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Bachelor's thesis in Lektor i språkfag

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Kunnskap for en bedre verden

Introduction

Walter M. Miller Jr's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is a sci-fi novel that sheds light on the phenomenon of apocalyptic cycles and the differences and intrigues between religious and secular ethics. The novel is generally accepted as being *cyclical*, meaning it is a story in which humanity will have a period of prosperity followed by a period of regression ultimately ending in catastrophe. This cyclical chain of events is, among others, supported by Dominic Manganiello who has written that "The tone of *Canticle*, as I have noted, apparently upholds the theory of cyclical time, with its pointless repetition and hopelessness" (165). Moreover, *Canticle's* cyclical nature highlights the conflict between apocalyptic cycles and religious and secular ethics, and in particular how this conflict affects the human condition. It is apparent that the novel thinks the dynamic between the opposing elements of religion and secularity is unproblematic unless humans allow it, which certain characters in the novel do, and in abundance at that. However, other characters believe religion and science are intertwined in a dynamic ethical dependency with what Miller's narrator makes out to be the will of God. Conflicts in the novel, therefore, mainly occurs as a result of when religious reasons stand in the way of scientific embrace on one hand and when scientists violate religious morale by refusing faith on the other. In *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Miller explores the dynamic between cyclical history and ethics. He uses the way religious ethics battle with secular ethics in driving the book's plot forward in an intricate relationship with human behaviour, and the apocalyptic cycles are, according to Miller, the unnatural result of the division between religious and secular ethics.

Overview of the book and central ideas

The book guides the reader through its three different phases, where humanity spans over several centuries and an entire human civilization. It would do the book an injustice to keep the focus only on one specific passage from the novel, therefore this paper will be based on key concepts which are the main driving forces in the plot.

The first section of the book is called "Fiat Homo", and it covers the first version of human civilization succeeding "the Flame-Deluge" which was the apocalyptic atomic happening which destroyed the previous civilization. During *Fiat Homo* technological gadgets of any sorts are nothing but estranged words on old blueprints, illiteracy is the norm, the old world has been reduced to a pile of rubbles and superstition is rampant (Fried 194). This is also where we are introduced to the momentary protagonist "Brother Francis", a young priest

devoted to his band of Judeo-Christian monks whose main purpose is to collect and study old texts which they call “memorabilia” in order to preserve historical knowledge. It is during *Fiat Homo*, that the issue regarding ethics first is shown. This is also where the book gets its name from, as Brother Francis discovers ancient documents from a twentieth century engineer named Leibowitz. The importance of these documents, and later the canonization of Leibowitz, sheds light upon the religious ethics which the Judeo-Christian monks embrace. *Fiat Homo* also introduces the reader to those who are opposed to science and believe that by preserving the knowledge of the pre-Deluge world eventually will lead to another nuclear disaster.

In the second section of the book, “Fiat Lux”, the world is undergoing a cultural renaissance where mechanical devices are becoming increasingly more popular causing scientists to dwell into troubled discourses with theologians. The decreasing sterility of the post-apocalyptic world is here paralleled with the increasingly non-existent spirituality of scientists who are blinded by their atheist morale. These notions clash with theologians who embrace their faith, but reject to see, or understand, the ethics of the science they oppose. The issues regarding ethical frameworks and the problems technological innovations introduce are two major forces which are addressed by Miller in this section of the book and the consequences of those two issues combine what eventually results in the breakdown between religious ethics and science. In turn, this breakdown leads to the cyclical events in which Miller reveals to the reader that humanity is not inherently good by nature (Smith 39). Because, according to Lewis Fried “Human nature [...] is marked by pathos: the inability to respond to the ethical demands of God whose aim is to allow us to be fully humanizing individuals” (365). Which means that we are given a choice between facing God’s will or turning away. Nonetheless, we continue the cyclic history of destruction by facing away from God and embracing secular ethics.

In the third and final section “Fiat Voluntas Tua”, the world has evolved into a version which is more technologically advanced than our own, but the main points are that nuclear technology has finally been rediscovered and space travels are made possible. The head of the Leibowitzan Order, Abbot Zerchi, recognizes that the cyclical pattern of human self-destruction has begun once again and realizes that he has to send a spaceship filled with believers and clerks in order to establish a Christian colony on another planet. On this spaceship the momentary protagonist Brother Joshua is placed together with other refugees, including Rachel who can be interpreted by the book to be the second coming of Christ. They leave the earth as it is being destroyed by nukes.

