Night of Light Short Guide

Night of Light by Philip José Farmer

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

Many philosophical novels have no well-developed characters because the authors use them as emblems of the various ideas and concepts being explored. To a degree, Night of Light is such a novel. Only the protagonist, John Carmody, is complex and interesting; the secondary characters are strictly emblematic and often have names symbolic of their function in Farmer's moral allegory.

"Boonta," for example, contains the word "boon," meaning "benefit" or "blessing," indicating the goddess's role as a benevolent creator. Her "good" son is named "Yess," and Carmody's two wives, both innocent victims, are named "Mary" and "Anna," respectively. The symbolism of "Mary" is obvious; "Anna" is derived from the Hebrew "Hannah," meaning "grace," and in the Christian tradition, Anna is Mary's mother—the grandmother of Christ. John Carmody also has a symbolic name, with his initials suggesting that he is a redeemer figure.

His first name indicates that like John the Baptist, he is the forerunner of a god.

(He is, in fact, the father of one.) His last name hints at "karma," the Sanskrit word for the concept that the sum of our actions in one life determines our fate in the next, perhaps suggesting that destiny always had more in store for Carmody than the destructive life of a psychopath.

Carmody is much more than a straightforward Christ-figure, however.

He first arrives on Dante's Joy as a professional killer and master thief, guilty of the appalling crime of murdering his pregnant wife. He is cynical in the extreme—a "frozen dark soul" convinced that human life is meaningless in an equally meaningless universe. As well, his small physique and drinking of milk suggest that, developmentally, he is still a child. His conviction that he is independent of others may reinforce this idea, for like a foolish child trying to assert himself in a dangerous, unknown situation, Carmody recognizes no limits to his power.

In Farmer's terms, his main fault is his excessively masculine outlook: By killing his wife, he has symbolically killed the "feminine" side of himself. Now, ironically, he has arrived on a planet ruled by a mother-goddess.

The night of light reveals to Carmody the contents of his subconscious, resulting in his rebirth and transformation into Father John Carmody, a compassionate and enlightened Roman Catholic priest in the Order of St. Jairus. (Christ raised the daughter of the Biblical Jairus from the dead.) Father Carmody probably comes close to embodying the kind of Christianity that Farmer himself values and dramatizes in detail in his 1979 Utopian novel, Jesus on Mars. The Martian society in this novel acts out the main elements of Father Carmody's personality: tolerance, compassion, charity, and Christian love.

Social Concerns

Night of Light is a central document in Philip Jose Farmer's quest for a vital religious myth as potent as the biblical one, but lacking what Farmer views as the repressive puritanism the Bible has often inspired in Judeo-Christian religions. Part One of this novel portrays John Carmody's initial encounter with a matriarchal religion on the planet of Dante's Joy.

During the "night of light," the creatorgoddess, Mother Boonta, manifests her power. All humans who take the Chance by staying awake become what their subconscious desires dictate. (Thousands are driven insane; some find perfect happiness.) Carmody is a thoroughly repulsive master criminal and wife-killer who is taking the Chance in hopes of assassinating Yess, the Christ-like son of Mother Boonta. Instead, Carmody undergoes a cleansing and rebirth and becomes the father of Yess's next incarnation. In Part Two, he returns twenty-seven years later as Father John Carmody, a Roman Catholic priest. He attempts to persuade Yess not to acquire an army of zealots by forcing all of his followers to undergo the night of light.

Night of Light is not primarily a "social" novel, but a philosophical or allegorical one. As the two opposites of the title foreshadow, Farmer attempts to reconcile the eternal dualities of life: darkness and light, good and evil, reason and madness, permanence and change. Because the novel ends in a stand-off between Yess and his evil twin, Algul, these dualities are shown to be not the complete opposites of Western thinking, but complementary opposites, essential elements in the fundamental composition of the universe.

Although this novel deals with universal metaphysical issues, its rejection of conventional Western thinking reveals it to be the product of Farmer's general rebellion against contemporary religious beliefs in America. Farmer explores the possibility that somewhere in the universe there is a religion that is literally true and that will eventually impinge on Christianity. Father Carmody is a sincere Christian, yet Boontaism shakes his faith, and he wonders if he might be merely an instrument of the goddess. Thus, like The Lov ers, Night of Light is highly critical of patriarchal religions and societies and celebrates the feminine principle.

