

Classic post-modernist writers

Profession, Writer



Charles Dickens. Thomas Hardy. Joseph Conrad. During their time, they were considered to be realists because they shape their readers' perceptions of the world. In doing so, their writings are described to be modern and post-realist. This paper will discuss their approaches and on how their works, which we discussed this semester, are classic masterpieces simply because these transcend over time. Post-realism in literature is done when subjects are depicted on the page as how they are in daily life. There is no interpretation and embellishment.

They reveal the mundane truth. Most of the time, in post-realism, these truths are ugly and sordid. Therefore, during the 20th century, when these writers came up with their works, they were often criticized for discussing subjects at that time were deemed as taboo. Realism was the cultural movement that was quite popular in literature in the 1800s. It was the opposite of romanticism because it encouraged artists to present objects at their most real. The perceptions are undistorted by bias and it is said that realism is the objective reality.

The trend reformed the cultural movements in literature and became modernized. Cultural, political and artistic movements headed this direction at the turn of the century. It confirmed the ability of human beings to improve, create, reshape and enhance their environment. The period of modernism was during 1884 to 1914. Through technology, practical knowledge and scientific experiments, individuals are able to improve their way of life. It was at its earliest stages but these three novelists were able to become masters of the technique way before their counterparts did.

Modernism examined the aspect of existence. It ranged from philosophy to commerce. It allowed the readers to reflect without holding back and replaced the old methods with the new progressive techniques. It was the introduction on how the world must accept the changes that were already occurring. By embracing these changes and retaining some traditions, the post-realist movement came into place. (Crook, 1991, p. 32) Charles Dickens is known for his storytelling and immortal characters. With this, his literary creations received worldwide popularity which readers often anticipated for as well.

The demand for Dickens' short stories and novels didn't allow these to go out of print. He wrote serialized novels which the public eagerly waited and religiously read. Scholars who studied why Dickens' stories could reach out to his readers discovered that the author's childhood influenced his fiction. These innocent experiences assisted him in bringing these stories to life. His writing style is poetic because it combines fantasy and realism which allows readers to shift from one to the other. He was also inspired by the gothic romance theme that was made popular in the 18th century.

The downside to this writing style is that some of his characters are grotesque that they often overpower the stories. (Glancy, 1999, p 45) “Dombey sat in the corner of the darkened room in the great arm-chair by the bedside, and Son lay tucked up warm in a little basket bedstead, carefully disposed on a low settee immediately in front of the fire and close to it, as if his constitution were analogous to that of a muffin, and it was essential to toast him brown while he was very new. Dombey was about eight-and-forty years of age. Son about eight-and-forty minutes.

Dombey was rather bald, rather red, and though a handsome well-made man, too stern and pompous in appearance, to be prepossessing. Son was very bald, and very red, and though (of course) an undeniably fine infant, somewhat crushed and spotty in his general effect, as yet. " The two paragraphs are from the first chapter of Dickens' " Dombey and Son. " Dickens was an active participant in social concerns and such themes were rooted in this novel. Examples were marriages being arranged as if it were financial partnerships. Other themes were familial relationships and child cruelty.

A factor that made Dickens' works post-modernist is his take on social commentaries. He often wrote about poverty, specifically the social stratification in the Victorian society. The approach Dickens often utilized is presenting the incidences through caricatures in order to present the readers the social truth. (Glancy, 1999, p. 53) Another post-modernist theme is that Dickens often highlighted his idealism through the poignant social commentaries of his novels. A number of his novels discussed social realism and concentrated on the mechanisms of the social control which directed the lives of the individuals.

He used coincidences which only showed how idealistic his works were. Thomas Hardy is Dickens' exact opposite. He is a realist in the sense that his novels often ends in a tragic note. Hardy was an English novelist, writer and poet. Unlike Dickens, Hardy's childhood was privileged nor luxurious. His father was a stonemason and his mother provided him with his formal education. He was trained as an architect before he moved to London where he enrolled at King's College. Because of his skills in designing, he

won prizes from the Architectural Association and the Royal Institute of British architects.

He discovered he also had the knack in writing, thus he began his career as a novelist. “Jude the Obscure” was Hardy’s most controversial work. It received negative reviews especially from the Victorian public because of the brutal and unsanitized depiction of sex. It was touted as “Jude the Obscene.” It also caused further strain on Hardy’s marriage to Emma Hardy because it was said that the novel was autobiographical. Scholars pointed out that Emma was Hardy’s first love, just as Sue was Jude’s. Another evidence was Emma’s obsession with religion toward the latter years of her marriage to Hardy.

