

Religious Myth Utopia Resembled in “the Sound and the Fury”: Dilsey’s Episode

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Abstract

This paper will be focused on the elements of religious utopia exposed in the novel “The Sound and the Fury” by William Faulkner, through the episode of Dilsey. In contrast to Quentin and Jason’s meaningless, decomposed perception of time, responsible for its perversity, Dilsey’s religious sensitivity transmits a systematic structure to the world because historic human awareness is recorded by God’s projection: all events are based on Christ’s Alpha and Omega. Religious myth utopia, anticipated by Dilsey in the last episode, achieves its climax in Shegog’s predication. Just like Dilsey, who varies from the characters of the novel with her positive utopia, even the positive utopia projected by the priest’s predication alters from the alienating caustic and mortal circumstances of the whole novel. Dilsey together with the church congregation were gathered to listen to this predication, living the joy of Easter in the novel. Shegog is a transmitter of God’s word, to touch people’s hearts and join them in a “collective dream” dedicated to the Easter celebration. The people in the church reached a small utopian dream, part of the big dream instigated by the myth of Christian religion. Impeding all negativities, the ritual enabled the unification of humanity in a common positive dream. This dream is responsible for the religious utopia in the novel. Through an empirical analysis of this episode, Dilsey, and the sermon, I will arrive to the point to present the elements of religious utopia involved in this part of the novel.

Keywords: Christian religion, utopia, myth, Dilsey, Shegog

1. Introduction

Because of a new reality, where the societies at the beginning of the 20th century were encouraged by social movements and technological developments, the intellectuals started to produce a deeper thought on the political, social and structural consequences of these changes. The uncertainties over the role of men in this new society, even as part of uncertainties on technology, were seen from the positive and negative perspective. These social reactions, within a literary context, were manifested in the utopian literature. Modernist utopian literature, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, is different from that of other previous periods because of historical, social and cultural variations. If at the center of every utopia is the separation and division from the past, the same hostility is at the center of modernism. As a result, modernism created a break from the structural organization of all pre- industrial societies. These divisions hide a utopian idea to create a perfect society, but from a new perspective, distinctive from the previous ones. The creation of this ideal society would help modernism highlight the negative aspects of the period. While comparing the utopian ideas exposed before and after modernism, we could judge on their evolution and change. While writing on the book of Tomas Moore, Ogden (1949) declares “utopia, in itself, is a book on ethics. Utopia is an effort to project the ethical values of Christianity in a real social system.”(p. ix) This means that utopia before modernism is within a moralist context. Frederick Jameson (2004) exposes a completely new perspective in his article “Political Utopia”, while reassuring “the proposal of Marx does not include a concept of human nature; it is not even essential or psychological; it does not have passions, sins like lust for money, greed, or proud. That of Mark is structural diagnosis.” (p.4) As a result, utopia, during modernism was perceived as a structural change.

2. Myth and Utopia

A manifestation of utopia could be found within the context of myth. In many situations with human or superhuman creatures of a remote period, religious or secular archetypes, considered as a real overview of the manner the society and other natural phenomena were created. They present the living in the primitive form, but with emotional fulfilling, in full harmony of the man with the nature, avoiding the unnecessary wishes produced by conflicts and hostility. This simple and happy living has served as a reference for every crisis, with the hope that a near or far away future is the possibility to find happiness. What unites unlike mythic ideas and places is the expectation that such situation of happiness could be reached again.

If we horizontally and vertically analyze the ideas of utopia developed during the years and centuries, it is clearly understood a transformation, as they become part of the structure of life and contemporary experience. Manheim (1985) describes utopia as “a sort of passing orientation of the reality that at the same time rips the connections with that existing reality.” (p.173) At the core of different concepts on utopia, which prevailed in the western societies, was the ideal creation of a society. This concept varies from the search for reflection over a better life, but it can even change to a pursue of impressions not based on reality, being just an immeasurable project of human mind. The meaning itself of the word utopia, of Greek origin, can be translated as eu-topia (Manheim, 1985, 173), a place finding happiness or as ou-topia, a place not based on reality, but a result of fantasy. Different supporters of utopia, such as Saint Thomas, Fourier and Owen had no intention to emancipate the specific classes, but humanity as a whole. (Davis, 1984, 4) While Thomas Moore in his book *Utopia* (1516), projects utopia as a way of thinking for different kinds of societies, maintains the notion of Manheim that a good living can be reached only outside the existing reality.

