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Wandering Through Guilt: The Cain Archetype in the Twentieth-century Novel

Paola Di Gennaro

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The first comprehensive study on the pattern of guilt and wandering in literature, this book examines the relationship between these two complex concepts as they appear in twentieth-century novels, basing its methodology on archetypal criticism, psychology, anthropology, mythology, and religion. This study deciphers a universal model of behaviour and literary representation that finds its archetype in Western literature in the biblical figure of Cain; at the same time, it presents a critical framework valid for comparative approaches that cross its boundaries. From Graham Greene's The Power and the Glory and Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano, to Wolfgang Koeppen's Death in Rome and Ooka Shohei's Fires on the Plain, this book is not just a thematic study, but is, rather, an analysis of the literary phenomena that appear in those novels where the sense of guilt is controversially subjective, or rather, so collective as to be universal, as is often the case with war and postwar literature. Di Gennaro goes beyond the "explicit" retelling of the story of Cain, in order to uncover the monomyth through its rhetorical structures and mythical methods. The lost/abandoned garden, the wasteland with no religion, the classical and religiously-corrupted city, and the tropical, cannibalistic island at war are the respective settings of these novels, where neither homelessness nor journeying is the issue, but rather a desperate or useless movement toward self-consciousness, or self-destruction. After the Second World War, much was left silenced rather than unsaid. This study retraces those silences, those shouts over history through the power of myths.

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