters do their own thing, really, at any point, the author can change the tempo of the story, change the point of view, and change who is in control. The author can play God in a fictional world.”

As he finished the last syllable of his sentence, Pat turned his head and gave me a half smile. It looked like a satanic grin of pride and success. In my moment of terror, I prayed. I prayed to the gods of writing to send down a messenger and save me from this
hell that I have gotten into. I wanted vengeance for the deceit I had been shadowed in.

And as miracles happen, my prayer was answered almost immediately.

The screen door blew open like an explosion of twenty pounds of C-4 was behind it. As it hung on just a portion of the bottom hinge, a bright white light shown through the doorframe. Nothing could be seen through the light except for the silhouette of a man walking closer and closer. As he entered the room, the light seemed to dim and there he stood. Dressed in a white suit, with a white shirt, a white tie, and large brimmed white hat was Borges. Amidst his brilliance, everyone but me, since I still couldn’t move, knelt down on one knee. Italo, who was the closest to Borges, reached out and grabbed his hand. As he kissed his ring he said, “Don Borges.”

Barth asked, “Don Borges, what causes you to grace us with your presence?”

In a throaty, exasperated voice, Borges said in Spanish, “I have come as the guardian of fiction. I am here to ensure that what is done is not broken. What is to be will be as the writer chooses.”

I marveled at his words and I felt a sensation of joy. I knew my prayer was answered. The story would end, as it was suppose to. I would have leapt in triumph if I were able to move, but for some reason I was still paralyzed. While all was silent, Pat was the first to rise. I thought to myself, this is it. The end. He will grovel for mercy and receive none. But all he did was say, “I’m going out for a smoke.” He then sidestepped around Borges and walked outside.

Borges took out a .44 magnum that had Clint Eastwood’s autograph along the barrel and fired two shots into my chest. One in each lung. And that was it.
I was lying on the floor, most likely staining the carpet red; my eyes were still open; I was conscious of my thoughts. I could also hear what the others were saying around me, especially as Italo, Barth, Bert, Pat, and Borges hovered over saying stuff like “Holy Shit!” and “Yah, he’s dead.” While they were looking down at me, and I was gazing up at them, I saw another person join the men circled around me. The person was wearing a black, wool shroud with a large hood that was pulled over his head, hiding his face. He then took both of his hands and pulled back the hood. It was Roland Barthes, the angel of death. Barthes, after staring at me for only a moment, turned his head to Borges and said, “Well George, I see you have another one for me.” Barthes then picked me up and threw me over his shoulder and headed toward the hole where our front door used to be. With each step he took I could feel air escape through the holes in my body.

Italo said as Barthes carried me out, “You know we have a dumpster out back? You could use that if you want?”

Barthes replied, in French, “Not to worry. I bring my own when I travel.” He walked outside, down the sidewalk, and flopped my body into a wooden cart that creaked under my weight. From looking out of the corners of my eyes, I could see that I was not alone in my suite. From the left corner of my eye, I could see a man with dark hair and an eye patch. From the right corner of my eye, I could see another man, rather large with a white beard and white hair. He had a large stuffed marlin tucked under his arm. Both these men were dead, like me, and based by their attire, I thought for sure that Barthes was taking us to a pirate ship. But after looking again, I realized that Joyce was on my left, and Hemingway was on my right. Then Barthes grabbed the handles of his wooden cart, lifted up with a hump, and started walking forward, pulling the cart behind him, and
singing, “I got a lovely bunch of coconuts.” While being dragged to some destination that another has chosen for me, I realized that I was never in control, but a pawn, or maybe a rook. Even as a dead man, and despite all adages, I was still telling this tale from the point of view of a dead narrator who really wasn’t really narrating.

*No authors were hurt during the writing of this story. In fact, they weren’t even present. The narrator was not real, and Pat Couture really did not leave the room to have a smoke.*
What Does It All Mean?
Metafiction Techniques in “Absodiculous”

All the stories in the second part of this thesis, in one way or another, reflect the aspects of metafiction that were mentioned earlier in part one. The stories have self-consciousness, frames, and/or a reader-writer relationship, but the degree to which each story utilizes these aspects varies. This short essay will illustrate how the stories are examples of metafiction, comparing them to the aspects of metafiction mentioned in the first part of this thesis, and stories by Italo Calvino and John Barth, as well as other metafiction writers.

