Chapter III

DEATH KIT – The Recurring Nightmare

The novel can be read as a straight narrative in which certain magical events take place on exactly the same level as those events which are convincing in terms of everyday life.

Susan Sontag

Death Kit the second novel by Susan Sontag is an extension of the theme of the first novel The Benefactor. Though a distance separates the European Hippolyte from the American Diddy, yet the two novels are sequential. Hippolyte crawled through the tunnel of himself; Diddy is driven through on a fateful train. The death-obsession of Hippolyte’s dream life is the beginning for Diddy. Death Kit describes an extraordinary exacerbation of consciousness, the effort of its protagonist Diddy to journey “into himself, away from all coherent rational spaces”. The novel is narrated by an omniscient third person. Like Hippolyte exploring his dreams, Dalton Harron (Diddy) seems to be exploring the contents of his own imagination. The protagonist Diddy is on a business trip travelling by train from Manhattan to Albany. In the compartment of the train, the Pennsylvanian businessman Diddy observes the fellow passengers who include a blind girl named Hester and her aunt. The train comes to a stop in a tunnel. Diddy gets off the train to inquire the reason behind the sudden stop. While investigating the reasons, he encounters a workman Angelo Incardona. Reacting to the workman’s insults, Diddy sees a crowbar and kills him. On coming back to the compartment, Diddy takes Hester to the corridor and confesses to her about the murder. But Hester tells him that the train never halted and Diddy did not get off the train. Diddy starts contemplating that Hester might be right and the murder is merely an illusion. The opening of the story gives an effect as if the novel Death Kit is the story of a dead man told from a dead man’s point of view. Diddy who feels as if he is the “tenant of his life” experiences hypersensitivity towards the physical world. “Diddy not really alive had a life” is what we are told. He has attempted suicide so the following narrative seems to be his attempt to come to terms with his life.
Diddy who is upset with his own behaviour decides to accompany Hester and her aunt to hospital where Hester is supposed to be operated upon for restoring her eye-sight. Diddy who cannot forget his committing the murder wants to confirm from newspaper whether he has done it or not. He thinks about confessing his crime. Musing about a doll, Raggedy Andy, with whom he played as a child, he finds news about Incardona in the newspaper. But the news item reports that Incordana was “apparently struck” by the train in the tunnel. Here starts the dilemma of Diddy. Did he kill the trackman or not?

Apart from this, Diddy attends business meetings without any interest, and visits Hester in the hospital regularly. Diddy then decides to visit Incardona’s house so that his widow or son could make him realize what he has done. This he does by posing as an Insurance Investigator. During his visits to the Hospital, Diddy also comes to know that Hester was blinded by her own mother by throwing lye in her eyes. Diddy who plans to marry Hester feels Hester is the beginning of new life. He pays for her hospital bills and takes her to his apartment. Here we are introduced to Diddy-the author, who talks about his unfinished novel The Story of the Wolf-Boy. The story of the novel is intertwined with Diddy’s thoughts about his brother Paul, a famous musician. The concluding pages of the novel show the weakening of relationship between Diddy and Hester. In fact, Diddy is beginning to fail physically. He rouses himself up from bed, visits the same tunnel but this time he takes along Hester. He encounters Incardona there again. Diddy gets confused and wants to know if it is the same workman Incardona whom he had murdered. He again raises the crowbar and once again kills Incardona. He shouts “I want to be seen”. While exploring the tunnel, he finds corpses, decaying bodies. The novel ends with this nightmarish vision.

Reading this novel in fact is like watching one of French or Italian surrealistic movies which oscillate between fantasy and reality. Upon first reading, the narrative seems to be a simple one but soon we realize that nothing is what it seems to be. Death Kit has multilayered meanings. It can be read at various levels. On the one hand, as the novelist herself has suggested the novel contains magical events, which take place like the events in everyday life. At the same time the novel can also be read as an illustration of Sontag’s theories about literary form. The incidents seem to be weird but they are narrated with such precision that they seem to be actual. The novelist has used various narrative devices such as monologues, aphorisms, suspense,
etc. The novel is also a metafictional text as it provides a commentary on itself. It also uses parody and other popular genres as well as non-literary forms to expose the connections of the classic novel and also in a way suggesting the path along which fiction might develop in the future. The novel was described by Larry McCaffery as “one of the most interesting and successful experimental novels to appear in the 1960s” (Contemporary literature 20, 1979 484-499). Besides this, the novel can be read as about the burdens of consciousness and also it can be about the senseless brutality that is ruining America. The novel was written during the Vietnam War. Sontag herself observed this in one of her interviews that the novel could be called *Why are we in Vietnam?*

Since the aim of the present study is to analyse magical realism and metafictional elements in the novel, I will primarily focus on these aspects only. In the first section of this chapter I aim to bring forth and analyse the devices used by Susan Sontag which put the novel in magical realism category.

To begin with, *Death Kit* contains an “irreducible element” of magic which we cannot explain according to the law of the Universe as we know them” (Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 167). The novel seems to be the story of a dead man told from a dead man’s point of view. The character of Diddy is magical. Is he living or dead? Did he kill the trackman in the tunnel or not? Did he seduce Hester in the locked toilet of the train or not? If he had killed the trackman then how could he reappear? The irreducible nature of a dead man’s reappearance is the reversal of the natural order. The irreducible element also occurs in the novel when there is disruption of cause and effect. The whole story of the novel revolves around a conflict whether Diddy murdered the trackman or not and whether Diddy is living or dead. As told to us:

That Incardona died and that Incardona lives. Not all that different from, or significantly harder than, believing that he, Diddy died; and also that he lived.

Here is Diddy’s view, in the least extreme form. It *is* the same man, he (now) both believes and can not believe (285).

