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Abstract

Superficially the bulk of the stories in Olive Senior's *Summer Lightning* (1986) are primarily naturalistic accounts of a particular experience of growing up in rural Jamaica in the 1940's and 1950's. The stories repeatedly construct a situation in which a child-protagonist, usually a girl, has been displaced from the peasant home of her early youth and relocated in a middle-class household. Senior has said that this situation replicates the experience of her own youth,¹ which involved a similar movement between houses and made her socially, as well as racially, 'a child of mixed worlds, socialized unwittingly and simultaneously into both' / and the reader who knows this, even if s/he is anxious to avoid seeing the text simply as a fictionalized transcription of aspects of the author's own experience, may well be tempted to assume that its range is narrowly circumscribed by the particular nature of this situation represented.

JOHN THIEME

'Mixed Worlds': Olive Senior's *Summer Lightning*

Superficially the bulk of the stories in Olive Senior's *Summer Lightning* (1986) are primarily naturalistic accounts of a particular experience of growing up in rural Jamaica in the 1940's and 1950's. The stories repeatedly construct a situation in which a child-protagonist, usually a girl, has been displaced from the peasant home of her early youth and relocated in a middle-class household. Senior has said that this situation replicates the experience of her own youth,¹ which involved a similar movement between houses and made her socially, as well as racially, 'a child of mixed worlds, socialized unwittingly and simultaneously into both',² and the reader who knows this, even if s/he is anxious to avoid seeing the text simply as a fictionalized transcription of aspects of the author's own experience, may well be tempted to assume that its range is narrowly circumscribed by the particular nature of this situation represented. In fact, although the stories of *Summer Lightning* do work extremely well as naturalistic accounts of Jamaican rural life and owe much to their being rooted in concrete particularities, the predicament of the displaced child provides a medium for commenting on central conflicts of the society more generally. The accounts of ways in which children are socialized open up windows on issues of class, race, religion, education, gender, sexuality, language and migration.

Frequently the child who acts as the pivotal point of a particular story, whether as a first- or third-person centre of consciousness, is initiated into knowledge about the behavioural imperatives of the society, discovers that these are by no means monolithic and becomes involved in making some kind of tacit choice between its discrepant codes. In 'Bright Thursdays' the protagonist Laura, the child of an extra-marital liaison between a dark-skinned countrywoman and a fair-skinned 'young man of high estate'³ who has since been shipped off to the United States, is sent by her mother to live in the household of her middle-class paternal grandparents with the injunction to 'let them know you have broughtuptcy' (p. 36). Unfortunately Laura finds that any 'broughtuptcy' she does have still leaves her a misfit in her new environment, where a meal instead of being 'something as natural as breathing is a ritual, something for which you prepared yourself by washing your hands and combing your hair and straightening

your dress before approaching the Table' (p. 37), and is left feeling that there is 'no space allotted for her' (p. 37). Arguably the story, like the majority of the pieces in *Summer Lightning* is about the attempt to claim a space for oneself or, as Senior has put it herself, 'to create self-identity out of chaotic personal and social history'.⁴

Laura's sense of insecurity in her new social world is figured most strikingly in her response to clouds she observes as she waits for the bus that takes her to school. She associates these with pictures of Jesus she has seen in Sunday School, in which he is represented as descending to earth on a white cloud. Having had the notion that he is a God of judgement and punishment instilled into her through the church, the pictures make her feel that she is a sinner about to be visited by such a God, who will 'one day soon appear out of the sky flashing fire and brimstone to judge her' (p. 46). So her reaction to the clouds can be read as an expression of her guilt-ridden feelings of social inferiority and sense that she will be judged by some patriarchal authority figure. In the denouement, her father returns to Jamaica for a visit with his white American wife. Laura sees him as a rescuer-figure who will release her both from her fear of clouds and the uncertainty that surrounds her Thursdays, a day that she has always felt either 'turned out to be very good or very bad' (p. 36). However, on his return, her father proves to have no real interest in her at all – he is neither a deliverer nor a patriarchal God of judgement – and she receives rather more attention from his wife. The obvious conclusion, that fathers are not knights in shining armour who come to rescue latter-day Rapunzels from the misery of everyday life and that, if Laura is to achieve any kind of self-affirmation, it will be through her own endeavours, is reinforced at the very end of 'Bright Thursdays', when she overhears her father refer to her as a 'bloody little bastard' (p. 53). In a second she makes herself an 'orphan' (p. 53), thereby renouncing any loyalties she has previously felt towards the middle-class world, and dissipating the threatening clouds. This makes explicit what has been implicit throughout: that what she has taken to be some kind of malevolent force in the natural world is in fact a product of her own particular psycho-social conditioning. Her decision to 'orphan' herself emancipates her both from the middle-class social aspirations inculcated in her by her mother and from the guilt-ridden sensibility induced in her by a branch of the Christian religion⁵ that reinforces the society's class and colour hierarchies. She is left a free agent to find the space that she has hitherto felt 'Life' has not allotted her. 'Bright Thursdays' is typical of *Summer Lightning* in its skill in depicting areas of major social conflict through nuances and for the subtle way in which it exposes how the socially constructed has been naturalized.

