Dreams and Reality in Richard Brautigan’s

_Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942_

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ABSTRACT

The present article attempted to analyze Richard Brautigan’s Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942 (1977) in the light of a new genre called metaphysical detective story. As a postmodern genre, metaphysical detective story subverts the conventions and features of traditional detective stories in order to go beyond simple murder mysteries and become a literary phenomenon which examines the questions being. The central questions of the paper are: Can we trace elements of metaphysical detective stories in Richard Brautigan’s Dreaming of Babylon? What is the implication of the novel as a metaphysical detective story? To answer these questions, first the features of metaphysical detective stories are introduced, and then these features are studied in the novel through the concepts of ‘parodic detective’, ‘dreams’, and ‘circular narrative’ to see how the novel has subverted and altered the tropes of hard-boiled detective stories and has become a philosophical novel picturing a bleak world, in an absurd life. The present study argues that Dreaming of Babylon is turned into a postmodern novel which deals with life in the postmodern world and explores the questions of being and knowing through its comical detective and his daydreaming in which he becomes the hero that he wants to be in life.

Keywords: Richard Brautigan, Dreams, Postmodern Novel, Metaphysical Detective Story, Detective Fiction

1. INTRODUCTION

The present article traces the themes and features of metaphysical detective stories through the analysis of Richard Brautigan’s Dreaming of Babylon to answer the following questions: Can we find elements and features of metaphysical detective stories in Dreaming of Babylon? What is the significance of these elements, and to what end they have been used? To answer these questions, the image of the protagonist as a failed parodic detective, the concept of “dreams”, and the circularity of the novel’s narrative, which revolves around the absence of narrative closure, are discussed.

First, Dreaming of Babylon and the circumstances around which it was written and published are briefly discussed, followed by a summary of the novel. In the next section, titled ‘The Image of the Parodic Detective’, the image of detective/protagonist is analyzed to see how he is a broken image of the traditional heroes and what his position is in this postmodern world. In another section, titled ‘The Function of Dreams in Dreaming of Babylon’, the concept of ‘dreams’ is analyzed as an important part of the novel
which reflexes both the protagonist’s escape from reality, and his chance to create and translate stories and act as the hero of these adventures. The myths he experiences in dreams seem to liberate him and give him a sense of purpose in an otherwise absurd world. In the last section, titled ‘Unanswered Questions and the Circular Ending of the Novel’, the ending of the novel and the subsequent lack of narrative closure are studied to see the significance of the novel’s circular narrative in which the novel ends where the detective is put almost right back where he had started.

2. Metaphysical Detective Story

Although the term ‘metaphysical detective story’ was first used by Howard Haycraft in 1941 to describe the philosophical significance of G. K. Chesterton’s series of books titled Father Brown, it took almost three decades to the idea of detective stories being and becoming philosophical was continued by William V. Spanos and Michael Holquist. Holquist, for example, wrote that metaphysical detective stories are different from the traditional detective fiction in that they become complex stories which do not have ‘neat’ endings and no answer is provided to the questions raised by the ambiguities in the novel, and he continues to explain that metaphysical detective stories solve (or at least attempt to solve) life rather than investigate death as in traditional detective stories. [1] In 1999, Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney’s edited volume titled Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism was devoted to introducing the genre of metaphysical detective fiction in that they become complex stories which do not have ‘neat’ endings and no answer is provided to the questions raised by the ambiguities in the novel, and he continues to explain that metaphysical detective stories solve (or at least attempt to solve) life rather than investigate death as in traditional detective stories. [2] Metaphysical detective fiction is a relatively unexplored genre which turns an otherwise entertaining genre into a postmodern phenomenon which examines epistemological and ontological questions rather than merely narrating crime stories.

