

HEARING THE QUIET FOOTFALL: THE FUNCTION OF  
MYTH IN HAWKES'S THE BEETLE LEG AND THE OWL

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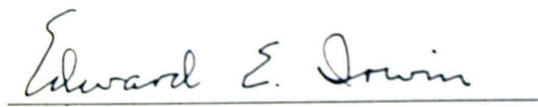
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HEARING THE QUIET FOOTFALL: THE FUNCTION OF MYTH IN  
HAWKES'S *THE BEETLE LEG* AND *THE OWL*

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Graduate and Research Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Arts

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by

Vicki G. Magnuson



FOR MY FAMILY

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Clarence Ikerd for first encouraging me to do graduate work. I would also like to thank Dr. Lewis Tatham, Dr. Don Der, Dr. Ed Irwin, and Dr. David Till for sharing their wisdom and knowledge with me over the last twenty years. I owe special thanks to Dr. Steve Ryan, my thesis advisor, for his encouragement and direction over the last five years. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Larry, for the chapter titles and for encouraging me to finish when I wanted to give up.

## ABSTRACT

In his early works *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl*, Hawkes depicts societies and individuals who have entombed themselves by adhering to a spiritually bankrupt religion and its mythology out of a fear of the power of the unconscious. Thus alienated from the unconscious, the societies Hawkes portrays are creatively, emotionally and spiritually sterile. In these two works, Hawkes demonstrates how closing off the unconscious robs men and women of their potential for living creative, enlightened, compassionate lives. Hampered by religious dogma, out-dated traditions and a mythology which no longer enlightens, the societies portrayed in *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl* wither emotionally and creatively within a coffin of delusion. The world Hawkes portrays is, therefore, a sterile wasteland where beauty and love are doomed to decay before they are even conceived.

Because Hawkes creates desolate landscapes of human waste, his early works are often criticized as unnecessarily bleak. Critics claim they portray humankind as unable to free itself from the grips of paralyzing conformity and fear of the unconscious and death. However, in his early works, the hope Hawkes offers the reader of escaping this self-entombment lies not in the reader's ability to fathom another traditional novel which relies on fully developed, believable characters who, if allowed by the author,



discover life's eternal verities, but rather in the reader's own creative response to the poetic activity of the author's distinctive style, which encourages the reader to examine his own psychic enclosures. Hawkes's very means of telling his story denies that men must remain entombed in a sterile world, for in refusing to adhere to the traditional symbolic, structural and mythological formulas of the novel, Hawkes implies that we can live creatively by exploring and facing our unconscious and our fear of it just as the artist can challenge and breathe new life into old artistic forms. These two visionary works become far more than cryptic reflections of our neurotic world if read as creative myths. They attempt to heal a culture alienated from its unconscious. In *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl*, Hawkes reinvents traditional mythologies as he attempts to rouse the reader from complacent acceptance of old artistic conventions which do not reflect the reality of modern man. In so doing, he hopes to awaken the reader simultaneously to life and art.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

"I want to find the fluid, germinal, pestilential 'stuff' of life itself as it exists in the unconscious. The writing of each fiction is a taking of a psychic journey; the fictions, in themselves, are a form of a psychic journey." Thus says John Hawkes in a 1983 interview (Hawkes, *Life and Art* 125), and these words are especially true of Hawkes's early novels, *The Beetle Leg*, published in 1951, and *The Owl*, published in 1954. In these two works, Hawkes and the reader together explore the vicissitudes of societies which entomb themselves within the confines of repressive cultural laws and religious dogma derived from traditional myths fossilized into lifeless forms which may map where the society has been but can no longer act as a guide toward the future.

In Hawkes's early works, we find "Hawkes closest to the psychic mainstream, fended off and partially diverted by the more formal structure and explicit themes of his more mature work" (O'Donnell 42). *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl* are transitional works between the often chaotic, surreal writing of *Charivari* and *The Cannibal* and the structurally more coherent, deceptively traditional appearing later works such as *Second Skin*, *The Blood Oranges*, and *Travesty*. In *The Beetle Leg* and in *The Owl*, we see the young writer who has said that the enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme and who believes that cultural myths as



well as artistic forms can lose their power to awaken the reader to a recognition of the unconscious. Thus both *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl* reflect Hawkes's wariness of traditional myths and traditional methods of story telling, and in these early works Hawkes's "'anti-realist impulse' is the most evident" (O'Donnell 42). Using metaphorically concise language and tightly controlled structure in *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl*, Hawkes creates novels which in their entirety become objective correlatives for the battle between the conscious and the unconscious.