Incidentally, this was Sue’s predicament on the novel as well. In spite of the controversies, Hardy became one of the best English novelists by the 20th century. His other works “Tess of D’urbervilles” and “The Mayor of Casterbridge” were well-received by the public. His novels are set in Wessex, an imaginary world that covered the large area of the south-west and south England. (Harvey, 2003, p 23) He also wrote poetry and these were published after 1898 when Hardy took a break from writing novels to concentrate on his poems instead. Hardy was a hybrid of the rural and the architectural world.

He understood the former because he knew this as a child and at the same time, he also adapted to the changes of the latter because of how he was trained as an architect. The post-modernist approach that is apparent in Hardy’s works is his ability to capture the industrial revolution, particularly the ones that took place in the English countryside. He also set this in the

Victorian setting which makes his novels more real. (Harvey, 2003, p. 25) “ It was as old fashioned as it was small, and it rested in the lap of an undulating upland adjoining the North Wessex downs.

Old as it was, however, the well-shaft that was probably the only relic of the local history that remained absolutely unchanged. Many of the thatched and dormered dwelling-houses had been pulled down of late years, and many trees felled on the green. Above all, the original church, hump-backed, wood turreted-and quaintly-hipped, had been taken down, and either cracked up into heaps of road-metal in the lane, or utilized as pig-sty walls, garden seats, guard-stones to fences, and rockeries in the flower-beds of the neighbourhood.

In place of it a tall new building of modern Gothic design, unfamiliar to English eyes, had been erected on a new piece of ground by a certain obliterator of historic records who had run down from London and back in a day. ” That is an excerpt from “ Jude the Obscure. ” Another post-modernist theme that is common in Hardy’s works is his depiction of the rural life in the nineteenth century. He presents it as a fatalistic world that is filled with injustice and suffering. The lead characters in his stories are often alienated and ostracized for following their innermost desires that do not coincide with what society expects from them.

He emphasizes on the power of fate, especially on the working class. He also shows the deep human instinct and will to struggle against elemental passion. Examples are Tess in “ Tess of the D’urbervilles” and Jude and Sue in “ Jude The Obscure. ” (Morgan, 1992, p. 15) “ Tess of the d’Urbervilles” was a censored novel that followed “ Jude the Obscure. ” It is a great classic

but received mixed reviews when it was first published because like “Jude the Obscure,” it presented sex in a straightforward manner that was rarely done during that time by other writers.

Hardy illustrated modernism and this was a common theme in “Tess of the d’Urbervilles.” He portrayed Tess as a woman who was able to strike the balance between the rural world and the architectural world, just as what Hardy was able to do. Hardy also discussed the separation of man from nature. In one part of the story, Angel was reduced to a skeleton when he got sick. This is an allusion to his creation of the destructive machinery. (Morgan, 1992, p. 18) There is also the double standard on sexuality which Tess had to go through.

Hardy questioned and criticized the Victorian period’s perception of female purity. In the novel, Hardy made Tess suffer in order to repent for the scenes of her forefathers. This was a common belief during that time. He also presented her heroine as a sacrificial victim which symbolized her personification of mother nature. This is the similarity Tess shares with Sue in “Jude the Obscure.” (Morgan, 1992, p. 20) “Jude the Obscure” tells the story of Jude Fawley who wishes to be a scholar. He fell in love with his cousin Sue, an intellectual who is training to become a teacher.

The apparent themes in the book that are post-modernist concerns are class, religion, scholarship, marriage and the modernization of intellectual thought along with society. It also questions whether fate has an important role to a person’s life letting it lead him to where it will or the person can eventually take the reins and control his life on his own. The accidents and the details that are encountered in the stories eventually leads to the ruin of both Jude

and Sue. The book also discussed loneliness and sexuality, in terms of incest. Sexuality also prevents individuals from following through with their dreams.

The most controversial topic that was present in the novel is marriage and on how personal dreams could no longer be fulfilled because of that. There was also the satirical look on how living a life as sophists, intellectuals and libertines often result to the condemnation from traditional society. All these themes are post-modernist. Scholars who focused on Hardy concluded that the author loved leading his characters to their downfall as if he were a sadistic god. There are also strong autobiographical references to Hardy's life in "Jude the Obscure."

Two important clues to this theory is that Hardy did not attend a university and the love of Jude's life, Emma Gifford, became more and more religious. (Harvey, 2003, p. 83) Joseph Conrad is the combination of Charles Dickens' idealism and Thomas Hardy's realism. He was one of the best English novelists of his time. Despite being Polish born, he was recognized as a master prose because of his approach on modernist literature. His style is narrative and his characters are often anti-heroic. He has been said to influence the likes of Graham Greene, DH Lawrence and even Ernest Hemingway. (Orr, 1999, p 46)

Conrad reflected on his experiences in the navy in his works. He wrote short stories and novels that showed areas of an empire and how it affected the human soul. Closely looking into Conrad's life and how this affected his work, other autobiographical accounts are the clear depictions of certain parts of the world such as South American, Malay states, Borneo and Australia in some of his novels. This was because Conrad quickly became first mate and

was already the master of his own ship by 1886. By the age of 36, he settled down and started writing.