To know and believe in what he has done, Diddy wants to attend the funeral of Incardona but he gets disappointed when he comes to know that he has already been cremated. Then he attempts it second time when he visits Myra Incardona the widow of Incardona. The reality of the murder starts settling for some time in his mind as he
thinks of marrying Myra Incardona. Now there seemed no reason for Diddy to doubt the existence of the workman and his role in his death. But still Diddy expected a surprise which can confound “all his previous theories, throws his seasoned memories into disarray”(136).

Secondly, Death Kit contains a phenomenal world in it that is the realism which distinguishes it from fantasy and allegory. The novel creates a fictional world exactly the same that we live in. The novel is set in authentic descriptions of society and humans. The narrator also accepts the events which are otherwise contrary to the usual operating system of the universe as natural. We are told an astonishing tale but the narrator does not express any surprises at all. The use of the word “now” lends the text a peculiar effect of immediacy. This concentrates our attention on the movements of Diddy in the present. The repetition of the word “now” in parentheses suggests that the events are happening “now” in the narrator’s mind. On the one hand, the use of the word “now” represents continuation while on the other hand like a magic realist fiction, these events presented with the repetition of “now” like the murder of the trackman and seduction of Hester entice us with magic details. The presence of these details is a clear departure from realism and also signals that these might be imaginary. But as Luis Leal in his well known essay, “Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature” argues that in magical realism the writer does not create “an imaginary world in which we can hide from everyday reality. In magical realism, the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts” (Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community, 121). In the same way, in Death Kit, Diddy also explores the contents of his own imagination. The novelist tries to explore, to solve the mysterious in the life of the protagonist Diddy. The repetition of the word ‘now’ in parentheses also suggests that the events are provisional. For example the use of the word now gives a different effect while the murder of Incardona is being narrated to us. We feel as it is happening at the moment:

A hard, heavy, uncooperative body. Diddy brought near to vomiting by the odd new smell the workman gave off (now)—a cold smell, like meat; flatulent. Stifling nausea and fear, Diddy is able to kneel and grip the body under the armpits (23).
This parenthetical “now” is also Sontag’s attempt of phenomenological trip into the story in order to seeing the events and ordering. But on the other hand, the novel also entices us with other captivating details like “Diddy, not really alive had a life” (2). Moreover we have the same events happening repeatedly like the dreams. Diddy experiences the dreams in the same way as the events of daily life. Moreover he accepts the events as real. The dream in which Diddy explores the seashell, *Conus gloriamaris*, the Glory of the sea is most remarkable. As all of us are very familiar with the fact that this particular seashell used to be one of the most sought after of all the seashells and it still remains the most famous and the most remarkable shells for modern collectors. But all this historical information is told to us in the form of Diddy’s dream. Diddy informs the priest in his dream:

> It’s true that the Glory of the Sea was the rarest, costliest, the most coveted of shells. In the early 1800’s, there were only two known specimens in the entire world; both found in the waters east of New Guinea…The price plummeted. (Now) anyone can send away for one of the debased, modern specimens (101).

Thus, the novel presents these unrealistic events with realistic presentation of life and its realities. Dreams play a role in altering the reader’s perception of reality. The dreams of Diddy reflect and present the more realistic events. Ultimately, we can say that it is the reality in the novel, which is more dreamlike than the dreams themselves. This invokes the reader further into examining the higher reality. If dreams are more real than reality then the dreams become just another aspect of life. We can also say that dreams play as important a role as waking. Sontag, who has combined the unreliable events with reliable dreams, exactly has done this. This combination is what is called magical realism.

Further, Diddy murders Incardona in the tunnel. However, Hester’s insistence that he never got off the train and the train never stopped gives another dimension to the story. And then at the end of the novel, Diddy once again encounters the workman and kills him again. So we hesitate between the two contradictory understandings of the events. We are left wondering as to how the narrative will end and the mystery will be untangled. This echoes the argument put forward by Wendy B Faris in *Scheherazade’s Children: Magical realism and postmodern fiction* where he supports the critical insight given by Tzvetan Todorov:
Much of magic realism is thus encompassed by Tzvetan Todorov’s well known formulation of the fantastic as existing during a story when a reader hesitates between the uncanny, where an event is explainable according to the laws of the universe as we know it, and the marvelous which requires some alteration in those laws (Faris, Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, 171).

Here, in this case our hesitation is between the understandings of the murder of the trackman occurred twice as a character’s hallucination or as a miracle. The character of the trackman and also that of Diddy slithers between these two understandings. Hester wants to know, “Diddy, died; and also that he lived.” Was the trackman really murdered or the dead trackman comes back? Sontag, who does not want to clear suspense as yet, feels “with so many refinements of belief and assertion, it’s hard to give a simple and straight answer to Hester’s question. Better to watch and wait” (285).

Another feature, which makes Death Kit a magical realism text, is “near-merging of two realms, two worlds” (Faris, Magical Realism: Theory, History Community, 172). As magical realism aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites, Death Kit also challenges polar opposites of life and death. Diddy, who has swallowed sleeping pills, lies dying in the hospital bed. He is imaginatively, constructing his own ‘death-kit’. “What Diddy sees is, at the very least, never less than interesting. Death = an encyclopedia of life” (310). His whole experience is divided around the question of nightmare:

A false question, since there are in fact two nightmares. Distinct, if not contradictory. The nightmare that there are two worlds. The nightmare that there is only one world. This one (310).

