

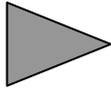
**THROUGH LOSS TO REVELATION:  
*BEAUTIFUL LOSERS AND THE ENGLISH PATIENT***

Diana IONCICĂ

***Introduction***

The present essay will attempt to analyze Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, discussing the way in which the 'loss to revelation' pattern is transformed in the two books, and trying to make out the possible connections between the archetypal structures discernible in them.

The first component of the pattern – the idea of loss – is the easiest one to demonstrate in both of the novels. There are two levels at which this idea can be followed – the public and the personal level. I shall start with the personal level – referring to the amount to which the characters of the novels are 'losers', that is to the circumstances that have made them into 'deficient' beings.




---



---

### *Losers in search of an ideal*

---



---

In *Beautiful Losers*, the main character – the nameless narrator – is at the same time the most important ‘loser’ – one may even argue that his multiple losses are the ones that characterize him the best. He is defined by absence and lack – his main function is longing, a tension towards the things and people he does not have. Not accidentally, the other three main characters are characters ‘in absentia’ – his wife, Edith, is dead, his friend and lover, F., is for the most part of the book in an asylum, and then dies, whereas the third character, Catherine Tekakwitha, is a seventeenth century saint, embodying perfectly the narrator’s aspirations – his quest for the impossible, for the ideal. The one salvation he sees is in this desperate pursuit of a dead saint, The Iroquois Virgin he is in love with.

F. characterizes the narrator thus:

*‘Something in your eyes, old lover, described me as the man I wanted to be. Only you and Edith extended this generosity to me, perhaps only you. Your baffled cries as I tormented you, you were the good animal I wanted to be, or failing that, the good animal I wanted to exist. It was I who feared the rational mind, therefore I tried to make you a little mad. I was desperate to learn from your bewilderment. You were the wall which I, batlike, bounced my screams off of, so I might find direction in this long nocturnal flight.’<sup>1</sup>*

His suffering is his defining feature, as it comes out from F.’s words:

*‘From time to time, I will confess, I hated you. The teacher of composition is not always gratified to listen to the Valedictorian Address delivered in his own style, especially if he has never been Valedictorian himself. Times I felt depleted: you with all that torment, me with nothing but a System.’* (Cohen, 1991: 162)

The above quoted fragments reveal, besides the nameless narrator’s key features, the role in which his friend, F., is cast: F. is, in Jungian terms, the Magus, an archetypal figure synonymous with the Old Wise Man, the teacher and the master.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers* ( Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991) 161. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.



He is the narrator's self-appointed guru, having to teach him a lesson in suffering and at the same time, as his 'Long Letter' will finally reveal, a lesson in magic. This lesson is contained in, probably, the most beautiful fragment of the book, the one in which the 'revelation' is, if not attained, summoned with the greatest passion, invoked though the only kind of magic we feel is still possible in the Beautiful Losers' postmodern, 'post-miraculous' world : the magic of writing, the enchantment of art.

*'Old friend, you may kneel as you read this, for now I come to the sweet burden of my argument...*

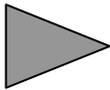
*God is alive. Magic is afoot... Magic never died. God never sickened. Many poor men lied. Many sick men lied. Magic never weakened. Magic never hid. Magic always ruled. God is afoot. God never died. God was ruler though his funeral lengthened. Though his mourners thickened Magic never fled. Though his shrouds were hoisted the naked God did live. Though his words were twisted the naked magic thrived. Though his death was published round and round the world the heart did not believe. Many hurt men wondered. Many struck men bled. Magic never faltered. Magic always led...Many weak men hungered. Many strong men thrived. Though they boasted solitude God was at their side... Police arrested Magic and Magic went with them for Magic loves the hungry...But Magic is no instrument. Magic is the end. Many men drove Magic but Magic stayed behind. Many strong men lied. They only passed through Magic and out the other side...This I mean to laugh with in my mind. This I mean my mind to serve till service is but Magic moving through the world, and mind itself is Magic coursing through the flesh, and flesh itself is Magic dancing on a clock, and time itself the Magic Length of God.'* (Cohen, 1991: 167-168)

If we were to select, out of *Beautiful Losers*, this one fragment as the basis for our argumentation, then the 'loss to revelation' pattern – which is, in fact, the archetypal sacrificial pattern best described by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – would seem to be easily discernible in the novel we discuss.