In *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl*, Hawkes establishes the theme which he continues throughout his works and which he explains in a 1975 interview with John Kuehl. When asked whether his notion of survival was similar to what Faulkner thinks of as the "old verities" and the honor found in enduring, Hawkes replied, "to me, the first values are found in the most demeaned kinds of life. I don't think of life as something to be endured. It's something to be created and lived" (170). Hawkes believes that if we are to create our lives rather than merely endure them we must first look into our psychic depths, which are revealed not only in our dreams but in our literature as well. In *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl*, Hawkes gives the unconscious a voice that can be heard in the twentieth century. He deconstructs the myths and literary forms of the past, which too often guide us to mistaken attitudes about ourselves and our

world. In giving the unconscious a voice that speaks to us in the twentieth century, Hawkes creates what Carl Jung called living myths and which Joseph Campbell calls creative myths.

In *Myths to Live By*, Joseph Campbell describes three ways in which myths have most often been interpreted in this century. The first is the interpretation given by Sir James G. Frazier's *The Golden Bough*, which sees "magic and religion as addressed finally and essentially to the control of external nature; magic mechanically, by imitative acts, and religion by prayer and sacrifice addressed to the personified powers supposed to control natural forces" (*Myths to Live By* 12). Frazier believed, according to Campbell, that customs or beliefs shown to be unreasonable would eventually disappear. But as Campbell points out, Frazier's psychology was based on rational concepts and did not take into account the deeply rooted irrational impulses of human nature. Campbell also points out that Frazier's general theory was wrong: although science and archeology have disproved or removed the metaphysical presence from most of the myths of religion, religion and myths continue.

Because Campbell finds in world myth positive and altruistic expressions of humankind's dreams and aspirations, he contends that the second, manifestly Freudian approach to the process of myth formation is inadequate. In Freudian psychology, which does take into

account the irrational impulses of human nature, myths are seen as public dreams and dreams as private myths, both of which are, as Campbell points out, viewed by Freud as "symptomatic of repressions of infantile incest wishes" (*Myths to Live By* 11). Thus according to Freudian analysis, myths along with art, philosophy, and even civilization are all manifestations of man's sexual neuroses. Because Freud "interpreted the phenomenology of the spirit" (*Myths to Live By* 112) in terms of man's sexual neuroses, his method is unable to fully interpret humankind's mythological symbols.

The twentieth century's third main endeavor to interpret myths has been through Jungian analysis, which posits that humans have a psychic system which is common to all, while each human being has a personal unconscious. The former, collective unconscious is of a "universal and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals" (Jung 43). According to Jung the collective unconscious does not rely on individual experience for its morphology and is shared by all men, as opposed to the personal unconscious which is shaped by repressed ideas and experiences which were once conscious at some level to the individual before being submerged in the unconscious. While for Frazier and Freud, myths were essentially interpreted as collective manifestations of the individual human psyche's will to power, Jungian analysis sees them as a potentially



positive force, a door to our "wiser, inward Self" (*Myths To Live By* 13).

According to Jung, we strive to consolidate consciousness against the waters of the unconscious, which we fear will swallow us up, and as a result we too often build psychic dams in the form of dogma and rites based largely on truth revealed by myths of the past. However, when myths and the dogma and rites which they have fostered no longer reflect the reality of the present, they belie the messages of the unconscious, and the wisdom the unconscious has to impart goes unheeded. This alienation of the unconscious from the conscious creates a fractured Self and Jungian individuation cannot occur. Thus separated from the conscious, the unconscious may become a ruthlessly destructive force driving us to act in ways which we can neither understand nor control:

Discerning persons have realized for some time that external historical conditions, of whatever kind, are only occasions, jumping-off grounds, for the real dangers that threaten our lives. These are the present politico-social delusional systems. We should not regard them causally, as necessary consequences of external conditions, but as decisions precipitated by the collective unconscious. (Jung 23)

This destructive potential of the unconscious is what Jung sees as the shadowed side of the Self. For Jung the unconscious is a force which must be recognized rather than cut off and ignored if we are to integrate it into the Self. For example, the Biblical story of Job for Jung is a myth calling for recognition of both the conscious and unconscious and for their full integration with the Self. In the story of Job, the power of the shadowed side is clearly defined. In the book of Job, God, which Jung interprets as the psychically integrated Self, shows Job Leviathan, who represents the shadowed side of the unconscious. God explains to Job that Leviathan is also a part of God, or the Self, and that within God reside all things good and evil. After seeing that God contains all, Job realizes that God, or the Self, contains much that he may never understand. Job reconciles himself with God as he integrates the shadowed side of the unconscious with the conscious. Job speaks to God:

I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me. I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise

myself, and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:  
2-6)

In acknowledging incomprehensible, and even sinister, aspects of his God's, or the Self's, nature, Job becomes a wiser man. According to Jungian theory, like Job, people who face the unconscious realize that much exists which they cannot control and must face the unpleasant reality of their own deficiency. But Jung also points out that knowing the truth is better than hiding behind walls of cultural taboos, religious dogma, and repressive laws that cannot hold back the waters of the unconscious forever. As Jung points out, "it is probably better despite our fear to know where the danger lies. To ask the right questions is already half the solution of a problem" (Jung 23). We must make ourselves aware of all parts of the human psyche so that periodically we can reintegrate the Self, Jungian "individuation." Without this psychic individuation, we merely endure rather than live full and creative lives, as Jung and Hawkes would agree.

Often Hawkes speaks of his works as an unfolding of the imagination and creativity, and much criticism of Hawkes's works considers his novels as studies in the artistic process, a process which Jung and Hawkes see as a means of revealing the secrets of the unconscious. John Hawkes's early works, *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl*, are works of what Jung calls a visionary artist. As a visionary artist,



Hawkes is driven to create and to enter into a dialogue with the unconscious resulting in works which are unsettling to the audience, unlike the works of the traditional artist, which reinforce the status quo and reassure the audience. As visionary works, Hawkes's early novels lay bare that which is painful to recognize in oneself or the world, yet they can help heal "the one-sidedness of culture like the dream heals the imbalance of the ego in the individual personality" (Martin 174).

Hence when read as Jung would have us examine myths, *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl* are far more than cryptic reflections of our neurotic world. These works, if examined as creative myths, become more than post-modern metafiction, paradigmatic manifestations of Freudian neurosis, or complex parodies of religious and cultural myths. By revealing what we most fear, these works can help heal the imbalance of the fractured Self.

In traditional mythology according to Campbell, symbols are delivered through socially sanctioned rites which reveal "certain insights, sentiments, and commitments the individual must experience or pretend to experience" (*The Masks of God* 4). However, in creative or living mythology, the individual shares a truly personal experience or realization which he attempts to communicate through signs or symbols. If the individual's "realization has been of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the

value and force of living myth--for those, that is to say, who receive and respond to it of themselves, with recognition, uncoerced" (*The Masks of God* 4).

As Campbell's post-Jungianism explains, myths have four major functions. The first is reconciling waking consciousness to the fascination and tremendous mystery of the universe "as it is" (*The Masks of God* 4). The second is to reveal "to waking consciousness the powers of its own sustaining source" (*The Masks of God* 4). The third function of myth is the execution of a "moral order," and as an enforcer of moral order, myths help to sustain a common canon of beliefs for a social group (*The Masks of God* 4). However, when myths fossilize under the weight of enforced dogma, they may become instruments for social coercion constituting a destructive force, a force to which John Hawkes alerts us in his early works.

Because in *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl* John Hawkes warns that our society is heading toward a dangerous point of no return, these early works are often interpreted as implying mankind cannot escape a world of socially imposed psychic entombment and that mankind is doomed to a sterile existence. However, while Hawkes's early novels do warn us that many of our cultural and religious myths no longer reflect accurately the psychic reality of our modern culture, they also serve the fourth and most important function of Campbell's view of myth which fosters "the

centering and unfolding of the individual in integrity . . . in accord with that awesome ultimate mystery which is both beyond and within himself and all things" (*The Masks of God* 6). Hawkes's *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl*, thematically as well as structurally, grow from Hawkes's own experience of value rather than from a dictating cultural or literary authority. Hawkes's early work seeks to correct, as does a creative myth,

the authority holding to the shells of forms  
produced and left behind by lives once lived.  
Renewing the act of experience itself, it restores  
to existence the quality of adventure, at once  
shattering and reintegrating the fixed, already  
known, in the sacrificial creative fire of the  
becoming thing that is no thing at all but life  
. . . (*The Masks of God* 8).