Techniques

Farmer's most important technique in this novel is the use of an intricate network of contrasting images, colors, and symbols to reinforce his thematic insistence on the acceptance of dualities. The novel associates "good" with heat and light, "evil" with cold and darkness. For example, Mother Boonta's temple includes seven candles and a flaming sword, and the six fathers of Yess speak in terms of light and warmth. Conversely, when the six fathers of the evil Algul try to convert Carmody, they image ecstasy for him in terms of darkness and the coldness of space. Farmer also uses contrasting colors to suggest dualism: Red symbolizes passion, sexuality, and birth, as is illustrated by the red floors, walls, and curtains of Boonta's womblike temple; green symbolizes rationality and technology, as is shown by the color of the fountain pens, space-ship interiors, and officers' uniforms.

Perhaps the most important cluster of contrasting images is that associated with the dualities of permanence and change.

The evil fathers project images of frozen space, (green) gemstones, hardness, darkness, coldness, and death, suggesting something rigid and unchanging. The good fathers ultimately win Carmody's support with images of light, softness, dissolution, and pain, all suggesting change, or, in other words, rebirth. All the contrasts reinforce the symbolism of the novel's two-part structure, the two sides of Carmody's personality, and the two choices he is offered. He can accept the evil fathers' offer of a cold, unchanging immortality or the good fathers' promise of a painful, but transforming rebirth. Whichever fathers he accepts, however, he cannot negate the existence of the others. At the end of the novel, both Yess and Algul are alive, and Algul, the evil twin, must be acknowledged.

Themes

Like much of Farmer's writing, Night of Light focuses on the dark and light sides of human nature as represented by the demonic and benevolent aspects of sexuality, power, and religion. Typically, Farmer does not allow one side to defeat the other, insisting on the recognition and acceptance of both. Perhaps the theme is suggested most clearly by the statues of Mother Boonta, who holds in her arms her twin babies, Yess and his evil twin, and smiles beatifically at both.

Father Carmody's rebirth and conversion suggest that individual purging of egotism and evil is possible, but the statues and the novel's open ending indicate that the universal victory of one side over the other is not. We can, at best, recognize our capacity for evil and attempt to transcend it: seeing ourselves clearly is the necessary precondition for rebirth.

Key Questions

Critical analysis of Night of Light has focused on the character of Father Carmody, the nature and significance of Boontaism, and the novel's network of interrelated images. All of these topics are likely to stimulate group discussions. An essential first step in analyzing this novel is to make a list of all of the examples of similar images (images of the organic and the inorganic, for example), before attempting to relate them to Carmody's rebirth and the novel's conclusion. Readers may also want to consider such issues as the credibility of Carmody's rebirth and conversion and the attractiveness of Boontaism as an alternative to Christianity.

1. In Part One, what are Carmody's main strengths and weaknesses? Does anything about him prepare us for or foreshadow his spiritual rebirth and transformation?

2. Both parts of this novel progress from death to birth. How is reproductive imagery used in both parts?

3. To what extent can Carmody's alienation in Part One be analyzed as an Oedipal rebellion against parental figures?

What does his rebirth process reveal about the psychology of conversion?

4. Does Father Carmody's religion seem to be very vital or vivid? How does it compare with Boontaism, as reflected in the kinds of events occurring during the night of light?

5. Make a list of all the images of light and darkness in the novel and then relate them to the novel's themes. For example, what is the significance of the candle eaten by Yess and the cigarettes smoked by Carmody?

6. How are the states of sleeping and waking and the dualities contained in the setting used thematically in this novel?

7. Analyze the imagery in the closing passage of Part One. For example, why does Farmer have Carmody's finger trapped in the mouth of a bronze statue?

What is the significance of Carmody's method of escape?

8. Make a list of all the novel's Christian symbolism, images, and parallels.

Does this novel use allusions to Christianity in a straightforward way, or are there significant inversions?