3. Dreaming of Babylon

In the early seventies, Brautigan decided to experiment with different literary genres, and he “vowed to write a novel each year, each novel of a different subgenre.” [3] Through these experiments Brautigan explored different literary forms, often a hybrid of different (and sometimes juxtaposing) genres, and pushed the boundaries of these forms, and mixed “existing genres in a pastiche style to map out a means by which new narrative forms could be configured.” [4] Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942 became the fourth and the last genre book Brautigan wrote, and he never finished the five genre books that he had planned. [5] The book was not a critical success, and most critics panned the novel. Joe Flaherty reviewed the novel, writing that “Brautigan delivers a litany of screwups and lame jokes” and Rob Swigart, in the San Francisco Bay Guardian, described the novel as “a cotton candy souffle, pretty to look at but not very wholesome.” [5] But gradually, Dreaming of Babylon gathered a cult following years after Brautigan’s death, especially between
those who shared Brautigan’s interest in man’s imagination as a way to liberate him. Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942 tells the story of C. Card, an ineffectual private eye who hasn’t had a case in months. He is struggling for his everyday meals, and he has borrowed money from all those around him, and cannot find someone to turn to. He has not paid the rent for a few months and his landlord, an old lady, is always waiting for him to express her disgust. He has finally got a client he has not seen yet, but the said client wants him to carry a loaded gun. He struggles to find bullets for his empty gun. He asks around, from friends and those he used to know, one of them being Sergeant Rink who is a police investigator until he manages to get a loaded gun from Peg-leg, a friend who works at a morgue. While all of this is going on, Card spends his time dreaming of Babylon, in which he is a hero, and can be whatever he wants to be. He finally meets his only client: A woman who he only calls the Blonde, a mysterious woman who drinks beer like truckers, and with a bodyguard whom Card calls the Neck. The Blonde asks Card to steal a corpse from the morgue, and meet her at the graveyard at midnight, and then pays him the first installment. While Card is on his way to the morgue to make a deal with Peg-leg to get the corpse from the morgue, he sees two men carrying something from the morgue to their car. He gets the corpse the Blonde wanted, the body of a beautiful girl, and puts it in the trunk of the car. After a confrontation with another group who were also trying to steal the corpse, Card finds out that these men were hired by the Blonde to steal the same corpse. Card decides to find out what is going on. He puts the corpse in his refrigerator, and goes to the place of the meeting to ask for an explanation, and more money. There he finds Sergeant Rink trying to handcuff the Blonde, but the Blonde explains that Rink has got nothing against her. The Blonde, the Neck and Sergeant Rink leave the graveyard to go and have a beer, while Card finds his mother in the graveyard next to his father’s gravestone. Card and his mother decide to leave the graveyard and go home, while Card admits that he is right where he had started, but now he has a corpse in his refrigerator.

4. The Image of the Parodic Detective

The title of Brautigan’s novel, Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942, specifies the genre to which it supposedly belongs. Even the cover of the book, featuring a tough-looking detective being surrounded by other characters while the corpse of a beautiful woman is lying underneath his picture, suggests that the story is similar to the old ‘40s’ hard-boiled stories but in fact, it is anything but. Perhaps one can see the subtitle and the cover of the book as the first indications/clues as to read this novel against the traditional detective stories. As will be shown, Dreaming of Babylon is not a typical detective novel. The plot itself does not involve murder or any other kind of crime being committed except the one that the detective, who is supposed to be the hero, commits. This difference between the novel and the traditional private eye novels can be seen in Card, the detective. The image of the detective is the opposite of the one constructed in traditional hard-boiled stories. Here, instead of a typical tough private eye, we have a parodic detective who is like a comical version of the old traditional detectives. He is a coward, a loser who is manipulated by everything in his life. C. Card is defeated even before the story begins. He admits it in the first page of the novel, saying:

I didn’t have a cent to my name and my credit in San Francisco wasn’t worth two bits. I had to give up my office in September, though it only cost eight bucks a month, and now I was just working out of the pay telephone in the front hall of the cheap apartment building I was living in on Nob Hill where I was two months behind in my rent. I couldn’t even come up with thirty bucks a month. [6]}
Aside from being a failure as a human being, Card is also a disappointment as a private eye. This is evident both from other people’s opinion about him and in the story itself. Early in the novel, when he visits Sergeant Rink to borrow bullets or money to buy bullets, Rink directly tells Card what he thinks of him, saying: “What can I do for you except give you directions to the Golden Gate Bridge and a few basics on how to jump? When are you going to give up this silly notion of you being a private detective and get a paying job and out of my hair?” [6] Rink does not think Card is a detective (let alone a good one) neither does his mother. His mother has no respect his profession and thinks that he is wasting his life and that he is a burden. Later in the story, when Card hesitates to call his mother, as he does each week, he recalls earlier phone conversations with his mother that start almost the same way, when she tells him that “if this is my son, then he must have given up his private-eye nonsense and now he has a decent job.” [6] Card’s relationship with his mother seems rather complex even though it is only implied in moments when Card hesitates to call her or when he remembers their earlier conversations or incidents. Card’s mother blames him for killing his father by throwing his ball in the street where his father died when getting the ball, [6] and this has created a void he is trying to fill, perhaps by trying to be successful, someone to be proud of. Something which he fails to do in real life, and can only achieve in his dreams of being a hero in Babylon. Beside an ex-girlfriend who had told him that he is a no-good detective, and he’ll be a perfect bellboy instead. [6] there is another instant, a rather important character who also plays an important role in the novel and who also doubts Card and his profession: Pegleg, his friend at the morgue. When Card visits him at work, to borrow some bullets, he offers his thoughts about Card being a detective saying: “Why did the person choose you? They’ve got real detectives in San Francisco. They’re in the phone book.” [6] And later on saying: “Face it, pal. You’re not any good at this private detective business. If my wife was cheating I’d hire Donald Duck to find out who she was doing it with before I’d hire you, and I’m not even married.” [6] All these examples of Card being an incompetent detective, who is seen as a failure to everyone he knows, emphasizes his dissimilarities to hard-boiled detectives. He is more of a parodic version of those heroes who had come before him. The reader also sees Card’s condition in his own descriptions. Not only does he acknowledge how poor he is, but he describes his apartment, sometimes with vivid details. Early in the novel, he explains his situation and talks about his apartment, saying: “My apartment is so dirty that recently I replaced all the seventy five-watt bulbs with twenty-five-watters, so I wouldn’t have to see it”, [6] and several pages later returns to the apartment, and it is the same thing, just as his life hasn’t progressed at all: “The dank grubbiness of my apartment hadn’t changed while I was gone. What a rock bottom hole... Jesus, how could I live the way I was living? It was a little frightening.” [6] This is not how one imagines a detective. Living in a dirty hole of an apartment, penniless and disrespected.

Card’s inability to be a good detective is also shown in a few scenes in the novel. He has a poor memory, and cannot figure out the simplest things. When he visits Sergeant Rink, he sees Rink looking at a letter opener which is a murder weapon. [6] Later in the story when he visits Peg-leg and he mentions the letter opener, Card cannot remember why a letter opener might be important: “She was stabbed with a letter opener?” I asked. That rang a bell but I couldn’t place it. Somehow it was familiar.” [6] Another example of his incompetency to detect and see the details is seen when he visits the morgue to get the corpse from his friend Peg-leg, he witnesses two men carrying out a big bag but he cannot imagine what might be in the bag, saying: “I wondered briefly what was in the
bag. It was kind of late to be taking things out of the morgue”, [6] and only ten pages later, when it is revealed that those men were stealing a corpse, can he conclude what was in the bag. Card is also a man with no moral. He once acknowledges that he is willing to do anything for money, [6] and when he finds out that his landlady has died, he is happy and excited [6] and only responds by saying “Good”. [6]

The whole book is narrated by Card, our detective, and yet he also fails to be a good narrator. There are times when he cannot “keep track of his own narrative development”, [3] and makes mistakes in narrating the story. The most vivid examples of such moments is when, early in the novel, he visits his friend Peg-leg to borrow bullets, and he says to the reader: “Peg-leg walked me out to the front door. He moved quickly and gracefully for a man with a peg-leg. Did I mention that before? I don’t think I did. I should have. It’s kind of interesting: a man with a peg-leg taking care of dead people.” [6] Being a bad narrator also explains the repetitions in the novel where he expresses his optimism for the future and also keeps explaining that he always gets lost in his dreams. These moments and the fact that he easily gets lost in his daydreams make him some sort of an unreliable narrator only through whose point of view the reader can understand what is going on in the story.

