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Religion & Literature: When God Appears in Literature

Alan Lightman's book *Mr G, A Novel About the Creation* opens with "As I remember, I had just woken up from a nap when I decided to create the universe." That simple opening should humble the reader. The narrator is God and He is taking the time to document how the universe came into being. The book explores the process and gives the minute details that we may discount when we ask the question "How did we get here?" Mr. Lightman's approach with God as narrator differs from the other books we read this semester, however, God still appears in many of them. Our authors this semester faced persecution for taking on what many see as a blasphemous task of imaging god. The Great 20th Century writers we explored this semester are great because they can pinpoint and verbalize what we all thinking. They all take on the imaging and personification of God to better explain our own humanity.

Lightman uses God as the narrator of his novel. He takes us through God's thinking and his creative process. Just like the other authors this semester Lightman humanizes God. Yes He is all knowing and powerful (in fact the only being who can will things in and out of existence) but his Aunt Penelope and Uncle Deva help to inform his opinion. His antagonist Belhor constantly challenges His thinking. The reader can easily relate to these humanizing traits.

In the beginning of the novel Lightman gives background to pre-creation. God lives in the Void. There was no space and time - He had to create it. This annoyed his unkempt Aunt and Uncle who took pleasure in their unending sleep. He had much to do - including how to measure time and distance. The hydrogen clock and the time it took a particle to move were used to measure time and space respectively. After long periods of thinking (which did not appear long to him because nothing significant happened in his absence), suggestions from his Aunt (realist) and Uncle (bleeding-heart), and debate with Belhor he began to create more than space and time in the Void.

In the book there are instances that should humble the reader. In a discussion with his Aunt Penelope He says:

I will not continue to be brought into these arguments, I said. Were you happier in that endless sleep we all had before time? When we were all doing a great deal of nothing? When there was nothing to do? It was easy, I admit, but is that what you wanted? I, for one, realize I was ... *bored*.

God was bored; he woke up from a nap and began experimenting. All people ask at one point or another in their lives, "Where did we come from?" We came from an experiment. Meaning we were the end result of the experiment. He thought long and hard how things should be. When the universe started as a tiny ellipsoid He did not want it to get out of hand. But, He then created other universes tweaking them

in different ways and at different points. Finally he settled on Aalam – 104729. He created matter – and proposed that He would create only inanimate matter. Never having to answer his Uncle's serious questions about immortality and the soul for those are the products of animate beings. But, when He walked away (His Aunt Penelope encouraged him to let things happen by themselves akin to the watchmaker vision of the Deists) without his input animate matter came into being:

How mistaken I had been. To believe that I could purposefully decide whether to create animate matter or not. As was now apparent to me, animate matter was an inevitable consequence of a universe with matter and energy and a few initial parameters of the proper sort. If I wanted, I could destroy life. But I was only a spectator in its creation.

In that brief paragraph once again Lightman humanizes God. Despite his best efforts things did not go as planned.

In another interesting episode Lightman describes how religions begin to pop up without God ever revealing himself to creation. Talking about souls and connection to God:

Well, Nephew...do the creatures know that you are the maker?

Yes and no, I said.

Here we go, said Aunt P. I tell you, the two of you are impossible, absolutely impossible.

The creatures have made up their own ideas about me, I said. They have *religions*.

What are you saying, Nephew? Did you straighten them out? Did you make an appearance?

An appearance? I said. A personal appearance! That would be way too much for them. And showy. I could never make a personal appearance.

So the creatures have *ideas*, without knowing anything about you for sure?

They have a lot of different ideas, I said. They want to believe in something big, to give meaning to their lives. They want some large purpose in the universe. I admire them for that.

In the episode about the independent development of religion Lightman once again makes the reader feel humbled. There in fact might be a God, but he actively sought to be unknowable. But intelligent creatures wanting to give meaning to their lives

create religion – correctly guessing they have a maker but falsely guessing on what he is like.

Lightman's minimalist style is different than some of the authors we read this semester. But that is what adds to the power of the story being told. First the narrator is God. He does not speak in flourishes or with embellishments. He just what he needs to say. The most powerful being in the universe/Void is not known for his verbosity. As compared with Joyce and Rushdie the book is easy to read. The reader does not have to circle back to make sure he did not miss an important fact or meaning. The story is told in plain language (even the science calculations of time and distance) and as such the most important facts of detached creator are not lost on the reader.