When it comes to central ideas in the book it can be wise to try to understand the author's message. According to the book, humans in *A Canticle* does not seem to advance neither spiritually or technologically without obtaining the ethics it is required of them to have, because without a good sense of telling right from wrong, the relationship between religion and science will fail and thus another cycle of eradication of humanity will happen. This sense of ethics, which ultimately derives from religious belief united with science, is believed (interpreted from the narrator's voice) to be the optimal situation to ensure humanity's long-term survival. This is well captured in how Miller appropriates the Catholic church-structure with its moral teachings, rituals and the everlasting tension between piety and learning into the novel (Van Der Weele 371). Furthermore, the book continually holds the story's two central pillars of ethics and cyclic history up against each other throughout its separate sections which forms a tale of morale that is driven by the dynamic relationship between the two. This dynamic relationship can be said to be the spine of the plot, holding it together, but it is also the source for the apocalyptic cycles. Its significance is well captured by Doherty who says that "the monks in the novel thankfully accepted anyone who simply wanted to learn about the universe in pursuit of enlightenment and greater truth. They worked thanklessly under the symbols of Judeo-Christian culture in service to humanity, only to be consumed by the same fire that had once visited the earth" (201). This statement does well in capturing the dynamic between ethics and cyclical which is something we will study closer.

Cyclic history in 'A Canticle'

A Canticle is a novel whose plot depicts the rise and fall of a civilization. It is centred around a post-apocalyptic group of Judeo-Christians in a monastery some place in North America. The monastery is highly relevant in the plot as it is one of the main locations in the story, as a result, the monastery and the monks who reside there have first-hand experience with the apocalyptic cycle that has stained their existence. The cyclical pattern of destruction seems, according to the book, to be the nature of humanity because no matter how sophisticated humanity becomes it will always find a way to complete another cycle. The book's plot is based on the past event of the atomic blast which eradicated civilization as we knew it, and towards the ending phase of the book when another apocalyptic atomic bomb has been dropped, we are faced with one of the biggest issues the book addresses. Abbot Zerchi (the protagonist in *Fiat Voluntas Tua*) asks:

Listen, are we helpless? Are we doomed to do it again and again? Have we no choice but to play the phoenix in an unending sequence of rise and fall? Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Carthage, Rome, the Empires of Charlemagne and the Turk. Ground to dust and plowed with salt. Spain, France, Britain, America-burned into the oblivion of the centuries. And again and again and again. Are we doomed to do it, Lord, chained to the pendulum of our own mad clockwork, helpless to halt its swing? (Miller 263)

The book faces the issue of cyclical history head on and asks if the apocalyptic event has been preserved in popular memory and if humanity has learned something important from it (Manganiello 160)?

There is no doubt that the plot in the novel is driven by the force of cyclical patterns, but in the sense of promoting its appearance, Miller uses two other elements: the motifs of repetition and recollection. Repetition and recollection in *A Canticle*, as described by Manganiello, are “the same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas repetition properly so called, is repeated forwards” (160). These repetitional motifs, in addition to the cycles of renewal and destruction, also share a central part of the plot. Examples of repetition are the many appearances of the wandering pilgrim as a “wriggling black iota” (Manganiello 160) throughout the book and the fact that the Leibowitzan monks copy ancient scientific texts from before the Flame Deluge in every section of the book as well. The monks are called “memorizers” because of their role of preserving so called “memorabilia” which is everything connected to human history, literature and science, secular and sacred alike. The repetitional motive manifests itself in that Miller makes these monks repeat the work of preservation carried out by their predecessors in the 11th century, but now by doing it in the 21st century. In the same fashion, Miller introduces the counterpart to these scribes which is the mechanical writing machine who, ironically enough, writes backwards indicating regression in a time period which otherwise appears to have a positive development (Manganiello 160). Thus, the emphasis on the preservation of memorabilia indicates that the author and the plot raise questions about the beginning of history itself, just as much as nuclear destruction raises questions about the end of history.

