Chapter II

THE BENEFACtor: Dreams of Hippolyte

I was not looking for my dreams to interpret my life, but rather for my life to interpret my dreams.

Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag’s first book and first novel The Benefactor was published in 1963. Autobiographical in format, the novel is fantastical in tone. Divided into sixteen chapters, the novel is written in the form of a memoir depicting the life of a French writer named Hippolyte. The Benefactor begins with a telling epigram in French, Je reve donc je suis which means “I dream therefore I am”. This sets the tone for the rest of the book. The opening scene of the novel is set in Paris, though Sontag never describes it as such. She simply calls it “capital”. In the opening of the novel, we encounter Hippolyte, the protagonist moving about and muttering to himself like a heavy sleeper coming to the surface. Is he in a dream? The answer seems to be- yes. But he sounds the same when he is dreaming and as well when he is awake. He moves about like a somnambulist about the vaguely identifiable landscape of the “Capital”. The protagonist Hippolyte narrates his imaginative dream life in the first person. Hippolyte is a young man without any of the usual human ambitions. In spite of lacking the usual ambitions, Hippolyte still proves himself a capable and enthusiastic student. After studying for three years, he publishes a philosophical article which helps him in gaining entry in Salon of Anders, a middle aged foreign born couple. It is a Salon where intellectuals of the city meet regularly. Hippolyte finds the place interesting and decides to abandon his studies which further confirms his philosophy that, “Instead of accumulating ideas, we might be better occupied with dissolving them not by a sudden act of will, but slowly and with great patience” (The Benefactor, 8). The idea of dissolution preoccupies Hippolyte as he feels that only through dissolution he can penetrate the surface of his consciousness.

Hippolyte has the first of a series of dreams in which he is ordered by a sadist in a black wool bathing suit. Hippolyte narrates this dream to his friend Jean Jacques, whom he meets at Frau Anders’ Salon. Jean Jacques is a writer, a homosexual prostitute and a boxer as well. He suggests to Hippolyte to live his
But Hippolyte makes a great decision. He decides that instead of his dreams interpreting his life, he will use his life to interpret dreams, so the variations in his dreams become Hippolyte’s new fate makers.

Taking a cue from one of his dreams, Hippolyte starts seducing Frau Anders. Not only does he seduce her, he elopes with her to Africa. As he grows bored with her, he sells her to an Arab man in an Arab city. Alongside this, more dreams with pornographic and religious connotations appear. As suggested by his friend Jean Jacques, Hippolyte discusses his dreams with Father Trissotin. But Hippolyte does not want any psychological or moral interpretation of his dreams. A talk with professor Bulgaraux convinces him that the dreams are a form of psychic cleansing. Hippolyte feels liberated and submits himself to the power of his dreams. Lucrezia, Frau Anders’ daughter receives a ransom letter from her mother to which Hippolyte agrees to pay. The intention of the novelist here seems to present waking life of Hippolyte as it were a dream and to present dreams as it were the real experiences. Hippolyte has many repetitive dreams, in which he encounters a woman and a person in black bathing suit. The woman who appears in Hippolyte’s dreams later on becomes Frau Anders and the bather becomes Jean Jacques. Hippolyte encounters Frau Anders in his dreams like a guilty conscience. Alongside this, Hippolyte tries his hand at acting in films and at an experimental religion. During this, he regularly keeps on meeting Jean Jacques. Hereafter the novelist presents more fantastic events in the novel. Frau Anders returns back as a mutilated and abused woman. Hippolyte has another dream in which he crawls into a piano played by Mother superior. Hippolyte notices that Mother superior of his dreams resembles Frau Anders. In order to get rid of her, Hippolyte tries to murder her but remains unsuccessful. Hippolyte tries to become her benefactor by giving her his own house, which he inherited from his father after his death. But when Frau Anders asks him to marry her, Hippolyte feels that the only way to escape the trap is that he should marry somebody else. The novel has many other escalating events also, the war breaks out, and Hippolyte marries after his friend named Monique marries somebody else. Then again a long sequence of dreams follows. Hippolyte has a “dream of a mirror” in which he seems to be waking up to see his dream in the mirror. Frau Anders seeks refuge with Hippolyte and his wife. His wife who is suffering from leukemia also dies. Hippolyte mourns his wife’s death and starts staying in the house which was given away as a gift to Frau Anders.
The narrative takes a new turn towards the end. Hippolyte comes across some documents which question the validity of what is being narrated to us. One of the documents tells us that Hippolyte has been evicted from his own house by Frau Anders at the behest of his brother. The document tells us that Frau Anders was not held as a slave but had ruled as a queen because of her talent of interpreting dreams. The ending of the novel is also ironical, as another document tells us about a letter written by Hippolyte to the warden of an insane asylum. And yet another one tells about the outline of the story which we are reading. This document puts Hippolyte in confusion. He doubts the veracity of events. What has he been dreaming? What has been “real”? This draft of the outline story of the narrative shows that in fact what we have been taking as Hippolyte’s dreams are the real events and the events rendered as real are in fact his dreams. The real events happening in the novel like Hippolyte’s participation in the making of a film, missing his dying father, marrying for the sake of avoiding Frau Anders all are described in the novel with expressionistic details.

Towards the end of the novel one more thing is revealed that the novel is the retelling of an ancient myth. We are told this in the form of a dream that Hippolyte is, of course, the “Hippolytus” of the Greek myth, whose step mother, Phaedra attempts to seduce him; he refuses and she wreaks her revenge. Hippolyte calls it a literary dream and recounts:

In the dream I am my famous namesake of myth and drama vowed to celibacy. Frau Anders is my lusty mother. But since this is a modern version of story I do not spurn her. I accept her advances, enjoy her, and then cast her off. Nevertheless I am punished. As the goddess in the opening of the ancient play declares; those who disregard the power of Eros will be chastised. Perhaps that is the meaning, or one of them, of all my dreams (TB, 227-228).