“The human need to make myths is very deep-rooted, since myths are symbolic projections of the cultural and moral values of a society, figuring of its psychic state.” (Leri, 1993, p.xi) The new mythology of modernism seemed to be different from other periods, considering that it was not an original formation, but would always remain as abstract. In his writing Friedrich Schlegel would insist that it must be the most artificial of all works of art, for it is to encompass all, it is to be a new course or vessel for the ancient, eternal fountainhead of poetry and itself the everlasting poem which contains within itself the seeds of all other poems. (qtd. in Leri, 1993, p.xx) Even Joyce (1882-1941) based his *Ulysses* (1922) on the myth of Christianity. From an analytic perspective, the phenomenon of utopia is reflected in this modernist novel. The overview of utopia as a philosophical phenomenon is necessary to understand and interpret *Ulysses*, which reflects this philosophical context. Joyce does not write a utopian literature, but in his novel, like in all novels, throughout different literary periods are present elements of utopia that penetrate his characters.

One of the concerns, in this new century, was to present in depth the personality traits of the individual, but at the same time the new relations between this individual and the surroundings. Unique meanings were addressed towards him. These meanings objectify some hidden essences of the world. Within this situation of anarchy, it was used a literary mean to put order within a poetic organization. Such symbolic order was achieved by the usage of the myth. Through the logic of the unconsciousness and its associations, the myth displayed a new viewpoint in the social reality. According to Frank Kermode (1962), the myth offered a possibility to “free the imagination from the scientific connotation of the modern world.” (p. 37) While analysing the usage of myth by Joyce, Elliot (1975) declares “the usage of myth by Joyce is a manner to control, systematize, give form and meaning to the endless paradox of contemporary anarchy.” (p. 480-483) The same ‘mythic method’ is used even by Faulkner (1897-1962) in his novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

3. Myth and Religion

When God and faith become a meaningful urge to give meaning to man’s life and help him face everyday problems, then faith takes a utopian connotation. This connotation is widespread in the context, where different religious preachers accept to leave apart the differences to bring peace and harmony through the formation of an existing utopian faith, just before the creation of universe. This concept of a far away future on faith forms the interfaith utopias. Members of a community fulfilling the rules imposed by the society form the intra-faith utopia. The Garden of Eden as well as Paradise is forms of utopia based on faith, found in different religions and preached in places where man finds peace, harmony away from sin, suffrage, misery, death.

Utopia within the context of myth is one of its oldest usages. In many stories with human or superhuman creatures of a remote period, religious or secular arch-types, considered as a real collection of the way society or natural phenomena were created present the living in a primitive form with more emotional fulfillment, in full harmony between man and himself, man and nature, avoiding unnecessary desires producing conflicts and conflicts. This simple and happy living served as an element of reference for times of crises hoping that the near or remote future, or beyond life there is the possibility to find happiness. One of the most far away myths is that of the Greek poet Hesiod (flourished c. 700 BC) in the poem *Work and Day* (8th century before Christ) explaining that living before his time had been happy, but the Golden Period was the most important. In 1850 Philip Seymour in his prose *Old Archadia* (1590) describes a flooding pastoral environment, transforming the word archadia in a synonym of a utopian place within the mythic context. A utopian place on religious myth is Eden’s Garden, the myth of human sin and universe creation. What connect these ideas and utopian places is the hope that such happy condition and fulfillment can be reached again.

4. Religious Utopia in the Sound and the Fury

In the last episode of *The Sound and the Fury*, is clearly seen the technique of compositional contrast based on chapter contraposition. This episode is contra posed to the others, avoiding being accidental, but following a logical line in the development of Dilsey, as a character, who has her highest exposition in this part. In it, Dilsey, the black servant, plays a crucial role. She is a representative of symbolism and realism. Even though, her role as a character is more restricted than the other characters, the impact she has in the novel makes her character more realistic, individualistic, while her character qualities surpass the racial connotation, avoiding every other sharp interpretation within common racial stereotypical prejudices. Through the exposition of a different behaviour from that of the Compson family, her role in the novel is to put order within the house, being responsible for the homework progress, taking the place of Mrs. Compson, becoming a parent to the eyes of Benjy, protecting Caddy and her daughter from Jason's authoritative control. Jason's pragmatism, Quentin's idealism are put into confront with Dilsey's generosity. Dilsey's utopia is to make world a better place to live. Contrary to Compson family, she is the one accepting the world as it is, avoiding surrender, denial, but expressing the desire to make it a better place. She is the only character tracking the chronological development of time, considering it a natural process, part of everyday reality. Through the technique of narration, temporal description is presented in space connection. Within the ongoing perception, the linear development prevails.