The first story in the collection is “Everyyperson.” Like Barth’s Chimera and Calvino’s Invisible Cities, this story is based on another story. It is framed inside a medieval morality play called Everyman. However, the story is not a re-writing of the morality play. Though the first disclaimer mentions that the author has changed the morality play to a more politically correct play, the reader will never actually come to the talked about Everyyperson play that the narrator has revamped.

By the third or fourth disclaimer—or perhaps it would be more accurate to call them glimpses into the narrator’s life—it becomes apparent that the reader will never get to the Everyyperson politically correct play. In fact, by the third or fourth glimpse in “Everyyperson,” it is apparent that the short story is not about the re-writing of the morality play, but rather about a narrator’s slow decline into financial, emotional, and spiritual depravity, all based upon the author’s delusion that his politically correct book is going to save the world. The reader can decipher all this information through the disclaimers.
A reader is in direct contact with what the author is saying through a disclaimer. With the use of self-consciousness, I am trying to connect with the reader in the hope that he or she will understand that the disclaimers are the story. The new morality play *Everyperson* is not what is important, and by using disclaimers I can relate to the reader that the fictional author of *Everyperson* is speaking to the reader directly, since disclaimers are the author’s words to the reader.

A final note concerning the title “Everyperson” relates to the self-consciousness and intertextuality of the story and the author’s tragic realization that stories are not going to save the world or change people’s attitude. Aware that all I was doing was telling a story, I tried to use concepts that Calvino used in *Invisible Cities*, in which I make it known that all I am doing is telling a story. Barth, also, is trying to tell a story in *Chimera*. His storytelling motive is especially clear when the reader learns that “Perseid” is nothing more than a story that Bellerophon is reading. In making sure that storytelling is just storytelling, I wanted to express my opinion that in metafiction, stories are not going to save the world, and *Everyauthor* is not a savior but a storyteller.

The second story in the collection is titled “To Write a Two-Page Story.” I remember writing this story after a writing professor said that it is very difficult to write a two-page story with all the elements that make a story a story. Thinking that I was being really clever, and adopting Calvino’s style of self-conscious storytelling from *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, I decided that I was going to prove my professor wrong and write a metafictional story that was aware that the author was going to write a two-page story and that was all. The self-consciousness in the story is seen in the author’s
conscious voice, which is aware that a story is being crafted. “To Write a Two Page Story” is a prime example of how a reader-writer relationship can exist through play.

By playing with the story, the reader can believe that he or she is the narratee, similar to “Everyperson” and Barth’s The Floating Opera. Similar to the narrator who speaks to the reader in The Floating Opera with comments such as “would you please excuse me,” the author of “To Write a Two Page Story” makes comments like “I’m thinking intently right now,” and asks open-ended questions which the reader could believe that the author is directly addressing him or her.

Though “To Write a Two Page Story” is the most self-consciously aware piece in the collection there is also a visual aesthetic that relates to the self-consciousness of the story. Aware that I am trying to write a two-page story through a narrator who is also trying to write a two-page story, I change the font size throughout the story, starting with size 12 and going to size 7. This change in the font provides a visual impact that reflects my self-consciousness in trying to write a two-page story. Since I want the story to be only two pages, I am going to try and do anything I can to ensure that the story remains to be only two pages. When it looks as if I am not going to be able to do that, I start to change the font. Making it a slow change, I illustrate that I am trying to make everything fit in exactly two pages, rather than just shrink it all at once and not allow the reader to see that it is difficult, if not impossible, to write a two page story.

The next story in the collection is “An Occurrence in the Life of Dr. William Tade, receptionist; D.D.S.” In this story, I was trying to use the self-consciousness that was found in eighteenth-century novels, in which the reader is actually acknowledged, such novels as The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy and Tom Jones. Also, as in
"To Write a Two-Page Story," I was focusing on the simple storytelling. With "an occurrence" in the title, I wanted to stress the point that this story was nothing more than an instance in a person's life, granted, though, an abnormal instance in an already abnormal life.