Sontag is an intelligent writer who has very skillfully interwoven elements of magic and mysticism in an otherwise realistic setting. The novelist has used the literary devices of magical realism and metafiction, which has added a twist of fantasy to an otherwise verisimilitude setting in the novel. Susan Sontag has incorporated aphorisms, epigrams, dream elements, sensory details, self-referential expressions, expressionistic descriptions in a skillful way. She has crafted a magic realist and a metafictional text as well. To prove my point I aim to analyze the novel on this basis. In the first part of this chapter, I aim to prove that The Benefactor like a true magical
realist text blurs distinction between what is serious and what is trivial. Though the novel, The Benefactor is a multifaceted novel which lends itself to analysis from various angles and perspectives but this study aims to analyze the magical realism and elements of metafiction in the novel. The second part of the chapter takes into consideration the metafictional devices used in the novel.

On the one hand, the novel is the “dreams of Hippolyte” at the same time his dreams cannot be reduced to a definitive explanation. By attempting to live entirely in his dreams, Hippolyte has no basis for comparison; he himself does not know how much he has been dreaming. His problem is not psychological; it is ontological. The novelist herself has strong convictions about dreams. She has offered many glum and portentous aphorisms on dreams in the novel such as, “Dreams are the onanism of the spirit”. The novel represents a shift in emphasis from the psychological to social and thus creating a magically real text. The novel can be read as an extended treatise on subjectivity.

The Benefactor is full of fantastical elements. First and foremost Hippolyte declares that, “I dream therefore I am.” He begins writing his book at sixty one, looking back at a life he tells us was not a journey but a block of marble. Without ambition, without opinions, he comes as a young man to the capital to pursue his studies. He has a series of dreams in the novel. In fact the dreams have been captured with a photographic gaze. Hippolyte seems to reason in the novel that insofar as dreams are present, they are also performative and banal at the same time, and then perform simultaneously, telling a story and as well making it short. Hippolyte himself believes that the license of dreaming permitted us the most irregular and cryptic fantasies. Hippolyte says:

This is what I learned from dreams. Dreams always have the quality of being present even- when, as, I am doing one relates them ten, twenty, thirty years after. They do not age, or become less credible; they are what they are. The loyal dreamer does not seek his hearer’s credence; he does not need to convince his hearer that such and such amazing thing happened in the dream. Since all events in the dream are equally fantastic, they are independent of the assent of other people. This reveals by the way, the falsity of that life which people of taste insist on drawing and redrawing between the banal and the extra-ordinary. All events in dreams are extra-ordinary, and banal, at the same time (116).
Susan Sontag has kept ironic distance from the dream world of Hippolyte. She presents the dreams as daily events. In *The Benefactor*, the cautious move from thought to dream and from dream to interpretation is mediated by a narrative strategy that formulates dreams as aphorisms. The novelist has constructed aphorisms in *The Benefactor* in a strategic way. She contemplates, argues and then poses rhetorical questions to suggest that interpretation and literary criticism rely on the simplicity of form. In a way, Sontag seems to suggest the role of a literary critic also. With the form of aphorisms the novelist has shown how the literary critic balances the relationship between dream and interpretation. She has done it in a truly metafictional style. Sontag has created a narrative that combines dreams and narrative and performs an act of literary criticism. Hippolyte’s voice from beyond the dreams creates a style that masquerades the intellectual climate in France before the war. This intellectual climate is conducted in a salon society of artists and intellectuals. Initially Hippolyte does not like their readiness to express opinion on any subject but slowly he adapts himself to the atmosphere and starts taking pleasure in their conversation. After his visits to the Anders’ house Hippolyte starts having a series of dreams which upset him. Hippolyte reflects after his first dream:

> It seems that from the beginning I did not accept dream as a gift but as a task. The dream provoked a certain reaction of antipathy in me. Therefore I sought to master the dream, by understanding it. The more I thought of the dream, the greater I felt the responsibility (21).

His remark shows that for him the dream is the thought of action, not action in itself. Hippolyte performs the dreams as acts. He does not accept any interpretation of his dreams; rather he wants his life to interpret his dreams. The dream state challenges Hippolyte’s powers and eventually his urge to interpret. Although he first responds to his dreams by attempting to interpret them but soon he gives this up asking, why not take the dreams at face value? He takes cues from his dreams and enacts those dreams. The magical or distinctly uncommon events in the form of dreams occur frequently in the novel. The novelist has presented the dreams as the most commonplace events. The narrator dreams when he is in need of dreams. Hippolyte’s dreams initiate a movement towards silence, as he learns from his dreams how to pursue them better. The dreams taught him “the secret of perpetual presentness”, and freed him from the desire to adorn his life and conversation. The
novel works to reflect the imaginary democracy of the dream state in which all phenomena-dreams, real events, and memory-are given equal significance, which means that there is no hierarchy of significance ordering, or priming interpretation. For Example when Hippolyte murders his mistress Frau Anders, he feels that it came to him “more and more like a dream” (144). The dreams also have been presented with sensory details involving the reader with its presentation. The minor details in the dreams add to the richness of the text also. Hippolyte dreaming of “a large man wearing a one-piece bathing costume of black wool” looking down at Hippolyte is explained as:

A trap door opened, and a large man wearing a one piece bathing costume of black wool peered down at me. The man lowered himself by his hands, hung for a moment, then jumped to the floor. When he stood up and walked, he limped a trifle and grimaced. I assumed he had hurt himself in jump. I thought it possible that he was already lame; but when it seemed odd for him to have attempted such a feat, for the ceiling was high. And, being lame did not suit the acrobatic fitness of his shiny muscular limbs (14).

