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Susan Sontag's "The Way We Live Now" and AIDS Metaphorics: A Postmodern Approach

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of AIDS in a story by Susan Sontag within the social context of conversations held by a group of people about their sick friend and an atmosphere of sexual liberation characteristic of the postmodern era. "The Way We Live Now" (1986) interrogates the condition of postmodernity and engages postmodern artistic techniques to effectively communicate a socio-cultural theme about life in the wake of AIDS epidemic in the West late in the twentieth century. Lack of depth, consumerism, pluralism, self-referentiality, the hyperreal, and incredulity toward master narratives are the main indicators of this postmodern culture. Exploring the "postmodern" context of the story, this article links its form to its content and concludes that despite the unavoidability of metaphorical thinking about illness (the cultural model), a more practical way of dealing with patients (the bodily model) is better for the sick and those around them. The absence of the sick man in Sontag's story is an indication of the negative role of social voices in ostracizing patients, exacerbating their suffering, and mediating their fragmented life, a fact enhanced by the unmentioned disease in the story, the unidentified patient, and the lack of real support friends can provide. The loss of the materiality of the body is the story's comment on the negative role of the discursive mediation of the diseased body in the context of postmodern culture.

Keywords: Sontag, "The Way We Live Now," Cultural Criticism, AIDS, Illness, Fiction, Postmodernism, Body/Culture.

I. Introduction: Sontag and Postmodernism

In her famous essay "Against Interpretation" (1964), Susan Sontag argues against replacing the work of art by exaggerated interpretations and allegorizations that take its place or negate it. In a formalist spirit, she contends: "For I am not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased. They can be. The question is how. What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place?" (12). She concludes this article with an assertion that "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (14). Hence, this article offers a postmodern reading of her story "The Way We Live Now" not simply by way of emphasizing the story's content about sickness and social hypocrisy but by linking the story's style and form to its content. We link postmodernity as the cultural condition of life in the second half of the twentieth century (with dominant features like postindustrial capitalism, consumerism, indeterminacy, subjectivism, pluralism, self-referentiality, and lack of depth) with postmodernism as peculiar style to art and literature. We take this postmodern reading to be in service of this work of art, answering Sontag's question raised in her article "Against Interpretation" regarding the "how" of reading a text. The linkage between postmodernism as a way of life and a literary style heightens the story's message against superficial lives and negative lifestyles.

Essentially, the term "postmodern" is known to be loose and ambivalent. Fredric Jameson (1991) legitimately contends that postmodernism as a concept "is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory" (xxii). However, one aspect of postmodernism Jameson asserts is "the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (x). Using Sontag's short story, we argue that the commodification of the body and its desires, the consumption of sex/drugs, and superficial relations are characteristic features of the postmodern condition. Sontag brings together postmodern form and content in a self-conscious literary work taking the medium of the short story. Hence, we argue the location of the body within an unavoidable cultural context that negates its materiality and, instead, fosters its discursive potential. AIDS, the story shows, is a lifestyle illness and a postmodern one associated with a particular era. Just like anorexia nervosa, AIDS is a feature of life in a high-tech world with compartmentalized lives and an obsession with the pursuit of pleasure or the perfect/ideal body type. The essential premise of this article is in line with David Morris's assertion in his seminal book *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (2000) about the intersection between the body (i.e. disease and pain) and culture (i.e. illness and subjectivity). Morris claims: "Postmodern illness is fundamentally biocultural—always biological and always cultural—situated at the crossroads of biology and culture" (71). However, the body in the postmodern gets subsumed under the metaphorics of culture. Just as the postmodern favors the image/representation over the real, the body (i.e. the ailing body) is also at risk of dissolution behind its metaphors.