The narrator's various tests – losing his wife, as a consequence of his own inability to love that lead her to suicide, losing F., embarking on a hopeless quest after Catherine Tekakwitha, being fascinated with the loser tribe of the A\_\_\_\_\_s,

characterized by ‘incessant defeat’ – all these would be just the preparatory lessons for the ultimate revelation the quoted fragment reveals.

But are we really to discard the whole dead weight of the other passages of the novel, is their irony and desperation so easy to overlook? One must take into consideration the whole picture the novel offers, and in this picture the place occupied by the obsession with sanctity is comparable with the stress placed upon sexuality. As a matter of fact, the two obsessions in the novel cannot really be separated – the narrator’s aspiration towards the higher reality Catherine Tekakwitha embodies is translated into sexual terms.



---

---

### *Ambiguous symbols*

---

---

However shocking this ‘translation’ may be – and this is, undoubtedly, Cohen’s intention – it is not an isolated occurrence in the history of imagination – as Gilbert Durand demonstrates, when underlining the relation existing between fire, sexuality and the symbol of the cross, united in the general scheme of ‘rhythmical friction.’<sup>2</sup> The cross represents the unity of contrary drives, ‘coincidentia oppositorum’. It is not surprising, then, that in a scene prior to Catherine Tekakwitha’s death, the symbols of fire and of the cross are united – she sits praying at the foot of the cross, a fire burning beside her.

The symbolism of fire is a possible link between *Beautiful Losers* and *The English Patient*, as fire plays a very important role in the latter, and may be included in the ‘loss to revelation’ pattern in Ondaatje’s novel.

The ‘English Patient’ – nameless, up to a point, like the narrator in *Beautiful Losers* – suffers a ‘purification through fire’ when his plane crashes. What the fire purifies him of, by burning him beyond recognition, is his identity – he becomes nameless, nation-less, he sheds his skin and all that remains is his only ‘true’ identity, the only identity he would choose – Catherine’s lover.

---

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 2000) 322-323. My translation.



All that remains of his former self is the reality of the story he has to tell – his story of love and loss, starting in the desert and ending in the ‘Cave of Swimmers’. This journey from desert to cave (seen as symbolic sites) matches the ‘loss to revelation’ pattern – belief attained through sacrifice. The desert is, in *The English Patient*, the only place where God can be found: ‘There is God only in the desert’.<sup>3</sup> The desert is referred to as a former sea, i.e. a former cradle of life, now a Sand Sea, still haunted by the memory of long-dried waters.

*‘In the desert it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation. When I came out of the air and crashed into the desert... all I kept thinking of was, I must build a raft... I must build a raft.’* (Ondaatje, 1996: 18)

The ‘Cave of Swimmers’ where Catherine dies is the final point in her journey. The final point in the English Patient’s journey is the Villa San Girolamo. The expectation would be that the two final points should coincide, that the lovers’ journey should end at the same point – and, on a symbolic level, this actually happens: the cave and the house have similar archetypal values – as Durand says, ‘there is only a difference of nuance between the cave and the dwelling, the latter being only a transposed cave.’ They are both symbols of intimacy, pointing to the image of the ‘happy space’, the heavenly center, and also, as they are ambivalent symbols, to the womb and the tomb.<sup>4</sup> For the pair of lovers, therefore, the cave – house symbol plays its twofold role – it is the place of their death, and, also, of their symbolic encounter.

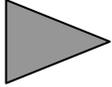
The God they find in the desert – in the cave at the heart of the desert – is a God of love, the God of their love they had lost in the space of the city. This interpretation would suit perfectly the archetypal pattern we are discussing (loss would lead to a final revelation). However, as in the case of *Beautiful Losers*, accepting the lovers’ final reconciliation as a sign of revelation meets with a certain resistance – due to the ambiguity of the two novels.

There is, in both novels, a mixture of contrary drives – on the one hand a tension towards unification and harmony – translated as *love* (romantic love) in *The*

<sup>3</sup> Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (New York: Vintage International, 1996) 258. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 2000) 236-237. My translation.