As Hawkes seeks to reignite the creative fire, he also draws on old forms as he attempts to make them communicate anew. Again, looking at the book of Job, God asks Job if he can face and accept the shadowed side of God,

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,  
or press down his tongue with a cord?  
Can you put a rope in his nose,  
or pierce his jaw with a hook? (*Job* 41.1-2)

and Hawkes closely echoes these lines in *The Beetle Leg* when he describes Luke fishing the fetus from the lake:



He loosed the hook, forcing his hand to touch the half-made face. His hook cracked through the membrane of the palate . . . . In both hands he picked it up, circling the softened chest inside of which lay the formless lungs, and stooped again to the water . . . . He held the body closer to the surface, water touched the back of his knuckles, and letting go, he gently pushed it off as if it would turn over and quickly swim away to the center of the bankless stream. (132)

In *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl*, Hawkes the writer, like Luke, fishes out and shows us the shadowed side of our being just as God shows Job Leviathan. For Hawkes, the Book of Job, however, has lost much of its power to communicate as it has become entrenched in religious dogma, and in his early works Hawkes attempts to retrieve the archetypal power of the story of Job, as well as other archetypal images, by freeing them from religious dogma.

Hawkes sees his works as potentially healing forces which forward the process of the reintegration of the conscious with the unconscious, the process of Jungian individuation. Hawkes explains his view of the creative process and how it helps reintegrate the disparate parts of the psyche when he discusses the scene from *The Beetle Leg* quoted above:

. . . . it is a real paradigm of what the artistic process should be. The writer should undertake to do what he finds most difficult and most threatening, and then deal with these materials in such a way as to reintegrate them within human consciousness. When the protagonist of the novel seizes what he has caught, this aborted, fish-like form of dead human life, then puts it back into the initial floodwaters of Noah's time--that, to me, is a parable of the creative process. (Hawkes, *Life and Art* 123)

Hawkes attempts to reveal the workings of the psyche and man's need to integrate all aspects of the psyche. The *Owl* and *The Beetle Leg* present such shocking and vivid personal visions that they can help the reader face Leviathan, or the shadowed side, allowing the reintegration of the conscious with the unconscious. Thus *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl*, like our myths and dreams, serve as a lifeline to our shared as well as our personal unconscious.

While analyzing the way in which Hawkes uses mythic allusions and parodies traditional literary forms or how Hawkes reveals the neurotic, sexually fixated individual is instructive, these methods do not reveal fully the riches his works contain and which may be revealed through Jungian analysis. An awareness of Jungian formulation is useful in the analysis of literature. For instance, Bruno



Bettleheim's work on autism and on the positive nature of our most gruesome fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*, relies not only on the Jungian concept of unifying the divided psyche but also on Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of mythemes and is, in part, an attempt to demonstrate the need of the psyche for establishing shared conscious structures which transmit cultural values subconsciously (Levi-Strauss 809). Although Jungian theory of myth formation occasionally has been used in analyzing the novels and novellas of John Hawkes, most of the best criticism of John Hawkes's work has either analyzed Hawkes's parody of myths and his use of mythological allusions or has relied heavily on Freudian psychology. While analyzing Hawkes's use of mythic allusions and parodies of traditional literary forms or how Hawkes reveals the neurotic, sexually fixated individual, is enlightening such analyses do not reveal fully the psychological insights that his works contain.

While some critics object to Jung's concept of the "collective unconscious," his theory of myths and mythic archetypes remains a powerful tool for the analysis of dreams and myths which reveal, or at one time revealed, the psychic truths behind cultural laws and religions. However, Jung uses the term the collective unconscious to describe from whence myths, which recur throughout time and across varying cultures, come. This recurrence of myths has not satisfactorily been demonstrated as heritage or

acculturation, and thus the persistence of myth itself has become mythic. Perhaps we are in part driven by a psychic force, the collective unconscious, which we can learn to know even though we cannot fully control it. Nevertheless, whether or not we are moved by collective and deeply rooted impulses of a shared and universal nature, as Jung pointed out, we are better off knowing the truth of our inability to completely know or control our own nature. Desires and fears not necessarily sexual in nature certainly are part of an extended shadowed side which we are better off admitting than ignoring.