In fact, Sontag is well-known as an American cultural critic who wrote books and essays on postmodern themes like the non-stop photograph images (war

photographs in particular) and the mediation of our knowledge of suffering through the camera. Her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) and her companion essay "Regarding the Torture of Others" (2004) are, in a sense, postmodern reflections on the digitalization of suffering at a global scale. It is part of her aim that we should not suppress, ignore, or simply misread human suffering captured in the image but rather analyze it and assess our ways of responding to it. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, however, Sontag maintains the unavoidable importance of the hyperreal culture. She claims that "photographs are a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore" (p.4). In "Regarding the Torture of Others," Sontag maintains that photographs are closer to the "real" than words. For her, words "are easier to cover up in our age of infinite digital self-reproduction and self-dissemination, and so much easier to forget" (42). In this sense, the story is even less real than the photographs because it is mainly composed of elusive words. This shows Sontag's awareness of a postmodern age of images, signs, and copies, and thus the relevance of this culture to our conception of the body and its metaphors. Nevertheless, our study is a unique exploration of this postmodern logic in a short fictional work by Sontag. The postmodern import of her fiction is mainly unexplored, which makes this article legitimate, timely, and simultaneously original. The body itself (the one suffering from AIDS in the story) is more important than the discourses constructed and stories told about it. The silenced body, in a sense, becomes the object of "discursive" violence in the postmodern formulations of power relations.

Before we discuss the story, it might be necessary to give an overview of our theoretical and philosophical framework while highlighting relevant notions to be used in the discussion of the story in the next section. Postmodernism, a late 20th century movement, rejects the possibility of absolute truth or objective knowledge and asserts subjectivism, relativism, and the construction of individual meaning and relative moral values. Instead of fixed sexual identities, postmodernists believe in the freedom to shape one's sexual identity. Postmodernism is suspicious of religion, nationalism, science, and philosophy as ultimate principles or overall schemes for interpreting life since reality is constructed in the individual mind. In literature, writers continue their experiments with form and technique. Discontinuity, fragmentation, and intertextuality are notable features of this postmodern literature. Mixing of genres and eroding the difference between high and low culture are additional features of postmodernism. The postmodern sensibility is that of the computer age, loss of continuity, loss of meaning, shifting position of the subject, copies and images assuming the place of the original, the proliferation of signs, and the technological mediation of experience. Within this culture, the body is effaced behind its metaphorics, behind its representations and what is said about it.

In this regard, Baudrillard asserts that in postmodern times "signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real" (7), which brings about what he calls "the hyperreal." Postmodernists reject the elitism of modernism in favor of popular culture. John Storey contends that postmodernism signals "the collapse of all metanarratives with their privileged truth to tell, and to witness instead the increasing sound of a plurality of voices from the margins, with their insistence on difference, on

cultural diversity, and the claims of heterogeneity over homogeneity" (185). In Sontag's story, we will encounter a multiplicity of voices (mininarratives) negotiating an essentially postmodern epidemic, presumably AIDS, related to the consumption of unsafe sex, drugs, contaminated blood, among other things. The negotiated body becomes the subject of discourse rather than a suffering material entity, an effect the story achieves by having many characters deliberate about the condition of the diseased man. This loss of the materiality of the body is the story's comment on the negative role of the discursive mediation of the diseased body.

In an article entitled "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson argues that one way of understanding postmodernism is by viewing it as a periodizing term whose task is to "correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order –what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism" (113). Jameson locates the beginning of this period (this new social order) in the postwar period in the late 1940s and early 1950s in America. Jameson also elaborately explicates this newly emerging social order in the following terms:

> New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, center and province, by the suburb and by universal standardization; the growth of the great networks of superhighways and the arrival of automobile culture—these are some of the features which would seem to mark a radical break with that older prewar society in which high modernism was still an underground force. (125)

This new standardization entails loss of originality and creativity, and thus a culture of imitation. The postmodern culture of networking and easy flow of commodities and images privileges what the body signifies over what it really is. This effacement of the body may not necessarily be the best alternative for people living in the postmodern age, as will be demonstrated in the discussion of the story in the next section.

Finally, Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, originally published in French in 1979, defines the postmodern in terms of incredulity towards grand narratives (xxiv). He defines the postmodern as that which seeks to present the unpresentable or look for new presentations. He asserts: "A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work" (81). In modern literature, the unpresentable is missing content within a seemingly ordered form. In postmodern literature, this beautiful form is already lost. The postmodern culture is one of exhaustion and repetition. It is what can be defined in terms of lack, loss, play, and negativity. By seeking to represent the unrepresentable, postmodernism gives room to the marginalized, excluded, and

repressed impulses in our culture. Depicting abnormal lifestyles and sexualities falls within this postmodern context the story engages. The next section presents the story and discusses the way it allegorizes this distance between the sick body and its harmful cultural metaphorics by way of privileging the former.

