

REINTERPRETATION OF MARX CAPITALIST ALIENATION INTO INTERNAL ALIENATION IN *LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE* BY JOHN BARTH

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Abstract

*This paper looks at the short story *Lost in the Funhouse* by John Barth through a new angle. Karl Marx built his theory of alienation on the idea that workers lose touch with their labor, the product of their labor, other people, and their own human nature because of the capitalist system. This paper takes that same theory and moves it away from factories and wages. It looks at how a person can feel cut off from their own self even when no economic system is forcing them to work. The main character Ambrose is used as an example of this internal alienation. He does not work in a factory, yet he still feels lost, empty, and separated from his own identity. This paper argues that alienation today often comes from personal, emotional, and social pressure rather than only from labor and money. The paper uses the method created by Robert McKee to study character and story structure, and it uses the work of Erich Fromm to connect Marx economic idea to a more personal and psychological one. Real lines from the story are studied closely to show how Ambrose feels separated from his family, from Magda, and from his own mind. The paper ends by showing that this reinterpretation can help readers understand modern feelings of emptiness that many people feel today, even outside of work and money problems.*

Keywords: alienation, internal alienation, Marxist theory, self estrangement, identity, postmodern fiction, Ambrose

Introduction

Karl Marx wrote about alienation in his early work called Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Marx, 1988). He said that alienation is not just a feeling. He said it is a real condition made by the way capitalism works. In a capitalist system, workers are cut off from the product they make, from the act of making it, from other people, and from their own human nature. Marx called the last one alienation from species being. He believed that people are naturally creative and social, but capitalism turns work into something forced and empty. This makes people feel like machines instead of humans.

Marx built his idea on the earlier work of Hegel, who talked about alienation as something that happens to the human spirit through history (Marx, 1988). Marx took this idea and turned it into something about labor, wages, and property instead of only spirit and philosophy. For many years, this theory has helped people understand why workers feel small, tired, and disconnected under capitalism.

But the world today is different from the world Marx lived in. Many scholars now say that alienation is not only about factories and wages anymore (Øversveen, 2022). People can have jobs, money, and comfort, and still feel empty inside. This feeling is not always caused by an employer or an economic system. Sometimes it comes from inside a person, from their own mind, their family, their relationships, or their struggle to know who they really are. This paper calls this kind of feeling internal alienation.

To study this idea, this paper looks at a short story called *Lost in the Funhouse*, written by John Barth in 1968. The story is about a boy named Ambrose who goes on a trip to the beach with his family during the fourth of July. He is thirteen years old and going through a hard and confusing

time in his life. He likes a girl named Magda, but his older brother Peter also likes her. At the end of the story, Ambrose is left alone inside a funhouse, which is a maze full of mirrors. He is not lost because of money or work. He is lost because he cannot understand himself, his body, and his place inside his own family.

This paper argues that Ambrose experiences a kind of alienation that looks like Marx idea, but it comes from inside himself rather than from an economic system. The mirrors of the funhouse show Ambrose many broken images of who he might be. Instead of one clear identity, he sees many confusing pieces of himself. This paper reinterprets Marx structural idea and turns it into something personal and emotional, using Ambrose as an example of a modern kind of human alienation.

It is important to understand why John Barth wrote this kind of story in the first place. Barth was one of the most important writers of the postmodern period in American literature. He did not want to write simple, realistic stories the way older writers did. He wanted to remind readers that a story is always something made, something built out of words and choices, not a direct window into real life. Because of this, *Lost in the Funhouse* is full of strange breaks in the story, comments from the narrator about writing itself, and even small diagrams placed inside the text. Barth felt that many traditional story forms had become tired and used up, and he wanted to find new ways to tell a story that were honest about being a story. This is why the funhouse works so well as a symbol in his hands. A funhouse is already a place built to confuse and trick people using mirrors and moving floors, so it becomes a fitting symbol for a story that wants to confuse and trick the reader in the same way, while still saying something true about human confusion.

At the same time, Barth places a very ordinary, human problem at the center of this experimental story. Ambrose is not a strange or fantastic character. He is a normal teenage boy who is shy, smart, and confused about his body and his feelings. This mix of experimental writing and an ordinary human problem is what makes the story useful for this paper. The strange structure of the story becomes a way of showing, on the page itself, what confusion and alienation feel like from the inside. When the narrator interrupts the story to talk about how stories are built, it feels similar to the way Ambrose interrupts his own thoughts to worry about who he is. In both cases, something that should feel natural and smooth, whether it is a story or a sense of identity, keeps breaking apart into pieces.