Although Hawkes often speaks in Freudian terms about his work, he clearly believes that his own works do, in a Jungian sense, reflect psychic desires and fears common to all men. As Hawkes himself states:

the writer who exploits his own psychic life reveals the inner lives of us all, the inner chaos, the negative aspects of the personality in general. I'm appalled at violence, opposed to pain, terrified of actual destructiveness. . . . It isn't that I'm advocating that we live by acts of violence; I, myself, don't want to live the nightmare. It's just that our deepest inner lives are largely organized around such impulses, which need to be exposed and understood and used. Even appreciated. (Hawkes, *Craft of Conflict* 165)

Both Jung and Hawkes realize the paradox of the unconscious: that within it lies our power of creativity as well as our destruction, and in light of this, Hawkes's *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl* warn against complacency and stagnation brought about by alienation of the conscious from the unconscious and the resultant fear of our own unrecognized psychic energy. Thus, victims of alienation and their fear of the unconscious, the inhabitants of *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl* sever the lifeline with their unconscious, the creative life force, rather than delve into its secrets which could revitalize their lives and allow them to constantly recreate themselves and their world. Instead, the inhabitants of Hawkes's early works endure rather than create. They submit to delusional systems which they allow themselves to believe are the result of external rather than internal forces. They read their myths as representative of external reality rather than psychic reality, or they unquestioningly adhere to laws and observe rituals which may once have encouraged creativity and life but which now entomb them. As Hawkes draws the world of the psychically self-entombed, he gives us in *The Beetle Leg* and *The Owl* living myths which can help us understand the dark desires of the unconscious so that we may redeem ourselves from stagnation and impotence through integration of the Self, both the dark and the light sides of our nature.



## CHAPTER II

### DRAWING OUT LEVIATHAN

Various critics have pointed out that in *The Beetle Leg* Hawkes parodies myths such as that of Isis and Osiris, the cowboy and manifest destiny, the Garden of Eden and Christ's resurrection, but they do not consider the work as what Jung called a living myth . Most critics commonly agree that in *The Beetle Leg* Hawkes expresses his early belief that mankind is all but hopeless in the search for meaning and creative possibility in life. However, if viewed as a living myth, in *The Beetle Leg*, Hawkes offers the reader a lifeline to the unconscious.

As a visionary artist, Hawkes in *The Beetle Leg* creates an almost dream-like world which parodies our own world in an effort to expose the truth behind our culture's fossilizing, often coercive myths. *The Beetle Leg* functions much like a dream in which our unconscious desires are allowed to surface so that they may be examined and re-integrated with the Self. The novel itself acts as an objective correlative for the workings of the human psyche as it attempts and finally fails to suppress the shadowed side of our being.

In *The Beetle Leg* as he attempts to reveal the workings of the unconscious, Hawkes urges the reader to ask the right questions, to explore the psyche, the shadowed as well as the conscious side. He also urges examination of the



effects of our dominant cultural myths on our cultural, as well as personal, psyche.

In comparing Hawkes's early works with his later novel *The Passion Artist*, Carol A. MacCurdy argues that,

In the early fiction the conflict is characterized by entropic landscapes wrecked by war and in the later fiction by landscapes more and more disordered by the destructiveness of the narrator's own psyche. With *The Passion Artist*, however, Hawkes brings together these two domains--by presenting both a civilization in collapse and an interior excavation into the psyche. (330-331)

She argues that the entropy and stasis evident in the early works are the result of war, the First World War in the case of *The Cannibal* and a war with humankind against nature in the case of *The Beetle Leg*. However, while Hawkes's early works do indeed create entropic landscapes, the sterility apparent in *The Beetle Leg* is created not only by an external war, as MacCurdy asserts, but also by a war within the human psyche as the citizens of Clare and Mistletoe disastrously try to repress their shadowed, unconscious side. The townspeople's conscious side, fearing their unconscious will swallow them up, attempts to wall the unconscious off by clinging to hollow, time-worn myths. Unfortunately, these myths cannot guide the people to an

understanding of themselves or their rapidly changing world. That hostility and eventually death prevail in the novel is the result of the shadowed side of the unconscious breaking through the cultural controls created to keep it buried. Unlike Hawkes's later works, the narration of *The Beetle Leg* is not related through any one character or filtered through one dominant character's psyche, as is the case of *The Passion Artist*. However, the hostile battle led by the Sheriff against Cap Leech and finally diverted to the Red Devils in *The Beetle Leg* represents an internal, psychic battle nonetheless. Consequently, the desolate world the novel portrays is the product of a psychic struggle rather than a physical battle.

In *The Beetle Leg*, the most complicated of Hawkes's early fiction, the people of Clare and Mistletoe are afraid to ask the right questions, or for that matter any questions at all. They fear they are upsetting what little security they have been able to construct, first by creating the dam to hold back Old Lifeline and then by hiding behind their mystification of Mulge and the Sheriff's notion of law and order. In so doing, they also deny themselves the possibility of living creatively and freely because paradoxically, as Hawkes and Jung both understand, "the unconscious simultaneously offers freedom and annihilation" (MacCurdy 326).