According to Gardner McFall, Sontag "has written an allegory for our time, inspired by deep feelings about what is becoming 'such a common destiny'" (Web). In writing a story about AIDS, she was commenting on an era of sexual liberation and lack of personal privacy. AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was identified early in the 1980s. By the end of that decade—according to Lois Tyson—"a generation of men had died from it, six times the number of American soldiers killed in the Vietnam War" (331). Hence, it assumed the status of an epidemic due to its association with many unhealthy physical conditions. This story under discussion covers the AIDS crisis in the second half of the twentieth century. Using the title of Anthony Trollope's novel (1875), this innovative story uses narrated dialogue and fragments from many characters (more than twenty five) to convey a socio-cultural message. By the time Sontag wrote this story, she had suffered from cancer for many years and got treated. While cancer dominated people's imagination as an incurable disease in the first half of the twentieth century, that same status was given over to AIDS in the second half of the same century. There is a level of personal investment on Sontag's part due to her own experience with cancer and the time in which she was an active writer and critic.

In *Aids and Its Metaphors*, Sontag presents AIDS as a trope; she clarifies that AIDS is not a single illness but an open syndrome, that it is "not the name of an illness at all. It is the name of a medical condition, whose consequences are a spectrum of illnesses" (16). This broad, loose nature of this disease makes it an apt metaphor for an era. Commenting on the military metaphors ascribed to AIDS as an invasion, Sontag writes: "In the era of Star Wars and Space Invaders, AIDS has proved an ideally comprehensible illness" (18). The science/science-fiction context is, again, a suitable one for a disease that did hit industrial and technologically advanced communities that commodified the body. Within this logic, AIDS becomes symptomatic of a whole era (the postmodern) and equally its "legitimate" outcome.

In addition, in her 1978 essay *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag attempts to correct our conceptions about notorious diseases like TB and cancer, and thus to remove the myths associated with them (7). In her discussion of the shame and disgrace we ascribe to such diseases, she asserts: "Any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious" (6). She claims that a disease "widely considered a synonym for death is experienced as something to hide" (8). Such a disease is seen as a scandal, as something obscene. She argues that the metaphors ascribed to "TB and to cancer imply living processes of a particularly resonant and horrid kind" (9). This description also applies to AIDS because it is assumed to hit people with sexually deviant lifestyles. In addition to risky sexual lives, blood transfusions can be equally dangerous. The negative connotations once socially and culturally applied to the metaphorics of TB and cancer

are also applicable in the case of AIDS, which should bring the body itself, not its images or discourses, to the forefront.

II. "The Way We Live Now" As A Postmodern Allegory of the Subsumed Ailing Body

The title of the story–"The Way We Live Now"–makes it clear that AIDS is a metaphor for a style of life (in the second half of the twentieth century as the publication history of the story indicates). Risky lifestyles and sexual experimentalism would lead to social ramifications affecting both the healthy and the sick. It is the consumption of sex, drugs, smoke and even language that characterizes this era of the epidemic. In fact, analogies between the story and Sontag's theory on the myths and metaphors associated with famous diseases in works like *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988) are adequately present. However, we highlight here the postmodern framework that the story invites. The fact that the illness of the main character is not named makes the story an allegory about "the way we live" nowadays. Hence, the story is a good illustration of the postmodern culture/condition of the time and the equally related gay liberation movement. The numerous characters populating the story are types rather than fully individualized ones; they are leading superficial lives and chatting while the diseased one is often silenced, which proves the negative dominance of the cultural model over the bodily one in the postmodern culture.