In a forum post dated 5/7/2012 Alfredo Jimeno said "The philosopher David Hume poses the problem in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: 'Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? When then is evil?'" Alfredo's point comes to the heart of Lightman's novel. God did not intend for a lot of things to happen. He wanted to shield (what would become) us from sadness, evil, and the tough questions that an intelligent being confronts. However, everything he wanted to prevent did happen and he did very little to change it. All the authors this semester ask the reader that serious question: Is God malevolent, impotent, or indifferent?

Professor Keefer's lesson on imaging God is an important part of looking at the role of literature and religion in society. As I have said before the writers we have read throughout the semester have in some way personified or humanized God. In my original midterm I made the point this was in an effort to lampoon religion (which is created by man) and shame God (for being indifferent when such evil exists). In retrospect I would like to amend that assertion. These writers take on imaging God or personifying prophets to give the human qualities that make them more identifiable. In turn making the reader rethink his position.

In Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Gao Xi Jiang's *Soul Mountain* and Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley* we see the vivid depictions of God. Imaging God in these books serves different purposes. In *Children of the Alley* both Mohammad and Gebelaawi (God) are flawed characters. Mohammed is a hashish smoking womanizer and Gebelaawi is suffering from dementia near the end of the novel and has become indifferent to the plight of his descendants. Rushdie portrayed the Supreme Being in Gibreel's dream writing, "For Blake's Isaiah, God had simply been an immanence, an incorporeal indignation; but Gibreel's vision of the Supreme Being was not abstract in the least. He saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close the line of the jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected. "Who are you?" he asked with interest. (Of no interest to him now was Alleluia Cone, who had stopped in her tracks on hearing him begin to talk to himself, and who was now observing him with an expression of genuine panic.)" The Supreme Being is a fat and balding man. He has no aura around him, there are no flowing robes and trumpets. He is human and easy for the

reader to identify with. Yet Naguib Mahfouz and Salman Rushdie almost lost their lives for such blasphemous portrayals. I think the writers assert the truth that all of us are flawed. In *Soul Mountain*, Gao Xi Jiang has God make a short appearance portrayed as a frog. In the scene with the blinking eyed frog I cannot understand him. Gao Xi Jiang tells the reader we cannot understand all of God, and he is indifferent to that fact. This matches Lightman's portrayal of God, he sees and knows everything but he becomes indifferent to the everyday dealings of specific creatures (just as Gebelaawi did in *Children of the Alley*).

In the *German Mujahid* the book can be used to compare the two brothers to one another. It can be used to examine the effects of family history on self-identification and quantifying self-worth. But, most importantly the book calls into question evil in the world. Looking at Alfredo's quote from David Hume and thinking of Uncle Deva's compassion reader's must question God's role. Was he there at the Holocaust or when Rachel and Malrich's parents were slaughtered? The author depicts the horrific scene:

...kids bawling, women screaming, girls scarred with fear clinging to their mothers, trying to hide their breasts, dazed old men praying to Allah, pleading with the killers, ashen-faced me parleying with the darkness. I see a towering bearded man with cartridge belts slung across his chest ranting at the crowd in the name of Allah, then cutting a man's head off with a slash of this saber.

Even if He is not present, He is all knowing. And he did nothing to stop it.

As I said in my midterm:

"I am a part of all that I have met
 Tho much is taken, much abides
 That which we are, we are --
 One equal temper of heroic hearts
 Strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."
 -Alfred Lord Tennyson

In the closing lines of the poem *Ulysses* the Romantic Era poet Alfred Tennyson embodies the truth found at the end of life. We are, in short, the sum of all we have met and done. We are products of the environment to which we are born. For many, that environment is formed by the religion they are born into. Some embrace it, others quietly turn away, and a small minority loudly rejects it. In the case of Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, Naguib Mahfouz, and Nawal El Saadawi they are the small minority that rejects it. Their works are not rejections of god or faith but rather the manmade institutions of religion. Depending on their own experiences the authors harpoon the outrageous practices of religion. In their respective works the major 20th Century Writers respond to their environment (formed by the tenants of religion) in a critical analysis that points to the hypocrisy and paradoxes of religion.