Susan Sontag has presented such sensory details and has involved the reader in the process. It appears as if Hippolyte is describing the real events. Hippolyte is thinking in his dreams. The images and sensory details of ‘limping’ ‘acrobatic’ add richness to the narrative. The words like ‘trifle’, ‘grimaced’ and activities of attempting ‘feat’ add an effect of magic to the otherwise real setting. The novelist has played with the reader’s senses by telling the dreams of Hippolyte. The Benefactor works to reflect the imaginary democracy of the dream state in which all phenomena of dreams, real events, and memory are given equal significance which means that there is no hierarchy of significance ordering or priming interpretation. For example we are told that after the murder of Frau Anders, it seemed to Hippolyte “more and more like a dream—all throbbing image, no consequences”. With the cinematic presentation of Hippolyte’s dreams, Sontag has also added twist to events in the text making it more magical and fantastical. In chapter three, Hippolyte has a ‘two rooms dream’ after which he begins a ‘new project’, the seduction of Frau Anders. He describes his affair with Frau Anders in a surprising way:
You may conclude that our affair did not take me outside the curious questions which preoccupied me, but rather provided me with new material. My feeling for Frau Anders was an exploration of myself. Our affair ran parallel to the successive editions and variations of my second dream, “the dream of the unconventional party (34).

And adding further twist to the escalating events in the novel, Hippolyte elopes with Frau Anders. After travelling for some months, they settle in a small island. The novelist describes their stay at the island in a photographic way. The food ‘soaked in olive oil’ had ‘varied tang and odour’. Hippolyte himself feels the acuteness of his senses with a rich diet of ‘sun, water, sex and empty talk’. He could also distinguish between the sound of ‘the monastery bell’, ‘shriller ring of the goat bell’ and ‘the heavier bell worn by the donkey’. Adding further twist to the narrative, Hippolyte sells Frau Anders for 13000 old francs to a merchant in Tangier. Though the reader is given enough to muse on in this camped version of male privilege yet this indestructible, benighted woman has her triumph in becoming worldly wise in her own terms. After coming back from the city of Arabs, Hippolyte wishes for fantasy:

I wished a powerful desire or fantasy, which could be fulfilled as I had fulfilled that of Frau Anders. I wanted to shed my skin. In a way, I had done this, by disposing of my mistress; but I had accomplished more for her good than for my own (83).

Hippolyte’s passion depends on his ability to freshen his fantasies and Frau Anders and Hippolyte’s erotic life together becomes a dream rehearsal rather than a dream ‘reprise’. The imagery that Sontag incorporates in the narrative exemplifies magical realism. Frau Anders’ return from the Arab City takes place in chapter nine. She appears in a dramatic way. Hippolyte’s girl friend Monique receives a letter written by Frau Anders whose handwriting Hippolyte recognizes but the letter is signed by “A Ghost”. Hippolyte reacts in the situation which is full of fear, mystery and reality:

I trembled I must confess, at this missive, and at the sight of that familiar yet distorted handwriting; it was an unconvincing scrawl, like the look of distress on a face stiff with powder rouge and mascara. The same handwriting as in the letter to Lucrezia. I can not bear scenes and reproaches (130).
These situations echo the definition of magical realism which is offered by Bowers whereby magical realism “includes a presentation of the mysterious and ordinary” in events of everyday life. The magical is “presented as a part of ordinary reality” and the boundary “between what is magical and what is real is eroded” (Bowers, Magic(al) Realism, 67). This reflects the acceptance of magical events as part of daily life as explored in the definition of magic realist fiction offered by Faris that magic events occur as an “ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence…admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism” (167). This also echoes the assertion by Angel Flores:

In magical realism we find the transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal. It is predominantly an art of surprises (Angel Flores, “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction”. Magical Realism. Ed. Zamora and Faris, 113-116).

Hippolyte cannot live with his guilt. So, he tries to murder Frau Anders. This he decides to do with “careful preparations”. He lays some old rags around the small house of Frau Anders. Hippolyte narrates all this in an interesting way:

Along the base of the small dwelling I laid thick rope of rags which I drenched with kerosene and then ignited at one spot; the flames traveled like a spark along a fuse and encircled the house with fire. I watched at some distance from the house while neighbors ran into the street, and the firemen were summoned (139).

And Hippolyte goes home feeling reassured ‘that Frau Anders had perished in the flames”. This seemed to Hippolyte like a dream, “all throbbing image and no consequence”. The text in fact imparts the reduction of significance and in a way a hallucinatory, throbbing association. Such miraculous and hallucinating events keep on happening in the text in such a way that it becomes difficult to believe. The novelist has incorporated fantasy, dream like elements in presenting the ordinary events in the narrative. The novel in a way blurs the traditional distinction between what is serious and what is trivial; what is horrible and ludicrous; and what is tragic or comic. This is the transgressive quality of magical realism which transgresses boundaries no matter “the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic” (Bowers, Magic(al) Realism, 67)
The novel is full of such exciting and elevating events which blur the boundaries between the real and the magical. Adding further mystery to the narrative, Frau Anders appears again and on seeing her in a café, Hippolyte cannot believe himself. He feels like calling for the waiter and flinging under the table. The novelist does all this in a style. We, the readers, are compelled to believe in the narrative. Hippolyte wonders if this is a dream but Frau Anders comes near Hippolyte and tells him about how she escaped while he was busy “touching a match to the front of the house”. She also calls him “no better as a murderer than as a white-slaver”.

Repetition is a key motif in the novel, in dreams in acts of Hippolyte. The dreams keep on repeating and at one point, Hippolyte himself compares acting to dreams as both bring out the best when repeatedly done. He feels, the things we do over and over again do well and “the best are those which have themselves an essentially monotonous form: dancing, making love, playing a musical instrument” (103). These acts which repeatedly appear in his dreams are presented as acts without consequences. Moreover repetition also signifies obsession and equivalence. In both the dreams and the narrative where repetition and reduction are more valued Hippolyte is also learning “disinterested surrender” (249).

The novelist herself has kept an ironic distance from the magical world view of the novel. She has told us a story from the perspective of Hippolyte who lives in a world like ours and experiences a different reality. The narrator in The Benefactor not only depicts a different reality but also invites us, the readers, to experience that different reality. The miraculous events like the dream-life of Hippolyte, the elopement, the letter of ransom, and Hippolyte accepting to pay for it are described in the novel with such a precision that it fits into the ordinariness of daily life.

These descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world. This is the realism in magical realism which distinguishes it from fantasy, realism, and allegory. It appears in several ways. These realistic descriptions create a functional world that resembles the one we live in. On the one hand, this attention to sensory detail continues and renews the realistic tradition while on the other hand the magical events like the dreams of Hippolyte, and the elopement of Hippolyte with Frau Anders takes place. This sense of growing magic within the real was articulated early on by Franz Roh in his initial discussion of magical realism in painting “with the word magical as opposed to mystical”(Roh,12).
Sontag does not use magic in the sense of casting spells or manipulating reality but she has used magic in the sense that it has exceeded the boundary of a purely realistic setting. There are no raining flowers or talking demons but the escalating events in the life of Hippolyte like escaping with his mistress, selling her, getting rid of her, and all this happening in a world which exists in reality where magic is part of that reality. *The Benefactor* is a magical realist novel in the sense that it is a real world literary novel in which we get diversion from normal reality. It is a magical realist novel in the sense that in this novel the improbable events like, elopement of Frau Anders, selling Frau Anders, trying to murder her and setting the house on fire take place at a magically real level.

*The Benefactors* also belongs to a kind of magical realism, which is more often characterized by fragmentary invocations and creates difficulties in ascertaining which events have happened, which are imagined, and which are dreamed. Hippolyte’s discovering a novel-like narrative at the end of the novel calls into question whether his present account is fact or fiction, a history of what has happened to him or is simply a delusion. Hippolyte who, refers to himself as ‘the elderly scribe to a younger self’ in the beginning of the narrative finds himself confused on finding letters and journals. One notebook is “in the third rather than in the first person” which challenge his “memory in entirety. Perhaps it would be best for me to present some excerpts from these and leave the reader to decide for himself” (264). Hippolyte also concedes that there are six years of his life about which he is doubtful. He admits:

> Let me say at once that this plaintive letter seems to me unquestionable proof of a certain period of delusion during which my dreams became my real life and my real life the dreams (271).

The narrator’s life is interwoven with the autobiographical elements from Susan Sontag’s life. In the beginning of the novel, it is difficult not to see in Hippolyte the emerging figure of Susan Sontag. But in *The Benefactor*, the autobiography becomes allegory. The city of New York has been replaced by a city almost like Paris. Sontag like Hippolyte also got fame after the publication of her essay ‘Notes on Camp’. Sontag in fact does not want to make her novel a report on reality. Hippolyte does not want to interpret his dreams on psychological terms. The narrator uses hybridity in the novel mixing autobiography and imagination. The first
person narration adds to already existing autobiographical element in the novel. Although Sontag told James Toback in one of her interviews that she does not resemble Hippolyte at all. She found him wasteful and evil, but another critic, Sohnya Sayres commented to this also saying, that “Sontag was hiding from a complex set of feelings.” But the autobiographical dimensions are very much present in the novel all through the text. I of Hippolyte and I of Sontag are intermingled. The narrator, Hippolyte, attempts to live through his dreams which are often nightmares in which he is dominating and also tortured. His dreams are the art which he makes of his life. Like the novelist’s idea of art, Hippolyte’s dreams are also self-contained. Like Sontag herself, Hippolyte imagines himself to be self-invented. He does not want to explain away the pleasure and pain of his dreams but to make himself more aware of them.

Like Susan Sontag, Hippolyte spends his childhood in solitude and melancholy. He is inspired by the prospect of becoming learned. He has university education, but his most serious learning comes from his own voracious reading. For him as for Sontag, the real revolutions are “revolutions of feeling and seeing”. Sontag intrudes into the text off and on, either directly or indirectly. Sontag has also written a lot of essays on criticism. She published her most famous book of essays, Against Interpretation in 1966, three years after her first novel The Benefactor was published. Sontag advocated in this essay against critiquing art in moral terms. She argued in this essay that people should not find meaning in a work of art but experience it as a thing in itself. Like the novelist, Hippolyte also resists any interpretation of his dreams into psychological or moral terms. He accepts the dream not “as a gift but as a task”.

Hippolyte decides:

Since the dream haunted me, I would now haunt the dream. I considered the exercises and prohibitions commanded in the dream I bought a black bathing suit and a flute which I painted the color of copper. I walked around the bedroom barefoot; I learned the tango and the foxtrot. I conquered the affections of several reluctant women (24).

Hippolyte then also has sex in his dreams. Like the aestheticism of Sontag, the sex in his dream is just that sex which Sontag has described in her essay, “The Pornographic Imagination”, a form of pure pleasure that should resist moralistic
debates. Hippolyte describes it as “the gift of a rare object d’art or bouquet of flowers, or a verbal compliment”.

Thus the Magical realism created in the novel is not the magic in the sense of casting spell; it is magical in the sense that it exceeds the boundaries of the purely realistic setting. The magic has been woven into reality in such a way that the boundaries between the two are either fluid or non existent. In the novel *The Benefactor* the world is ‘real’ imbibed with realistic characters and events happening at a magical level

*The Benefactor* is also a metafictional text as it explores a theory of writing fiction while the text is passing through a process of writing fiction. Moreover, the novel interprets the writing of novel. The novel in a way suggests the author’s awareness of the theory of writing fiction. As per the critics, the major characteristics of a metafictional text can appear in combination or singularly in a text. In the present case, *The Benefactor* incorporates almost all the characteristics of metafiction. From analyzing fictional systems, incorporating both theory and criticism, creating biography of imaginary writers, intruding to comment on writing, the novel is full of such examples. The aim of the present study is to explore and analyze how Susan Sontag has allowed her readers a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative while providing an accurate model for understanding the contemporary experience of the world. Susan Sontag in *The Benefactor* offers comments on the construction of novel with the help of the intrusive narrator. Hippolyte’s intrusive narration indicates the text’s self- reflexivity by providing comments and disruptions in the story.