9. Is Part Two of the novel as successful artistically as Part One, or is Part Two flawed by unnecessary melodrama? For example, why did Farmer include the subplot involving Mrs. Flatt?

Literary Precedents

Night of Light's plot dramatizes how transcendental forces can unlock the true heroic self trapped inside even the most alienated antihero. This motif of nearmagical transformation is very common in popular literature, which often reassures us of the ever-present possibility of radical change for the better. However, Farmer's use of this motif in combination with a matriarchal religion indicates that the most significant precedents of Night of Light are more mythic than literary. In particular, this novel echoes the central thesis of each of two major works of mythic criticism, Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949) and Robert Graves's The White Goddess (1948).

Campbell believes that despite their infinite variety of incidents and settings, the myths of the world offer only a limited number of responses to the riddle of life. He characterizes the most important of these as the "monomyth" or the story of a composite hero (Apollo-HerculesJesus-Buddha, etc.), who undergoes a three-stage process of death and rebirth, consisting of "Departure," "Initiation," and "Return." In Farmer's writing, the Tarzan novels most clearly illustrate this process. Farmer even uses a quotation from Campbell as one of the epigraphs for Tarzan Alive (1972), and Chapter Twenty-Four of this novel is entitled "Tarzan and the Monomyth." The basic elements of Campbell's monomyth are also evident in Night of Light. John Carmody first separates himself from his society by journeying to a strange planet; next, he is initiated into an understanding of the power of Mother Boonta's religion; third, he returns to his original world, reborn and transformed.

The White Goddess is also a major precedent for Night of Light. Graves's study of the influence of matriarchal religions on poetry is so convoluted a document that its details almost defy analysis, but his central argument is relatively clear. Essentially, Graves creates a monomyth of his own. He assumes that matriarchal forms of social structure preceded patriarchal ones, and that the ancient peoples of Western Europe originally worshiped a lunar mother-goddess. (Actually, she was a "Triple Goddess" appearing in the three forms of Nymph, Mother, and Crone.) Graves refers to this goddess in all her various manifestations as the "White Goddess," describing not her race but her association with the moon and the lunar cycle. The most eccentric aspect of his thesis is that even today, goddessworship is the only source of inspiration for "true" poets. Moreover, he claims that there is only one "story" ("monomyth"), the hero-poet-king's relationship with the Muse-Goddess.

In Farmer's story "Brass and Gold" (1971), a character refers directly to Graves's theory of poetic inspiration. As well, Night of Light's demonstration of the supremacy of the feminine principle has obvious parallels with The White Goddess.

Farmer is capable of creating a ribald parody of mother-goddess worship, as he seems to be doing in his novel Flesh (1968). Generally, however, his work repeatedly demonstrates that individuals and societies who reject the feminine principle are incomplete, even deformed, and destined to suffer.

Related Titles

From 1957-1961, Farmer published separately five stories featuring Father John Carmody and then later collected them together in Father to the Stars (1981).

In addition to "The Night of Light," which Farmer turned into the novel Night of Light, these stories are "Attitudes," "Father," "A Few Miles," and "Prometheus."

These stories are in no sense "sequels" of each other, but when grouped together, create a episodic, loosely structured novel that could be described as "picaresque" if Father Carmody were a rogue or a rascal instead of a Christian humanist and Catholic priest.

"Attitudes" illustrates the kind of ironic reversal often present in Farmer's writing: A gambler assumes he is winning a fortune in an alien roulette game until Carmody informs him that the "winner" will be crucified. "A Few Miles" and "Prometheus" are charming stories revealing how Carmody teaches moral laws to a group of intelligent birds on the planet Wildenwooly. In terms of Farmer's religious beliefs, the most significant of these stories is "Father," in which Carmody visits a planet ruled by an apparendy benevolent father-god. Eventually, Carmody discovers that Father's dislike of sexual intercourse has resulted in the elimination of all male animals from the planet, and that, overall, Father is a megalomaniac tyrannizing a false paradise. This story can be read as another cautionary tale against religions with an excessively masculine conception of God and no compensating image of the feminine principle.

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