The story is also a self-conscious artistic construct narrated and reported by many characters. This self-reflexive postmodern style offers commentary on the very lifestyle the story is engaging. With no apparent climax or substantial plot, the story highlights deferral of real meaning, repetition, and metafictional self-reference. The formal features of the text suggest irony and play and provide a necessary background for the story's thematic content about the effacement of the sick body behind language/culture. John Storey claims: "Rather than a culture of supposed pristine creativity, postmodern culture is a culture of quotations; that is, cultural production born out of previous cultural production" (192). Cultural exhaustion is manifested in this blank imitation/copying and recycling of what has already been said or written. This culture has lost touch with history and celebrates, instead, the empty or trivial present. The queer elements the text encodes function in line with its experimental nature and unconventional themes. The story not only breaks with realist conventions─with its lengthy unpunctuated sentences and unending reporting of events─but also employs a multiplicity of perspectives on the sick (silenced and distanced) man. In this postmodern world, commodities and consumers freely and rapidly exchange positions. The characters take turns reporting the medical condition of the patient, discussing his likes and dislikes, and gossiping about his past life. Aside from this, the story gives the impression of being "empty." Within a postmodern context, words, symbols, and dialogue seem grandiose and capture people's attention but have no real substance or essence behind them.

In Sontag's story, the sick man is the victim of social hypocrisy and gossip. Sontag's depiction of the deceitful social relations concerning the sick draws on a

literary tradition in this regard. For example, Ivan Ilych in Tolstoy's story "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (1886) also has that "queer taste in his mouth" (187) and some pain in his left side. He comes to realize the deception and lies of those around him, including his own family. Their apathy and hypocrisy make him enraged by their corresponding dishonesty and materialism. Like the man in Sontag's story, Ivan's illness is "said to be incurable" (172). In fact, Ivan's friends and acquaintances are relieved that he is the one who is sick and dying rather than them (173). The story covers his thinking about his situation and makes a case against the indifference and dishonesty of his friends: "Those lies--lies enacted over him on the eve of his death and destined to degrade this awful, solemn act to the level of their visitings, their curtains, their sturgeon for dinner--were a terrible agony for Ivan Ilych" (198). They would lie to him about his situation and deceive him that with proper treatment he will get better although he was dying. They neither really pity nor comfort him. Thus, his helplessness and loneliness are apparent.

Sontag's story, on the other hand, dramatizes how illness of a friend "superficially" affects the whole circle of his friends. However, their gossip and reporting of events shifts the focus from the sick to the social context of their reactions and observations. Thus, they live in a state of fear, hypocrisy, denial, and one of speculation about health and illness. The circle of friends gets to embody postmodern features analyzed earlier like superficiality, consumerism, subjective truth, empty repetition, among others. The story begins this way, with characters reporting what happened to the main, nameless character:

> At first he was just losing weight, he felt only a little ill, Max said to Ellen, and he didn't call for an appointment with his doctor, according to Greg, because he was managing to keep working at more or less the same rhythm, but he did stop smoking, Tanya pointed out, which suggests he was frightened, but also that he wanted, even more than he knew, to be healthy, or healthier, or maybe just to gain back a few pounds, said Orson, for he told her, Tanya went on, that he expected to be climbing the walls (isn't that what people say?) and found, to his surprise, that he didn't miss cigarettes at all and reveled in the sensation of his lungs' being ach-free for the first time in years. ("The Way" 1)

This beginning makes it clear that the strategies of citation and reporting used are juxtaposed against the social context of the story while projecting the language of the text and its self-referential strategies. Moreover, the reporting of events by many characters from their partial perspectives indicates, in a postmodern fashion, that there is no absolute truth but subjective renderings of reality. This extract is but one instance in the text of abundant, lengthy run-on sentences lacking punctuation while recording subjective impressions. The characters reduce the sick man to the matter of words, which also relegates the materiality of this body.