*The Benefactor* comments on its own construction from a theoretical perspective. The novel presents a theory of fiction from within a fictional text and blurs the boundary between primary and secondary writing. In the first chapter, when the narrator Hippolyte is describing himself in the first person, the novelist Susan Sontag intrudes in between and makes the readers aware that what they are reading is a piece of fiction. Hippolyte narrates:

I omit the name of the city not to tease the reader—for I have not excised from this narrative certain words and the names of local institution known to every would-be tourist, so that the reader will soon, be able to identify in which city I lived (3).
Thus the text explains the writing of the book in hand and comments on the writing process of the present text. The novelist intrudes and talks to the reader in the voice of the narrator. She warns the reader in the voice of the narrator in the beginning of the novel that her endeavour is to present a recollection of past events. The use of the intrusive narrator indicates the novel’s self-reflexive awareness by providing comments and causing interruptions in the story. With this intervention Susan Sontag has created a new narrative level in the novel. The readers are made aware of the fact that they are reading a creative work. And at the same time it can be said that real life situations are presented in metafictional style.

Hippolyte is transposing his life into this narrative in an autobiographical mode. He feels it difficult not to tell the truth but to tell the truth in the more “pretentious sense, truth in the sense of insisting souring convincing, changing another”. He talks about the process of writing in detail:

When we write the truth, we should address ourselves. When in writing we are didactic and admonitory, we must consider that we instruct and admonish only ourselves for our own failings alone (12).

These interruptions by the narrator leave the impression that real life has entered the text. In this regard Brian McHale has given useful insight, especially his distinction between the primary world of the work of fiction – the diegesis, and the world within this primary world – the hypodiegetic world. These interruptions and comments which create an illusion of real life entering the world of the text form a new didactic level. The novel is vaguely set during the years of the Spanish civil war and world war. Again this is told by the narrator in an informative way informing the reader and asking him to recall that it was a decade in which “political discontent among well meaning Europeans often took the form of much more radical commitments then they intended.” So the Spanish Civil War becomes “the civil war which was raging at the time in the country to the south”

The narrator is a Frenchman in his sixties. He is looking back at his life. He is a writer. In the beginning of the novel, he writes a philosophical article and gets its published. This article helps him in gaining entry to the world of intellectuals at the salon .This article is prophetic of Sontag’s essay “Notes on Camp” and of its reception. Hippolyte’s work provokes “controversial and excited” discussion in the “general literary world”. He aspires to silence, indeed he is a devotee of the aesthetics
of silence which became Sontag’s key term in her essays and films later on. Hippolyte, though a recluse also becomes attracted to film acting because it affords an experience comparable to being a spectator of one’s own dreams. Adding further to this is that Hippolyte’s film director is a Scandinavian film director Larsen. Prophetically Sontag was also invited to make her first two films in Sweden.

The novel is self-reflexive and there is also a lot of metafctional stress on reading and writing. Hippolyte is also fond of reading and is narrating his life experiences in the present narrative. Thus the novel notifies its status as an object, an artifact, the life story of Hippolyte. Elaborating on the function of writing, Hippolyte feels that:

The truth is always something that is told, not something that is known. If there were no speaking or writing there would be no truth about anything. There would only be what is (11).

He makes another declaration while he is writing this present piece of fiction that he is daring to transpose life into “this” narrative. Though he finds it difficult yet he is ready to shoulder “the dreadful responsibility”. He elaborates the writer-reader relationship. He declares that he cannot help but pursue the ideas of characters and preoccupations of his readers. He promises that henceforth, he will try not to imagine who his reader is. On the art of writing and speaking as well, Hippolyte expresses his opinion:

For to speak the truth is one thing; to write it another. When we speak, we always address someone else. When we speak what is best—which is always the truth—still it is to a person, with the thought of a person. But if there is any chance of writing something that is true, it will only be because we have banished the thought of another person (12).

Adding further to this device of metafiction Hippolyte asserts in chapter three that this narrative is “autobiographical narrative” serving the function of a photograph album or collection of letters. In this, in fact he surpasses even Sontag’s book on photography when he declares that, “Life is a movie. Death is a photograph”. He has dreams with pornographic and religious connotations, prompting him to take the advice of Father Trissotin, who inquires from him if the dreams are inspired by devil. But Hippolyte believes in the assertion by Sontag that just as literature should be appreciated in its own terms, his dreams are not to be reduced to any interpretations.
He wants his dreams to guide his actions. His “avowed desire” is to achieve unity through dreams by allowing them to “eradicate thought” (57). Contemplating on “the idea of being liberated through contradicting one’s settled life and unleashing one’s deepest fantasies” (74), Hippolyte claims to live by the ‘truth’ of his dreams, and acts them out in an aesthetic and irrational existence. Sexuality and crime appeal to Hippolyte but he feels that for the purpose of freedom he wants, “there is something more valuable than sexuality and crime… There is the dream” (96). He is surprised that the dreams are not outlawed like crime. He exclaims, “What a promise the dream is! How delightful! How private! One need not enlist the cooperation of anyone, female or male (97).

The Benefactor also takes its theme as theory and criticism. Not only it discusses the creative process of the present text and others as well, but it also discusses the functions of interpretation. The dream state of Hippolyte challenges him to interpret his dreams. In fact he started in the beginning to interpret his dreams but soon gave up asking, “Why not take the dreams at the face value?” (55). In order to do this he feels that he required a state of total attention. “In a state of total attention, there are no dark corners, no sensations, or shapes that repel nothing that seems soiled” (145). Moreover Hippolyte asserts that in a state of total concentration “there is no place for interpretation or self-justification or propaganda on behalf of the self and its resolutions” (145).