Research Problem

Feeling cut off from your own self is becoming a common and serious problem in modern life. Many people today feel confused about who they are. They feel disconnected from their emotions, their goals, and even their own bodies. This feeling can come from family pressure, broken relationships, social media, technology, and the pressure to meet expectations that are not natural to a person. Marx theory does a good job explaining alienation that comes from labor and economic class, but it does not fully explain this newer and more personal kind of alienation. There is a need to take Marx idea and reshape it so it can explain this modern, internal experience, using a literary example like *Lost in the Funhouse* to make the idea clear and human.

Research Questions

1. How does Ambrose in *Lost in the Funhouse* show a form of alienation that comes from inside himself rather than from an economic system?
2. How can Marx theory of alienation be reshaped into a theory of internal alienation using ideas from Erich Fromm?

3. What can this reinterpretation teach readers about identity and self alienation in the present day?

Significance of the Study

This paper is useful for a few reasons. First, it helps readers understand a feeling that many people experience today but do not always have words for. Many young people feel emotionally numb, disconnected from their own desires, and unsure of who they really are. This paper gives a clear way to talk about that experience. Second, it adds something new to literary studies of John Barth work, because most studies of *Lost in the Funhouse* focus on writing style and story structure, not on alienation in a psychological sense. Third, it connects literature with psychology and social theory, showing that reading fiction closely can help explain real human feelings. This kind of connection can be useful for teachers, students, and even mental health professionals who want a simple way to explain identity confusion and emotional disconnection.

In terms of understanding modern human experience, this paper argues that people today often feel alienation from many sources beyond a job, such as social media comparison, family pressure, and constant self monitoring. This study helps explain a rising feeling of mental numbness and emptiness by showing that it has deep roots going back to a much older theory, while also proving that the theory can grow and change over time. In terms of psychology and mental health, the idea of internal alienation described in this paper gives mental health professionals another way to talk with people who feel disconnected from their own selves, without needing to give that feeling a heavy or frightening label. In terms of identity and selfhood studies, this paper brings the idea of the self back to the center of a theory that used to focus mostly on economics and class. This shift helps researchers ask new questions, such as how a person builds an identity, how society quietly shapes that identity, and how a person can slowly lose connection with the parts of themselves that feel most true and most their own.

Literature Review

Several scholars have studied *Lost in the Funhouse*, but they usually look at it from a writing and story point of view instead of a psychological or Marxist point of view.

Tanner (1971) wrote about Barth in his book called *City of Words*. He said that Barth shows a world where reality is hard to reach directly. Instead, everything is built and rebuilt through language and story. Tanner explained that Ambrose tries to tell the difference between what is real and what is only illusion, and this shows that identity in the story is not fixed. It is shaped by the words used to describe it. Tanner also said that the funhouse works as a symbol for both the real world and the world of fiction. It is a place full of mirrors, confusion, and repeating reflections. According to Tanner, Barth stories make the reader aware that they are reading a story, which is a method later called metafiction.

Abu Jweid and Ali Termizi (2015) explained that Barth builds the story around a strange and layered kind of narrative. Their paper looked at how Barth mixes old story styles with new experimental ones. They argued that Barth writing shows both a criticism of tired old story forms and a way of building something new out of them. Their work focused mainly on story structure and narrative theory, not on the emotional or psychological life of the character Ambrose.

The idea of alienation from Marx has also been studied and updated by newer scholars. Øversveen (2022) wrote a paper that looked again at Marx later writings and argued that alienation should be understood as something that happens when the results of a person work are taken away

and turned into capital. This paper focused mainly on economic and social structures, not on personal or emotional experience.

Fromm (1955) took Marx idea in a very different direction. In his book called *The Sane Society*, Fromm said that alienation is not only about factories and wages. He said a whole society can become alienated, and people inside that society can feel cut off from their own feelings, needs, and creativity. Fromm believed that alienation is one of the biggest problems for mental health because it takes away a person sense of being real and alive. Fromm idea builds a bridge between Marx economic theory and a more personal, psychological understanding of alienation.

More recent psychological research supports this shift toward personal alienation. Chaudhary and Reddy (2025) studied people with strong perfectionist habits and found that many of them feel a kind of self alienation. They feel disconnected from their true feelings, they hide their real emotions, and they feel like they are wearing a mask in front of other people. Their study showed that self alienation is a real and common experience, even without any factory or wage system involved.

Alienation has also been studied in health research. Øversveen and Kelly (2022) explained that alienation theory can help researchers understand why people feel powerless and disconnected in modern society, even when they are not doing hard physical labor. This shows that alienation theory is being stretched by scholars beyond Marx original economic focus, into new areas such as public health and personal wellbeing.

Taken together, these studies show two separate paths of research that rarely meet. On one path, literary scholars such as Tanner and Abu Jweid and Ali Termizi study *Lost in the Funhouse* as a work of language and story structure. They are mostly interested in how Barth builds his story, not in what his characters feel on the inside as human beings. On the other path, social theorists and psychologists such as Øversveen, Fromm, and Chaudhary and Reddy study alienation as a lived human experience, but they rarely use a literary story as their main example. Fromm comes the closest to joining these two paths, because he was interested both in Marx economic theory and in the emotional life of ordinary people, but even his work does not look closely at a specific story or character.