The dam which the people of Clare and Mistletoe have built creates a sterile wasteland rather than a fertile valley as it slowly inches toward destruction, and the dam becomes

. . . a vision of life contained within deathly confines. Man-made, it suppresses, by analogy, the primitive flow and force of existence. These, in their instinctual, evolutionary nature, suggested by the image of the beetle's leg, cause the dam to move, threatening eventual explosion and annihilation after centuries of being dammed up. (O'Donnell 63)

While literal annihilation by flooding if the dam breaks threatens the people of Clare and Mistletoe, O'Donnell points out that external nature is not the greatest threat. The greatest threat to the townspeople is their self-imposed repression of the unconscious as evidenced when Luke is confronted by a child's awe of the Red Devils. Luke's response, typical of the town's attitude toward their unconscious, is "We don't want to hear about it" (63). Fearing their unconscious will swallow them up, the people of Clare and Mistletoe obsess about Mulge-- disloyal husband and errant son assumed to have died in a mud slide--as though he were endowed with a mystical power that could save them. They also submit to a dictatorial sheriff who creeps about the desert in search of "them



people too easy found doing things a man can't talk about, things that happened or not depending on whether you arrived five minutes early or five minutes late" (8). Ferreting out fornicators before they are able to copulate is the Sheriff's primary task as the laws which he enforces call for the acquiescence of the townspeople to a culturally imposed castration of their psyche, leaving them emotionally and creatively impotent. For the inhabitants of Clare and Mistletoe, like the characters of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," submission to laws whose purpose they have forgotten is easier than exerting themselves toward freedom through scrutiny and then constructive assimilation of the unconscious with the conscious, the dark with the light. Nonetheless, the psychic force they fear is ever present regardless of the measures taken to hide it and to keep it at bay.

In *The Beetle Leg*, the inhabitants of Clare and Mistletoe seek salvation in the deification of an unfortunate dead man, Mulge Lampson. They obsess about him, and the town barber maintains a shrine of relics attesting to Mulge's sainthood:

His razor was spread open before the shaving mug on a square of Christmas paper, marked by a little card tied to it with yellow string. A nick had been cracked in the bone handle and there was scrollwork on the blade like that etched upon a



naval sword . . . . and for fifty cents the relics could be touched, a hooked shadow here, a bristling object on its back, gilt flowers on porcelain. (72)

While the barber doesn't sell the relics, as Chaucer's Pardoner does, "there's postcards of them at Estrellita's" (72) which may be bought, and Ma grudgingly makes do with these pictorial copies of Mulge's belongings.

Like the two Marys of the New Testament, Mary the mother of Christ and Mary Magdalene seeking the body of Christ, Ma searches for the entombed Mulge, moving over his earthen grave, divining stick in hand. But unlike the Biblical myth of the two Marys, in Hawkes's myth Ma is unable to find the savior or speak with him upon his resurrection because, like all the citizens of Clare and Mistletoe, she misses the significance of their mystification of Mulge as she walks the dam crying out, "'Oh, Mulge. Where are you Mulge?'" (118). The narrator of *The Beetle Leg* describes Ma's search for Mulge:

But eyes staring at the flat of her apron, face buried in stiff fingers, she could not hear the quiet footfall, the close deliberate opening of the earth, the parting of the weeds. She could not see behind her. (120)

Ma is unable to hear the quiet footfall or the opening of the earth and the parting of the weeds because she is unable

to recognize the need for psychic regeneration, and the constant reintegration of the conscious with the unconscious. She seeks a physical rather than psychic presence; she has cut herself off from her inner voice, the unconscious.

Like Ma, the inhabitants of Clare and Mistletoe are no longer able to hear their inner voice. Inhabiting a self-made psychic as well as a physical wasteland, the people in *The Beetle Leg* are condemned to sterility because they have placed their salvation in the hands of a powerless savior, Mulge, rather than saving themselves. Thus they wait for a literal resurrection which will never come, although a psychic resurrection or rebirth might occur within themselves and their society if they heed the unconscious rather than attempt to isolate and bury its power.