The search for an equation which could pull him back into life changes his story into dualism. There are two worlds, “a world of lucid, explainable, calmly proceeding events”, and “a world of opaque, blind, high speed events shrinking and distending, withering and swelling without any apparent logic” (135), two truths (of Hester and Diddy), and two kinds of blindness. Diddy thinks “the world is divided into two camps: the fortunate ones with normal eyesight and the tiny minority of the blind” (186). Ironically, the people gathered in the conference organized by Watkins and company are divided into two groups. On one side of the conference were those
who felt that the competition to the new product by Japan could be beaten by improving advertisements and selling procedures while the second group felt that to be in the market the basic features of the product should be overhauled. So the whole story of the novel occurs between two realms. While narrating all this, Sontag puts an extra stress on this division between “exactly two” categories. She asks the readers to “Think for instance how much it is simpler for all of us that the conference was divided into exactly two factions. Just two” (82). The story of the novel also occurs between two realms that are life and death. The magical realism exists at the intersection of these two worlds. Moreover we are introduced to another intersection of these two realms when we are introduced to Diddy in the beginning of the novel as:

Diddy not really alive, had a life. Hardly the same. Some people are their lives. Others, like Diddy merely inhabit their lives. Like insecure tenants, never knowing exactly the extent of their property or when the lease will expire. Like unskilled cartographers, drawing and redrawing erroneous maps of an exotic continent (2).

After committing the murder, Diddy takes some vital energy. He realizes that he is now a “posthumous person” which will allow him to explore the “far side” of death. After committing the murder second time, he calmly walks deeper into the tunnel “looking for his death” (291). Then only he realizes that “perhaps he has the answer to the desperate thought about the world” (310).

Life = the world. Death = being completely inside one’s own head (310-11).

At this point he feels free from the conventional concepts upon which he had to judge his life. He feels free from the “duty of classifying himself” as he is with the dead. He concludes:

Nothing could be less relevant here than judgment. That’s what death is about. They’re all collected here, the guilty and the innocent, those who tried and those who didn’t. Which thought makes Diddy laugh aloud. Absolved from the duty of classifying himself or appraising his surroundings (310).

Thus, the fluid boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead are traced only to be crossed. Like Faris says, “If fiction is exhausted in this world, then perhaps these texts create another contiguous one in which it spills over, so that it
continues life beyond the grave, so to speak”  (Faris,  *Magical Realism: Theory, History Community*, 172). In the same way the novel is about the relationship between life and death; between beginnings and endings. We are told: “knowing one has a life induces the temptation to give it up. One is dead. Therefore, one wants to die. Equally one wants to be born” (6). Thus, Sontag’s novel swarms with images of the doubles which give it the voice which the doubles bring forth. This explains Wendy B. Faris’s theory of Magical realism. In a Magical realist novel, a reader as a character in the novel may undergo a sublime experience when the ontological boundaries are transgressed. These boundaries can be between life and death, dream and waking, past and present or human and animal. In the present case, Sontag does the same. She blurs the boundaries. Diddy the protagonist himself is not sure of his existence. He wants to know it from Hester. After murdering Incardona he wants the confirmation from Hester whether he is “real” or “unreal”. At the same time Sontag also breaks down the idea of the absolute truth and allows the possibility of many truths to exist simultaneously. Sontag presents the truths of an individual, society and the world as well. As for the individual and the society, Diddy’s retreat into himself away from all “coherent rational spaces” is the result of communication breaking down between humans. While watching television, Diddy finds no information being transmitted but lists of cruelties and atrocities committed in a “denatured voice” (165).

America has also been presented as a place where conscious space is rapidly being eroded. In fact, America has been presented as a “doomed place” which Sontag does not like at all. There is hatred for the corporate world, suburban homes, “Homes that are quite (now), emptied of father bread-winner and school-age children” (73). The living place of the trackman’s wife has also been presented as shabby and sordid. On every visit to the railroad station, Diddy finds the deterioration of the surfaces of the station. Diddy feels:

Not only mere negligence is at work here, surely. A question of policy or principle. Only a matter of time before the wrecker’s ball gets around to undoing this generous space, so that something smaller can be put up in its stead. But isn’t there a good deal to be said for keeping a doomed place clean and in decent repair? The claims of dignity, for instance. Especially since nemesis is proving to be somewhat dilatory in paying its anticipated call. (44)
Diddy gets startled on his visit by the depressing look of the city. As magical realism incorporates aspects of human existence such as thoughts, emotions, dreams, and imagination, in the same way *Death Kit* also incorporates all these elements. Through this amalgamation, a more exact depiction of human reality has been done.

In *Death Kit*, that is the dream narrative of Diddy, there are two traumatic events—the murder(s) of trackman occurring twice in the novel. Hester is convinced that Diddy day dreamed the workman but Diddy, though he wants to believe Hester but can not do so. So he takes Hester to the spot where he killed the trackman. Hester’s warnings to Diddy about not attacking the trackman get mixed up with other assertions such as “Wake up!”, and “Hey!” and “Try the oxygen!” It is here that we come to know that Diddy is constructing all these events while he is lying in the hospital dying and he has entered his death (now). And in the house of death Diddy “feels a sickening edge of something that resembles fear. A particular hush. A rancid smell” (311). The enigma of death is also one of the origins. So at the end of the novel while he is dying, Diddy “swarms with happiness of being in his body” (311). All these events are presented with much emotion and intensity to create the effect. Magical realism is evident when these emotions are depicted with an exaggeration through the characters as they cause sobs and sometimes death also. Sontag here uses magical realism asking the readers to use their senses and imagination to get into the depth of the story. Thus, reader is instigated to solve the mystery, to know the higher reality.

In drawing on fairy tale narratives, Sontag creates the impression as if the characters in the novel are fairy tale characters. Fairy tales act as a means of escapism and expressing the creativity and fantastical ideas about magical realism. Sontag’s protagonist Diddy himself feels it when he along with Hester is walking in the tunnel:

> Feels they’re the two children from the fairy tale, wandering hand in hand through the enchanted forest. Lost. Being the boy, he’s obliged to be the braver and the stronger. Reassuring his little sister who weeps in fright; supporting and tending her. (281)

However, it is also important that the fairy tales are social constructs. They offer an alternative view of reality but also reveal the values that a society holds important through the actions they categorize. The idea of a brother and sister wandering alone in the wild is an ancient one and occurs in many folk tales. Even in the house of death at the end of the narrative Diddy dreams that he will find Hester at
the end of his tour. He is sure that she will come “to save him like the princess in some fairy tale. Love’s power sweeping him up from the kingdom of death. “Death and the maiden” (311). As soon as Sontag establishes the references, she slowly shifts the tone away from the folk narrative to that of a realist narrative enticing us with careful details of everyday life and thus creating the illusion that what we are reading is a realistic narrative.