Each of these writers have specific environments that helped form their particular views and writings on religion. Huxley came from England during the '20's and '30's. James Joyce was from Ireland and lived at the turn of the century. Naguib was an academic in Egypt writing in the middle of the century. Finally, Nawal El Saadawi was also from Egypt but wrote at the close of the century (and still continues to do so). In Huxley's case he was critical of agnostics and atheists making it clear that alienating religion would leave a void. In Joyce's case he knocked the antiquated morality of the super imposing Irish Catholic Church. And although Saadawi and Naguib come from the same country and are exposed to Islam they arrive at two different paths. Sick of the partisan bickering Naguib paints a scathing picture of man made religious institutions. In comparison, Saadawi, a female author, is able to call into question the strong patriarchal bias of Islam.

Aldous Huxley completed a *Brave New World* in 1931. He completed his education at Oxford and served in the Air Ministry during World War I. Huxley like many in his generation was battered by the devastation of that war. As a member of the fashionable Bloomsbury Set he counted among his friends Bertrand Russell and the economist John Maynard Keynes. Influenced by the horrors of war and his esteemed cohorts Huxley talks of the dehumanizing aspects of progress. In a *Brave New World*, Ford replaces God and Ford's idea of mass production is praised. But at the end of the novel Huxley writes:

The door of the lighthouse was ajar. They pushed it open and walked into a shuttered twilight. Through an archway on the further side of the room they could see the bottom of the staircase that led up to the higher floors. Just under the crown of the arch dangled a pair of feet.

"Mr. Savage!"

Slowly, very slowly, like two unhurried compass needles, the feet turned towards the right; north, north-east, east, south-east, south, south-south-west; then paused, and, after a few seconds, turned as unhurriedly back towards the left. South-south-west, south-east, east...

Even though Huxley uses his work to reject what he sees as the dangers of progress, the war battered Huxley points to a place for religion in society. Many of his generation, including members of the Bloomsbury Set were atheists - changed by the cruelty man has towards other men. Yet Huxley does not reject that religion's moral tenants are important in a world that is constantly changing. The book's pace and tone suddenly changes at the end. After chapters of fast paced orgiastic pleasure the book ends with a slow drumbeat. Unable to handle the progress John Savage commits suicide. The world has lost a moral compass that Huxley vividly describes literally and figuratively.

Born in Dublin James Joyce is one of Ireland's great literary sons. Like many Irish Catholics Joyce received his early education in a traditional Catholic school. The Catholic Church in Ireland has had powerful influence over the Irish people and

the Irish government. The moral tenants of the Church have informed policy and everyday decisions in Ireland including a ban on divorce, contraception, and abortion. In his book *Ulysses*, published in 1922, Joyce writes that these tenants are outdated. That people do not always have the convenience to uphold the morality spelled out by unmarried priests. Joyce sees that the tenants of the Church are just moral diction formulated by Rome – created by man not God. Molly Bloom, a turn of the century women in Dublin, is liberated and must live life in the here and now and cannot be held back by the Church's rules. She has taken a lover and sleeps head to toe with her husband with whom she has not had sexual relations since her child died at birth. In her soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses* we see the stream of consciousness that Joyce perfected:

O that awful deepdown torrent O and the seas the sea crimson
 sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the
 Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and pink and blue
 and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the Jessamine and
 geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of
 the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian
 girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the
 Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I
 asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would
 I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around
 him yes and drew him down Jo me so he could feel my breasts all
 perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will
 Yes.

There is double meaning in the last two lines. The dichotomy is subtle but nonetheless there for the reader to use his own imagination. The obvious yes to the marriage proposal (the yes he seeks and the yes she gives). But the rhythm and tone of the “yes” mimics that of a climax. At first slow and sparse, then built up with more and more frequency until the final “yes” at the end of the book is capitalized...the climax. In this soliloquy Joyce paints the teenage years of a young Irish woman abroad. She has committed sin but in this soliloquy she seeks forgiveness and redemption but it never is verbalized. Why? Because the behavior is so reprehensible, made so by the Church, that to ask for forgiveness is impossible.

