

Unit 5: Murder in the Postmodern World

In this unit, you will:

- Read Rankin, *Resurrection Men*.
- Post final drafts of Essay 1 (your original mystery) to me.
- Post to me your evaluation of your work so far.
- Read intro, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.
- Complete several group and discussion board posts. See individual lessons.

Lesson 1: What Is Postmodernism Anyway?

Preview

Post to group on postmodernism in culture.
Read Introduction, *Poetics of Postmodernism*.
Post to class prediction about novel.
Email final draft of Essay #1 (original mystery) to me.

Maybe a good way to begin our unit is to talk about postmodernism, since that's the title for this unit. It's a term that's used a lot these days: almost anything can be called postmodern—Quentin Tarantino movies, some TV ads, novels with muddy endings, odd conversations. What postmodernism reflects, in all the areas of endeavor where it's applied, is a *take* on something past, a commentary on an earlier belief or period, or an application, using new materials and methods, of that earlier time.

The term originally applied to architecture, where architects moving out of the modernist, or international approach to building, looked back to earlier times—to romantic, or baroque, or classical movements, to get their inspiration. Here are three examples of architecture that show the movement.

Notice that the international, or modern, style, has very little adornment and it doesn't signal or suggest where it's located. It's a building that could be located anywhere, Boston or Houston or Taipei. And of course that's why it's called *international*. There are lots of examples of this style in almost any town, some good, many pretty awful. Look around your own setting to find them.

I chose an example of romantic architecture here, one of the most famous buildings in the world. The Empire State Building is very different from the international style since it depends on the beauty of design and adornment for its uniqueness. The curves, the spire, the arcs, the layers, all suggest characteristics of romantic style—movement, decoration, metaphor.

Postmodern architect Michael Graves often uses romantic style architecture as he designs his own buildings. He reflects the curves and graceful adornments of romantic architecture, but he does something different: he uses different materials, different spaces, different colors. He is making a *comment* on that style. In this work, the comment appears admiring and reflective. In many postmodern works, in literature as well as architecture, the comment is also ironic, suggestive of the limitations or naivete of the earlier style.

The characteristics, then, of postmodernism include:

1. Reference, either direct or implicit, to some earlier version or style.
2. Commentary on that style, often ironic or playful—sometimes critical.
3. Critique rather than assertion; that is, the postmodern move is often to offer criticism and less often to suggest solutions.

4. Playful, or ironic, relationship with audiences or viewers.

There are likely other characteristics that we'll discover as we read the next two novels in our course, *Resurrection Men* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. But these few suggest some of the differences between postmodern fiction and other approaches.

So how would postmodern mysteries offer commentary on traditional mystery styles? Think about the characteristics of mysteries, and of novels themselves, that we've been talking about as we read Auden, Griffith and Forster.

- Plot—introduction, rising action, climax, denouement, conclusion
How might a postmodern story change that plot line?
- Character—flat, round, protagonist, antagonist
How might postmodern story alter character traits?
- Theme—in mysteries, the murderer is caught—the world returns to its normal and innocent state
What might be a postmodern theme?
- Setting—can be anywhere, but usually within the story settings are predictable
How might a postmodern story play with setting?

Activity 1: Group Post: A Postmodern Work

Think of a film or TV show or music or book that you'd consider postmodern in its approach. Write about your choice to your group, and see if you can together decide what makes your work postmodern.

Activity 2: Read and Ponder: Postmodernism

Read the first few pages of the Introduction to Linda Hutcheon's study of postmodernism, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. It is difficult reading, but it gives a good beginning summary of the importance of postmodern theory to literature and culture. Use it to help you think about how this novel might be considered postmodern itself.

WEBLINK: Click here to read Hutcheon's introduction.

Resurrection Men

Ian Rankin's *Resurrection Men* is a kind of postmodern mystery, because it has some of the characteristics of postmodernism in fiction. There is a kind of critique of the law enforcement system embedded in the novel for one thing, and a kind of ironic voice that dominates the narrative too. As you read the novel, think about the ways that you find irony or dark humor or critique in the characters or the action.