On the wall above a cupboard, invisible save at night, by lamp light and even then evincing an enigmatic profundity because it had but one hand, a cabinet clock ticked, then with a preliminary sound as if it had cleared its throat, struck five times. 'Eight o'clock,' Dilsey said. (Faulkner, 1954, p.341-42)

An aureole of Christian religion accompanies Dilsey. In reality this is a naive faith giving meaning to her being, persevering in her everyday life while taking care of Compson's family members. Her faith gives her the possibility of a perspective on Christ Incarnation, Passion, Embodiment, and Resurrection. Even her time perception is within religious context where the past is based on faith, the present linked to endurance, whereas the future radiates hope. In contrast to Quentin and Jason's meaningless, decomposed, perception of time, responsible for its perversity, her religious perception transmits a systematic structure to the world because historic human perception is recorded by God's projection.

The religious myth pervading the novel accomplishes its climax in the episode of Easter predication. This religious myth utopia, anticipated by Dilsey, in the last episode, achieves its climax in Shegog's predication. Just like Dilsey, who varies from the characters in the novel with her positive utopia, even the positive utopia created from priest's predication alters from the alienating caustic, mortal circumstances of the whole novel. Dilsey together with the church congregation were gathered to listen to priest's predication, living the joy of Eastern in the novel. Priest's predication is accompanied by a collective daze from the moment the congregation listens to his voice.

When the visitor rose to speak he sounded like a white man. His voice was level and cold. It sounded too big to have come from him and they listened at first through curiosity, as they would have to a monkey talking. They began to watch him as they would a man on a tight rope. They even forgot his insignificant appearance in the virtuosity with which he ran and poised and swooped upon the cold inflectionless wire of his voice, so that at last, when with a sort of swooping glide he came to rest again beside the reading desk with one arm resting upon it at shoulder height and his monkey body as reft of all motion as a mummy or an emptied vessel, the congregation sighed as if it waked from a collective dream and moved a little in its seats. (Faulkner, 1954, p.366)

This dazing speech-making, as a result of priest's imposing voice, is accompanied by a key element in his church performance, where his oratory is part of the black people's dialectic. If the whole novel is based on the white dialectic of a white family, priest's prediction exposes a metamorphosis. Unexpectedly, this whole dialectic "sinking in their hearts" (p.366) is when religious people transmit the word of God. The visual aspect or the discourse were inconsequential, the words and their meaning were decisive. Shegog was a transmitter of God's words, to touch people's hearts and join them in a "collective dream" dedicated to Eastern celebration. They joined a small utopian dream, part of the big dream instigated by the myth of Christian religion. During the predication he resembled "a worn small rock". (p.367) Due to this spiritual union are forgotten the economical, social troubles, partitions, disorders, individual and collective insecurity before the ritual of symbolic crucifixion of the preacher where "his whole attitude that of a serene, tortured crucifix that transcended its shabbiness and insignificance and made it of no moment". (p.367) This ritual impeded everything negative permitting human unification in a common progressive and positive dream.