Research Gap

Even with all of this work, there is a clear gap in the research. Most literary studies of *Lost in the Funhouse* focus on language, story structure, and postmodern writing style. Most studies of Marx alienation focus on labor, class, and economic systems. Very few studies connect these two areas together. There is very little research that uses a piece of literature like *Lost in the Funhouse* to show how Marx idea of alienation can be reshaped into something personal and psychological. This paper tries to fill that gap. It takes Marx structural idea, adds Fromm psychological understanding, and uses it to read Ambrose experience as a form of internal alienation rather than only economic alienation.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative and interpretive method. Instead of collecting numbers or running surveys, the paper reads the primary text of *Lost in the Funhouse* closely and pulls out lines that show alienation, confusion, and disconnection in the character Ambrose. This kind of reading is often called textual or document analysis, and it is common in literary research because it lets a researcher study meaning, symbol, and emotion inside the words of the story itself.

The data for this paper comes from two places. The first and main source is the original short story written by Barth, read closely and carefully more than once, with attention paid to any line describing Ambrose thoughts, his body, his family, or the funhouse itself. The second source is a small set of secondary materials, including literary criticism about Barth work.

To organize the reading of the character, the paper uses Robert McKee method of story analysis. This method asks a reader to first find the deep theme of the story, then look closely at the main character and his goal, then study the conflicts he faces and whether they come from outside him or from inside him, then study the turning points that push the story forward, then look at how the character changes from the start of the story to the end, then study the shape of the story as a whole, and finally connect all these parts together into one clear meaning.

Textual Analysis

This section studies lines from the story to show how Ambrose experiences internal alienation.

Alienation from Self

Early in the story, the narrator explains that Ambrose feels something strange about himself. The text says he is at "that awkward age" and struggles with wondering what makes him different from other people (Barth, 1968). The narrator goes even further and describes this confusion directly, saying, "There was some simple, radical difference about him; he hoped it was genius, feared it was madness, devoted himself to amiability and inconspicuousness" (Barth, 1968). This line shows that Ambrose does not fully understand his own mind. He is not sure if his difference makes him special or broken. Instead of dealing with this confusion directly, he hides it and tries to appear normal and pleasant. This is a clear form of internal alienation, because Ambrose is not separated from a job or a wage. He is separated from his own understanding of who he is.

Later, inside the actual funhouse of mirrors, this feeling becomes even stronger. One well known description of the mirror room explains that a person "can't see yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way" (Barth, 1968). This shows that Ambrose cannot ever get a full, clear view of himself. His own head, his own presence, blocks the view. This mirrors Marx idea of alienation from the self, but instead of being blocked by a factory system, Ambrose is blocked by his own body and mind.

This point matters a great deal for the argument of this paper. Marx said that a worker under capitalism cannot fully see or own the value of what he produces, because the system itself gets in the way. Ambrose faces a very similar wall, except the wall is made of his own body and his own thoughts rather than a factory owner or a wage system. He is not stopped by another person taking his labor away from him. He is stopped simply by being himself, by having a single head that can only look from one angle at a time. This small physical detail becomes a large symbol. It suggests that some forms of alienation do not need a boss, a class system, or private property at all. They can grow out of the basic condition of being a self conscious young person trying, and failing, to see the whole picture of who he is.

Alienation from Others

Ambrose also feels cut off from the people closest to him. His attraction to Magda, described in the story as "very well developed for her age" (Barth, 1968), causes him confusion and shame rather than closeness. Even though he wants to be near her, he cannot express this

feeling in a simple or comfortable way. Instead, his brother Peter takes Magda into the funhouse, while Ambrose is left behind, alone in the maze of mirrors. This physical separation mirrors an emotional separation. Ambrose realizes that "to get through expeditiously was not the point" of the funhouse (Barth, 1968), which shows that he misunderstands the true purpose of the maze in the same way he misunderstands his place among his family and peers.

The description of the father as "tall and thin, balding, fair complexioned" (Barth, 1968) and of Peter and the uncle as having "dark hair and eyes, short, husky statures, deep voices" (Barth, 1968) shows how different Ambrose feels from the physically confident men around him. He does not share their ease or their confidence. This adds to his feeling of being an outsider even inside his own family.

Marx wrote that capitalism turns human relationships into something transactional, where people compete with each other instead of connecting with each other in a natural way. Something similar happens inside Ambrose family on this trip. Even though nobody in the car or on the boardwalk is selling anything or exploiting anybody for profit, there is still a quiet competition running underneath the surface. Ambrose watches his older brother move easily and confidently toward Magda, while he himself stays frozen with worry and self doubt. Instead of feeling supported by his family, Ambrose feels measured against them and found lacking. He is physically present with his mother, father, uncle, and brother the entire time, yet he feels almost completely alone with his private fears. This shows that alienation from other people does not always need an economic cause. It can also be produced by comparison, insecurity, and the simple pain of feeling different from the people closest to you.