Following the cyclical theme which is embedded in the very structure of *A Canticle*, Miller can be said to look upon human culture in an apocalyptic way, meaning that he sees humanity behaving in such a way that it results in a future which will always rise and fall in continuous apocalyptic cycles (Smith 14). In addition to adopting the cyclic view, Miller believes that “the whole notion of sin plays an important role in the cyclic nature of human civilization” (Smith 14). According to this approach, Miller does not naturally portray science

as a purely progressive factor in the novel despite the continuous mechanical inventions it brings with it. Instead, he sees science as the factor which will trigger the downward facing spiral of humanity before it is able to turn the tide into progress, but then, according to his cyclical approach, science will progress to such an extent that another cycle of regression starts once again. This is quite evident already from the beginning of the book. *A Canticle* starts with a description of how humanity bombed itself to smithereens (regression), and already from that point on, the book concerns itself about the progression of humanity's culture and science, until science and human hunger for power forces the book's focus over to how nuclear war again is looming on the horizon.

These cyclical patterns must, of course, have a foundation in human behaviour. This brings us to the point that the cultural aspect of the book, which is not connected to the apocalyptic cycle, is connected to Catholic theology (Smith 14). This theology is what Miller uses as the foothold from which civilizations are brought to fruition from, with the help of science. Civilizations though, are nevertheless still riddled with consequences from humanity's reckless behaviour, which is the root of both havoc and war. This is the same behaviour humans have brought with them throughout all of history, and Miller makes sure to emphasise it in the novel. When reading the novel, then, with the intent of understanding Miller's message, which is a rather difficult task, it seems as if he beholds the perfect human as the Catholic who is faithful and wedded to Catholic morality, but also the scientist who upholds Catholic morality (Smith 15). However, in the novel, there are many characters from both camps who break with this ideal. This is probably Miller's intent, because he does not see one side as purely evil and one side as purely good, there are a great deal of nuances in this dynamic. Therefore, *A Canticle* is home to both scientists who are opposed to religious responsibility as well as theologians who are opposed to science and its progress (Smith 15). Furthermore, and perhaps the main takeaway from the book's cyclical nature and its inherent relationship with ethics (which will be discussed later) is how the "lack of religious faith and moral responsibility on the part of scientists that results in immoral behaviour like [...] nuclear war destroying civilization yet again" (Smith 15). From interpreting Miller's ambiguous message, one may imagine that letting oneself be too blinded by the hunger for power that one forgets faith and religious morale can be that sinful behaviour which ultimately leads to nuclear holocaust.

To further emphasise, and to exemplify with an excerpt from the book, we can look at what Manganiello writes about how Dom Paulo, the abbot of the Leibowitz Abbey, when meeting Thon Taddeo, the secular scientist, understands that the scientist's ambition is to live

up to the “Protagorean creed that man is the measure of all things” (162) and that his wish is to “be as gods” (162). The calamitous disconnection between religious morality and the scientist’s vision of greatness results in that Taddeo repeats the tragic errors which will lead to the Flame Deluge. After Taddeo made this mistake, a new “dark age of enlightenment” (Manganiello 162) developed in the wakes of the atom bomb blast, creating a bomb-culture pursuing further, and greater knowledge and power. Power which ultimately leads to another nuclear holocaust.

A Canticle is, as we now have seen, riddled with elements which portray repetition and the cyclical history of humankind, but even though the book has two factions (religious and secular) who oppose each other Miller does not pit religion against science per se. His meaning is deeper than that. The Leibowitzan monks who devote their lives to preserving the memorabilia of the old world in order to preserve humankind’s cultural heritage and history, are in addition to being religious and upholding religious ethics also embracing science, because the Church sees science as a part of the *logos* of the Creator (Miller 143). Miller also manifests this when Brother Joshua leaves earth (which at the end of the book is bombing itself to pieces) in a spaceship carrying with him all of the memorabilia from the Leibowitzan Order so that the knowledge in those archives can help humanity by starting up a new civilization somewhere else. When leaving, Brother Joshua says “It was no curse, this knowledge, unless perverted by Man.” (Miller 285). This passage of the book tells that Miller divides humanity’s self-consciousness from its knowledge, because humanity becomes disconnected with itself in the search for knowledge and power. Rather than saving the earth, humanity has become blinded by its sinful behaviour and hunger for knowledge and power that it chooses to destroy instead.

Humanity’s never-ending hunger for knowledge and power in the book is very much a theme for humanity’s desire to become perfectly rational beings (Doherty 205), meaning that scientists will never stop expanding their knowledge until everything is optimized. These desires make up much of the delusional rationalization of civilian casualties caused in the event of a nuclear war and the absurd view that humanity has to rely on technology to be able to survive (Doherty 205). The apocalyptic cycles will as a result of that never end. Humanity is portrayed by Miller as a species who will rationalize their own existence in order to fulfil their desire of achieving ultimate power. Thus, Miller’s view upon humanity’s everlasting desire for power can be interpreted as if humanity cannot be changed even in the events of a nuclear holocaust, nothing will.