In the novel *Death Kit* Sontag has crossed genres combining romance, history and fantasy. Different genres have been used and parodied in the novel. Two eminent critics, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg have expressed useful insights regarding the mixing of various genres in a narrative in general and in a novel in particular. In *The Nature of Narrative* Scholes and Kellogg explain:

The narratives which men have admired most are those which have combined powerfully and copiously the various strands of narrative: the epic and the novel. The epic, dominated by its mythic and traditional heritage nevertheless included fictional, historical and mimetic materials in its powerful amalgam. The novel dominated by its realistic conception of the individual in an actual society, nevertheless has drawn upon mythic historical and romantic patterns for its narrative articulation… Myth, mimesis, history, romance and fable all function so as to enhance one another and reward the narrative artist whose mind and art are so powerful that he can contain and control the richest combination of narrative possibilities (232-233).

As mentioned earlier also, the novel *Death Kit* emphasizes magical realism as a postmodernist key element. In this regard two theorists in particular, Fredric Jameson and Jean- François Lyotard have provided gainful insights for considering magical realist writing as postmodern. Jameson claims that postmodernism is the “attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten to think historically in the first place” (3). So the inclusion of historical references in magic realist texts suggests that magical realism has not forgotten to think historically. And Sontag confirms this in her novel saying, “The past must be reimagined” (36). There are many references to historical events. The Vietnam War is there in the background of the novel. Though there are no direct references to the war but the TV news reminds Diddy of the behaviour of his own country towards a defenseless nation.
There are also references to the floods in Italy and famine in India. On the concept of past events and imagination, Sontag informs us that all “past events, both real and imaginary, are consigned to the trusteeship of the imagination” (35). Exploring whether the killing of the workman in the tunnel was fantasy or fact, the narrator informs us that “Diddy has no access to it (now) except through his imagination”. The love making scene at the lavatory also deports the readers to a different realm which has been described by Sontag with intensity.

In childhood, Diddy was so obsessed and emotionally attached with a doll that he could not sleep without it. He used to take it to his kindergarten. The doll used to sit in his lap while he took his dinner. The doll Andy was “dearer to Diddy than his parents”, “Dearer than Paul. Dearer than Mary” (56). Diddy mutilated the doll after he found his brother Paul playing with it. The doll became an “even more precious historical totem, an album of Diddy’s hopeless sorrow” (56). The elements of magical realism become more prominent when these feelings of lust, love, sorrow and attachment are described using rhetorical devices. The double indented paragraphs are used, and rhetorical questions are asked at the end of the paragraphs about the motives, “Who could hardly imagine that their surly able shortstop played in secret with a doll? (57), Why should she be? (93) Or developments in the inquiry, the police are making into the possible negligence on the part of the railroad? (105). The examples are not few but many. Not only this but, we also have the frequent shift in the pronouns from “they” to “we”. The novelist uses these devices to create different moods in the novel, which further create the magical upshot in the novel.

Sontag also bombards the readers with metaphors. Sontag imbibes magical realism as a development out of surrealism that expresses a genuinely third world consciousness. She has shown reality more truly with the aid of metaphor. In her book *Against Interpretation*, Sontag has given a definition of Surrealism which goes very well with her novels also. She describes surrealism as:

A mode of sensibility, which cuts across all the arts in the 20th century. There is a surrealist tradition in theatre, in painting, in poetry, in the cinema, in music and in the novel…The surrealist tradition in all these arts is united by the idea of destroying conventional meanings and creating new meanings or counter-meanings through radical juxtaposition (*Against Interpretation*, 269).
Sontag further elaborates that literature draws on surrealist insight that “the meaning of modern art is its discovery beneath the logic of everyday life of the logic of dreams” (271). This insight as we see was a significant influence on her first two novels, *The Benefactor* and *Death Kit*. Magical realism used by Sontag is more a combination of surrealist and real. Some art critics and writers have failed to distinguish between surrealism and magical realism. In fact both the modes use a mixture of realism and fantastic, the only difference lies in the content itself. In magical realism the aim of the artist is to present the observations from the everyday world, whereas in Surrealism the writer takes us to the other world. The magic realist may use different points of view, mysterious juxtapositions or common objects and events presented in an uncanny way. But everything is presented in the world of possible. Surrealism takes us beyond this world, which is impossible and exists only in mind. No doubt the novel, *Death Kit* also exists in the mind of the protagonist Diddy but the techniques with which it has been described correspond to magical realism. Sontag has depicted reality which is similar to our own, the impossible occurring without a comment. Moreover the self-aware narrator establishes a relationship with the reader outside the realms of the story.