In *The Beetle Leg*, the inhabitants of Clare and Mistletoe retreat from life to become the living dead. Living in the shadow of the dam that may collapse at any moment, the inhabitants of Clare and Mistletoe are brought together only by their mystification of Mulge as they retreat behind the product of what has become a coercive rather than a living myth. They wait for Mulge's resurrection as though it, and it alone, will restore meaning to their lives. As they watch the seismographic needle which indicates that the dam has shifted a "beetle's leg every several anniversaries" (68), the people of Clare

and Mistletoe pay homage to a myth which robs them of their spirituality. Their mythology has become life threatening rather than life sustaining. They choose to ease the pain of their existence by anesthetizing themselves with an impotent religion rather than participating in life's creation. About religion in regard to his work, Hawkes explains:

I think that religion does indeed depend on repression, on the lawful arranging of one's life, and also offers consolations that let us off the hook. I do not believe in any kind of god or any kind of afterlife, obviously. It seems to me necessary to live by creating our own contexts within the constant knowledge of the imminence of annihilation. (Hawkes, *Craft of Conflict* 160-161)

Creating their own contexts within the constant knowledge of their imminent annihilation is exactly what the people of Clare and Mistletoe cannot do, and unlike Hawkes's later first person narrators, the people of Clare and Mistletoe are unable to examine their personal history or to actively shape their own world.

In *The Beetle Leg*, the townspeople's attempt to build the dam in a sense castrates nature, and this attempt to tame nature, and by analogy the unconscious, fails. The dam, originally built to produce a fertile delta, has on the low side left a desert with only the trickle of a choked-off



river running through it and on the high side a drowned garden of Eden. The townspeople know that eventually, in spite of what they tell tourists, the dam will give way, and as O'Donnell explains:

The body buried in the dam suggests a comic reversal of the myth of progress, as the flawed structure moves annually toward its inevitable destruction . . . . man is imprisoned by his own technological dream and myth, subject to habitual and instinctual outbursts of violence or to inane rituals which are totally incongruent with his failed quest to control and conquer the intractable land. (O'Donnell 65-66)

The townspeople are unable to create life from the water of Old Lifeline, the river they have choked off. But more importantly, they have also choked off their unconscious which, analogous to the river, is their creative lifeline. Like the temporarily contained power of Old Lifeline, the shadowed side will inevitably and violently break through its feeble dam.

The dam which holds Mulge's body is described by Hawkes as a sarcophagus of mud. While the dam is literally Mulge's grave, metaphorically it is the townspeople's grave. Thus the creative power of the townspeople and their earlier plans "had stopped, fossilized and emerged" (67).



As John Kuehl points out in *The Craft of Conflict*, "In *The Beetle Leg*, Mulge's personal fault of marrying an elderly mother-surrogate becomes analogous to Mistletoe's communal fault of damming up the river, since both block natural forces. Jehovah punishes Adam and Eve for their carnality, but Hawkes, who inverts original sin, punishes Mulge and Mistletoe for their sterility" (36). The Sheriff's attempts to control sexual activity and the townspeople's submission to his authority is far more than the repression of human sexuality. For Hawkes sexuality, like evil, is a powerful metaphor:

It's true that all of my fiction does depend on the conflict between sexual or life possibility and drives toward destruction and death. A kind of death-ridden fiction, I suppose, but much of the negative sexual material--what Albert Guerard called the landscape of sexual apathy--is a metaphor of the destructiveness of the forces working against us and therefore of our inability to love. In other words, I don't think that I'm simply writing about castration, say. When we talk about the inner psychic life, certainly I'm trying to deal with childhood fears, fears of being devoured, overwhelmed, punished, and also, I suppose, desires to exert oneself toward freedom . . . . (Hawkes, *Craft of Conflict* 166)

All that can save the townspeople is the will to disobey the Sheriff and his perverse sense of law and order which focuses on stamping out carnal desires. Only the rekindling of their sexuality, which is a symbol of creative possibility and the will to live, can save the townspeople.

In the *Beetle Leg*, Hawkes implies that only the sexual act with the brassy, crass, middle-class Lou can save the town; and in so doing, Hawkes challenges the core of our own puritanism by choosing Lou to represent the potential for salvation. Therefore, an understanding of Lou, largely ignored by critics, is vital to a full appreciation of Hawkes's accomplishment in *The Beetle Leg* and of Hawkes's condemnation of castrating myths as opposed to creative, living myths.

A decidedly unChrist-like figure, Lou, wearer of the crucifix, the premier symbol of Christian sacrifice and rebirth, faces the unconscious and recognizes its power, and thus she represents the possibility for salvation from living death. Lou Camper, with no saving grace except her procreative power, energy, and desire for life, is so callous that after her son has been bitten by a rattlesnake, her main concern is with tuning the car radio. This shallow callousness partially accounts for why Lou's function as a regenerative force in the novel has been largely ignored by critics. However, none of Hawkes's characters is a typical hero or necessarily even likeable. Hawkes himself has

pointed out that as a writer he finds the foremost values in the most demeaned lives as he seeks to move us toward greater compassion.