Religious and secular ethics

The cyclical view upon history as portrayed in Miller's novel introduces another central point which is the element of religious versus secular ethics, which has been briefly mentioned in the previous chapter. The book's main events happen as a result of the constant battle between those who uphold religious faith and those who favour scientific embrace but who lack the sense of religious morality. The link between secularity and religion in the book is the Leibowitzan monastery which connects the past with the future, and in the context of apocalyptic cycles and how humanity's future is always connected to the past in the present, Miller creates a comparison between faith and science (Smith 38). The monks who reside in the abbey preserve pre-Deluge scientific knowledge which they do not understand, and scientists battle for power without much regard for religious ethics. This dysfunctional dynamic between theologians and scientists is doing nothing but add to the already turbulent notion of cyclical events and war between institutions, but if they were to combine forces then the fruits could be enormous.

Miller's novel could be argued to favour a religious source of values, where science is viewed upon as the flawed body of knowledge, but an important point discussed in *A Canticle* is that science conducted without a foundation in religious ethics will always end in disaster (Tietge 677). Tietge argues that the return of humanity to Catholic faith may not be Miller's way of telling the reader that Catholicism is "*the best source for an ethical framework*", but that it rather provides substance. This is because Catholicism has survived for such a long time that it is not unreasonable to think that humanity would return to it in a post-apocalyptic "spiritually defunct world" (Tietge 677). This argument also supports the statement that if science and religion were to combine forces, humanity would thrive off of the fruits that would be produced. The institutions of both science and religion in the book, however, do not cooperate to form a common language on as to how an ethical framework should be made. Instead, both secular and religious institutions maintain a blurred emphases on their respective ideologies which furthermore suggests that if they maintain their uncritical dogmatism in their respective realms the results of that are both dangerous and self-destructive (Tietge 678), which is exactly what happens in the plot. To be able to form this ethical framework it is of paramount importance that those institutions who claim to possess ultimate knowledge, which in this instance is the Church, local government and the scientific community, are able to cooperate. Interpreted from Miller's ambiguous message, then, if humanity were to live up to the ideal form of ethicality, the new, reconstructed set of knowledge must contain knowledge

which originates from both religion and science.

That leads us to the next topic which is how Miller depicts the differences between religious and secular ethics. Miller seems to imply that the major difference between the two pillars of the story lies in the “teleological ramifications entailing the embrace of one or the other” (Smith 38). In the book, those who seek knowledge in the pursuit of power are those who have distanced themselves from religion, which is the case with Thon Taddeo, but also those who alleviate human suffering “at the expense of maintaining the sacred quality of life, as with Doctor Cors” (Smith 39). Religious ethics are on the other hand seeking a way to use knowledge in order to serve humankind in a productive way. That includes the desire to both make righteousness prevail, even if it is at one’s expense, and the importance of respecting life.

Miller’s view upon the matter can be further looked into by analysing how he portrays certain central characters in the book. As mentioned above, Thon Taddeo and Doctor Cors are two characters who represent secularity and secular ethics. When Miller paints these characters, he is not notably ambiguous in the way he portrays them. To Miller, Taddeo and Doctor Cors are those who symbolize the way science and religious ethics are divided, and as a result, Miller puts them in an unfavourable light in terms of their position to the Catholic ideology which Miller holds high. As an example, Thon Taddeo is portrayed as the atheist scientist who neglects religious practise and ethics, painting the character as unsympathetic. In contrast to Taddeo, Miller portrays his counterpart, Brother Kornhoer, as someone who embraces faith but still has respect for science which makes him a sympathetic character (Smith 39). What this results in is a clash between cultures. Paganism is being held up against Catholicism, it is a war between faith and atheism.