Rankin is the #1 bestselling mystery writer in the United Kingdom, and he is from Edinburgh, Scotland, the setting of his Rebus novels. There are fourteen or so other Rebus novels (a new one came out this year), so if you like him, you can read lots of others.

WEBLINK: To learn more about Ian Rankin, check out: <http://www.ianrankin.net/>

The main character in Rankin's mysteries, Detective Rebus, works for a police unit in Edinburgh and in *Resurrection Men* has been assigned special duty as punishment for an inability to get along well with a superior officer. The action takes place in and around present day Edinburgh. There's a female officer who is friendly with Rebus and another young male detective who dislikes him intensely. The crime is a body found in the river, a smalltime hoodlum whom Detective Rebus has known slightly.

Activity 3: Group Post: Prediction for Resurrection Men

Before we move on, take a minute to predict what you think will happen, taking into account what we've been discussing about postmodernism. What postmodern moves might this story make? Write a small postmodern prediction to your group.

Lesson 1 Assignments

If you have not already done so, please make sure you complete the following readings and activities.

Reading

- Introduction, *Poetics of Postmodernism*.

Activity 1: Group Post: A Postmodern Work

Think of a film or TV show or music or book that you'd consider postmodern in its approach. Write about your choice to your group, and see if you can together decide what makes your work postmodern.

Activity 2: Read and Ponder: Postmodernism

Read the first few pages of the Introduction to Linda Hutcheon's study of postmodernism, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. It is difficult reading, but it gives a good beginning summary of the importance of postmodern theory to literature and culture. Use it to help you think about how this novel might be considered postmodern itself.

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Activity 3: Group Post: Prediction for Resurrection Men

Before we move on, take a minute to predict what you think will happen, taking into account what we've been discussing about postmodernism. What postmodern moves might this story make? Write a small postmodern prediction to your group.

Activity 4: Email to Instructor: Final Draft of Essay #1 (Your Original Mystery)

Email the final draft of your original mystery to me.

Lesson 2: The Detective Against the World

Preview

Read up to Ch. 13, *Resurrection Men*.
Review Griffith, Ch. 3.
Write journal entry to me on title.
Post to group on conflict.

Reading Chapters 1 and 2, you already get a pretty clear sense that the world of *Resurrection Men* is not a world of innocence, quiet, or order. Here are the first lines of the novel:

"Then why are you here?"
"Depends on what you mean," Rebus said.
"Mean?" The woman frowned behind her glasses.
"Mean by 'here'," Rebus explained. "Here in this room? Here in this career?
Here on the planet?"

You learn something of the personality of the detective from these first few lines of dialogue. Do you hear a tone of sarcasm, or anger, in his voice as he responds to Ms. Thompson, the career counselor? You might think about what questions you have already: why he's angry, why he needs counseling, why he mentions the career and then planet. Why are we, any of us, on the planet, he appears to ask. A postmodern kind of question.

Rebus appears to be a man at odds with his superiors and with the system in general. By the end of the first chapter, he also seems to be a man in trouble with his own demons. But he's the detective, the one who's going to be charged with restoring order and calm to the disordered world around him. How will it be possible if he is disordered himself?

Consider how the setting or the characters make you feel as though the world is chaotic and perhaps won't be set right even if the case is solved. Look for clues in the language, as in the beginning conversation above, that might suggest the disorderliness of the world Rebus operates in. Notice, for example, the end of the first chapter where Rebus is in the pub.

You might also consider how this world or this detective compares with the world in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* or of the detective, Easy Rawlins, in *Little Scarlet*.

Note: Some of these ideas might be worth pursuing as subject matter for your essay #3, coming up next. Keep them in mind as we brainstorm possible topics for consideration for the last essay.

Activity 1: Journal: Meaning of the Title

For your journal entry this unit, speculate about the importance of the title to the meaning of the novel. Is it ironic? Will there be some kind of "resurrection" or renewal?