The Benefactor offers a complex allegory and also mockery of the modernist myth of a total self-sufficiency and privatization of human experience. Hippolyte’s experiment is “to live out to the fullest meaning of privacy” (95). This experiment is evident in many French novels such as Justine by Sade and Jean Genet’s The Thief’s Journal. These texts have also been considered as major intertexts for the novel. There occurs a struggle between Hippolyte and Jean Jacques. Though never acknowledged by Hippolyte, there is a struggle of dialogue and dream between them. The two men in the narrative of the novel dance a slave-master relationship. Jean Jacques, the bather, Jean Jacques the writer-friend, Jean Jacques who begs money from Hippolyte, Jean Jacques, who is almost murdered by Hippolyte and now Jean Jacques who has been secretly bestowed an inheritance by Hippolyte, plays a puppet in the hands of the crowd also. Hippolyte also taunts him saying that “his act have been transformed into postures only” (213). Jean Jacques resembles Alfred Chester who adored Genet and went mad like Artaud. As Michael Feingold noted in an article in Village Voice, “Chester carried in himself two of the great polar elements on which
most 20th century art is based: He was an intelligent homosexual—that is, a man perpetually conscious of life as a series of roles or poses to be taken on; and he was a madman—a visionary…” He and Hippolyte argue both about the trivial and profound. Like Chester confronted Sontag in the same way Jean Jacques challenges Hippolyte.

Sontag admitted in one of her interviews that The Benefactor was influenced by Kenneth Burke’s novel Towards a Better Life. John Neal, the protagonist of the novel, Towards a Better Life is like Hippolyte a narcissist concerned with perfecting himself. The language used by Neal is “pure artifice” which means that it does not come out of his character development or plot. In the same way Hippolyte encounters the same problem. His language is baroque that draws attention to itself. Sontag herself felt the novel as a sequence of arias and fictive moralizing. She was impressed with Burke for calling Neal as hero, who was so ingeniously self-absorbed that no reader could be tempted to identify with him. Thus both Neal and Hippolyte are fashioning narratives that represent themselves not the world. The novel by Burke reads like a stencil for The Benefactor. In the novel, Towards a Better Life, Neal talks to others who are only projections of himself and reply to him in his own voice. He has lost sense of the outer world. In the same way Hippolyte who thinks that he is improving and moving towards a better life realizes that his memory has failed him. He is not able to connect to the actual events of his life. He is not able to separate his waking from his dreaming.

The novel includes the characters that are extremely fond of reading, writing, thus being closely related to the world of books through their work and their passion for the written word and written worlds. Hippolyte gets acquainted with the dream repertoire from books. He tries to interpret his dreams on the basis of dream repertoire: ‘the dreams of being trapped in fire, ‘flying’, ‘falling’, and ‘nakedness’. Not only Hippolyte, but majority of other characters in the narrative is also fond of reading. Hippolyte’s dying father wants Hippolyte to read to him which is narrated to us as:

For several hours a day I read to him, within the limits of his now highly specialized taste, for he liked only novels which took place in the future. I must have read him a dozen. I imagine that they gave him a taste of immortality—and, at the same time, confronted him by their grim prognostications: it would not be so bad a thing to miss that future which they described (149).
Jean Jacques another character who is a writer by profession himself declares to Hippolyte “I am a writer because I write. I do not write because I am a writer” (65). Jean Jacques is a talkative person. Hippolyte also wonders whether Jean Jacques is able to write “in silence”. The novelist shows the development of Jean Jacques as a writer, while the narrative progresses. In chapter fifteen, his last novel is almost cleared for the most exclusive of the year’s literary prizes but he is charged by the police for collaboration. Portraying characters engrossed in the acts of reading and listening to stories at times, forgetting about the world that surrounds them outside these texts points to the ways in which the characters of a fictional world can become engaged in the fictional world of other fictional works and in a way shows that real life reader can also be in the same situation. The Benefactor offers especially revealing insights into the story telling and reading processes in the scenes in which Hippolyte reads to his wife:

During the spell before my marriage in which I had kept my father company, I had learned that there is an art to reading aloud, and that there is one kind of book which each person prefers above all others. To my wife I read children’s stories and fables, but she liked even better the ones which I made up myself. One that she was especially fond of, I called “The Invisible Husband” (194).

By including storytelling, the novelist invites the readers into a world, different from the diegesis of the novel. The characters feel the world of the story to be another world and they want to live in that other world. For example, when Hippolyte narrates the story of “The Invisible Man” his wife likes the story very much and wants to listen to it again and again.

The use of languages is another issue closely related with story telling and reading. The characters in The Benefactor feel the importance of words. Hippolyte the protagonist himself uses many philosophical words. The words like ‘virtuoso’, ‘epistolary’, ‘anecdote’, ‘mood of tranquility’ are not the words used by a common man. His conscious use of the philosophical words adds another feature to text making it a metafiction. He announces an acute suspicion of language:
I came to understand that words coerce the feeling they attempt to embody. Words are not the proper vehicle for a general upheaval which destroys the old accumulation of feeling (63).

*The Benefactor* not only contains avid readers as characters but also writers. Susan Sontag has created major as well as minor characters who write books, articles, plays as well as letters. By creating characters, who are writers and depicting the process of writing and as well examining the process of writing, Sontag has manifested the metafictional feature of schematizing writing and examining the act of writing fiction. The major writer figure in the novel is the protagonist Hippolyte himself. He is writing his life narrative. While narrating his sixty plus life, Hippolyte tells that he wrote several stories in his childhood. The philosophical article written by him, when he was a university student, excited discussion in the literary world. He writes for film journals and other literary journals as well. In the very beginning of the narrative, he reminds us that we are going to read a piece of fiction created by him and he does not want to imagine who will be his readers. He does not want to think “whether he or she is reading what I have written”. He discusses his own style of writing and further elaborates the reader-writer relationship also:

The reader is a happy accident. One must allow the reader his liberty, his liberty to contradict what is written, his liberty to be distracted by at alternatives. Therefore it would be improper for me to try to convince the reader of all that is in this book (12).