The stories encompass a broad range of Jamaican social experience and span the whole range of the linguistic continuum⁶ with an easy movement between different tonal registers and between Creole and Standard English

in the narrative voices employed. Class snobberies are at the centre of 'Real Old Time T'ing'; 'Ascot' is concerned with migration abroad and the different responses the metropolitan success of the trickster-hero elicits in those who have remained behind; 'Country of the One Eye God', the one story set in a later period – the 1970's – dramatizes conflicts between generations and rural and urban value-systems, particularly in the area of religion. And religion is also to the fore in 'Confirmation Day', a first-person account of a girl's fearful response to becoming 'a child of god' (p. 81) which uses the clouds metaphor of 'Bright Thursdays' in an almost identical way, and 'Do Angels Wear Brassieres', in which the precocious Becca, a more socially confident child-protagonist than Laura, subversively refashions God in her own image as 'a big fat anansi in the corner of the roof'⁷ and, completely uncowed by the judgemental aspects of the respectable brand of local Christianity that instil fear into Laura, envisages a gossipy neighbour who calls her 'the devil own pickney' (p. 68) being punished in the after-life: 'Fat Katie will get her comeuppance on Judgement Day for she wont able to run quick enough to join the heavenly hosts' (p. 70). The witty and irreverential tone is quite different from that of 'Bright Thursdays' and the comic use of Jamaican Creole perfectly complements the 'force-ripe' (p. 69) Becca's capacity to function as a satirist of social hypocrisy, particularly when she pits her biblical knowledge against that of a visiting archdeacon, asking him a series of riddles that culminates in the question that give the fiction its memorable title. Again the dominant thrust of the story is anti-middle class and, although its touch is light, it can be read as an attack on the way in which children are socialized into 'respectable' values (values which have their origins in the colonial culture) with a resultant loss of spontaneity and a positive response to the society's folk culture. All of these stories involve a dialogue between different areas of Jamaican social experience and in the two finest pieces, 'Ballad' and the title-story, the child-protagonist makes a choice between adult role models who represent the supposedly opposed worlds of the island's middle-class and folk cultures. 'Ballad', a sustained linguistic *tour de force* narrated in a 'mesolect' form of Jamaican Creole and incorporating forms closer to 'basilect'⁸ in its dialogue, juxtaposes the two cultures on the level of discourse, as is clear from its opening words:

Teacher ask me to write composition about The Most unforgettable Character I Ever Meet and I write three page about Miss Rilla and Teacher tear it up and say that Miss Rilla not fit person to write composition about and right way I feel bad...⁹
(p. 100)

Miss Rilla is 'not a fit subject' for scribal discourse in the context of the educational curriculum of the late colonial period, but the text itself opposes this view by instating her as the subject of the 'ballad' it foregrounds itself as being. Gradually it reveals why Miss Rilla has been seen

to be beyond both social and literary pales. As a 'scarlet woman' who has had a succession of lovers, some of them younger than herself and one of whom has been killed in a fight over her, she has infringed the sexual taboos of the society and not surprisingly this has stirred up the jealousy of 'respectable' women like the narrator Lenora's step-mother. However, on a more general level, Miss Rilla can be seen to embody the vibrancy of the oral, folk culture and a joy in life which transgresses the codes of the middle-class society in a more radically disruptive way. At several points Lenora speculates on whether Miss Rilla will be admitted into Heaven and by the end she decides she probably will be:

... if there is no forgiveness it mean that Miss Rilla is down there burning in hell fire. But I tell you already that I dont believe that at all. I believe that Miss Rilla laughing so much that Saint Peter take her in just to brighten up Heaven.¹⁰ (p. 134)

