

Ideology in *Cloudstreet* -

Textual Ideology

When we talk about the ideology of a text we are talking about the complex sets of beliefs, values and ways of thinking which are reflected in, endorsed or produced by the text.

Note that certain ideologies may be *represented* in a text but not *endorsed* by the text. For example, we might find that a text represents (i.e. presents the reader with) patriarchal ideology but does not endorse it. It is important to get your head around this distinction.

It is also important to note that a text does not necessarily present the reader with a coherent, consistent, single ideology. Ideology in a text may be confused, conflicting, inconsistent or multi-faceted. This is especially the case with postmodernist texts which often deliberately refuse a single coherent ideological explanation. This is part of the postmodernist strategy of rejecting coherent explanations which lay claim to truth status, preferring rather eclecticism and uncertainty as strategies more appropriate to modern existence.

Ideology and Context

The ideologies we find within a text are influenced by the context of the text - the circumstances surrounding its production. In other words they are influenced by the ideologies of the society in which the text was produced. However, and this is important, it is rare that we find a literary text which simply reproduces an existing social ideology. Rather we often find, and certainly do find in *Cloudstreet*, a complex amalgam of social ideologies. Writers are not simply scribes for society. They are themselves a complex intersection of social and psychological forces and this is reflected in their writing.

In *Cloudstreet* we can identify the influence of the following contextual ideological factors:

- Winton's Christian upbringing and ongoing commitment to Christianity, which encompasses a belief in a benign supernatural being who directs humans from a state of 'sin' - disharmony, dissatisfaction and a lack of belonging - to a state of 'grace' - harmony, satisfaction and a sense of belonging
- Winton's situation as a writer in a postmodernist literary context which implies a postmodernist refusal to accept that all aspects of human experience and existence can be fully explained in terms of a coherent pattern (note that this belief conflicts with the previous one)
- Winton's working class background and inheritance of an Australian literary tradition of representations of working class life which values 'battling' as a way of life and accepts a life lived in terms of half-felt understandings and superstitions, rather than rational, developed understandings; and which values a sense of belonging to family and community

- Winton's working during a time in Australian history which saw a movement towards an attempt at reconciliation between Aboriginal and other Australians, and a discovery and appreciation by non-Aboriginal Australians of particular values within Aboriginal culture - especially strong family and community ties, a sense of place as an integral part of being, and a sense of the spiritual.

The ideology of *Cloudstreet*

The first point to make, therefore, is that the ideology of *Cloudstreet* is complex and not necessarily consistent. It is a complex amalgam of values and ideas drawn from a range of social ideologies. We can say that *Cloudstreet* represents not a coherent philosophy, but a number of different sets of values and ideological positions. Keeping this in mind, we can identify particular ideologies at work within the text:

An understanding of life in terms of a religious pilgrimage

This clearly draws on Christian tradition but *Cloudstreet* does not reproduce a wholly Christian ideology. While there is a sense of the supernatural at work in the lives of the characters, this is represented as an eclectic amalgam of traditional Christian attitudes, working class superstitions and Aboriginal spirituality.

This is perhaps the dominant ideology (because it is the dominant theme) of *Cloudstreet* but there are other ideologies at work, some separate, some intersecting and some conflicting.

A valuing and celebration of working class experience and of the resilience of working class people - an appreciation of 'battling' and 'battlers'

This draws on the working class tradition in Australian literature but it is also an ideology strongly associated with evangelical Christianity. This valuing of working class experience is particularly highlighted by the celebratory ending of the novel with its valuing of 'how we've all battled in the same corridor time makes for us'.

A valuing of the importance of family, community and place

Again in producing this ideology the novel draws on Christianity and the tradition of the Christian community; the working class tradition of solidarity; and Aboriginal culture.

An acceptance and valuing of the diversity of human experience and understanding

This is illustrated in the position the reader is invited to adopt towards the characters: especially in the first half of the novel the experiences and understandings of all characters are presented in terms of equal validity. As the novel draws to a close, while it is true that the understandings of Rose and Quick are privileged, throughout the novel as a whole no experiences or understandings, however strange, are discounted or presented as aberrant. It is significant that in *Cloudstreet* there is no real villain. Even the mass murderer is eventually reconstructed as not aberrant at heart: "... there's no monsters, only people like us," Quick says of him.

This ideology is also illustrated in the novel's eclectic approach to ideology - the way it draws on a diverse range of ideological traditions and positions.

In this respect the novel reveals the influence of postmodernism which refuses the privileging of one particular ideology over others.

A refusal of final and complete explanations

This ideology reflects both postmodernism and a much older religious spiritual tradition which includes but is not restricted to Christianity, and which Winton is known to be interested in. While the portrayal of life as a pilgrimage is the dominant structuring and ideological device in *Cloudstreet* there are many events and occurrences which cannot easily be explained in terms of this construct or indeed in any terms at all. Examples include:

- the pig's talking in tongues
- the appearance and then departure of Beryl Gray
- much of the behaviour of Fish Lamb - such as his attitude towards the burning of the guy on bonfire night.