*English Patient* and as *magic* in *Beautiful Losers* – and on the other hand a pervading sense of loss, of sorrow and despair – attributed to war in *The English Patient* and – perhaps – to the flaws of modern society in *Beautiful Losers*. This gap between (personal) aspirations and (public) reality makes it hard for the interpreter to affirm that a final revelation is available to the characters of the two novels.



---

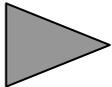
---

*The almighty Story*

---

---

However, there are aspects of the novels we have not discussed – as the crucial fact that they are both *metafictions*, that is, they are, first and foremost, auto-referential novels, fictions about fiction. This kind of fiction contains its God inside itself – then the revelation we are searching for is not in the ‘lives’ of the characters, in the plot of the novels we have recovered, after having being exploded in the bits and pieces of the incidents. The ‘God’ we have been looking for is not in the story, it is The Story – meaning that the *English Patient*’s revelation lies in the completion of the story of his love, while the narrator of *Beautiful Losers* has his own formal revelation, reassembling himself ‘into a movie of Ray Charles’. (Cohen, 1991: 258)



---

---

*The roles unveiled: translating the story in Jungian terms*

---

---

Returning to the archetypal structures discernible in the two novels, there is a striking similarity between the functions female characters have in the novels: both Edith and Hanna are referred to as nurses, their main role is to care for the men they meet. They may be seen as playing the role of anima – Edith being the nameless narrator’s anima, and Hanna – the *English Patient*’s. There is, however, a difference – Edith may be seen as verging towards the dark aspect of the anima – ‘la femme fatale’ – having as counterpart the saintly image of Catherine Tekakwitha – obviously the luminous version of the anima – The Holy Virgin.

There is an important observation to be added to the discussion of the Edith – Catherine Tekakwitha characters – namely, the fact that they actually seem to melt



into the same character ( which they actually do, in the final part of the book, when out of the four only two characters remain – a composite F. - narrator character, and an Edith – Catherine one.) The arguments supporting this affirmation are the similarities between incidents in their lives – the most important one being the rape incident: both Edith and Catherine suffer an attempt at rape – the difference is that Catherine escapes the attempt, while Edith does not.

Another similarity is revealed by F., who affirms he has cured Edith's acnea. Catherine also had marks all over her face, marks that would disappear at the time of her death, when, by a miracle, her face turned white.

Also, F. repeatedly tells the narrator he did not know the woman he married. He also refers to her as 'his creation', assuming the role of Pygmalion in remodeling her body. He is also the one who directs the narrator in choosing Catherine as his object of adoration.

In *The English Patient*, Hanna's role as anima seems to be centered on the luminous side – she is the one who heals, who loves, she is compared to a bird (by Caravaggio ). Though she rejects the comparison, by saying, 'I'm not a bird. The real bird is the man upstairs' (Ondaatje, 1996: 120), the symbolism suits her perfectly. In Durand's view, the bird 'is never considered an animal, it is only an accessory to the wing.'<sup>5</sup> The image of the bird corresponds to the impulse towards ascension and purity. The bird is the symbol of spiritualized love, a symbol of perfection.

The interesting thing is that the symbolism of the wing is extended towards the artificial wing of the plane. 'For the collective conscience, the aviator is an archangel endowed with supernatural powers similar to the chaman's.'<sup>6</sup> Thus, symbolically, Hanna is proven right – the man upstairs – the English Patient – is a bird, his flight – though broken – betrays the same aspiration towards the purity of the heights.

There is, between the two novels, a circulation of motives that does not seem to be accidental – taking into consideration the fact that Ondaatje knew and appreciated Leonard Cohen's works, as his critical study on Cohen proves (1970). There is, for

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 2000) 131-133. My translation.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, 133.

one thing, the spilled wine incident in *The English Patient*. Caravaggio upsets a carafe of wine that is spilled on the table, which triggers the recollection of blood flowing down the table in the room where his thumbs had been cut (an echo, maybe, of F., who had lost his thumb while blowing up Queen Victoria's statue, in a suicidal revolutionary gesture).