There are moments when Card (as the narrator) implies that he wants to be like the detectives in books and movies, and references to these works can be seen throughout the novel. One of the earliest examples in the novel is when Card recalls a conversation with his mother where she tells him what he thinks of the private eye business: “I know you’re sorry, son, but why are you a private detective? I hate those magazines and books. They’re so seamy.” [6] This is an example of the self-preferentiality of the whole fictional premise of the novel, and of course, a critique of the fake ‘seamy’ nature of the traditional novels in which characters and stories are often formulaic, if not simple and recycled. It is as if everybody is aware of how fictional these stories are. There is also a moment in the novel when Card is lost deep in his adventures in the dreams of Babylon, where he actually imagines his situation in Babylon like a story in crime magazines. He says, “I had just finished doing a private-eye mystery in detective magazine form like a short novel in Dime Detective. As I read the novel paragraph after paragraph, page following page, I translated the words into pictures that I could see and move rapidly forward in my mind like having a dream.” [6] He is aware of all the stories written and published before him, and he desires to be just like those tough private eyes appearing in stories published in cheap magazines like Dime Detective.

If one examines the main characters of the novel, it seems as if the detective story, the proper traditional hard-boiled story, should have been about Sergeant Rink and not C. Card. It is as if while Card is the narrator of the novel, it is Rink who acts, at least partially, as the hero. Sergeant Rink, once Card’s colleague from when he wanted to join the forces, is tough a cop/detective who is not afraid of getting his hands dirty, as he confronts the men trying to steal the corpse and punches one of them while torturing another by putting him in the corpses’ freezer. He knows how to investigate and find the truth. We first see him early in the novel when Card visits him at his office and sees Rink investigating a letter opener, a tool used to kill the victim in a case. Later, Sargent Rink somehow figures things out and catches the men who were trying to steal the corpse, and later on, he somehow finds out that all of this leads to the mysterious Blonde, therefore he goes to the meeting by the graveyard at midnight. Even Card himself admires Rink for being the successful cop/detective he dreamed to be, saying, “Sergeant Rink had a reputation of being a very tough cop, and it was a reputation that he lived up to 100%. I really had to admire him.” [6] Expect for the ending, Sergeant Rink acts as the
embodiment of the traditional hard-boiled detective. Rink fails as a hero, of course, because his actions lead to nothing, and this can be interpreted as another clue to Brautigan’s depiction of the failure of the traditional detective to save the world and bring order to the society. In this bleak world of San Francisco in the early 40s, in which the world is amid the World War II and after which the world will not be the same anymore, heroes don’t seem to win. The novel seems to be Brautigan’s “most extreme statement of the futility of life.” [7] This absurdity of life is, of course, softened by Card’s unusual life and his daydreams, and the funny incidents and encounters that he has.

5. The Function of Dreams in Dreaming of Babylon

In his Historical Dictionary of Postmodernist Literature and Theatre (2007), Fran Mason dedicates a small section to Richard Brautigan, and when describing his novels (especially his late novels), he writes that Brautigan’s novels are “inward looking and deal with characters’ inability to face up to reality.” [4] This is true, at least partially, in the case of Dreaming of Babylon. In the novel, C. Card, our detective/narrator, is trying to survive while trying to make sense of life. In a world, and a profession, filled with violence and war, he seeks shelter in his dreams, his dreams of Babylon. Card’s dreams of Babylon in the novel have two functions in the novel, both of which seem to be equally central to the novel’s theme: One as an escape from reality, and second as a metaphor for the process of creation, and creating a fictional world.

