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MYTHICAL ELEMENTS OF “PANTALOON IN BLACK”

by Rosemary Stephens

One of William Faulkner’s most neglected short stories, “Pantaloons in Black,” emerges under scrutiny as one of his most artistic. The reader may view it as a simple love story containing the dramatic analogy of the hero as pantaloon: inarticulate, dependent upon gestures, desolate because his love has returned to the spirit world.¹ He may consider it a single chapter in the novel Go Down, Moses, where it illustrates the book’s major theme and contributes an enriching irony through the intensity of Rider’s inner turmoil contrasted with the placid ignorance of the white people who misinterpret his emotional outbursts.² However, not until he sees it as a part of all literature treating man’s lost happiness, his isolation, and his quest for self, does he realize that it contains archetypes and other mythical elements which lift it out of a contemporary and regional context and place it with those stories transcending time and place in revealing man’s eternal attempt to understand his world.³

¹The traditional Pantaloon of the Italian Commedia dell’Arte is a slippered dotard, often in love with the fairy Columbine who returns to the spirit world. The art form’s use of pantomime and masks shows the title of Faulkner’s story to be effective in emphasizing Rider’s inability to express his feelings except in violent gestures—striking the man at the graveside and the moonshiner in the swamp, for example—and his mask, worn as a southern Negro in a community dominated by white people. The dropping of this mask causes the deputy’s puzzlement.

²Go, Down, Moses (New York: Random House, 1942) is a collection of short stories which form a novel about white and Negro members of one family and their relations with other whites and Negroes and with the land. Page numbers in parentheses refer to this edition, which contains “Pantaloons in Black” on pp. 133-159.

The rituals civilization has imposed upon the southern rural community in this story reflect the cyclic patterns of life and death, sunrise and sunset, seasonal changes, repetition of daily human needs and rhythmical natural demands upon man. 4 Rider’s reaction to these rituals, most of which—in his fragmented condition—conflict with his desires, constitutes the story. Its mythical elements involve archetypes and the search of a naïf person for life’s meaning. While the nature of archetypes depends upon man’s individuality, their presence indicates a human bond. The story of Rider is thus a story of the reader, of every man’s search for understanding, for decision in catastrophe, for peace in the midst of hostility.

“Pantaloons in Black” opens with the ritual of Mannie’s funeral on a Sunday evening. Six months ago, as winter ended and spring began, Rider was born into a world of happiness and order. His marriage to Mannie brought him a new name and a new life filled with meaning. Now, in August, as the year approaches winter, he experiences a spiritual death, an end to order and a resumption of personal chaos. The marriage fire has been extinguished.

Refusing the communal supper after the funeral, the hero, isolated by grief from his fellow man and by death from his beloved, returns to the mandala of his own house, although it is no longer a paradise and he knows that his wife “be wawkin yit.” Religious spokesmen insist that the dead leave this earth “not only without regret but with joy, mounting toward glory,” but Mannie has not gone—which is in keeping with a superstition of “the dead who either will not or cannot quit the earth yet although the flesh they once lived in has been

4A ritual is a formal observance by members of society repeated ceremoniously and often contains religious or magical connotations. Rites connected with worship, birth, adulthood, marriage, and death are familiar patterns in a community and originate in primitive society. In Faulkner’s story the act of eating assumes a ritualistic nature, serving as a timed observance of cyclic phenomena and as acknowledgment of man’s physical weakness in the face of supernatural forces. Another ritual is work which, in today’s society, has therapeutic value as well as socially beneficial qualities. The “chanted phrases of song tossed back and forth” by the sawmill workers the morning Rider returns to work (p. 144) are modern evidence of primitive attitudes regarding labor and its magical overtones. The act of becoming intoxicated is a ritual which often involves initiation into manhood; in its history it is related to religious rites. Another of the rituals Faulkner uses in this story is gambling. While this act is not instinctual, it follows a communal pattern and has magical and religious implications dating from primitive times.
returned to it” (p. 136). In the company of his dog, a reminder in its loyalty of the one belonging to Ulysses, Rider sees the ghost of his dead wife and begs her to let him go with her (pp. 140-141).