It is, however, difficult to tell where exactly Miller himself places his allegiance. Even though one definitely can argue that Miller’s way of portraying the Church’s ideologies triumphs the portrayal of runaway science, one cannot neglect the fact that even those who follow religious ethics still make fallacious decisions (Tietge 684). The way Miller criticises both groups in their own ways makes Miller’s moral ambiguity hard to interpret. It may seem that he thinks ignorance is the factor that leads to the most mistakes, such as the biggest crime against humanity, the atomic blast. However, Miller’s dichotomy of good and evil is not as simple as that. To gain further understanding we need to look at the moral grounding from where decisions are justified from. To exemplify this issue, we can look at the way both the Simpletons (those who survived the atomic blast and mobbed together to murder every scientist, leader, teacher, ruler and intellectual to prevent another holocaust) and the Church

made significant crimes against humanity in the first section of the book. Tietge mentions that “[i]gnorance leads to error, and in some cases, crimes against humanity, but ignorance is here carefully placed on a sliding scale of degree” (684). What this means is that the severity of the crime committed has to be judged on the premise of moral fortitude. The Simpletons are a result of self-inflicted ignorance (Tietge 684), making them unethical beings who strive for a world wholly free from science. Their actions may sprout from a “mis-guided sense of moral preservation” Tietge (684) argues. They kill in the name of saving humanity in the long run. The Church, on the other hand, which is supposed to follow the ethical rules of humanity and religion has committed crimes that surpass those of the Simpletons. The Church’s ancestor-worship ultimately leads to the next annihilation of man, which is a worse crime than killing a few people in good faith as is the case for the Simpletons. The ancient “Golden Age” which is proclaimed by the Church, may not be a thing after all according to Miller, because the Church’s moral fortitude is not any greater than that of the Simpletons. What these observations leave us with are questions regarding which side, theologians or scientists, has the best reason for their actions, if such a thing even can be judged. Tietge asks: “Is the Church morally superior because they have the apparent sanction of God? Are scientists more noble because the Church has erroneously lent them the empowerment of martyrdom?” (685). These questions reflect on Miller’s dichotomy of ignorance and enlightenment; where should power come from? A question which can be argued to be the very essence of *A Canticle*. Miller, then, seems to suggest that both science and religion are two different sources of power, but ultimately it is a “human problem” (Tietge 685) as to how that power should be wielded.

The issue regarding power and ethics once again makes its appearance, but it is also bound to the cyclical nature of human history. When it comes to Miller’s point of view on this matter, I do not think that he is ultimately placing the blame on either side for the atrocities being made against humanity in the novel. I do, however, think that he pits religious and secular ethics against each other to state a point that no matter how much moral reasoning one has to back their actions with it all comes down to two different paths which ultimately leads to the same goal on the premise of human nature. The whole plot will, on that basis, become a fight between those who cherish and respect life and those who are willing to destroy everything in their way in the hunt for power. The book seems to make a stand towards that statement also; those who have lost their moral compasses and chooses to ignore the sacredness of life are the ones who are responsible for the worst atrocities against humanity regardless of their position. However, evil will never conquer what is good, because to Miller there is

always hope for the future even though the past is blackened by humanity's sinful behaviour. This is apparent in the book's ending, where the earth is suffering its second atomic apocalypse. Here, Brother Joshua leaves as it is bombing itself to pieces together with the preternatural Rachel who is free from sin and humanity's bad traits, leaving the reader with an impression that there is a bright future for humanity somewhere on the horizon.

Conclusion

A Canticle for Leibowitz is a post-apocalyptic sci-fi novel and Miller places his focus on the ideological structure and battle between theology and secularity. This thesis has specifically looked into the author's treatment of cyclical history and the battle between secular and religious ethics in *A Canticle*. It does not come as a surprise that Miller's book is so heavily drenched in the theme of cyclical history and nuclear warfare given that the cold war was very much a thing when he wrote the book and as such, cyclical history is manifested through the many symbolic cues and examples of repetition in the book. The notion of sinful behaviour of humanity also plays an important role in Miller's portrayed cyclical view and this paper has specifically addressed the occurring theme that human history hits a period of regression before they convert the cycle into progression again. Humanity's quest for power has also been scrutinized in an attempt at interpreting how Miller portrays characters in the light of their ethical frameworks. Moreover, ethics plays an important and central role in the novel and as a result there is no main protagonist in which the reader can identify with, but instead, the "hero" of the story is civilization itself. The trials civilization has to endure in order to succeed is what makes this story a great one, and it these very trials that make up the religious and secular overtones which are the main driving forces of the story. The dynamic between cyclical history and ethics is handled very delicately in the way the plot is being driven forward by their continuous battles. The biggest happening in the book, the second Flame Deluge, is according to Miller an event that has been triggered by the separation between religious and secular ethics and can be said to be the result of when humanity neglect to follow necessary ethical frameworks which ensures the sacredness of human life.

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