

Postmodernism, style, structure and point of view in *Cloudstreet* **Or** **Generic innovation and tradition in *Cloudstreet***

Generically

Cloudstreet, in postmodernist fashion, draws on and blends the conventions of a variety of very different genres:

1. The traditional popular literary tradition of the family saga (cf soap operas)
2. The gothic novel, which revolves around a house with a character of its own and a mystery at its centre
3. The biblical tradition, with its parables and stories of miracles
4. The new postcolonial genre of magical realism
5. The tradition of working class anecdotes and yarns.

Partly because of its rich mixture of genres *Cloudstreet* also differs from many traditional novels in that:

1. It has a meandering plot, rather than a single unified plot with a clear trajectory.

This is not that unusual – many novels consist of a series of sub-plots - but these usually reflect on and comment on each other. Also whereas most novels tie all the different threads together at the end to produce a sense of unity to the narrative, *Cloudstreet* leaves some loose ends..

It is important to note that there is a central narrative – the families’ eventual discovery of a sense of place, family, community and peace, involving the coming together of the two families through the marriage of Rose and Quick, and Fish’s achievement of his longing to return to the water. Connected to this is the house ‘settling’ and finding a sense of peace.

However there are departures from this central narrative and *Cloudstreet* is characterised by the inclusion of events and mininarratives which seem unrelated or whose connection to the central narrative is minimal, tangential, non-existent or hard to discern:

- the coming and eventual departure of Beryl Lee, the story of the pig, the courtship and marriage of Hat Lamb, the incidents involving the cockatoo and the delivery horse, some of the supernatural events such as Quick’s experience when the fish jump into his boat
- the ups and downs of Sam’s success at gambling appear to follow no discernible pattern.

The effect of these is that the novel offers a view of experience which accepts the incoherence of much human experience and a lack of a belief that life always follows a clear pattern. Thus the novel can be seen to validate a working class view of experience where one isn’t always in control of life but subject to the ebb and flow of experience. It can also be seen to offer a postmodernist outlook on life which rejects coherent and systematic narratives as the most appropriate reflection of human experience.

2. There is no single dominant character

The lack of a single central characters is somewhat characteristic of the family saga but it is not characteristic of the mainstream European novel tradition which prioritises individual experience and growth.

By departing from this focus on the individual as focal (and therefore ideological) centre of the novel, *Cloudstreet* accords greater priority and value to the experience of communities and groups – it values and celebrates collective experience above individual experience. This is reinforced by the opening and closing which focus on and celebrate communal experience and the importance of belonging to a group: “Will you look at us by the river. The whole restless mob of us”. “We’ve all battled in the same corridor that time makes for us”.

The valuing of the communal is further reinforced by the central narrative which follows a movement from separation to belonging.

This valuing and celebration of community aligns the texts with both Aboriginal cultural values and working class cultural values.

It also means that the texts reflects postmodernist inclusivity in accepting and valuing a variety of voices and accounts of experience. It values both Sam’s superstitions and Lester’s shaky Christianity. It accepts Dolly’s promiscuity and drunkenness as well as Oriel’s puritanism and hard work ethic.

However:

Stylistically the book uses a mixture of language drawn from both:

- biblical tradition – which presents a serious, mythical approach to the novel’s subject matter
- Australian vernacular – which presents a more flippant, down to earth approach

This postmodernist melding of conflicting styles invites readers to see the spiritually significant in everyday working class life by incorporating previously unvalued, marginalised (in literature at least) or denigrated ways of talking into a discourse of seriousness and high religiosity.

Its **symbolism** can be seen as a mixture of Christian, Aboriginal and working class Australian. The river brings together both Christian and aboriginal beliefs. The novel can be seen as valuing different ways of knowing – those found in Christianity along with those found in Aboriginal culture.

Point of view

There is no consistent or dominant focaliser (a character which offers a dominant point of identification for the reader and through whose mind the reader experiences the narrative). The point of view in *Cloudstreet* shifts between characters. The narrator is neither solely the anonymous narrator (but is omniscient) nor one of the characters in the novel as found in traditional novels. The narration shifts between an anonymous third person and Fish at the moment of transfiguration. Other unusual aspects of point of view in *Cloudstreet* are that:

- the narrator speaks to characters in the novel
- the narrator comments on his own situation.

Ideologically the novel presents a complex mixture of:

- Christian beliefs and values
- Working class values and superstitions – family, life as a battle, matriarchy
- Aboriginal understandings and values – esp. an emphasis on the importance of place.