Earlier Lenora has been encouraged to study hard so that she can go on to high school and perhaps become a teacher, but the story ends with her expressing doubts as to whether she wishes to pursue this middle-class ideal and plumping instead for the folk values represented by Miss Rilla. In 'Summer Lightning' a lonely boy living in the middle-class household of his aunt and uncle takes refuge in a garden room of indeterminate identity and which he thinks of as his 'secret room, a place where he could hide during thunderstorms' (p. 1). Alienated from his snobbish aunt and his uncle, the boy finds his affections are fought over the Rastafarian Brother Justice and a mysterious man who comes to stay in the house for a few weeks each year 'for his "nerves"' (p. 1). The atmosphere is laden with menace and what Senior has referred to as 'the drama, magic, and mystery inherent in all human transactions'.¹¹ Like the boy, the reader has to decode ambiguous signifiers. Mysteries surround the nature of the strange man, the garden room and summer lightning. Equally enigmatic are his uncle's box-level, which is associated with memory and perception, and an ivory elephant which he is given by the 'man' with an instruction to turn it towards the door for luck, a gnomic piece of advice since the garden room in which he keeps it has three doors. As the story develops, the boy is drawn to the man's company and spends less time with his former friend Brother Justice, a figure of whom his aunt disapproves since his conversion to Rastafari has led to his deserting the 'respect for them which had been inculcated in men like him for centuries' (p. 6). Brother Justice, who has been disturbed many years before by the man's 'watching him the way he should be watching a woman' (p. 7), reacts by telling the aunt to look after the boy. The story reaches its climax with summer lightning flashing outside and the boy feeling threatened as, 'through a film like that covering the eye of the spirit level' (p. 10), he sees the man approaching him. The open-ended narrative breaks off here, leaving what happens next and the issue of whether the man is a child molester

unresolved.¹² All the major symbols are, however, reinvoked in the closing paragraphs and there is resolution of another kind, as the boy makes *his* social choice by seizing the ivory elephant and pointing it towards the garden door through which he feels sure Brother Justice will now come; he is no longer unsure as to where 'good luck' lies and consciously chooses the social outsider over the threatening middle-class character. And the narrative also clarifies the significance of the garden room. Immediately before the final incident the boy has felt that if the man ever touches him, 'everything – Bro. Justice, the room, the magic world, even the order of the aunt and uncle's life that he both loved and despised – would be lost to him for ever' (p. 9). The room and the things he associates with it are his childhood, to which he now clings desperately in the face of adult behaviour that threatens an end to innocence.

NOTES

1. Unpublished talk, University of North London, 8 May 1990.
2. Charles H. Rowell, 'An Interview with Olive Senior', *Callaloo*, 11, 3 (1988), 481. Subsequent references cite 'Rowell'.
3. *Summer Lightning* (London: Longman, 1986), p. 38. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the text.
4. Rowell, p. 482.
5. Ostensibly the Anglican church, the state church of Jamaica. In her entry on the church in her *A-Z of Jamaican Heritage* (Kingston: Heinemann/Gleaner Co., 1983) p. 6, Senior comments: 'The Church of England was the church of the ruling class and planters and therefore supported the institution of slavery.'
6. David DeCamp, 'Social and Geographic Factors in Jamaican Dialects', in R.B. Le Page, ed., *Creole Language Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 82, expresses the linguistic situation in Jamaica as follows: 'Nearly all the speakers of English in Jamaica could be arranged in a sort of linguistic continuum, ranging from the speech of the most backward peasant or labourer all the way to that of the well-educated urban professional. Each speaker represents not a single point but a span of this continuum, for he is usually able to adjust his speech upward or downward for some distance along it.'
7. Anansi (or Anancy) is a spiderman-trickster figure of the Akan peoples of West Africa, brought to the Caribbean by the slaves of the Middle Passage. As Senior notes in her *A-Z of Jamaican Heritage*, p. 5, he 'personifies the qualities of survival' in the face of colonial oppression. Anansi stories are among the most popular form of folk tales in Jamaica. Cf. Edward Kamau Brathwaite's representation of the subversive potential of the Anansi figure in 'Ananse', *The Arrivants*, pp. 165-7.
8. 'Basilect' is a term used to refer to that segment of the linguistic continuum that is assumed to be 'furthest' from Standard English; 'acrolect' that which is assumed to be closest; and 'mesolect' refers to all the intermediate varieties of the Creole. See Derek Bickerton, *Dynamics of a Creole System* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975), p. 24.
9. The essay-topic suggests the metropolitan model of the *Reader's Digest's* 'My Most Unforgettable Character' feature. Cf. similar passages in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for*

Mr. Biswas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 356-7; and Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (London: Picador, 1985), pp. 38-45.

10. Cf. Becca's imagined version of Fat Katie's 'comeuppance' on Judgement day, quoted above.
11. Rowell, p. 481.
12. Senior says, Rowell, p. 483: '... what you see on the page is only part of the story. The inexplicable, the part not expressed, the part withheld is the part that you the reader will have to supply from your emotional and imaginative stock... I believe it's my job as a writer not to say it all, for I am only one half of the equation - reader-writer - and that the work becomes complete only when it is read, when the reader enters the world I have created. I therefore tend to leave a lot of my work open-ended.'

Readings

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