The first function mentioned above is, perhaps, the easiest one to detect, especially if one thinks about Card’s failure as a detective, his messy life, his financial situation, his poor memory and etc. While reality has nothing for C. Card, and he constantly fails at even the simplest things, and struggles to find something to eat, Babylon is a safe haven, a paradise in which he is a success. The world, especially in 1942 and in the midst of catastrophes, wars and human deprivations, is not the ideal place to live, but Babylon becomes both a shelter and a way to escape reality, something which he does whenever he possibly can.

Card prefers dreaming to the reality, saying “I’d much rather be in ancient Babylon than in the Twentieth Century trying to put two bits together for a hamburger.” [6] But the relation between the dream world and Card’s life is dual. It both fosters his imagination and prevents him from achieving great things in life. He explains this in the novel, once saying: “Dreaming of Babylon got the best of me. I would have been a good cop, too. If only I had been able to stop dreaming of Babylon. Babylon has been such a delight to me and at the same time such a curse.” [6] The imaginary world of Babylon seems to have stopped him from achieving his goals time and time again. First it was his chance of being a successful baseball player which was ruined because he started daydreaming about Babylon right when he was about to swing the bat and hit the ball, [6] and then it was when he was trying to be a cop, just like his friend Sergeant Rink, but Card did not pass the final examination because he was lost in his dreams. [6] So although dreams of Babylon work as a temporary way out of the world’s miseries, Card has been lost into it so deep that he fails even when actually living.

But Babylon is a place in which Card has an imagined freedom, and can be whomever he wants to be, any hero in any form. This liberates him and gives him a (false) sense of importance and confidence. Therefore, he manages to be the hero of the dreams in different forms. As he explains to the reader: “Sometimes I played around with the form of my adventures in Babylon. They would be done as books that I could see in my mind what I was reading, but most often they were done as movies.” [6] Each adventure, each form which he talks about, is like a different genre in which he plays the protagonist, often saving the world.
of Babylon from danger. This leads us to the second function of the dreams by which he becomes the author of his own adventures. Card’s dreams of Babylon differ from time to time as he changes the genre of the adventure. In the first of his adventures in Babylon which he talks about, a dream which had sprung from Card’s first dream of being a baseball player, Card is a famous baseball player playing in front of some fifty thousand people. Talking about the fans coming to see his ‘home runs’, he explains that “I think they were glad to be at the ball game watching me hit home runs. It certainly was a lot better than going to war.” [6]

Even in this glimpse of his dream adventures we see traces of his thoughts about war, and how this imaginary world is preferred to the one outside. Card has many names in his Babylon adventures, like Ace Stag, Samson Ruth, Smith Smith. His dreams take different shapes, in one he has the most famous detective agency, or in another dream he is a cowboy in Babylon, and his imaginary girlfriend, named Nana-dirat, is kidnapped by ‘the bad guys’ and he rescues her and almost marries her. [6] In yet another dream, he is a military general and the girl is a nurse who cares for him when he is wounded in a battle, and she bathes his face while he suffers through hot nights (ibid.). In other forms, some similar to the literary works he had read, he plays the role of “a Babylonian Hamlet”, and Nana-dirat plays the roles of Gertrude and Ophelia. [6] He makes up or adapts stories, changes them, plays the hero in such stories, and these situations become real for him. What had started as a hobby, becomes a full-blown occupation, always creating characters and situations in Babylon. Card admits that sometimes he adapts/translations parts of a story he has read (or something he has watched), and plays it in form an adventure in Babylon:

I had just finished doing a private-eye mystery in detective magazine form like a short novel in Dime Detective. As I read the novel paragraph after paragraph, page following page, I translated the words into pictures that I could see and move rapidly forward in my mind like having a dream. [6]