Mannie is the anima, the magical feminine being which is the archetype of life, the soul which offers man something to believe in and a reason for living. Faulkner uses the marriage fire to symbolize this flame of life and its influence upon Rider. Mannie has a secret wisdom which provides Rider’s life with meaning. She effects his wholeness, in keeping with the Platonic myth of the creation of man. Her death causes his consciousness to face overwhelming situations as he attempts to adapt to his altered world. While the anima brings meaning into man’s life, the archetype of the spirit of meaning is the wise old man: in this story, Uncle Alec, who tries to persuade Rider to come to his aunt’s house, to give up drinking, and to turn to God for help.

The need for food forces Rider to eat before he sets out on his quest for identity and purpose. “Whut’s Ah doin hyar?” is a question which means more than “What am I doing here in this rented house where I used to feel alive with love?” It contains the same cry heard from Lear at the death of Cordelia: “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,/And thou no breath at all?” It implies a refusal to accept as normal the world of now and indicates a need for self-knowledge and direction. Rider journeys through the woods with his dog as the moon provides light for the shadow, the archetype of self. Sleep brings no relief but a continuation of the battle within him (p. 142).

Several tasks are imposed between Rider and self-understanding. His first, requiring the lifting of a huge log, occurs when he returns to the mill at dawn to participate in the rituals of eating and of work. He hopes to discover through a superhuman physical feat that he has not changed essentially and that through his own power life still has

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6 Plato suggests through Aristophanes in The Symposium that from a creature combining the two sexes, Zeus had Apollo create two beings, man and woman. This explains why man contains an inner thirst for that lost part of himself and is continually searching for the completion of his own original nature.

7 King Lear, V, iii, 306-307.
some meaning. The search for self traditionally leads to water where one might contemplate his mirrored image and find truth. Although Faulkner does not emphasize any reflection in the water, Rider lies face down and drinks from a branch before his uncle comes with an offering of food from his aunt and the magical words: “De Lawd guv, and He tuck away. Put yo faith and trust in Him. And she kin help you” (pp. 143, 144-145). After the first task, Rider resumes his quest, journeying downward and reaching the black river swamp by sundown (p. 146). Descent into a dark water world, symbolizing both the unconscionous and the return of man to primordial darkness, is necessary before ascent can be made.

In the swamp Rider encounters another archetype: the half-evil magician with whom he must contend for the magical weapon of a jug of whiskey—a cold, fiery liquid which should enable him to adjust to a changed world. His second task requires courage, demonstrated as he defeats the magician, turning his back “on the man and gun both” (p. 147) and leaving with the mana in the liquor. Unable to breathe in the black depths of the watery swamp, Rider climbs a hill and sees the moon again. His uncle finds him on the hill and offers words of wisdom: “Come home, son. Dat ar cant help you” (p. 148).

Rider’s third task is to conquer the jug which is not only mana but a personified adversary. In primitive fashion, the power of his enemy in defeat becomes his own power, but he realizes that this victory does not contain the answer he seeks. He now follows the sage advice of his uncle and returns to his aunt’s house, another mandala. His journey carries him back into his past as he sees in the magic circle of the home of his second mother the childhood toys he used to stay loneliness: “empty snuff-tins and rusted harness-buckles and fragments of trace-chains and now and then an actual wheel” (p. 149). This imagery recalls the shards of pottery in the cemetery, invested with meaning and magical powers (p. 135) and implying the childish efforts of adults to prevent imperilment of the soul.

The moon in Jungian terms often symbolizes the mother archetype, in this story a positive figure. Here the moon can be said to represent both the aunt’s teachings which hover over Rider, beyond his grasp, and the replacement of the mother image by the maiden, now beyond reach of the man who gropes in the desert of isolation for his lost paradise. The dog—merely a dog on one level of the story—in an archetypal interpretation also has a dual meaning: It symbolizes the
mother in its role as guardian of the house, and it becomes a link with the dead after Mannie's burial. The church is also a symbol of Rider's second mother, associated with fertile fields and plenty.

Rider admits to his aunt that the *mana* of whiskey employed in the ritual of getting drunk has failed him, whereupon she urges him to try worship of God to stem the dangers of uncontrolled emotions. Although Rider cannot subscribe to his aunt's religious tenets, in this conversation and in the time immediately following it, he seems to discover an answer to his dilemma. Faulkner does not show us the workings of Rider's mind, but the reader knows that he finds life unbearable without his wife and wants to join her in the spirit world. In his tasks he has shown strength, courage, and endurance, but his efforts to adjust to a world without her have been in vain and his desire to be with her has grown stronger. In talking to his aunt, he realizes that God is not about to swoop down to render the desired service, and this realization spurs him to action. Lacking the strength to live without Mannie, he has—as subsequent events show—the strength to commit murder and to undergo the ritual of punishment because through such action lies hope. A man who benevolently destroys evil and thus causes his own death stands a chance of regaining paradise.\(^8\)