And then again while Hippolyte tries to interpret his dream in chapter two he does not want the “thought wholly clear to the reader at the present moment” (17). Later on when we become fully engrossed in the storyline and we want to know about the hiding place of Frau Anders and we become curious to know about her fate, but the authorial intrusion again tells us “I shall describe in a later chapter.” At once we realize that what we are reading is a narrative which the novelist has divided in chapters.

Not only this, the intrusion by the novelist takes place at many levels. Hippolyte’s wife dies. He is in utter grief. And we, the readers are also made the participants in his grief. By addressing us in intrusive voices, he asks Monique, how did her husband die? And she answers, “His eyes closed.” At this, the narrator
addresses the reader directly, “That, reader, is grief. Such incoherence. You will understand why I do not continue further” (217).

Thus, Susan Sontag self-reflexively comments on the reading, writing, and meaning making process all through the novel. She addresses the reader with her intrusive comments. While analyzing these comments and intrusions this chapter has examined how Susan Sontag has incorporated the major elements of metafiction in the novel, *The Benefactor*, thus making it a self reflexive metafictional text. Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh in a number of studies on metafiction have suggested that one of the major characteristics of a metafictional novel is including writers and readers as their characters and the talk about books as an integral part in the text. In the same way, Susan Sontag has created the character of Hippolyte and Jean Jacques. Both are writers. Hippolyte keeps on pondering about the importance of writing all through the text. He feels that reading is important but writing is also equally important. One must arrest one’s thoughts or else one “could never pass beyond the first sentence”. He also gets attracted to the print version. He starts taking record of his dreams in a journal. In the last part of the novel, he finds notebooks, letters, and diaries. In one of the notebooks he finds written entries “belonging to the same period” written in blue ink, and “to a later period those written in red” of which these are the few:

1. The dreams make me see myself as someone alien.

13. When I destroy the dreams, do I destroy myself?

33. My dreams will expel my character. (240)

On finding a narrative similar to his own, Hippolyte wonders if the narrative will be read as a psychological study. The narrator like the novelist is also conscious about different type of writings and also interpreting them differently. His knowledge about assigning labels to various types of writings is depicted as follows:

Nevertheless there are labels which I do repudiate. I’m aware that any kind of eccentricity may be considered a psychological deformity; and that a narrative about someone of unusual tastes and inner experiences, as this one is, tends to be read as a psychological study. In a psychological study one takes dreams as evidence, as supplying information about the dreamer’s preoccupations. I beg the reader not to avail himself of this easy way out, without at least considering my own example (245).
Thus, like the novelist herself, Hippolyte also does not want any interpretation of his dreams. So he begs the reader not to interpret this narrative “from the point of view of psychology”. The concluding pages of *The Benefactor* further present the most revealing accounts of the writing processes. The narrative found out by Hippolyte which seems to be the draft of the present novel is in the “third rather than in the first person”. In a truly metafictional style Sontag has included her character as writers and readers. Hippolyte writes articles, reads from books to his sick father. In the same way Jean Jacques is a writer who earns his livelihood by writing. Hippolyte also earns his livelihood by writing. Hippolyte reads children’s stories which he himself creates. Jean Jacques writes novels and presents one of them to Hippolyte with his autograph. Moreover one of his novels is also selected for a literary prize. But at the time, Jean Jacques was charged for collaboration. Therefore, Sontag has not only provided a critique of her own methods of construction, but also “examined the fundamental structures of narrative fiction” (Waugh, 2).

As the novel moves to a close, Hippolyte reminds the readers that as he had talked at the beginning of the narrative about his quest of certitude now he has achieved that. He finds a note book which seems to be the draft for the present narrative. Other characters who have been presented as involved in the writing processes are Jean Jacques, Lucrezia, and Frau Anders. Jean Jacques is a writer, who “wrote novels which were well received by the critics.” Though none of his novels sold more than a few hundred copies but he called writing as his “work”. Frau Anders writes letters to her daughter Lucrezia which are full of metaphors. Frau Anders writes, “While to be a man is to attempt something, unnatural, something that nature never intended. The task of being a man overstrains the machine” (72). Hippolyte who mocks at her style of writing and does not want to tire the reader with her use of ‘natural and mechanical metaphors’ clears that the “effort of assuming the identity of a writer might deprive her of scant realism which she possessed” (71). On being asked by Hippolyte not to include poetry in her letter which she is writing to her daughter, she obeys and clears that “It is philosophy alone which claims my interest” (73). She is so passionate about writing that she uses a ‘scented note paper’, fountain pen, red ink. After finishing, she reads the letters to Hippolyte. Hippolyte listens and then corrects those letters.
Hippolyte has been presented as a character who is the most experienced as a writer. That is why everybody wants writing tips from him. And in the same way Jean Jacques also gives him the drafts of his novels written by him to read, on which Hippolyte comments after reading:

I am re-reading his first two novels, and I find them very good, although a little over-written. The one about the boxer is especially fine. He has made something sublime out of the agonies of the arena (51).

Jean Jacques is a kind of writer who himself hates writings that have “plots that illustrate death of love, the failure of talent, the mediocrity of society” (51). Discussing with Hippolyte that what a writer should be, Jean Jacques elaborates that a writer “may celebrate or mock, but he must not stare or whine”. So The Benefactor not only includes characters who are writers but they also evaluate each other’s writings. Further Hippolyte reads an entry in his diary where he is annoyed with Jean Jacques because Jean Jacques had told him that he is not a writer. He is so infuriated that he wants to know the reason behind his observation. The narrator is very conscious of himself as a writer and this he transposes in the present novel in a reflexive way. To him the events happening in the novel are the events happening in a literary work. When Hippolyte and his wife give shelter to Frau Anders in their house, Hippolyte describes the location as:

Well, the refuge I had devised for her -in the best traditions of detective fiction –was none other than her own house, then being used to billet enemy troops. I remembered a windowless back room in the basement adjoining the kitchen (235).