The novelist makes the most of magical realism through what Wendy B. Faris refers to as “linguistic magic, when we identify magical realism in the novel where language thrives on the pervasive intertextual nature of much postmodern writing and the presence of Intertextual bricolage” (Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History Community*, 176). The intertextuality often comes from the way metaphors are turned into reality. In the present case we have Diddy cooped up in small antiseptic space; and on the wall framed, “O beauteous land”, and “O gracious land”. This is effectively added to the fictional atmosphere of the text when Diddy remembers his brother Paul, a musician, crowded by his fans whenever “he is out there in the beauteous gracious land”. Then we also have “Diddy the good”, “Diddy the seducer”, “Diddy the incomplete”, “Diddy the treacherous”, and many more. We also have “guilty eyes”, “metal eyes”, “meteor eyes”, “paper eyes”, “damp eyes”, “annealed eyes”, etc. The company where Diddy works manufactures many microscopes. Sontag tells all this in a style:
We are surprised by the play of the language in the fictional moments of the narrative. *Death Kit* in fact is a novel in which Sontag uses her imagination to create an altered version of magical reality. The perspective of the novel is not one of fantasy only but instead of logical narrator. The reliable narrator tells the story; making these impossible events seem very likely or very memorable to the reader. The reader is left wondering, did this really happen? Or could this really have happened to Diddy? By presenting this with vivid imagery and dazzling events, we are able to see through the eyes of Diddy who experiences life more fully and more real. The scene in the tunnel where Diddy kills Incardona is the finest example of this. Incardona is busy working on the track, “lifts up the boards” and “hurls them onto the others”(21). He “rubs his face with his forearm” and “hitches up his pant” and “spits on the ground” (21). These expressions take the reader along for the further action. Diddy “smelling his own sweat (now)”, takes a deep breath before bringing “the crowbar down on the back of the man’s head” (22). After confirming that the workman is no more, Diddy gets apprehensive of going to jail. Looking at the dark tunnel he wants to know has anybody seen him. These hallucinatory images erupt into the realm of real. The narrator in disguise of the third person protagonist is always there to narrate to us these events with the use of images. Thus Sontag succeeds in creating the magical effect in the text.

Further magical realism takes place on the edge of reality, when among realistic events, an inexplicable phenomenon suddenly occurs. Reality turns out to be deceptive when the reader gets a glimpse of hidden aspects. Drawing on this, we are told in the concluding chapters of the novel that Diddy committed suicide. Although Diddy’s attempt at suicide is successful, but Sontag withholds this information from the readers till the end of the novel. Regarding this aspect in a magic realist text, Rawdon Wilson has given critical insights. He has highlighted this hybrid quality of
magical realism in an essay titled “The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism”. The essay collected in a book on Magical realism by Farris explores the link between magical realism and the idea of deception. He explains:

One world may be hidden within another... the hybrid construction emerges from a secret, always already contained within, forming an occulted and latent dimension of the surface world (Faris 225).

As Metafictional Dimensions are common in magical real texts so in the same way *Death Kit* also contains the magical power of fiction itself, the narrative devices, images, metaphors, intrusions by the novelist and the experimentation with literary conventions. This part of the chapter aims at analyzing the metafictional characteristics in *Death Kit*.

In *Death Kit* Sontag has developed an aesthetics of self-reflexives which is a mode of fiction which investigates the very process of signification or meaning production. In particular, literary narrative concentration like plotting, use of metaphor and omniscient narrator are parodied so as to expose their role in the fabrication of meaning; so as to present the text as a fiction making apparatus. All through the story Sontag never lets us forget that what we are reading is constructed, not natural. The novel contains many authorial interventions. Sontag in fact has expressed her opinion through the words of her protagonist Diddy and depicted secondary characters in a way which include comments on social constraints. The authorial intervention in novel happens in various shapes. The parenthetical “now” is an attempt by the novelist to intrude into the story in order to make her presence felt. We are told Diddy “had a life”. If Diddy once “had a life” then how can Diddy speak (now) with such clarity about his own condition. Perhaps Diddy would not unless, Sontag would have consider us that the posthumous state lifts the cloud and the “fetid under life” assumes an intelligence of its own. And then we do not have only the parenthetical (now) we have the word “we” also. While narrating the story Sontag makes her presence felt. Making herself and the readers a part of the narrative process she tells us that “On time, we left the city heading northwest” (10). Then “we” (Sontag) remain in the tunnel with Diddy and Hester for seven minutes and also “we” sit in silence in the compartment with other fellow passengers.
In *Death Kit*, Sontag has experimented with styles and narrative techniques. This extraordinary text breaks most of the rules that would be subsequently advanced for the writing of traditional realistic fiction. Sontag has played with form, structure, language, style, voice, and other things. The novel as a whole can be characterized by the ironic quote marks that much of it can be taken as tongue-in-cheek. Though the idea of employing the quotation marks or playing with the narrative techniques did not start with the postmodernists. The modernists were equally playful and ironic, but these features have become central features in most of the postmodern works. But in *Death Kit*, irony is certainly the key mode of narrative inquiry. It is certainly present as Diddy is described as endowed with vast amounts of irony applied at his own expense, he vowed to go on placing one foot in front of the other”(7). Sontag herself also seems to be endowed with a considerable degree of irony, at the reader’s expense.

*Death Kit* is very self-consciously concerned with the relationship between beginnings and endings. Diddy explores that when one knows that one has life, he has the temptation to give it up. “Equally, one also wants to be born” (6). This relationship between life and death suggests a key to its reflexive aims. Walter Benjamin has also observed that “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He links the human desire of knowledge of death to the imaginary closure of narrative which promises to confer meaning on the movements from beginning to end. The paradox of *Death Kit* is that it is prospective and retrospective at the same time. It seeks it a return at the end which its moment of beginning. Thus the novel explicitly thematizes this paradox and also reflexively plays with it. The novel in fact begins at the end, with Diddy’s death. It has made lengthy narration of his dream which has already taken place. The inclusion of the murder of Incardona is a mere plot device to add to its textual energies. The beginnings and endings have a special function in postmodern metafiction. Sontag has also structured the opening and closing scenes of her novel very well. In the first paragraph of the novel, we are introduced to Diddy who intrudes into the real world, which he does not belong to. “The Diddy, his family nickname, was used (now) only by his brother (1). The entrance draws our attention and in the same way at the end of the novel, Sontag makes Diddy exit the world by telling that, Diddy has made his final chart; drawn up his last map” (312).
Sontag has embodied herself and her ideas in the novel while focusing the reader’s attention on the creative process. One of the main features of Sontag as a novelist is her integration of creator and the creatures in the novel. This innovation can only happen if the boundaries between the creator and creatures are transgressed. Thus metafiction is the tool employed by Sontag to draw the attention to the fictional process involving the creator and the creatures. Unlike in a realist novel, in *Death-kit* the boundaries between the creator and the creatures remain blurred. Though at times Sontag creates the impression that her characters are autonomous beings but that also happens for a short span. Diddy, “the sort of man who is hard to dislike” at times doubts his existence and feels an “insecure tenant” of a life and then starts believing in his existence but is ultimately and tragically linked to the will of the creator when he is made to enter his death. It seems as if Sontag wanted to create an atmosphere of mysticism and confusion where the reader would begin to question the nature of reality and fiction. By doing so Sontag creates a very strong impression of her role as an author and a creator. While searching for news about Incardona, Diddy finds no information being transmitted, merely lists of atrocities of and trivialities delivered in a “denatured voice” (165). Diddy wants to retreat into “himself” but Sontag intrudes on his self-reflections in the form of news reports on the Vietnam War. One of the reports is narrated as:

Just more about the unspeakable war, the one in which territory does not change hands and the sole measure of each victory is how many small-boned yellow bodies, with flesh charred by napalm or shattered by metal, huddle and sprawl on the ground after the battle. Waiting to be counted. The newscaster deploys the usual senseless numbers; repeats the well-worn gruesome tautologies of self-righteousness. With a broadly serious set to his face. Lies, but terrible smiling lies (165).

The news reports the atrocities committed by his home country during the war of Vietnam. Though the Vietnam War is never mentioned directly but it is there in the background. By reporting about war, Sontag here suggests that the horror of war numbs human responses and renders language incapable of expressing the reality. Thus the novel contains many stories with in the main story of the novel. Along side the main story of Diddy, we are told the story of Hester, the story of her blindness, the
story of the Vietnam War, the crisis in the optics company, the story of the wolf boy, the story of Paul, a famous musician and Diddy’s brother. And then there are the strong judgments and ideas of Sontag also:

The past must be re-imagined; memories aren’t like furniture, something solid that you can own (36).

No one should be burdened with inventing his own nature from scratch. No one should be asked to decide whether he is good or bad (262).

Words cannot compel the unconditional movements of the heart (227).

The novel is mostly related by an omniscient third person narrator but the close reading suggests that Diddy the protagonist of the novel is viewing himself in the third person. We come across the use of word “we” so many times in the narrative. “We” also travel with Diddy into his consciousness. It is clear that the events in the novel are Diddy’s hallucinations in the final moments of his death. Sontag admitted this in one of her interviews that the novel is a “death-kit” because Diddy has assembled the elements of his death in the voice of a “disguised first person”. She conceded that the novel can be read as the “contents” of Diddy’s final coma. Hester and Incardona are figments of Diddy’s imagination. Diddy’s world is a “fictional world” But on and off Sontag includes the readers in the narration and tells that “we” are in a spacious, high-ceilinged, wood paneled room” (82). The role of the reader is further textualized in Death Kit with the very frequent address to the reader by the narrator. The conversation between the narrator and the reader is overtly spatialized in the novel in which different typographies are used as identity markers:

The train is really starting (now) unevenly shuddering and jerking. But in earnest. The overhead fluorescent lights in the compartment go on …. Though still enclosed within the tunnel the train is (now) moving smoothly (26).

The use of parentheses marks the phrase “now” as different from the rest of the narrative. It calls attention to the voice of the other who is interrupting the story being told. These direct addresses to the reader tell about the self-conscious element of the fiction. They not only enhance the artificiality of the fiction in which they are inscribed but at the same time they are also used to provide the narrative with a
rhythmic pattern that disrupts the intrinsic linearity of writing and enhance the spiral structure of the text. Diddy is described as Diddy the Good, Diddy the incomplete, and Diddy the capricious and so on. Further Sontag narrates in a rhythmic pattern:

Except for registering changes in the temperature and amount of tobacco pollution in the high ceiling room.

Except for being annoyed by the fidgeting and chain smoking of Ambergate, the Company’s treasurer, setting to Diddy’s left.

Except for being annoyed by the fidgeting and chain smoking of Ambergate, the Company’s treasurer, sitting to Diddy’s left.

Except for watching Pete La Salle head of Export, Walkin’s nephew, skillfully dozing without the other noticing.

Except for … (86).

The text explicitly mentions the names of four main literary texts of the time, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Sense and sensibility*, *Mansfield Park* all by Jane Austen. This has been done in order to establish a number of Parallelisms and contrasts among the literary figures of these texts and the protagonist of *Death Kit*. Diddy reads to Hester in the hospital. He finished *Pride and Prejudice* in eleven days. While Hester was still on a post-operative period of seventeen days, they had already started *Emma*. The effect of the fiction of Jane Austen is visibly narrated to us as:

Mrs. Nayburn, Diddy and perhaps even Hester, are calmed by Jane Austen’s authoritative prose, well pronounced and energetically delivered in Diddy’s pleasant baritone. The trio inspired by that unflagging intelligence, neither modest nor self-deprecatory. Intelligence, good will and reasonableness all seem possible. Indeed, inevitable. A few pages before the ball at Netherfield takes place, Hester and her two caretakers, the elder teetering on the verge of abdication and the younger barely more than an upstart pretender unite in an unspoken alliance expressly designed to denigrate nobody. A treaty, out of tact never exactly spelled out but nonetheless binding is concluded which regards everybody’s interests as having equal weight and dignity (210).
The trio is completely engrossed in the act of reading and listening. By portraying characters engrossed in reading and listening and at times forgetting about the real world surrounding their lives reflects the way in which the characters of a fictional work can become engaged in the world of other fictional characters. This in a way also points out that this might happen to the real life reader. The literary characters from the literary world of Jane Austen enter the lives of Diddy and Hester. They compare themselves to the literary personages and relate to the situations in the literary texts. The characters existing outside the realm of the novel enter their thoughts and this blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. Not only the literary texts are mentioned but a judgment on their styles of writing is also passed. The novels are described to be containing abstract certainties about pleasure and discord. At the same time Jane Austen’s authoritative prose is also complimented. Hester wants to see in Diddy a Mr. Knightly of Emma. While going back to the apartment sitting in the taxi with Diddy, she just imagines if:

Like Mr. Knightly, waiting impatiently, his true sentiments undeclared, until the moment when Emma perceives her follies, feels shame over them and repudiates them. Then, because it’s finally wanted, Mr. Knightly can offer the healing balm of his generous love (222).