While eighteenth century novels served as examples of the self-conscious language I wanted to use, I also was attempting to use the story’s language as a frame for the tone of this story. Though I do not use numerous nouns and verbs in "An Occurrence in the Life of Dr. William Tade, Receptionist; D.D.S," I do try to maintain a very formal tone, and write longer than usual sentences. The story is also written in a more traditional manner, similar to Barth’s *The Floating Opera*, due to the story’s attentiveness to characters and plot, rather than to the story’s artificiality. This use of eighteenth-century techniques is supposed to frame the story in a time when grave robbing was being used as a way to acquire cadavers, giving the story not only a self-consciousness, but a tone and topic that were prevalent in the eighteenth-century.

The fourth story in the collection is simply titled "Dialogue." For some time I have been pondering the idea of writing a very short story that is based on the way in which people really communicate on an everyday basis. Rather than write about an abnormal day in a character’s life, I decided to write about an average day in two characters’ lives and what these characters would talk about. The dialogue is, for the most part, question and answer. The idea for this piece came from three postmodern works that are not mentioned in the critical essay, but are still metafictional. The first one is Donald Barthelme’s short story “The Emerald,” which consists almost completely of dialogue in a question-and-answer format. The second source of inspiration came from
Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*, in which the two tragic characters are a couple of average guys who are talking with one another while they are waiting for a someone named Godot. Though Beckett’s play has a much darker side to the story than “Dialogue,” the manner in which his characters speak, with a matter-of-fact tone, was a large help, as was Barthelme’s story. The third source of inspiration was Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildensttein are Dead*. In “Dialogue,” I wanted to achieve that very quick comment/response style that Stoppard used in his play.

The reader-writer relationship in “Dialogue” is rather weak, not leaving much room for play or a connection to form between the writer and the reader. However, the use of a tongue twister, “she sells sea shells down by the sea shore,” provides not only an opening line for the story, but a frame in which the reader can indulge him or herself in the witless communication between the two nameless characters. The use of self-consciousness allows me to take a tongue twister and use it as an actual topic of discussion. It also allows me to have two characters, for whom the reader has no description, and make them anonymous characters to represent anyone and everyone. This is a representation to illustrate how at times, in our ever-busy lives, we do not talk about anything important, no matter how important we might think it is. The story, therefore, comes to be about pointless conversations, or in other words, the point of the story is pointlessness.

The fifth and final story of the collection is a tribute to my favorite writers, poets, and critics, titled “Metafictional Heroes.” Though there are a number of writers, poets, and critics I would have liked to include, the ones I wrote into the story are the ones I admire the most or were the ones best for a laugh. The story starts off with a narrator that
could be assumed to be me if the reader wished to play with the story. However, later in the story I do make an appearance as a character, so at that moment, the reader's concept of play in the story has to be revised. The reader has to assume that the narrator is someone else. As for the other characters in the story, Barth and Calvino both make an appearance. Donald Barthelme is also incorporated in the story through reference to one of his stories called "Some of Us Have Been Threatening Our Friend Colby," in which friends of Colby hang him. Barthelme's story is the basis for the news program that the narrator, Italo, and Barth are watching. This becomes just one of the inside jokes in the story. The next inside joke has to do with the lumberyard owner who is interviewed by the news reporter. The lumberyard owner's name is Bill Carl Bill and he represents William Carlos Williams, a poet I greatly respect. I included a famous line from Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" in which he writes, "so much depends/ upon// a red wheel/barrow// glazed with rain/ water// beside the white/ chickens," which reflects on the necessity of specifics. Like Williams, Bill Carl Bill says "so much depends upon good lumber and good rope," which also refers to the necessity of specifics, especially if you are going to hang someone.

Other characters introduced are Umberto Eco, another postmodern writer, Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentinean writer who popularized such genres as metafiction and magical realism, and Roland Barthes, who is a critic I refer to in my critical essay. Borges's depiction as the godfather is a representation of his importance to metafiction. Barthes importance in the story is his role as the undertaker who comes to pick up the narrator after the narrator is killed. The joke behind this scene is Barthes' role as the undertaker for the author, which refers to his essay "The Death of the Author." As the
undertaker, Barthes picks up the narrator, who learned that he was never in control of the story, and puts him in his death cart next to two other authors that I admire from the modernist period of literature: James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. Then Barthes picks up the cart and pulls it away.

The metafictional stories in this thesis each have something different to explore. Each one uses self-consciousness differently and each one is concerned, on one level or another, with the reader-writer relationship. Though the stories are different, they are all metafictional because of the level of self-consciousness in the stories and the way each story experiments with fiction and notes its own fictionality.