Priest Shogog starts his predication within negative connotation remembering Christ's persecution, while saying: "Bredden! Look at dem little chillen settin dar. Jesus was like dat once. He mammy suffered de glory en de pangs. Sometime maybe she helt him at de nightfall, whilst de angels singin him to sleep; maybe she look out de do' en see de Roman po-lice passin". (p. 369). References are launched towards the children of the Compson's family, initiating with Quentin's problems with death and time to Benjy's innocence, sitting in the church with Dilsey and the believers. Priest's predication surpasses time and reality borders becoming inclusive. Through the compositional technique of parallelism, the characters' and events' juxtaposition produces great emotional burden, making symbolism more understandable. The reader is active in the process of understanding the novel. The innocent Benjy is parallelized to Christ, while Dilsey playing the role of the commiserating mother, shining love and care parallelizes Christ's mother. The climax of pessimism is achieved through Christ's death, invading the Earth by a wave of destruction, death, and loss of hope. Such condition resembles that of the Compson family, a destroyed family losing control over itself and failing to believe in the future. Quentin, Jason, and Mr. Compson deny time, reality: "I sees Calvary, wid de sacred trees, sees de thief en de murderer en de least of dese; I hears de boasting en de braggin: Ef you be Jessus, lif up yo tree en walk! I hears de wailin of woemen en de evenin lamentations; I hears de weepin en de cryin en de turnt-away face of Good: dey done kilt Jesus; dey done kilt my Son!" (p.370) After such deprivation of hope comes the miracle of saving life to death, hope to hinterland, while the preacher utters "I sees de resurrection en de light; sees de meek Jesus sayin Dey kilt Me dat ye shall live again; I died dat dem whut sees en believes shall never die. Breddren, O breddren! I sees den doom crack en hears de golden hors shoutin de glory." (p.370) Predication's significance is not only the description of a religious or cultural identity of a group of people, just like the black community of South America, or of specific individuals like Mrs. Dilsey. Contrary to the bleak atmosphere of the Compson's family, Shogog's predication creates a utopian situation based on religious myth.

Religious myth's purpose is to feed, give hope to the reality amelioration, creating a utopian reality through death and time's negation. Such utopia is based on collective faith playing the role of an element of unification within a common culture. This faith, fed and kept alive by different rituals, finds the echo of widespread within a community that has remained faithful to its religion permitting the unification of people in an identifying community, above all serving the amalgamation of men to God. Apparently the Compson family has lost the contact with people of the same community and also faith and God. They resemble the sheep loosing the road, leaving the herd and the shepherd. Lonely, self-isolated, they have lost hope, the contact with reality and are afraid of the future because the past is always present tormenting their soul. These souls that have lost their road are confronted with the souls enlightened by the guiding force of faith. Religious mirage expanded beyond time and space, presented by Shogog and Dilsey, is transformed in hope, inspiration to face life's complexities.

Faulkner's language is influenced by Christian religious tradition. Language builds the figure for the reader enlivening a lot of emotions. Just like *the Sound and the Fury*, even in other works by Faulkner are found references to symbols, images, and cultural elements linked to the Christian faith. Under the inspiration of 20th century modernist writers, even Faulkner is affected by the myth of Christian religion, giving sense and clarity to the authentic reality search in his fiction. Such pursuit remains within Christian world created by this religious myth. Semantic interconnections are abundant by religious symbols' influence. Through a deep knowledge of Christianity, Faulkner arrives to oppose two different worldviews: Compson's family spirituality, mental hinterland together with the emotional, meaningful fulfillment through Eastern predication and the emblematic figure of Dilsey. Paradoxes, controversies, irony, symbolism transmit the insecurity and the search for a real authenticity. The first three episodes are plunged in the Compson's family existential absurdity, while the last episode is surrendered to the force of the myth and its utopian emission. A mythic illusion, widespread by Shogog's predication, symbolically presents the search of the author for a real authenticity which had apparently lost its existential meaning.

The whole predication is based on the coupling of images showing Christ's sufferings. The weird appearance of the priest leaves space to the message. The deep religious, spiritual, emotional and universal connotation of the words uttered delves in the believers' hearts. Thanks to the technique of using language artistically the impact on the reader is just a strong emotional aureole. Such emotional condition is in paradox with the alienating spiritual experience of the Compson family. As Davis (1983) puts it "this emotional situation is a full experience that the Compsons and other white southern inhabitants in the 20th century, desperately were seeking, but culture of separation could not permit." (p.240) What is left from the triumph of this rich and ruling class is the fury of Jason, and the sound of Benjy. Shogog's predication insists on the incongruity between the white class, representative of colonialism, and the new social reality together with the black suppressed class. Above all, his message becomes a spring of hope for the new reality at the beginning of the 20th century undertaking an inevitable utopian context.

