

Microserfs



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *Microserfs* Douglas Coupland attempts to analyze the lives of people whose work is closely associated with most advanced machines that have yet been made: computers. The title of the novel *Microserfs* introduces the two main ideas of the novel: it is a play on the dominant force within the computer industry (Microsoft) and the word serfs, which refers to the semi-slave groups who existed within feudal societies in medieval times. Coupland suggests that the people who work for companies like Microsoft are essentially a kind of voluntary serf.

The characters within this novel want to be machine-like for a number of reasons. First, that seems to be the characteristic which has enabled Bill Gates (the founder and CEO of Microsoft) to rise to the top of the industry. While they apparently hate their jobs at Microsoft, leading to their leaving them and attempting to set up their own company, they also greatly admire the machine-like quality that Gates brings to his work. Secondly, a machine is totally involved with what it is doing – it has no distractions that will take it away from the task at hand. Third, there is the beautiful logic of software code which contrasts with the often chaotic nature of their personal and professional lives.

In *Microserfs* the great spur for activity is the search to be “One-Point-Oh”, that is “to be the first to do the first version of something” (Coupland, 1995). Computer software is normally identified according to which version of the program it is, so to be “one-point-oh” (1.0) is to be the best. There is a machine like logic to this idea which is of course not really based upon reality: normally the first version of any program is crude and ineffective

compared to later versions which are more sophisticated and have been adapted according to the real-world experience of the software being used.

In many ways the main characters of the novel such as Daniel, Susan and Todd are removed from the real world to the extent that they need to employ someone from that world to be their “ reality-check”, that person being Daniel’s mother. The characters are obviously satirical in nature, and are taken to such an extreme that they almost seem like people who inhabit a video game.

Take for example Michael, who is a brilliant but awkward programmer who leaves Microsoft to start his own company, and decides to adopt a “ Flatlander diet” (Coupland, 1995). This involves only eating “ two-dimensional food” (Coupland, 1995) which means food that can be slid under his door, He has a screen name of “ Kraft Singles” (Coupland, 1995), an ironic comment upon his peculiar diet.

Michael is just one example of the tendency to take matters to an extreme among the characters. Todd is not just a body-builder, but an obsessive body-builder. Bug is not only experienced, older and a little more cynical than his younger fellow workers, he calls himself “ the World’s Bitterest Man” (Coupland, 1995). All of these characterizations make the people who inhabit the novel seem essentially machine-like: they are one/two dimensional, relentless in their pursuit of an end and often limited in outlook. A software program is designed to do one thing extremely well, but nothing else. In the same way the characters attempt to do one thing, or be one thing, extremely well.

The constant conflict between the need for a pure existence as a designer, body-builder, bitterest man etc. comes up against the natural human tendency to diversify and to be multi-faceted. While *Microserfs* was written before the massive explosion in Internet usage, the manner in which people are now essentially locked to their computers:- constantly checking e-mail even in the most remote locations – is a natural development of the kind of process that Coupland sees in this novel. The ongoing discussion between machine and human being, something which is reflected within Coupland's novels, continues unabated.

In conclusion, the characters of *Microserfs* seek to be machine like because they see this as a route to success. Their “king”, Bill Gates, who they leave, is nevertheless an icon to be aimed at. He seems more like a machine than a human being according to Coupland, and has all the strengths and weaknesses that are associated with this identity. The characters of this novel, wonderfully funny, but often very sad at the same time, reflect this search to be the perfect human machine. The fact is that they seem to lose their humanity along the way.

Works Cited

Coupland, Doug