(Orr, 1999, p 62) “Heart of Darkness” is a novella filled with symbolisms. It is a story in a story or what the post-modernist theme describes as “frame narrative.” It is the story of Charles Marlow and his recollection of his adventure in the Congo with a group of men. He was employed by the Belgian trading company to transport ivory. During this task, he then developed an interest in checking out the Kurtz. Conrad’s inspiration in writing the novel was his real-life experience in the Congo. He was there for eight and a half years before he sat down to write “Heart of Darkness.”

As a matter of fact, he was captain of the Congo steamer. Therefore, there details in the novel are quite accurate because Conrad was actually there in the Congo. “I looked at him, lost in astonishment. There he was before me, in motley, as though he had absconded from a troupe of mimes, enthusiastic, fabulous. His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem. It was inconceivable how he had existed, how he had succeeded in getting so far, how he had managed to remain-- why he did not instantly disappear.

‘I went a little farther,’ he said, ‘then still a little farther--till I had gone so far that I don't know how I'll ever get back. Never mind. Plenty time. I can manage. You take Kurtz away quick--quick--I tell you.’ The glamour of youth enveloped his parti-coloured rags, his destitution, his loneliness, the essential desolation of his futile wanderings. For months--for years--his life hadn't been worth a day's purchase; and there he was gallantly, thoughtlessly alive, to all appearances indestructible solely by the virtue of

his few years and of his unreflecting audacity. I was seduced into something like admiration-- like envy."

The previous paragraph is an excerpt of the novel which elaborates the post-modernist theme that is apparent in "Heart of Darkness." This is the ambiguity between civilization and the barbarians. A number of characters in the novel had spiritual darkness and were looking for their morals. Those who were deemed to be barbaric turned out to be the civilized characters in the end. All throughout the novel, there is the tension between civilization and barbarism. Kurtz represented the darkness which only served as the foundation to the moral structures that are often connotated to civilization.

Marlow confronted Kurtz and asked him to commit to the savagery of human instincts or to veneer in the civilization setting. Marlow was torn but between the two, it was the latter that he couldn't absolutely do. He was then horrified by what was in his heart. Conrad used the darkness in order to represent the unknown. Mr. Kurtz was the anti-hero of "Heart of Darkness." Marlow's recounts on the whole experience was also explored through the character build-up of Kurtz as well as Marlow's interaction with the Africans.

Another post-modernist theme is the novel's regard on women's naivety. There is also the struggle between the good and the evil in the characters. (Orr, 1999, p. 36) Conrad was an emotional man who was depressed and pessimistic. He doubted his self and his capabilities. He was able to discipline his craft by resorting to romantic temperament. As an artist, he focused on what could be seen and made the written word powerful by it. (Orr, 1999, p. 28) That was a post-modernist theme that was made popular by Conrad, Hardy and Dickens.

Their ability to write in a style that is similar to visual arts single the three of them out as the best in prose. They create the settings of their story, be it real like that of Conrad's Congo or fictional like that of Hardy's Wessex. Whether they choose to have their characters be confined and isolated or out there socializing, Conrad, Hardy and Dickens could do so. Literary critics comment on the works of these three novelists and recommend them for their complex narration, pessimistic ideas, profound themes and exotic styles. However, these do not put the readers off.

The ideas which Conrad, Hardy and Dickens presented way back in the 20th century are still interesting for 21st century readers. It only comes to prove that their approaches and their writing style are very modern and post-modernist. (Crook, 1991, p. 26) Modernists believed that rejecting tradition from the roots of romanticism and realism, they could make art that organized and guided individuals through the fast pace of the new century. Modernists take their cue from the Impressionists and they all believe that by redefining their art, they are able to arrange these in a modern way which anybody could relate with.

Post-realist in literature emerged from the historical backdrop that was presented by the romantic period. By responding to the architectural changes going on around them, post-realist writers in the previous centuries unconsciously became modern-writers because they replaced the themes that were dominant during the period of enlightenment by listening to their emotions and by combating the widespread conventions with taboo subjects presented in a new, truthful and sordid manner.

Influenced by the constant evolution of society, modernists such as Dickens, Hardy and Conrad present their literature in a society that embraces the social truth they are in. Most of the characters in literary creations with post-modern themes are often dissatisfied but they embarked on a journey which allows them to revive the traditional elements or way of life and at the same time discover the other world out there and the new life that opens its doors for them.