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Elements of Post-Modernism

in *Sweet Thursday*

Postmodern writing is a type of literature which largely emerged in the mid-late twentieth century, following World War II. The genre is often classified by more recently developed literary elements such as intertextuality, parody, irony, fragmentation, and more; and is further characterized by its often negative look at the postwar world and the many seemingly insolvable issues in society. In addition, postmodernism marked the birth of a new style of storytelling in which much of the focus laid on interconnectedness in communities or even society as a whole rather than on individualism. American author John Steinbeck portrays many of these qualities and more in his romantic novel *Sweet Thursday*.

Postmodern writing may be recognized by its reliance on experimental techniques and conventions such as paradox, intertextuality, and dark humor. Steinbeck's utilization of intertextuality is particularly notable in this novel, with several references made to classic tales such as *Snow White* (Steinbeck 145) and *Dracula* (Steinbeck 158), in addition to other references such as an allusion to "Wedding March" from the opera *Lohengrin* (Steinbeck 163). Steinbeck also creates a somewhat fragmented narrative in his efforts to force the reader the piece the story together

themselves by taking in the various elements which work to indirectly develop themes, characters, and settings; and using this information to draw conclusions about the personas and their actions. As is typical of postmodern writers, Steinbeck incorporates unreliable narrators and somewhat unrealistic plots in *Sweet Thursday*. Steinbeck reflects this distance from reality in his creation of heavily stereotyped characters. Many of the characters, including Doc, were drafted for the war, and several of the characters allude to the war throughout the book; for example, Steinbeck mentions that Doc was honorably discharged two years after the war victory (Steinbeck 1), and Mack referred to World War II as “the Big War” (Steinbeck 4). Steinbeck does not only work as a postmodern writer in his development of characters and settings, but also in his ideology which becomes apparent through the dialogue and inner thoughts of his very universal characters. Like many postmodern authors, Steinbeck often chooses to dismiss direct definition and characterization in his stories. Another postmodern element of Steinbeck’s writing in this book is his tendency to focus on the community of Cannery Row as a whole and how each of the individuals living there communicate with each other and contribute to the overall function of the society. This look at how individuals of a society affect one another may be considered very postmodern due to the author’s choice to focus on the idea of interdependence and his lack of focus on individualism. Within this novel, there is also a strong acceptance of the fact that humans can not be perfect, and an understanding that relationships take work, as may be seen through Doc and Suzy’s efforts to improve themselves so they may be in a happy, functional relationship with each other.

The manner in which Steinbeck chooses to develop his characters excellently reflects his reliance on the postmodern style of writing. Ideas of what love is “supposed” to be are somewhat twisted in Doc and Suzy’s minds by common stereotypes and the fear that the other is not as committed. When Suzy claims that she has no room of her own, multiple times in the story though in differing words, this signifies her not having achieved the independence and self-sufficiency to feel safe and fulfilled in a relationship. Alternatively, Doc is struggling to escape a low point in his life, and to accept help from others. He has only ever truly understood how to live happily on his own, and is initially not yet prepared to live codependently with Suzy. Other characters hold familiar traits that complement the development of those personas, some of these traits could even be classified as common and contentious stereotypes. These stereotypes which nearly separate the characters into seemingly different species help to complement Steinbeck’s idea that each of his characters are simply varying organisms in the figurative tide pool of Cannery Row.

The community of Cannery Row holds a variety of characters, one of the most arguably offensively stereotyped characters being Joseph and Mary. Steinbeck brings forth these stereotypes in subtle comparisons, and references to their backgrounds. One example of a comparison may be seen on page eight: “Doc and Joseph and Mary were about as opposite as you can get, but delicately opposite. Their differences balanced life figures of a mobile in a light breeze” (Steinbeck 8). Another example of this stereotyping of Joseph and Mary may be seen on page nine: “When the gang wars started in the Mexican district of Los Angeles, Joseph and Mary rose above Pachucos” (Steinbeck 9).

Similarly, the character of Suzy is written to fit the stereotypical qualities of a prostitute of that time: “Suzy was a pretty girl with a flat nose and a wide mouth. She had a good figure, was twenty-one, five-feet-five, hair probably brown (dyed blonde), brown cloth coat, rabbit-skin collar, cotton print dress, brown calf shoes (heel taps a little run over), scuff on the right toe” (Steinbeck 27). Suzy’s fake leather purse has a mirror, a comb with two of its teeth missing, peppermint lifesavers, eighty-five cents, lipstick, and aspirin (Steinbeck 27). She also used to work as a waitress (Steinbeck 30). The characters of *Sweet Thursday* are primarily characterized through their dialogue and internal feelings and conflicts. The main direct characterization Steinbeck uses is when he applies stereotypes in descriptions of his characters, such as the very detailed description of Suzy.

Postmodernism is a type of literature which came to prominence in the mid-late 1900s, following the second world war. This style is often classified by a somewhat pessimistic tone, as well as a large focus on interconnectedness in entire communities rather than on individualism. Through indirect characterization, a focus on community, the incorporation of a postwar setting, and a blunt understanding of the imperfections of humanity, Steinbeck explores a very postmodern love story which goes beyond a connection between just two individuals, and instead revolves around the relationships, interdependence, and inner workings of an entire community, or ‘tide pool.’