In addition to face-to-face conversations and superficial gossiping about the sick man, his friends make phone calls and continue the cycle of chatter about his case, thus reducing him to the level of language and discursive formation:

"I've never spent so many hours at a time on the phone, Stephen said to Kate, and when I'm exhausted after two or three calls made to me, giving me the latest, instead of switching off the phone to give myself a respite I tap out the number of another friend or acquaintance, to pass on the news I'm not sure I can afford to think so much about it, Ellen said, and I suspect my own motives, there's something morbid I'm getting used to, getting excited by, this must be like what people felt in London during the Blitz." ("The Way" 2)

In their empty conversations, the friends reiterate the mythology of AIDS as sinister, unmentionable, and secretive. Orson tells Stephen: "Listen, said Orson, you can't force people to take care of themselves, and what makes you think the worst, he could be just run down, people still do get ordinary illnesses, awful ones, why are you assuming it has to be *that*" ("The Way" 2; emphasis original). We assume that the character has AIDS because Ellen says to Quentin that her gynecologist says "everyone is at risk, everyone who has a sexual life, because sexuality is a chain that links each of us to many others, unknown others, and now the great chain of being has become a chain of death as well" ("The Way" 10). It is known that the exchange of sexual fluids and blood transfusions are primary ways of contracting AIDS. Hilda's seventy-five-year old aunt contracted the disease "from a transfusion given during her successful double bypass of five years ago" (16). Commenting on Donna Haraway's "cyborg" notion of leaky bodies and broken boundaries with relation to AIDS discourses, Allison Fraiberg writes: "The reality of HIV has opened up and relegated bodies to an integrated system of, among other things, sexuality. This bringing to consciousness of the presence of AIDS has broken down the traditional demarcations of the body, blurring the boundaries between inside and outside" (Web). Under postmodernism, the discrete body becomes a myth and is replaced by a desire for integration, fusion, and circulation. The postmodern culture believes in no limits to bodily shape and youth. Science can be used to carve our "elastic" bodies─making us bigger, thinner, or look "younger." This man had unprotected sexual relations with men and women like Lewis, Quentin, Tanya, Paolo, among others, thus losing the private space of his "body." Those who do not have the disease might be carriers and should also be careful with sex.

Consumption is a dominant postmodern theme in the story. Within the postmodern consumer culture they live in, his friends cram flowers in his room and bring him chocolate, champagne, helium balloons, and various art objects. They discuss what items he might like to consume over his stay in the hospital: "Is there anything else, asked Kate, I mean like chocolate but not chocolate. Licorice, said Quentin, blowing his nose. And besides that. Arent't you exaggerating now, Quentin said, smiling. Right, said Kate, so if I want to bring him a whole raft of stuff, besides chocolate and licorice, what else. Jelly beans, Quentin said" ("The Way" 3). In popular culture, chocolate may be deemed as an aphrodisiac. The repeated references to chocolate might signify the friend's inability to view the sick body without sexual objectification. Although AIDS, as we have mentioned, is not a specific disease, the friends subconsciously define it as a sexual one (i.e. sexual impotence in this case). Apparently, the values of capitalist consumerism and acquisition dominate the postmodern scene. Food consumption is offered as an alternative for proper cure; it is

the social negation of the sick body. While medical science is implicitly ineffective, myth-making and metaphors prevail.

The anonymous man in the story had many affairs and a risky sexual life. His friends show some concern over his health, but this does not exceed words and passing time with conversations and phone calls about the nature of his illness: "Well, everybody is worried about everybody now, said Besty, that seems to be the way we live, the way we live now" ("The Way" 5). Their life is one of constant worry about contracting the disease, which implies the easy-going sexual relations among this group of friends. Their exchange of silly, superficial stories is apparent in the following quote in which lack of depth mixes with unmeaningful consumption. In such scenarios, the sick man's passivity/silence is apparent. Instead, agency is given to the chatter of the "fake" friends:

> Who else has keys, Tanya inquired, I was thinking somebody might drop by tomorrow before coming to the hospital and bring some treasures, because the other day, Ira said, he was complaining about how dreary the hospital room was, and how it was like being locked up in a motel room, which got everybody started telling funny stories about motel rooms they'd known, and at Ursula's story, about the Luxury Budget Inn in Schenectady, there was an uproar of laughter around his bed, while he watched them in silence, eyes bright with fever, all the while, as Victor recalled, gobbling that damned chocolate." ("The Way" 5)

