

trying to live in a magic world in the past. Hightower may be opposed to Joe Christmas: while Joe is deprived of all certainty about his past and cannot rest from his engagement with the present, Hightower, obsessed with the past, does not live in the present, withdrawing from life and its sufferings.

For Southern Puritans, women represent guilt, since they embody sex. They also represent the guilt resulting from racial exploitation. Men, on the other hand, represent guilt when embodying racial problems and also a religion based on notions of sin and punishment. These three elements, sex, religion, and race, are interlinked and represent the burden that society carries along. However, at the end of the novel, Faulkner unites Lena Grove to Byron Bunch. He represents the common man, the persistent one, who does not have the air of mystery or intrigue which surrounds the other characters. His name suggests common people, humanity. By uniting humanity to the earth, the only triumphant element of his version of the modern South, Faulkner gives us some hope that Man will prevail.

IMAGERY IN *Light in August*

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Faulkner created a work loaded with symbols to depict the two strains that haunt the South and, by extension, all of mankind. These strains are the dualism represented by the black and white races, and time, as an inescapable circular trap.

Many are the symbols used, but there is one that summons up these aspects of Southern literature. It is the Ouroboros, the dragon biting its own tail. It is a Jungian archetype which is

symbolic of time and the continuity of life. Cirlot points out that "in some versions of the Ouroboros, the body is half light and half dark, alluding in this way to the successive counterbalancing of opposing principles."¹

The Ouroboros is one of the most symbolic animals to which various attributes converge. Joe Christmas, the central character in *Light in August*, embodies some of the characteristics of the dragon.² He is aggressive and dangerous; he follows his animal instincts, and therefore is linked to the idea of being the adversary, the devil himself. The dragon has, in many legends, this "meaning of the primordial enemy with whom combat is the supreme test," as Cirlot states.³

Although Christmas is identified with the beast, he has to fight his own dragon so as to find his identity. He takes then an opposite role, that of the sun hero. This hero is associated with the sun because he has the "virtues necessary to vanquish chaos and overcome the temptations offered by the forces of darkness."⁴ The sun hero must fight the dragon of his own low nature. This ambivalence is a characteristic of the sun, according to the Hindu *Rigveda*. On the one hand it is resplendent, while above the horizon; on the other hand, it is black or invisible, while under the horizon. Joe Christmas' quest follows the path of the sun: he ought to ascend slowly and painfully from hell toward heaven.

His first struggle is against his origin: he has both black and white blood, but is neither a black nor a white man. As he tried to live in either group, Christmas is rejected by both. This sense of non-belonging, which is a burden felt by the American Southerners, generates in him a mental imbalance that is also a characteristic of the dragon.

"Jung goes as far as to say that the dragon is a mother-image

(that is, a mirror of the maternal principle or of the unconscious)."⁵ The image Christmas has of a mother is that of a weak but castrating, servile but demanding woman. The first time he got near a mother-like figure was in the orphanage where he met the dietitian. His hearing her in a sexual act and her attempt to buy his silence led to a traumatic shock.

The second mother-like figure appeared when he was adopted. Mrs. Mc Eachern tries to buy his love and that enhances his negative conception of motherhood. The animosity brought about by these relationships was later concentrated in Joanna Burden, his mistress. As she tries to mother him, Christmas slashes her throat open. This image of the feminine enemy appears in the alchemical doctrine of Hermes Trimegistus. There, the woman is equated with a principle of dissolution and, therefore, she ought to be conquered and slain by the sun hero.

Another characteristic of the Ouroboros is revealed during Joe Christmas' search for his identity. He is driven by what Cirlot calls a "will which desires and yet has nothing capable of satisfying it except his own self."⁶ In other words, man's possibility for satisfying his desires is to be found not in external reality, but within himself. This aspiring will finds expression in the image of the dragon biting its tail. It symbolizes the ability of hunger to feed itself, being both the sacrificer and the instrument of sacrifice.

It has already been said that one of the characteristics of the Ouroboros is dualism. This binary feature pervades Faulkner's novel and can be found in both characters and themes.

Lena Grove, as the earth figure, is opposed to Christmas, as the hell/heaven figure. She is passive and fertile while he is aggressive and sterile. She is the earth that bears life, he is

the dragon that brings death and destruction.

Lena is dressed in blue, the colour that stands for calmness, quietness, and tranquility. The earth itself is blue when seen from outer space. On the other hand, Joe Christmas is always wearing a white shirt and black trousers. These colours contrast Everything and Nothing, Light and Darkness, and Life and Death. They are the external reflection of the inner conflict of his white and black blood.