The process of Card’s dreams can be rather complex. While he is a failure as a detective and a human being, he is a great author/translator in the world of dreams, and he spends a great time making stories and names and titles. He only wants the best for his dreams. Some chapters of the novel are only him finding titles or names for his adventures or his protagonists. His most important dream concerns the story of the perfect hard-boiled detective who is trying to save the world from Dr. Abdul Forsythe, the scientist who makes homeless people walking shadows to build an army and take over the world. At first, he spends his time finding a title for the adventure, saying: “I ran a hundred titles through my mind. The best ones I came up with were: The Horror of Dr. Abdul Forsythe. Adventures of a Private Eye in Babylon. The Shadow Robots Creep.” [6] In yet another chapter, he tries to find the perfect name for his detective, saying: “Some of the names were good but so far I hadn’t come up with one that was perfect and I wouldn’t settle for less than a perfect Smith.” [6] He does not want to settle for anything less than perfect, and it is a bit ironic that the name he finally chooses is Smith Smith, which seems to lack the innovation he was looking for, even the character of the villain, Dr. Forsythe, is an imitation of Ming the Merciless from the comic book Flash Gordon. [6]

It is interesting to examine Smith Smith’s adventure, titled ‘Smith Smith Versus the Shadow Robots’, which turns out to be the latest dream Card has of Babylon because it works as the perfect example of his creations and his power of imagination, an adventure which also tells us something about the genre(s) with which it plays. The villain of the dream, Dr. Abdul Forsythe, is trying to get his hands on “Mercury Crystals” [6] to turn people (mostly the homeless) into mindless shadow robots who follow his orders. He wants to dominate the whole world with this army of shadow robots. Smith Smith, who is the most
famous private eye in Babylon and has 3 operatives working for him, is hired by the man who invented and created the mercury crystals, Dr. Francis, to stop Dr. Forsythe from controlling the world. As examples were given earlier, the reader experiences the adventure being created from scratch, and we see the stages of its creation, just like a novel or an adaptation, and interestingly enough, while this adventure seems to be a work of cross-genre, supernatural combined with elements of hard-boiled detective fictions, the adventure works as a perfect detective story in which a traditional pulp story is being played. Smith Smith, however fake and forced he may feel, is the tough detective Card wished to be. The world of Smith Smith, Dr. Forsyth and the shadow robots, the poor souls who are stacked like newspapers in a warehouse, is evil and dark but it is nothing compared to the war-ridden San Francisco of 1942. Only one of these worlds can be saved (by Card or his alter ego), and it is clear which one he chooses. The world of Babylon is imaginary and dream-like, and consists of type characters and traditional genre adventures but it makes sense as opposed to the postmodern world in which no truth can be found as C. Card, the failed detective, cannot even find answers to the simplest questions to the case he was hired to do. Card, like many of Brautigan’s characters, seems to find asylum in carefully regulated fantasies but this time, these fantasies are more lucid and more overwhelming.

The world of Babylon, the dream world, is paradoxical. While it works as an escape from failures in life, it also fosters Card’s imagination and his tendency to create and translate/adapt stories, and it also gives him the freedom, perhaps “a loser's kind of freedom”, to not care about anything in real life. It makes him numb to the world outside in which there is a war, in which he has an apartment that resembles a rat hole. There is a thin line between his adventures in Babylon and the reality and these two are always intertwined as one influences and even interrupts the other. Card prefers the former, mostly because the possibilities and the scenarios in which he can win are endless, yet he cannot help but try to maintain a basic life to be able to sustain that dream world. It is a withdrawal from the world, but these dreams do not seem to give Card a Zen-like ability to look at the difficulties of life with detachment. It just allows him to flow in the world of dreams and saves him from drowning in pity and pessimistic thoughts.