We learn in these few chapters that not only is Rebus in trouble, but he's with a group sent away because they're *all* in trouble in their jobs. All policemen and detectives, they have misbehaved

or demonstrated insubordination, and have been sent to rehabilitate themselves before they can take on active assignments in their own units. Think about the differences among these men. And think about how their assignment connects with the art dealer's murder.

We've talked about conflict as part of the plot of any story, and of course mysteries depend on hidden and overt conflicts for their plot. You'll remember that Griffith talks about the various kinds of conflict in novels, and it's well to remember them here since there are so many conflicts in this novel:

- between an individual and someone else (a fight, a murder, a difference of opinion, a war)
- between an individual and the culture the individual operates in (trouble with an institution, a rule, a cultural norm, a law)
- between an individual and the natural world (a hurricane, a fire, a mountain)
- within an individual's own psychology (desires, fears, ethics, needs)

These conflicts get acted out by Rebus, his group of fellow renegades, and the other characters in *Resurrection Men*. Think about which of these conflicts seems to dominate, if any does, and where you see conflicts occurring: Between Rebus and Tennant? Or other officers in the Resurrection unit? Between Siobhan and Hynds?

Activity 2: Group Post: An Important Conflict

Explore with your group one conflict you find important in the first 12 chapters of the novel. What does it reveal about the detective, the crime or the message?

By the time we get to the last part of the novel, our attitudes about Rebus and his world will be well established. There is an irony in the characters and the situations that is clear from the point of view of the narrator and from Rebus himself.

Irony in Resurrection Men

Look back at Griffith's chapter on analyzing fiction (Chapter 3) where he discusses irony and its uses in a novel. In general, irony points out the gap between what is and what seems to be or what might be expected to be. He mentions several kinds of irony: verbal, situational, attitudinal, and dramatic. Let's briefly review those types so you can see how they work in Rankin's novel.

Verbal irony: satire or sarcasm, understatement, overstatement. Can be bitter or destructive. Often witty.

Rebus's comment at the beginning of the novel about "here" is an example of his verbal irony. As you read, see if you can locate other examples in his comments, in the narrator's voice, or in other characters.

Situational irony: characters behaving in ways opposite to what readers are led to expect by their jobs, their situations, or their personalities. The minister who commits adultery (*The Scarlet Letter*), the prostitute with the heart of gold (*Gone With the Wind*), the rich man who is poor (*A Christmas Carol*), are all examples of situational irony. You could think of lots of others; situational irony is a popular way to get laughs or sympathy or expose hypocrisy in fiction.

Rebus is a cop who sometimes skirts the law.

Attitudinal irony: characters with attitudes or ideas that don't square with reality. Overly naïve, paranoid, deluded, disturbed. Don Quixote believes windmills are invading soldiers, the slovenly waitress a princess, the donkey a noble steed.

Are any of the characters in *Resurrection Men* out of touch with reality? I don't think so, but maybe you see some attitudinal irony somewhere. If so, write and tell the class.

Dramatic irony: difference between what characters believe and what audience or readers know. Horror movies use this device a lot. We've seen the murderer hiding in the closet. The heroine, alone in the house, immediately opens the closet. *Hamlet* uses dramatic irony when Hamlet murders Polonius mistakenly.

Do you find dramatic irony in the novel? If so, where is it? What do we know as readers that characters don't know?

Irony naturally affects the tone of the work. Whatever kinds of irony you discover in your reading of *Resurrection Men*, it's true that there *is* irony—if only a kind of weary and understated recognition that justice is hard to come by in an unjust world.

Lesson 2 Assignments

If you have not already done so, please make sure you complete the following readings and activities.

Reading

- Read up to Ch. 13, *Resurrection Men*.
- Review Griffith, Ch. 3.

Activity 1: Journal: Meaning of the Title

For your journal entry this unit, speculate about the importance of the title to the meaning of the novel. Is it ironic? Will there be some kind of “resurrection” or renewal?