5. Mythic Method

The whole story is pursued by a biblical collection of Christ's life and the symbolism of Eastern jollification within the church. Under Joyce's influence, Faulkner applies in this work the 'mythic method'. T.S. Elliot (1975) annotates this method is not just "an amusing dodge or scaffolding erected by the author for the purpose of disposing his realistic tale, but instead a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." (p.177) Just like Joyce, using *Odyssey's* myth to build the novel's fabula, even Faulkner makes use of the Christian myth to build his fabula. While expanding his ideas on the difference between the fabula and sujet, originating in Russian Formalism, Ritivoi (2013) mentions the "fundamental narratological assumption: that the universe of utterance and the world...are distinct." (p.21) The inclusion of Eastern celebration in 1928 is on purpose. The events include the entrance of Christ in Jerusalem, his last dinner, trial, crucifixion, death and burying. More specifically, on April 5 is the Maundy Thursday, April 6 is Good Friday, April 7 is Holy Saturday while April 8 is Palm Sunday. In the novel there are some changes about dates related to the Hebrew calendar. That is the reason why Faulkner puts Maundy Thursday on June 2, to parallel the life of Christ and Quentin, since in this day Quentin starts his move to Cambridge and Boston.

Many events in the novel are parallelism of events presented in the five gospels. Luster and Benjy dabble at the place where women wash the clothes; Benjy's torturing and evil prosecution by Luster; Carolina Compson's play to feign as a widow disturbed by her situation; Jason's behavior resembling a crazy man, while the word craziness becomes a leitmotif of his life avoiding every Christian mercy toward the others; Luster is disturbed from father's return from death and his persecuting ghost, just like Herold, was concerned if the killed and resurrected John was Jesus. The only real date in the novel is 1928. All the other dates are unclear creating confusion to the reader. We cannot say Faulkner did not have knowledge of the events related to Jesus' life, on the contrary, the perplexity and incongruity of dates is made on purpose to add rhythm to Compson's absurdity. Eighteen years of time space from Quentin's episode in June 1910 to the Eastern period in 1928 is put to parallel with the period of eighteen years that Jesus needed to mature for his religious ministry. The bafflement related to Benjy's birth date deepens the level of confusion if he is thirty-two or thirty-three in 1928, similar to the bafflement about the age related to Jesus' death, being thirty or thirty-four.

The three Compson brothers present their point of view of the events in the story in three different episodes having their names. The technical composition of different viewpoints allows the three brothers to communicate their own action and way of reasoning. In a parallelism are even the happenings displayed in Mateu's, Mark's, Luke's and John's gospels in the New Testament in Jesus' last days. The episodes told by the Compson's brothers are not organized through a chronological order but through the compositional technique of synchronic time plan. In the first episode the action is narrated through Benjy's viewpoint. The Holy Saturday is selected as the day opening the book, while the sub-plot ensuing in the novel relates to Jesus' crucifixion and burial after descending to hell taking the old patriarchal of the Old Testament and sending them to paradise. Benjy's narration is full of references and biblical parallelisms to Jesus' deeds. Quentin stays in the center of the second episode whereas his symbolic day pertains to the Maundy Thursday. The action in the third episode is recounted by Jason. Furthermore, his symbolic day stays Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial since, just like Christ, he holds on his shoulders the heavy cross of his family, being destroyed and collapsed by the Jews. Good Friday represents the meaning build around the character of Jason. The Eastern Sunday finalizes Miss Compson leaving the Compson house. Just like Christ's leaving the empty tomb even her leaves empty her room together with Jason's savings box.

6. Conclusions

The days of the Holy Week in the Christian religion describe the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ, his love, and sacrifice to save humanity. "His resurrection marks the triumph of good over evil, sin and death." (Miasco, 2016) There is hope at the end of this week that a new beginning will come, hiding a utopian idea of a new instigation. In the novel *The Sound and the Fury*, each day of this week is symbolically portrayed by one of the Compson's brothers owing to the passions of their hearts. Benjy's contribution to this week is through his craziness; Quentin's due to his suicidal desire; Jason's thanks to his avarice. Out of a parallelism between the days in Compson's family and the days of the Holy Week is presented the family's huge panorama. The aim of the religious references running in the novel, together with *Odyssey's* myth operating in Ulysses, is to put order, give meaning to life, and hope to the absurdity, craziness, along with the alienation to this South American family. A Holy Week fulfilled with events from the life, love, sacrifice, also Christ's passion creates a utopian reality different from the spiritual as well as emotional drought of the Compson family. Moreover, it even symbolizes the drought of many families experiencing several modern world socio-economic changes.

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