6. Unanswered Questions and the Circular Narrative of the Novel

The way the novel ends, with Card having a corpse in his refrigerator and him seeing the standoff between the Blonde and Sergeant Rink leading nowhere, the story remains a mystery which seems perfect for such a metaphysical detective story. The whole novel is a circle in which the detective ends up in almost the same situation as he was before the story, except for a few hundred dollars in his pockets and a corpse in his house. The last sentence of the novel, told by the narrator/detective, acknowledges this: “I was right back where I started, the only difference being that when I woke up this morning, I didn’t have a dead body in my refrigerator.” This in itself refers to the futility of life and the fact that nothing comes out of this existence. It is a circle to repeat over and over again, with little to no change. In the end, no order is restored and no victory (for the detective/hero) is gained. Neither the detective nor the reader can make sense of the things that happened in the novel, as many questions are left unanswered. At one point in the story, even Card himself admits that he does not know anything about his client and his role. The novel itself is fragmentary and divided into 79 short chapters with “general typographical display of wide margins, large print, and chapter beginnings in the middle of the page continue the visual impact that is identifiable as the Brautigan mode of postmodernism.”
At the end of the novel, there are many unanswered questions: Who was the Blonde? Why did she want to steal a corpse from the morgue? Why did she hire three men to steal the corpse when she had already hired Card to do so? Who was the dead prostitute? Who killed her and why? How did Sergeant Rink find out about the Blonde and their meeting near the graveyard? None of the questions stated is answered, and the reader is left to wonder if any of it made sense. These unanswered questions lead to the conclusion that nothing makes sense in this world, a world of misery and darkness. There is the Second World War in the background as something inevitable, while we only see death and misery in this world. There is no positive image of the world in the novel except when in Card’s dreams, and even then the world of Babylon is always in danger of a criminal mastermind but at least there’s a hero, Card’s many alter egos, to save the day, but in reality, it is only misery. Brautigan does offer hope in this modern/postmodern world in the form of Card’s naïve optimism, but this hope does not lead to anything, and only brings Card where he was before the story. Unlike traditional hard-boiled stories, here we never find out who the victim was and we never get to know the murder nor the client.

The novel is set in 1942, when the world was in the middle of war and destruction, and it seems like the perfect way to begin and end the novel since it works as a cycle showing how death and destruction is all around us, and the old literary genres have no place in such a world, neither do the detectives. The traditional hard-boiled detective stories belong to the past long gone, and these stories and these detectives do not seem relevant, just as western stories are not. The epistemological questions of traditional detective stories, like “who has done it?”, gave way to more complex questions regarding the human condition. While Dreaming of Babylon may seem to be a philosophical novel, it does point to the bleak world around us, a world filled with death and destruction in which disengagement from society flows [8] and the individual’s escape from the harsh reality through his daydreams seems understandable. As Farhat Mohammed Iftekharuddin points out, Brautigan “draws our attention and awakens our sensibilities to the painful world around us by means of brilliant images, subtle wit, and magically apt metaphors.” [10] This is evident in the novel when one thinks of Card’s desire to be in Babylon rather than in the world outside which is not desirable at all.

CONCLUSION

The present article attempted to identify and examine the features of metaphysical detective stories in Richard Brautigan’s Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942, and study the function of these elements and themes in the novel. As it was explained through examples, Dreaming of Babylon can be considered a metaphysical detective novel through its use of three main features of the genre: 1 - A comic detective who is a failure in life, and does not resemble the hard-boiled private eyes at all, and fails to understand what is going on around him, let alone investigate properly and find the truth(s), as in the end, he is baffled and confused more than the reader. 2 – The image of the world as a dark place in which death prevails and where everyone is miserable. Brautigan presents the reader an absurd world in which anything goes, and that there is no explanation for things that happen in the story. The detective resorts to dreams as a way to escape his futile existence and be able to create stories and play as the hero of these adventures. 3. The lack of narrative closure and the novel’s circular narrative. The novel’s circular narrative is created in such a way that while none of the questions raised by novel’s ambiguity is answered, in the end, the detective returns to the state he was before the story, therefore the story works like a cycle repeating itself, which in turn, shows
how the world is a series of repetitions, and that nothing leads to progress or to truth(s). This lack of closure is related to the novel being a postmodern work since it refrains from offering totality and truth(s) to the reader. The novel can have many meanings and can have none. By using all of these elements, and by emphasizing the role of dreams, the novel becomes a postmodern detective story which transcends the genre and turns into a philosophical novel which examines the absurdity of the world we live in. C. Card is a failed detective whose life is surrounded by death, ambiguity and meaninglessness. He tries to escape this futile existence by creating several characters and adapting several stories in his dreams of Babylon, and while he cannot help but live in the real world which is filled with death and destruction, he somehow finds a way to both escape reality and to be an author of his own adventures.

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