This extract brings together two notable postmodern themes: consumption and lack of depth. Characters even discuss the sick man's food options and what he should consume, possibly hinting at the social regulation of sexuality and ultimately the body: "Meat and potatoes is what I'd be happy to see him eating," Ursula says, "And spaghetti and clam sauce, Greg added. And thick cholesterol-rich omelettes with smoked mozzarella, suggested Yvonne, who had flown from London for the weekend to see him. Chocolate cake, said Frank. Maybe not chocolate cake, Ursula said, he's already eating so much chocolate" ("The Way" 9). Sexuality and consumption are metaphorically linked. In the postmodern era, talking about sex often abounds with food-related metaphors. When he is in the hospital again, his private room is full of items, "flowers, and plants, and books, and tapes" ("The Way"16), some of which are sent as presents from friends who—significantly for us as readers—do not actually visit the hospital. Once he starts feeling better and regains the few pounds he has lost in the hospital, he crams his refrigerator with "organic wheat germ and grapefruit and skimmed milk" ("The Way"11) by way of seeking health, which might indicate his friends' wish to send a moral message by prescribing a cure for him with "safe" foods symbolizing safe sex. And when he asks his friends about how he looked, they apparently deceive him; "everyone said he looked great, so much better than a few weeks ago, which didn't jibe with what anyone had told him at that time" ("The Way"12). Social hypocrisy in the story proves the theme of depthlessness, superficiality, and lack of values/ethics in this postmodern culture. In such instances, it is the ailing body that is subsumed under deceptive images, lies, and consumed items.

Characters are not being honest with their sick friend. Their language does not reflect the reality of his condition. They do not seem to accept mortality, or rather they like to deceive themselves. Their state of denial counters his honesty and willingness to name his disease to his doctors: "But you see how he is, Lewis said tartly, he's fine, he's perfectly healthy, and Ellen understood that of course Lewis didn't think he was perfectly healthy but he wasn't worse, and that was true, but wasn't it, well, almost heartless to talk like that" ("The Way"12). There is some enmity and prejudice among his friends. The seeming harmony in their gathering around a sick friend is fake. Instead of morally and emotionally supporting their sick friend, they are actually being a burden on him, vying for attention and social outlook. In fact, they observe who comes to visit and who does not and how often he is visited by some friends. While Victor thinks that the sick friend should not know about Max also getting sick and being hospitalized, Donny says that he already knows about Max ("The Way" 15). Such friends cannot keep a secret, even when it comes to the morale of their sick friend.

In this commercial, language-driven culture, the sick man has lived as a bachelor young man with a taste for art objects; however, there is no real value in his attachment to such objects just as his friends seem to overlook his existence in their lives, dealing with it as an image or a sign, a trace of the past:

> But he's always been very generous, Kate said quietly, and though he loves beautiful things isn't really attached to them, to things, as Orson said, which is unusual in a collector, as Frank commented, and when Kate shuddered and tears sprang to her eyes and Orson, had said something wrong, she pointed out that they'd begun talking about him in a retrospective mode, summing up what he was like, what made them fond of him, as if he were finished, completed, already a part of the past. ("The Way" 6)

Whereas his friends assess his past life, he too decides to keep a diary to record his reactions to his illness as well as his superficial life of non-committal, "his pardonable superficialities, capped by resolves to live better, more deeply, more in touch with his work and his friends, and not to care so passionately about what people thought of him" ("The Way" 6). The interactions of the characters who live in New York or come to visit it form the "empty" basis of the story about the sick man. The man himself (the body) is mediated by language, specifically by the cultural constructions of AIDS.

The sick man—we get to know through the interactions of other characters—is a smoker and has been using the negative side of technology; he has been consuming "appetite-suppressing chemicals" for years like others in the company feasting on "chemical additives and other pollutants" ("The Way" 8). In this regard, Sontag argues: "The unsafe behavior that produces AIDS is judged to be more than just weakness. It is indulgence, delinquency—addiction to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant" (*AIDS* 25). Aside from drugs, one of the many things characters consume is sex. This sick man, for instance, cannot live without sex. Kate comments on how when she once asked him to be careful he refused due to the

importance of sex to his life ("The Way"13). This indicates how morality and ethics are personal and rather relative. In line with postmodern ideals, individuals have their personal codes of ethics; they are not following those of tradition or society.