The same blood – wine connection is visible in the story of one of Catherine Tekakwitha's miracles – when, at a dinner where she was invited, she spilled a glass of wine on the tablecloth, and the stain spread on the whole table, then started covering the guests, until *'the entire company, servants and masters, had directed its gaze outside, as if to find beyond the contaminated hall some reassurance of a multicolored universe. Before their eyes these drifts of spring snow darkened into shades of spilled wine, and the moon itself absorbed the imperial hue.'* (Cohen, 1991).

Cohen's commentary, 'It is my impression that the above is apocalyptic', followed by his detailed discussion of the origins and meaning of the word apocalyptic, seems to be an ironic address to the seeker of symbols, who would promptly advance the explanation at hand – that there is a close connection between the symbolism of blood and wine, as seen in the Christian belief in transubstantiation.

This is not the only instant in the course of *Beautiful Losers* (and the remark holds true for *The English Patient*, as well as for other postmodern novels) when the interpreter seems to be discouraged in his symbol-seeking attempts by the ironic 'help' the author offers, when disentangling the threads of archetypal interpretations himself. For instance, Ondaatje volunteers the image of the jackal as an archetypal image for the English Patient.

*'I will be the last image she sees. The jackal in the cave who will guide and protect her, who will never deceive her.'*

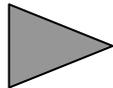
*There are a hundred deities associated with animals, I tell her. There are the ones linked to jackals – Anubis, Duamutef, Wepwawet. These are creatures who guide you in the afterlife – as my early ghost accompanied you, those years before we met...The jackal is not used much at Oxford as an escort. Whereas I am the man who fasts until I see what I want... The jackal with one eye that looks back and one that regards the path you consider taking. In his jaws are pieces of the past he*



*delivers to you , and when all of that time is fully discovered it will prove to have been already known. ' (Ondaatje, 1996: 258-259)*

The afterlife companion Cohen digs up from Indian mythology as a possible archetypal image of F. is Oscotarach, the Head-Piercer. His role is to remove the brain from the skull, preparing thus the spirit for the Eternal Hunt. F. fears he might have failed in his job. He says:

*'What is more sinister is the possibility that I may have contrived to immunize you against the ravages of ecstasy by regular inoculations of homeopathic doses of it. A diet of paradox fattens the ironist not the psalmist. ' (Cohen,1991: 173)*




---



---

### ***Conclusion***

---



---

Cohen's attempt was at writing, by using 'all the techniques of the modern novel', a 'huge prayer.' (Hutcheon, 1980:15). We cannot assert that his prayer has been answered, and lead through loss to revelation. But, as in the case of the more recent prayer Ondaatje launched, the important thing remains the act of trying to make a Holy Book, 'a commonplace book', out of the broken pieces of yesterday's faith.

---



---

### ***References and bibliography***

---



---

- Cohen, L.** 1991. *Beautiful Losers*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- Durand, G.** 2000. *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*. Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic.
- Fordham, F.** 1998. *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*. Bucharest: IRI.
- Hutcheon, L.** 1980. *Leonard Cohen and His Works*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- Hutcheon, L.** 2002. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.
- Jung, C. G.** 1997. *Imaginea omului și imaginea lui Dumnezeu*. București: Teora.
- Jung, C. G.** 1994. *In The World of Archetypes*. Bucharest: Editura 'Jurnalul Literar'.

- Lane, R. J., R. Mengham, P. Tew (ed.). 2003. *Contemporary British Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Nasso, C. (ed). 1998. *Michael Ondaatje in Contemporary Authors*. Detroit: Gale Research Company.
- Ondaatje, M. 1970. *Leonard Cohen*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Ondaatje, M. 1996. *The English Patient*. New York: Vintage International.

**The Author**

**Diana Ioncica** is an Assistant Lecturer in Business English and Professional Communication at ASE, Bucharest. She holds a Master's degree in English Language Literature, Bucharest University. She is currently working on her Ph.D. thesis in contemporary literature in the *Literary and Cultural Studies* doctoral programme, Bucharest University. She has been involved in designing and writing several academic textbooks – she coordinated *Mastering English for Economics* (Ed. Uranus, 2005) and is a co-author of *First Steps in Business* (Ed. Universitara, 2005).