Thus while Sontag makes reference to prior texts, she also consciously and unconsciously cites other major cultural events such as the violence and terror during the Vietnam War, the famine in India and the floods of Italy. It depicts the senseless brutality that is ruining America. Diddy is “reminded of the behavior of his own country, currently engaged in the cumbersome, drawn out murder of a small defenseless nation” (166). The novel can further be regarded as metafictional in its numerous allusions to other works of fiction. By making reference to other literary texts she points out that the reader consumes a work of fiction based on previous works of fiction. Moreover by doing so she also includes the critique of the role of received narrative traditions. The inclusion of the past works of fiction not only points out the fictionality of the present text but also illustrates how the past works of fiction are re-read and re-played in the present.

Sontag herself implies that Diddy the protagonist is unreal, merely a confection of literature a Diddy; or Didi – as Tony Tanner points out in his review of the novel. He reminds us of Didi – the nickname for Vladimir in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting For
Godot which was a major text for Sontag. Like Didi, Diddy seems paralyzed. He is a man of action but that also in his dreams only. Tanner also found resemblance between German novelist Elias Canetti’s famous novel, Auto-da-Fe and Death kit. In Auto-da-Fe the protagonist Peter Kien, a forty years philologist and sinologist also lives like Diddy in a hermetic world that is a death-kit. Sontag was much influenced by Elias Canetti and she has also written a key passage on Auto-da-Fe in her book Under the Sign of Saturn:

Auto-da-Fe depicts the stages of Kien’s madness as three relations of “head” and “world” – Kien secluded with his books as a “head without a world”; adrift in the bestial city, “a world without a head”; driven to suicide by “the world in the head.” And this was not language suitable only for the mad bookman; Canetti later used it in his notebook to describe himself as when he called his life nothing but a desperate attempt to think about everything “so that it comes together in a head and thus becomes one again,” affirming the fantasy he had pilloried in Auto-da-Fe (Sontag, 187).

As the novel Auto-da-Fe proved to be a dead end for Elias Canetti, Sontag also did not write any novel for the next twenty five years. The problem of Diddy is not new. Having existential credentials, it echoes Sartre’s La Nausee where everything that exists in an “opaque, meaningless thereness” which spreads “obfuscation and causes disgust”, where the “authentic privacy of the self” is assaulted by the public realm. Like Roquentin, Diddy experiences nausea when confronted by the brute facts of things. He feels totally abstracted from a world which is beyond his control. He becomes highly reflective and “an unskilled cartographer” (78). While this existential horror story has its roots in European literature and philosophy it also has an American dimension. The idea of “everything running down”, of linguistic, cultural, and informational entropy, is common theme in American literature of the 1960s. As Tonny Tanner has observed, “entropy is concerned with the fate of energy-the individual’s, society’s the world’s- and as such is well calculated to interest the novelist trying to discern what patterns the released powers and vitalities of his age and society are establishing”(City of Words: American Fiction, 144). Therefore Sontag has also combined the element of pastiche which is closely related to intertextuality. Pastiche means to paste together multiple elements
or styles of past. *Death Kit* is thus a parody of the styles adopted by Sartre and Elias Canetti.

*The Bible* is another intertext in *Death Kit*. In the last pages of the novel Diddy just wonders as if he is posthumous creature whose very touch was withering. He discusses with Hester the possibility of his being Lazarus:

May be … That I am a kind of Lazarus. I feel like one. Especially since I tried… to kill myself (251).

To this the Maestro replies:

I was saying just as strongly that I’m dangerous for you. If you’re Lazarus, may be I’m Medusa with the snaky hair turning you to stone (251).

Sontag makes Diddy a failed novelist. He has written a novel titled *The story of the wolf-Boy*. The actual draft of the novel is lost but the fragments of the story remain in his memory which tells that it was the story about a hirsute creature who wants to be more than an animal. He yearns for human society after coming to know that he is the offspring of Apes. Diddy remembers this story in a dream. While discussing the constructs of the fiction created by Diddy, Sontag informs us that the only thing “Diddy can do is to resurrect, in a recurrent dream, a parody or the fragment of the bizarre story set down in his lost manuscript. This just about the only dream he has (now)” (256). We can notice that this is a dream within the final dream of Diddy which he is having when he is dying. The novel is his artifice. Diddy’s writing the novel and then discussing it exemplifies the metafictional device of “presenting and discussing the fictional work of an imaginary character” (McCaffery 23) Discussing the creative process of *The story of the wolf-boy* Sontag tells us that the novel was “written in the first person, for Diddy couldn’t imagine the story being narrated by anyone except the hero himself” (254).

The manuscript of the novel discovered in the concluding pages of the novel creates two levels of fiction with in the novel, firstly the fiction of the narrator and then the fiction of the story which the narrator is telling. By narrating the story told first hand by one who witnessed the events, Sontag wants the readers to believe the story as reality while by introducing Diddy as an author in the novel she wants the readers to explore the creative process from the point of view of a fictional author.
This is mainly done to bring forth the process of creating fiction to the attention of the readers. Initially she makes the reader believe that the story being told is real and then by telling us about the story of Diddy’s novel, Sontag motivates the readers to explore and question that reality. By doing so, Sontag lays bare the creative process involved in the writing of fiction. The story of the novel depicts Diddy’s own estrangement from society and his own animal nature. And this in fact is Sontag’s fictional effort to come to terms with her own desire to be seen as well as with her own estrangement from society and family. Diddy remembers a childhood spent in Tucson which is a place where Sontag spent her childhood. Diddy also has a nurse Mary who reminds us of Sontag’s Irish Rose. And in the story of the unfinished novel also, Sontag tries to watch herself:

She was a tall, skinny girl about twelve or thirteen years old, with long black hair; wearing sneakers, blue jeans, a red checked shirt, and a fringed leather jacket probably bought at the tourist store on the Pima Indians reservation south of Tucson (260).