According to Faulkner, Lena's life is like a "string being rewound onto a spool" (p. 8). She is like the mythological figure, Clotho, the Moira dressed in blue that turns the spindle and presides over man's birth. Whereas Lena is linked to the continuous and timeless aspect of life, Joe Christmas is associated with the idea of time as a cyclic cage that has to be broken out of. This gives his life a characteristic of discontinuity and fragmentation. He is like another mythological figure, Atropos, the Moira dressed in black that cuts the thread of human life with her shears.

The contrast between the two protagonists is not the only example of binary presentation in *Light in August*. At least a half-dozen of contrasting pairs appear, but dualism is more poignantly expressed through Joe Christmas.

He was probably born under Capricorn, a sign whose dual nature represents the ambivalent tendencies of life toward the abyss and the heights.⁷ Again, Christmas is divided between the dragon that wants to hide in the underworld and the sun hero whose quest shall lead him to heaven.

It seems that in Hindu doctrine these two currents signify the involutive and evolutive possibilities, that is, birth and death and death and birth. This continuum of birth-death-rebirth

is the path followed by Christmas: when he was born his mother died, and Lena gave birth to a child by the time he was killed.

This twofold aspect was prolonged into his sexual behaviour. Sex first appeared in the dietitian episode. Once, in the orphanage, the boy Joe Christmas was hidden in a closet savouring a toothpaste, while the dietitian was having intercourse in the room. The toothpaste he was sucking may be a surrogate for either the breast or for the penis, according to Freudian theories. The dietitian's wicked reaction may have led him to an inadequate relationship with women.

This inadequacy was reinforced by the sado-masochist link with his adoptive father. The habitual flogging had for both, in Chase's words, "the uneasy satisfaction of an abnormal but somehow vehemently pure sexual alliance."⁸

Another dual image in *Light in August* is that of flight and pursuit. In Joe Christmas, it is represented by the unflinching ghosts that chase him. Faulkner describes them as "not pursuers: but himself: years, acts, deeds omitted and committed, keeping pace with him, stride for stride, breath for breath, thud for thud of the heart, using a single heart" (p. 284). He belongs to that race, very rarely found, "the hunting hunted kind," as the song in *Jesus Christ Superstar* says.⁹

Jung traces an early Christian current that has God as the father of both Satan and Jesus.¹⁰ This paradoxical opposition recurs in Christmas' personality: on a deep level he is the dragon and the sun hero, on a superficial level he is an evil and a godlike figure. When he enters a Negro church he is thought to be the devil, Satan himself. This is enhanced as he curses God and busts the lamps off. By the moment of his death, he overcomes his low nature and resembles a god, in Faulkner's words, with "his

raised and armed and manacled hands full of glare and glitter like lightning bolts" (p. 348).

The association of Joe Christmas with Jesus Christ begins with their names - the initials are the same, J.C.; they were born on the same day, lived 33 years, and underwent a seven-day Passion before dying.

Christmas plight reaches the end: he has fought the dragon and ascends to heaven through death as a true sun hero: "with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes" (p. 349), as Faulkner wrote.

All this dualism may be focused on the primordial conflict of Christmas' existence: white blood versus black blood. And Joe is but a symbol of the South in anthropomorphical scale. The repressive religious, sexual, and social codes, the capital sin of slavery, and the feeling that time is a trap were set upon his shoulders. Thus, he was turned into a sacrificial sheep offered in expiation of the South's feeling of guilt and, by extension, his death was an atonement for mankind's sins.

Notes

¹ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage, 2nd. ed. (London: Routledge & Paul Keegan, 1971), p. 247.

² William Faulkner, *Light in August* (Harmondsworth, G.B.: Penguin-Chato & Windus, 1952). All subsequent quotations from the novel are taken from this edition.

³ Cirlot, p. 86.

⁴ Cirlot, p. 148.

⁵ Cirlot, p. 88.

⁶ Cirlot, p. 89.

⁷ Cirlot, p. 38.

⁸ Richard Chase, "The Stone and the Crucifixion," in *Critique and Essays on Modern Fiction, 1920-1951*, ed. John W. Aldrich (New York: Ronald, 1952), p. 193.

⁹ Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, "Pilate's Dream," in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, MCA, 600.063/64, 1974.

¹⁰ Carl G. Jung, *Psicologia da religião ocidental e oriental*, trans. Padre Dom Mateus Ramalho Rocha, (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1980), p. 249.