As his aunt calls "Spoot! Spoot!"—the name he bore in his pre-Mannie life—Rider races away under the moon, covering with a *persona* the truth he knows about himself. The new facade—not to be confused with the mask of conformity which he refuses to wear—is evident in the way he shapes the muscles of his face so that he seems to smile at Birdsong (p. 152). Another touch of irony is provided in that Rider is face to face with a man wearing the false face of the hypocritical tempter, another archetype. The white man's very name, contrasted with his character, implies a perversion of nature. His position as the false priest who conducts the gambling ritual further proves his evil. Rider kills this white night-watchman who for

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\(^8\)That Rider subconsciously considers his act benevolent is obvious in his calm remark to Birdsong: "Ah kin pass even wid miss-outs. But dese hyar yuther boys—" (p. 153). The deed is actually one of self-defense, since Birdsong reaches for his pistol as soon as the second pair of dice falls to the floor, but even a drunken Rider has to know that this will happen. The whole scene indicates that Rider comes to the game prepared to use the razor hanging from his neck inside his shirt. He desires death; he knows the decision to stand up to Birdsong will result in murder and in his own death by law or by lynching.
fifteen years has robbed Negroes in his crooked crap game (pp. 153-154, 156).

After the murder, instead of seeking safety in flight, Rider returns to the mandala, the cottage where he and his wife found happiness. He sleeps soundly while awaiting the beginning of the death process which will enable him to join Mannie. Civilization demands the chase, the arrest, the punishment for crime; but Rider now regards such rituals as steps to his goal. His reaction to the breathless enclosure of the jail is a physical one: mentally, he accepts the punishment as a means of ultimately attaining his dream. The bars of the prison recall to the reader the imprisoning canestalks of the river swamp (pp. 158, 147), suggesting that this world may be a jail and intimating that Rider's impending death will provide liberation.

The bird's egg imagery used in the deputy's description of Rider (p. 159) is associated with the name of the man he has killed. It also has mythical associations for the reader, reminding him not only of the world-egg of mythology, but also of the innocence of creation, man's innate desire for pleasure, and the enormity of his continual and unnatural crimes against his fellow man.

There is no apotheosis in "Pantaloons in Black," but Rider has seen the ghost of his wife and this promises another world. The peace he gains after his destruction of Birdsong indicates that in death he may join the spiritual community beyond this life and be again with Mannie. The necessity for murder is an indictment of modern southern society. The inclusion of archetypes makes the story also an indictment of any society of any period of time in which authorities have allowed evil to flourish.

Among the stories by Faulkner which have benefitted from a study of mythical elements is "The Bear," the key story in Go Down, Moses. But "The Bear," for all the praise critics have justly heaped

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9 Critics' explanations of it as a myth have not been wholly satisfactory. For example, John Lydénberg's valuable essay, "Nature Myth in Faulkner's The Bear," American Literature, XXIV (March, 1952), 62-72, answers some pertinent questions but not all. Anyone providing an explication of this story should include the presence of the swamp farmers, the fact that in finding and training Lion Sam Fathers contributes to Ben's death, and the description of Boon as childlike.
upon it, is hardly an artistic entity. “Pantaloons in Black,” ignored by most critics, is far more artistically written. The author’s accomplishment is in keeping with his purpose. The cyclic nature of the plot’s completion is evident in the story’s beginning with a death and ending with a death, beginning with a separation and ending on the promise of a reunion, beginning with Rider’s rejection of the community’s code of behavior and ending with his use of its ritual of punishment as the means to escape this world. An examination of the archetypes in “Pantaloons in Black” points to a deliberate use of mythical elements and allows the reader to discern in this story extended and deeper meanings, a universality, and Faulkner’s artistry.

10Faulkner himself admitted that Part IV does not belong with “The Bear” as a short story and should be skipped by readers who are not interested in Go Down, Moses as a novel. See Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958, compiled by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville, Va.; University of Virginia Press, 1959), pp. 4, 273. In spite of its renown, the story contains some inconsistencies, flaws in Faulkner’s craftsmanship. See Rosemary Stephens, “Ike’s Gun and Too Many Novembers,” Mississippi Quarterly, XXIII (Summer, 1970), 279-287.