The only true outsider, her husband and Cap Leech both having been in Mistletoe before, Lou is also the only character with a lust for life. Her creative power as evidenced by her imagination, sensuality, and fertility offers the inhabitants their only chance for rebirth. Although Lou is a tacky, callous woman, she alone bears the cross, a detail mentioned several times. She wears green silk slacks, a detail which Hawkes repeats several times, emphasizing her sensuality and fertility.

Lou looks forward to dancing and enters the women's poker game rather than passively watching the others play. In the game, she takes chances and is a "reckless player" the likes of which Thegna, the cook, had never sat with "before now" (75). Her imagination alive, Lou envisions the card game taking place on a river boat complete with chandeliers, and she "heard the ringing on the river, smelled tobacco and glass tumblers of brandy" (75). Her vision is disturbed by a siren-like voice, the voice of the unconscious, calling out, "Oh, Lou, Lou, where's he at now?" (75)

Taking chances and asking questions, Lou attempts to understand her husband's past and that of Clare and Mistletoe. She questions the reality of the present as well



as the past. Thus she holds the key to discovering not only why the town has become stagnant but how she is endangered by it. Her desire to seek answers to her own questions about the world prepares her for self-discovery and allows her the possibility of escaping the mistakes made by the rest of the people of Clare and Mistletoe, although Hawkes leaves us to wonder about her fate as the writer must wonder about the reader's.

In *The Beetle Leg*, when Lou is left in town by her husband, she speaks with male workers who seem sexually attracted to her, but only one goes so far as to lightly rub his finger over her slacks. None of the men can muster enough courage to engage her. Intimidated by her sexuality the men attempt to ignore her, and Bohn, Cap Leech's adopted son, when he senses her sensuality, fertility and power, looks at her once and then "never looked at her again" (55). Instead of being drawn to her and her sexual potency, the men of the town fear and avoid her:

He shied, big and halting as he was, at the web texture of the flyless slacks and at the emerald apparatus that lived and breathed, but further at the metal relic buried in the middle of her chest, visible through the silk, in its modest wedge. At that time it was the only cross in Mistletoe, Lou the only woman despite several who gather in the cook's room for cards. (56)



In order to avoid her stare, the men talk of Mulge and answer her questions about her husband as though she referred to Mulge rather than her husband, Camper. Whenever threatened, the men turn to the mythic image of Mulge for security. By having the men respond to her as though she were asking about Mulge, Hawkes juxtaposes Lou's vitality against the townspeople's sterile deification of Mulge, making clearer how the people of the town are trapped by their hollow myth. Thus trapped, the people of Clare and Mistletoe are closed to the regenerative power which Lou offers.

During the scene between Lou and several men of the town, in one of his few editorial comments, the omniscient narrator states:

There was no flood but of light, and in the light no clash of cocks or bodies, only the lime glass garden and woman whose whispering relations with any one of the sitting men could have sacked as little and exposed as much as the accident which, with a clap of land, had rocked the little purgatory. (102)

In this passage, the narrator implies that had even one of the men committed the sexual act with Lou the town might have benefitted spiritually more than it had from its mystification of Mulge. By engaging in the sexual act with Lou, they might have begun living again, thus escaping their

self-created purgatory. Mulge is dead and impotent; salvation comes from life and creation.

In this same scene, Hawkes identifies Lou with "Old Lifeline." Hawkes, through his identification of Lou with Old Lifeline, the river that fed the valley before it was cut off and castrated by the dam, and through his juxtaposition of her imaginative vision of life before the damning of "Old Lifeline," again reveals Lou's potential as a saving force. Furthermore, in this scene Hawkes creates a sharp contrast between Ma's futile search for Mulge and Lou's search for knowledge of the town and her place in it. Ma's search for Mulge ends with her inability to "hear the quiet footfall, the close deliberate opening of the earth, the parting of the weeds" (120). Lou, however, is able to hear the voice calling out, "'Oh, Lou, Lou, where's he at now?'" (76). Able to hear her inner voice, she is psychically more whole than the rest of the town and is able to look at the past of Clare and Mistletoe as well as their present stagnation and death-ridden future.

Lou offers life, and despite being "the outsider repulsive in her middle-class American crassness" (Frost 68), Lou is the only one who realizes what the town had been before the mud-slide and the mystification of Mulge, and she is the only one who sees, in all its horror, what the town has become. She alone has a moment of self-recognition