Symbolic Alienation and the Funhouse

The funhouse itself works as a symbol of Ambrose inner alienation. Just like Marx believed that the worker becomes a stranger to the product of labor, Ambrose becomes a stranger to his own reflection. The narrator explains that Ambrose realizes, "more clearly than ever, how easily he deceived himself into believing he was a person" (Barth, 1968). This is one of the clearest lines in the whole story. It shows Ambrose questioning whether he is even a full, real person, or just a confused set of reflections and roles.

The story also describes an imagined power to see everything hidden, saying that if Ambrose had "X ray eyes" (Barth, 1968) he would understand the deeper truth behind ordinary places like restaurants and dance halls. This shows that Ambrose feels there is a hidden reality he cannot access, similar to how a worker under capitalism cannot see or control the full value of what he produces. Ambrose feels that something important is happening just underneath the surface of normal life, but he cannot fully reach it or understand it.

Toward the end of the story, the narrator explains that Ambrose accepts he will "construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator", though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are constructed (Barth, 1968). This line shows the final and saddest form of Ambrose internal alienation. He does not become one of the people who enjoys life directly. Instead, he becomes someone who builds experiences for others while staying separated from real connection himself. This is very close to Marx idea of alienation from the product of labor, but here the product is not a physical object. The product is meaning, story, and connection itself, and Ambrose is cut off from enjoying it, even though he is the one creating it.

The Story as Its Own Funhouse

Barth adds one more layer to this feeling of alienation, and it is found before the story even begins. Readers of the full collection are asked to cut out a small strip of paper with the words "Once upon a time" on one side and "There was a story that began" on the other, and to twist and join the two ends together, which creates what is called a mobius strip, a loop with only one continuous surface. This playful instruction turns the whole book into a kind of paper funhouse before Ambrose ever steps inside the real one. It shows that Barth wants the reader to feel a small piece of the same confusion that Ambrose feels, caught inside a loop that has no clear beginning and no clear end. This detail supports the idea that alienation in this story is not only something that happens to a character. It is also something built into the shape of the story itself, so that the reader experiences a small, gentle version of being lost, the same way Ambrose is lost.

This connects back to the theoretical framework used in this paper. Marx alienation is structural, meaning it grows out of the shape of a system rather than the personality of one person. In a similar way, Barth builds alienation into the very structure of his story, not only into the personality of Ambrose. The narrator interrupts the story, comments on its own construction, and refuses to give the reader one simple, comfortable ending. Fromm psychological reading of alienation helps explain why this matters emotionally. If a whole society, or in this case a whole story, is built in a way that blocks clear connection and clear identity, then even a thoughtful and intelligent person like Ambrose, or a careful reader of the story, will end up feeling a version of the same confusion. The structure and the character reflect each other, the same way two mirrors in a funhouse reflect each other into infinity.

Conclusion

This paper took Marx theory of alienation and moved it from factories and wages into the mind of a young boy named Ambrose in *Lost in the Funhouse*. Marx believed that alienation happens because of an economic system that separates workers from their labor, their products, and other people. This paper showed that a similar kind of separation can happen without any economic system at all. Ambrose feels cut off from his own identity, from his family, and from the girl he loves, not because of money or class, but because of confusion inside himself. By using Fromm more psychological view of alienation, along with Robert McKee method of studying character and story, this paper showed that Ambrose experience in the funhouse can be read as a symbol of a modern kind of internal alienation.

This reinterpretation is important because many people today feel emotionally lost in a similar way. They are not always suffering because of a boss or a paycheck. Sometimes they are suffering because they cannot see themselves clearly, just like Ambrose in the hall of mirrors. This does not mean that Marx original theory is wrong. Marx was right that economic systems can hurt and alienate people, and his ideas are still important for understanding class, labor, and money in the world today. This paper simply argues that alienation has grown beyond the factory walls Marx first described, and now also lives quietly inside personal identity, family life, and emotional experience, where it is harder to see and harder to name.

Future research could use this same idea to study other characters and other stories, or could use real interviews and surveys to see how common this kind of internal alienation is in everyday life outside of fiction. Researchers could also compare Ambrose to characters from other cultures and other time periods to see if this same kind of internal alienation shows up in different settings, or if it is shaped in different ways by different societies. Understanding this feeling, and giving it clear words, can help more people talk about it honestly, instead of feeling alone with a confusion they cannot explain. In the end, Ambrose becomes more than just a boy lost in a beach

town funhouse. He becomes a small, human mirror for a much larger and more modern feeling of being lost inside oneself.

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