The story ends with another postmodern scene and a key symbol of the hyperreal, i.e. the TV:

> It's undeniable, isn't it, said Kate on the phone to Stephen, the fascination of the dying. It makes me ashamed. We're learning how to die, said Hilda, I'm not ready to learn, said Aileen; and Lewis, who was coming straight from the other hospital, the hospital where Max was still being kept in I.C.U., met Tanya getting out of the elevator on the tenth floor, and as they walked together down the shiny corridor past the open doors, averting their eyes from the other patients sunk in their beds, with tubes in their noses, irradiated by the bluish light from the television sets, the thing I can't bear to think about, Tanya said to Lewis, is someone dying with the TV on. (17)

Television, computers, media ads, and film are key ways of representing the postmodern world. Elevators, nasal tubes, and lights are some of the artifacts of a postindustrial, postmodern culture which negate the body or make it machine-like. In a sense, the sick body is devoid of individual human existence. The idea of having someone die with the TV on hints at the insignificance of the human body against modern technology, the fake sentiments of popular culture, and the fleeting nature of the dominant image that replaces the body. In addition, the phone, over which characters exchange views, is another manifestation of the effacement of the real and the supremacy of icons and signs. Preoccupied with images and representations, the postmodern culture consigns the sick, ailing body (i.e. the real) to an "inferior" or less privileged condition.

The sick man, it should be noted, does not seem to trust modern medicine. He is reluctant to call for an appointment with his doctor when he begins to feel ill and lose weight. Instead, he prefers to wait and see the consequences. "But is there anything one can do, he said to Tanya (according to Greg), I mean what do I gain if I go to the doctor; if I'm really ill, he's reported to have said, I'll find out soon enough" ("The Way" 2). In a sense, the story insinuates an attack on scientific progress in medicine as a grand narrative. This incredulity toward scientific progress is characteristically postmodern. The friends who visit him in the hospital bringing flowers and chocolate want the reassurance of medical knowledge. However, the curt answers of the female doctor, her smiles, and her assertion that "in these cases the patient's morale was also an important factor," seeing no harm in feeding him chocolate ("The Way"4), all indicate this mistrust in the medical profession on the part of the characters. Stephen tells Donny that they want to trust "the promises and taboos of today's high-tech medicine but here this reassuringly curt and silver-haired specialist in the disease, someone quoted frequently in the papers, was talking like some oldfangled country G.P. who tells the family that tea with honey or chicken soup may do as much for the patient as penicillin" (4). Moreover, getting him accepted into the protocol for a new drug in the hospital takes "considerable behind-the-scenes lobbying with the doctors"

(9). Hence, the story directs some negative criticism toward medicine as a master narrative to show the relegation of the sick body during the course of ("futile") treatment and, thus, to communicate a socio-cultural theme about life in the wake of the AIDS epidemic in western culture.

III. Conclusion

At a language level, Sontag's story "The Way We Live" is a postmodern, metafictional reflection on social relations within the context of illness, with multiple characters reporting and narrating the events and making their observations/reminiscences more important than the sick friend they talk about. Thematically, the story also interrogates major postmodern themes, foremost among which are superficiality, consumerism, and relativism. As such, the story does not simply invite comparison/contrast with Sontag's other non-fictional writings like *Illness as Metaphor*, *Aids and Its Metaphors*, *On Photography*, among others. Rather, it deserves consideration on its own as a fictional manifestation of Sontag's cultural criticism project and postmodern perspectives. The text successfully makes its form (lengthy run-on sentences constantly reporting presumable happenings) correspond to its content (AIDS as a feature of superficial life in the postmodern culture). The story seems to suggest that despite the unavoidability of metaphorical thinking about illness (the socio-cultural model), a more practical way of dealing with patients (the bodily model) may be better for the sick and those around them. As such, the story becomes an allegory on the postmodern body that gets silenced behind the discourses we weave around it, be they social, political, or medical. Readers of Sontag's non-fiction cultural criticism might be familiar with this assertion. However, it is Sontag's fictional treatment of such themes that has been unexplored thus far and that is worthy of recognition. Sontag makes the apparent "emptiness" of the story and the "silly" lives of her characters significantly meaningful. Although the current reading does not do full justice to Sontag's singular text, it is just an attempt at a possible way of reading it through a postmodern lens.

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