In the concluding pages of the novel, we also have the discussion about the possible titles of the novel. When Hippolyte discovers a draft of the events happened, he realizes that “it is just a novel.” The note book has several pages written on the possible titles, which Hippolyte feels are indications of a devoted literary ambition. Among the titles considered are:

*My Curious Dreams, Poor Hippolyte, A Puppet’s Manual, In My Father’s House, A Reply to the Bather, Welcome Home, The confessions of a Self-Addicted man, Notes of a Dreamer on His Craft*, and-in a rare touch of what I hope is humor, but may be only self-consciousness-*Don’t Believe Everything You Read* (265).
Furthermore, Hippolyte also presents a synopsis of his projected narrative in the final pages of the novel. This newly found note book contains ideas and the draft of his autobiography. His afterlife described in the final pages of the narrative, which while challenging Hippolyte’s integrity as an autobiographical writer also suggests that authorial force in any genre can also be attained through a photographic posture. As Hippolyte says:

I shall conclude not by describing an act, nor with one of my favorite ideas, but with a posture. Not with words, but with silence. With a photograph of myself, myself as I shall sit here after finishing this page. It is winter. You may imagine me in a bare room, my feet near the stove, bundled up in many sweaters, my black hair turned grey, enjoying the waning tribulations of subjectivity and the repose of a privacy that is genuine (274).

Thus The Benefactor includes self-reflecting comments which engage the reader in the meaning making process. In a metafictional mode, the novelist intrudes in the narrative with the help of the narrator who off and on keeps reminding the readers what they are reading is a piece of fiction. Hippolyte is the intrusive narrator who provides comments on the creation of work in hand and gives insights into the writing process of the text. At the very start of the novel he tells his readers that this narrative which he is writing presently is his account of his past sixty years. And he does this by intruding in the text in a self reflexive mode. He keeps on making the reader aware again and again that there is a difference between now and then, he asks the readers to imagine him now as he has changed since then. He is the self-conscious narrator and the implied author in the novel. To maintain the reader’s interest in the narrative, he says that he does not want the ‘thought’ that is the story line of what is in his mind making wholly clear to the reader in the beginning.

Hippolyte also discusses what might be the major concern of Susan Sontag that is the writing of the present narrative without losing the narrative pace and as well to put life into the narrative. That is why he describes it as a ‘difficult task’. The key concerns in the novel are in fact the key concerns faced by the novelist herself. Read against the backdrop of Sontag’s life, the novel seems an exploration of the relationships she had savoured and renounced in her life.

The final pages of the novel clearly indicate that there is an author behind the text manipulating the characters. Hippolyte declares that his ‘effort’ to describe his dreams has resulted in ‘an autobiographical novel’. As the fictional characters in a
metafictional text not only think and talk about real life personages but the real life characters step into the world of fiction. In the same way, in *The Benefactor* also, the novelist Sontag combines the diegetic levels by presenting the real life characters into the narrative and blurring the boundary between fact and fiction. Hippolyte does audition for the role of a confessor in a film directed by the well-known Scandinavian director Larsen. He gets along with him very well. Hippolyte does not know whether his acting in the film was best but he wants the reader to judge his role as he says that “the film is still often shown by film societies.” This bridging of the gap between the fact and fiction confuses the reader and the reader starts wondering whether this fictional work exists or not, as the real life personages and works are discussed side by side. This makes the reader think and know how difficult it is to define the boundary between fictionality and reality. *The Benefactor* makes us realize that fiction can become reality and reality can also become fiction.

*The Benefactor* is full of most unexpected and delightful incidents and characters and thus has an extraordinary uplifting experience. There is a strong sense of irony, a powerful undertone of prevailing sadness. The novel never loses its capacity to surprise and delight. No matter whom we meet, we expect the unexpected, the original from the colourful, from moments of evocative beauty like the trail of dreams to the satiric like to erotic scene. There are characters whom we may meet for few pages, but there is a sense of vitality throughout and wonder at the world which makes this story hard to put down. There is something clearly magical about the world of Hippolyte. The intermingling of the fantastic and factual throughout the novel keeps us on edge, in a state of imaginative anticipation.

The novel interwoven with fantastical elements and sharply etched realism has attracted mixed reviews. Daniel Stern in the *New York Times Book Review* compared the novel to the *Nouveau Roman*. He commented:

> It has been said of the French that they develop an idea and then assume it is the world. Hippolyte has decided that he is the world and has proceeded to explore it (Stern, *New York Time Book Review*, “Life Becomes a Dream”. September 8, 1963.5).

Sontag herself said in one of her interviews to Joe David Bellamy that the novel contains “systematically obscure elements…because I want to leave several possible readings open” (*The New Fiction: Interview with Innovative American Writers*, 35-48). The novel written in the postmodern era cannot be discussed in naturalistic tradition as Sontag herself has attempted to construct a new critical
approach, to do justice to those works of avant garde artists whose rendering of the modern world she finds significant. Many critics have suggested that Hippolyte’s desire to become his dreams is the equivalent of the modern novel’s desire to free itself from the world, mimesis and to become what Poe said, a poem is “a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem’s sake”. Hannah Arendt a well known critic also admired “her strict consistency” and the art of making “a real story out of dreams”. Many critics also perceived Hippolyte as resembling the cultural heroes of Sontag such as E.M. Cioran and Antonin Artaud. Sontag had written exclusively about them in her essays. E.M. Cioran was an alienated Romanion exile who lived and wrote in Paris while Antonin Artaud was another great writer who wrote about modern theater and he went mad. Hippolyte also seems to be going mad at the end of the novel. Hippolyte admits that there are six years of his life about which he is doubtful. His friends treat him as he has been in a mental institution. Hippolyte thinks he was moving towards a better life but the sudden discovery of the novel-like narrative and diary entries put into question his present account of life. Is it a fact or fiction or history or simply a delusion?

No matter what the critics said about the novel, Sontag made the impression that, she possessed formidable intelligence and curiosity about new art and made an everlasting impression on contemporary culture.