Naguib Mahfouz was born in Egypt near the turn of the century. He won the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature. Mahfouz grew up in strictly Islamic upbringing and said in a biography, “You would never have thought that an artist would emerge from that family.” It was his surrounding environment that lead to his writing of *Children of the Alley*. Mahfouz looks past the partisan bickering that has consumed Egypt and the Middle East and points out we are not that different. He writes:

The poet went on with the tale in an air of quiet reverence. Rifaa listened raptly. This was the poet, these were the tales. How often had he heard his mother say, “Our alley is the alley of tales.” And truly

these tales were worth his love. Perhaps they would compensate for the loss...

In this passage we can all see ourselves as little. We all had that moment. Our experience is all uniquely human (divinely made). But it is religion (man made), which divides us. Mahfouz said, "An allegory is not meant to be taken literally. There is a great lack of comprehension on the part of some readers." Books like Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley* stir controversy, they raise the national blood pressure. These books upset many because they show man as he truly is. Mahfouz removes the mysticism from religion for a moment, and says to the reader we are only different in our practices not our goals. We all seek salvation, we all tend to identify with a group, and our "tales" vary very little.

Nawal El Saadawi like Naguib Mahfouz is an Egyptian Muslim. However, unlike Mahfouz Saadawi was not born a man in a society that is male dominated. Her works have centered on the feminist perspective in Egypt. This becomes more clear in her work *God Dies by the Nile* where she helps the reader understand what it means to be a woman in Muslim society.

...She can see its dark forbidding underside like the surface of a big hammer ready to drop with all its might on her head. A shiver goes through her, and she screams out loud. Two strong arms reach out to her and lift her from the ground. The feel of her mother's arms around her, the warmth of her breast, and the smell of her flesh are reassuring and her screams subside. She could no longer remember her mother's face; the features had faded away in her mind. Only the smell of her body remained alive. Something about it reminded her of the smell of dough, or of yeast. And whenever this smell was in the air around her, a strong feeling of happiness came over her. Her face would often soften and grow tender for a short moment, but an instant later it would become as harsh, and as resolute, as it had been throughout her life.

In the paragraph above it is the touch and smell of a woman that is comforting "the smell of her body...a strong feeling of happiness came over her." Why is god always portrayed as a masculine figure? The qualities humans seek in god are compassion, love, and forgiveness. These are more maternal characteristics, but god is never painted as a female. By vividly depicting the patriarchy and masculinities that still dominate Middle Eastern culture, Saadawi, through various characters, shows the thin line Muslim women must walk just to survive. Through foreshadowing and literary techniques Saadawi depicts that struggle as a constant and upward battle. However, the death of a character that embodies the very patriarchy and masculinities that Saadawi assails signals some hope for Muslim women. In her

novel Saadawi describes those small victories as small drops that will one day lead to a deluge. Muslim women's struggle for civil rights mimics that of blacks in the United States - a long and hard trial. As Langston Hughes wrote in a poem "I've been a-climbin' on, And reachin' landin's... So boy, don't you turn back. Don't you set down on the steps 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard."

All the authors Huxley in a *Brave New World*, Joyce in *Ulysses*, Mahfouz in *Children of the Alley*, and Saadawi in *God Dies by the Nile* respond in some way to the environment, which they find themselves in, environments shaped by religion. They reject old tenants and help the reader see the problems we all encounter in society. Some brick walls and societal norms are just hold overs from old religions. Some are good as Huxley points out. Joyce points out that others are unrealistic. Mahfouz points out that some of the antagonism is man made. Finally, Saadawi points out to the hypocritical and unjust circumstances religion can impose. They write about it but it is up to society to respond.

Religion and literature play an important role in society and in fact they influence one another. The Bible is a great piece of literature, and fiction writers find a great subject in religion. In the books I read this semester the authors have been banned for taking on the blasphemous role of portraying God in their works. They do it to stimulate the reader to ask questions and to show that we are truly flawed. When Rushdie made his presentation at Pen he brought up some interesting points. Before I heard him on Sunday he was as distant to me as God is. The Ayatollah had put out a contract for his life, and I didn't understand the stir behind a book that was provocative but hard to read. But when he spoke about censorship in a free society - that we give too much to the censor to determine what art is. That we don't allow people to make their own decisions. His words had power because he was the receiver of censorship. I thought it was funny that he was delivering the Arthur Miller lecture, when not even Arthur Miller, famous for his defense in the McCarthy hearings, would not defend Rushdie's work after the fatwa was issued.

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