The girl climbs a mountain towards the Wolf-Boy. She stops suddenly as her parents call her back. “But is the girl going to obey her parents? Will it occur to her to be disobedient, to place her own self-esteem over her parents”. (262). The girl comes down after muttering “Oh, hell!” and “Okay! Okay!”, “I’m coming”. These voices are of narrator Diddy and of Sontag herself. This triple screened autobiographical passage suggests that all of them want to free themselves by writing their own story. Diddy’s dilemma of ending his novel is in fact the dilemma of Sontag herself, “getting restless just listening. How will this story end, happily or sadly? Doesn’t want to be forced to imagine a body lying, broken smashed, on the rocky floor of the canyon”(261). This also speaks of the process in which fictions are constructed. Other than this many other autobiographical elements are also present in the novel. Sontag creates a brother named Paul for Diddy in the same way as she had a sister, Judith. But in the novel it is Paul who is the Sontag genius. She also portrays Paul reading by flashlight under the covers in the same way as Sontag herself did in her childhood. In the last pages of the novel when Diddy visits the Charnel house, he finds no dead body dating after the year 1933, which is the year of Sontag’s birth. By this Sontag seems to suggest that Death is visible and present around us but we avoid seeing it.
Another prominent dimension which shows the novelist’s reflexivity in the text is the novel’s ending in Charnel house/tunnel. This shows Sontag’s life long fascination with cave/tunnels. Diddy also dies at the age of thirty three. When Sontag completed the novel in 1966 she was also thirty three. Liam Kennedy in his book *Susan Sontag: Mind as passion* praises its reflexive treatment of psychological and narratological endings and beginnings. He feels that *Death Kit* “may well be making its own commentary on novel as a genre”. He writes:

In *Death Kit* she explores the modernist cult of self negation to reveal its absurdities and paradoxes. In his morbid self-absorption Diddy is the figure of the modernist writer who pushes the self to state of crisis, yet his very horror at this crisis is also a form of pride in his highly refined intellectuality. The writer becomes wholly reliant upon the imagination in the hubristic act of constructing an ‘inventory’ of the world. Sontag is wary of the hubris, she cannot help but parody it, yet she also wants to affirm the autonomy of imaginative licentiousness and extremism. She keeps her distance from Diddy, reluctant to present him as an anti-hero, yet she also implies that his necromantic dream perversely dramatizes the sense of an ending in late modernist culture (Kennedy, 61).

As discussed earlier also Sontag has included many textual types in the novel which has various different voices and hypodiegetic worlds with in the diegesis of the novel. She has experimented with various generic forms. Gore Vidal an eminent critic and novelist of the postwar period reviewed *Death Kit* and remarked that Sontag was an American trying too earnestly to fit her style into the form of French *nouveau roman*. While describing an average day in the life of Diddy Sontag focuses on surface detail depicting physical objects and random events of everyday life like:

> Arrival at the office. His jellied porous boss, Michael C Duva, advances across the floor with a file of correspondence between Watkins and company and *The Review of Scientific Instruments* that needs Diddy’s attention. Why does Duva tilt his head to the left when he speaks, why does he smile, and why does he allow those drops of saliva to collect at the corners of his mouth? (8).

Sontag has imbibed many styles in her text. Sometimes she writes like a biographer and sometimes like a critic. She has included history, fiction,
autobiography, myth and imagination. To James Toback Sontag herself revealed that she did not “know what Diddy is or even that he is...I guess he is many things and he learns about them through his fantasies. He is brutal and bitchy-but he’s a poor slob, too.” Sontag also conceded to Joe Ballamy in her interview that she wanted her novel to look real simply because it was “there”. She wanted both levels of experience to look “real”- that is, the dream and the experience of the dream as an actual event. Thus with Death-Kit Sontag was wresting her fiction from the outmoded notions of verisimilitude as Hippolyte says in The Benefactor “I am crawling through the tunnel of myself.” The “myself” is his dream, his novel and his death. And Death Kit which ends in a Charnel house full of nineteenth century images and dead bodies is a House of usher. The train that carries him to murder and then to re-murder conveys the energy and then the failing energy of Diddy’s comatose path through the barrier and into the Charnel house. Here he needs no experiment, no principle no dialogue with the Phantoms of modernism no cruel psychotherapy.

Like many postmodern novels, Death Kit is also double coded. One code is understood through the wide readership and which is for commercial purposes, while the other aims at the elite readers who are educated enough to understand the metafictional self-consciousness. Metafictive devices in a way open up the real time as well as the fictive time in the text. It lays bare the conventions of fiction writing which might not be understood by a reader. Therefore, some of the parallels drawn in the novel might not be understood by the common reader. But it is magical realism and metafiction which ask for the total absorption of the reader in the meaning making process. The textualisation of the reader is a feature which demands more participating role from a reader.

Thus, Death Kit is a novel in which the distinctly uncommon events occur not only frequently but these events are treated by the characters as everyday occurrence. Diddy murders the trackman twice in the novel but this has been presented as an ordinary occurrence. To achieve this Sontag has employed a wide variety of strategies. She has constructed a magic realist novel which shows that fiction is capable of imparting knowledge about world. The novel challenges the standard version of reality and in this way becomes self-reflexive and metafictional. The novel shifts the focus from the text to the reader and in the process engages the reader’s consciousness of the act of reading. The writing holds up the mirror to the reader caught in the act of reading by narrative devices. Thus challenging the traditional role of reader and the author, she destroys the illusion of reality and burs the line between fact and fiction.