

WANDERING THROUGH GUILT.
CAIN'S ARCHETYPE IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY NOVEL
(1940-1960)

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Abstract

“The literary fortune of the Cain-Abel couple seems to prove that the divine mark has worked”. It is around this quotation by Cécile Hussherr that my thesis revolves; that is, how a story that in the original text is just a few pages long – although we are talking about that Text, the Bible – has been able to give origin not only to a tradition, but also to a real literary myth whose germination in Western literatures is almost endless.

However, what is particularly urgent in this study is to demonstrate how this myth did not originate from biblical sources, or rather, not only; but how it is actually just one of the most influent forms taken by what is, in my opinion, a virtually universal archetype.

This research aims, therefore, to go beyond the “explicit” rewriting of the myth of Cain; I aspire instead to uncover the myth where it has penetrated more or less secretly and consciously. In my opinion, Cain’s story can be considered, together with that of Ulysses or Faust, a kind of monomyth. It is this consideration that moves the predilection for the archetypal criticism, as it was principally theorized by Northrop Frye in the second half of the last century. As it is rooted in psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology, this method can be considered “middle distanced” – not exclusively structured on close reading nor on a socio-historical or psychoanalytical analysis, but using all these instruments in concert.

This dissertation is divided into three parts. The first part is dedicated to the definition of the fundamental characteristics of the paradigm I am analysing, guilt and wandering, from a socio-historical, religious, and psychoanalytical point of view. In the second part the examination of the texts under review begins; they are all novels written between 1940 and 1960. Here I take into consideration two English works of the '40s, Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947), both characterized by the incarnation in the two protagonists of historical but also universal guilt; both of them are drunken outcasts, burdened by a sense of guilt and metaphysical and existential uncertainty, and they are destined to death. The third and last part is centred instead on novels written in the two countries which are perhaps the most “marked” by the Second World War: the German *Der Tod in Rom* (*Death in Rome*, 1954) by Wolfgang Koeppen, and *Nobi* (*Fires on the Plain*, 1951), a novel by the Japanese Ōoka Shōhei. In these works the paradox that can arise between guilt and sense of guilt is brought to its extreme manifestations, as it is between history and personal experience.