Activity 2: Group Post: An Important Conflict

Explore with your group one conflict you find important in the first 12 chapters of the novel. What does it reveal about the detective, the crime or the message?

Lesson 3: A Fragile Order: The Detective's Role in a Disordered World

Preview

Complete *Resurrection Men*.

Post to group on actor to play Rebus.

Post to class final reaction.

Post to instructor final draft of Essay #1.

Post to instructor evaluation of your work so far.

As you move into the last section of the novel, you see that Siobhan assumes a direct and crucial role in the investigation and in Rebus's professional life, if not his personal one. What do you think of their relationship and her function in the novel? There are several places where the two are compared. Derek tells Siobhan to watch out or she might "end up in rehab like Rebus." When she confronts McCullough about his shady dealings with Ellen, the prostitute, Gray asks menacingly, "Did Rebus put you up to this?" Hynds' comments on her attitude, and when Rebus says, "That's just the kind of cop she is," Hynds' responds, "I begin to see where she gets it from."

There are many places where we see a kind of symbiotic, and sympathetic relationship developing between the two. You might think about the detective in collaboration with another, something we have seen in both Christie and Poe with their partners and foils. The fact that this partner is a woman might be significant.

You might find yourself connecting with one of these two main characters as you read. Rebus is flawed, ironic, beaten down even, but he is, the novel seems to suggest, on the side of the angels. Siobhan is flawed too, uncompromising, unsure of herself sometimes, and—do you think?—in love with Rebus.

The plot turns many times in the novel, and the characters who we meet briefly, whether they're victims or perpetrators who get caught in their own web, feel human and vivid. There seems to be an undercurrent of pity for some of these characters, and you might speculate about the ones we feel sorry for. Laura, Ellen, even the poor art dealer. Of course the bad guys are pretty bad.

Even if many ends are left hanging, the murderer is caught, and presumably justice is done in some way. But we end with Rebus seeing "a complete and utter waste" and shrugging his shoulders at the way things have turned out. The last chapter of the novel has Siobhan wondering about policing methods, considering with the counselor—who began the novel, remember—whether she just might be cut out to "play the game."

A clue to the title, by the way, ends the penultimate, second to last, chapter. Perhaps there is a kind of resurrection after all, even if it's small.

Activity 1: Group Post: Casting Rebus

Post to your group about whom you think might play Rebus on screen. Siobhan too, if you'd like. Think about what kind of look he should have, how his voice should be. What actor might play this world weary, angry, troubled, and good detective? As a group, vote on the actor you think best and post your selection to the class.

This book reminds me of the TV series *24*. Jack, played by Kiefer Sutherland, is always just outside the bounds of institutional propriety, and he recognizes how chaotic the world is around him. But he still tries to save everything, and in the last season, he saved the world!

Activity 2: Discussion Board: Your Reaction

Write about your reaction to the novel's ending, the murderer, the method, the closing. Do you find it predictable? Sad? Post your reaction to the class.

Reminder:

By this time, you should have posted your final draft of essay #1 to me and have a draft of essay #2 to share with your group. Remember that your mystery story will be posted at the end of our course and we'll see the variety of good stories as well as vote on our choice for best murder mystery of the semester.

Lesson 3 Assignments

If you have not already done so, please make sure you complete the following readings and activities.

Reading

- Complete *Resurrection Men*.

Activity 1: Group Post: Casting Rebus

Post to your group about whom you think might play Rebus on screen. Siobhan too, if you'd like. Think about what kind of look he should have, how his voice should be. What actor might play this world weary, angry, troubled, and good detective? As a group, vote on the actor you think best and post your selection to the class.

Activity 2: Discussion Board: Your Reaction

Write about your reaction to the novel's ending, the murderer, the method, the closing. Do you find it predictable? Sad? Post your reaction to the class.

Activity 3: Evaluation of Your Work

Email me your evaluation of your work so far.