

The presentation of
the spiritual in tim
wintons novel
cloudstreet essay
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Spirituality is presented in Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet* as a greater force "beyond the mere physical" 1. Winton is an Australian author born in 1960. Elements of *Cloudstreet* have been derived from Winton's personal life, experiences and beliefs such as his sense of family, his Australian upbringing, and in particular his comprehension of the spiritual realm. When writing his novel, Winton "wanted to include both realms because [he felt] that is true realism: the supernatural and the natural accepted as one thing, as inclusive" because he believes "that everything that lives is holy and somehow integrated" 2.

The characters of *Cloudstreet* are thus exposed to a supernatural dimension and their spiritual journeys bring them to "find meaning in the chaos of existence" 3. Many Christian biblical references are interwoven throughout the novel, however, "rather than 'religious', 'numinous' is a safer word to use ... for though they reflect his personal quest for the highest ideals in life and focus on the spiritual attitude of those who recognize a controlling power, they are not expressed in terms of any conventional religion.

Winton avoids direct association with any particular form of spirituality but instead refers to one which transcends all religions. Winton employs the symbols of the house, the Aboriginal Blackfella and the water to present the landscape from which his characters, particularly the Lambs, are "totally affected" and consequently are brought to "apprehend God" and find their personal understanding and peace. *Cloudstreet* is a story which revolves around two families who share a house situated at "Number 1 Cloud Street" (43).

The novel traces the journeys of self discovery of central characters.

Disastrous circumstances unite the Lambs and Pickles. The Lambs have a catastrophic experience as family member Samson ' Fish' Lamb nearly drowns, only to be brought back to a partial existence where " it's like Fish is stuck somewhere... Like he's half in and half out" (69). On the other hand, the Pickles endure the loss of father Sam's fingers in a fishing accident. These physical tragedies trigger explorations of spiritual substance through which characters ponder the meaning of life.

The symbolism of the house in Winton's *Cloudstreet* is employed to play a part as an element of the physical and supernatural landscape through which characters are exposed to a higher spiritual realm. The house is a symbol for Colonialisation as it is explained that it was obtained to " make ladies" of Aboriginal girls " so they could set a standard for the rest of their sorry race" (36). The negative connotation of the victimization of aboriginal girls associated with the house leaves the house resonating with spirits of discourse.

The house is personified by Winton to represent this spiritual territory. Oriel wasn't the type to argue with a living breathing house" (134) and Fish senses that " the house sad" (166). This personification emphasizes " its dynamic nature" 5 and greater dimension of complex spirituality. As the families integrate in the house they are exposed to these spiritual elements. Specific spiritual encounters occur in the library, which is a room which had " no windows" and walls " blotched with shadows" (38). " The walls flicker with a black, gleeful flinching of shade... The shadows press in against themselves all of a sudden and dust motes freeze immobile in the air" (161).
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The evil described, which resides in darkness, is an allusion to Christianity. Jesus Christ is described in the bible as a light to the world so where there is an absence of God, there evil dwells. The windowless room signifies both families' rejection of spirituality in their lives. Conflict inhabits the house until the point of Oriel Lamb's rejection. She "[moves] her things out to the white tent beneath the mulberry tree at Cloudstreet" (133). Disharmony continues until the house is cleansed of its evil and the past spirits are released.

This cleansing takes place in the form of Rose and Quick's love and the birth of Wax Harry. When Rose and Quick make love in the "empty dark library", they are described as "two points of light sparking up the dark" (313). Eventually, when Wax Harry is born, "the room sighs, the house breathes its first painless breath in half a century" and it is "like the voice of God Himself pouring up... shaking the old smells from the walls and the worry from the paintwork" (385). These acts of love and new birth make reference to the birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The death of Jesus parallels to the death of the Aboriginal girl and Christ's resurrection is linked to the new life of Wax Harry. This cleansing of the house is symbolic of an overall development in characters' comprehension and acceptance of the existence of a spiritual realm. These events are employed by Winton as catalysts to bring about "a sense of completion and a sense of self" 6. The spiritual progression of the house is ultimately symbolized as "Quick prizes boards away... and a square of sunlight breaks into the room with a shudder and a riot of motes and spirits.

Fish sees the shadows with their mouths wide in horror” (374). The families of Cloudstreet are able to replace the darkness for light both physically and spiritually in their lives. The house is an example of where “ the frontiers of present reality and the spirit world emerge” 7. Winton uses the house to present spirituality in Cloudstreet in that it represents an element of the landscape which triggers the characters’ apprehension of God.

The Blackfella is another element linked to the landscape, which Winton employs to symbolically represent spirituality in Cloudstreet. The Black Man... personifies the identification Aboriginal people have with the land” 8. The Blackfella appears in the novel in many instances as a symbol of mystical powers from the spiritual realm. His overwhelming presence throughout the events of the novel is explained by Winton who intended for him to represent a figure similar to a guardian angel or savior. This allusion to Christian ideology, where God is depicted as a protector, is enriched by the historical significance of the ‘ angel’ being black.

The aboriginals in Australia were subject to much injustice during the period of Colonialisation. Similarly, Jesus Christ was persecuted and tortured as a man and also embodies the Christian Savior. The native Australian Aboriginals lived in harmony with the land for thousands of years before Colonialisation. This can be read as a parallel to God’s perfect creation embodied in the Garden of Eden, which was tainted when sin entered the world. This powerful sense of spirituality emphasizes the spiritual encounters of the Cloudstreet residence.

Divine events involving the Blackfella include his first appearance in the novel. “Lester saw his eyes suddenly widen” as he “turned and ran” (62) from the house at Cloud Street. His ability to recognize the spiritual discourse associated with the house valorizes his position as a spiritual being. The Blackfella again appears as a hitchhiker who is picked up by Quick during his period of separation from his family at Cloudstreet (208). The Blackfella is carrying bread and wine which are traditionally Christian symbols of Christ’s death.

The Blackfella directs Quick all the way back to Cloudstreet, which can be interpreted as his guardian angel guiding him home. There are many other instances in the novel where the Blackfella appears to characters in a supernatural and/or biblical manner. Quick sees “the figure of a man walking upon water... He was black” (217). Twentieth century psychoanalyst Jung “perceived that we all have a dark figure or shadow within ourselves which represents a positive unfilled aspect of our psyche, which we need to recognize” 9. Winton’s characters make the spiritual journeys to reclaim this part of self.

By representing the Blackfella as a spiritual element, “divine within the ordinary” 10, Winton refers to the aspects of the Aboriginal relationship with the land. He thus employs the Blackfella as an element of the landscape through which characters are “totally affected” and encouraged to apprehend a higher spiritual life force. “This is the life force which exists as a kind of fragment of God within all people” 11. Winton employs the water as a symbol of the landscape, which “offers knowledge, completion and wholeness” 12. “The river is a sacred place. It represents the spiritual.
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It becomes a place of revelation, the place of miracles, the place of regeneration” 13. “ Shall we gather at the river Where bright angel-feet have trod... “. This quote from the beginning of the novel creates a clear allusion to the spiritual aspect of the water. The water is central to events of the novel, as Quick realizes that “ every important thing that happened to him, it seemed, had to do with a river”. The most outstanding of these is the near drowning experience of his brother Fish. “ Fish feels death coming unstuck from him with a pain like his guts are being torn from him” (30).

Winton describes his own view of “ jumping into the ocean [to be]... a way of leaving [himself]”. Fish obtains a spiritual encounter of the mystical realm beyond physical life on earth. “ The act of diving down into the sea, as a metaphor for exploring the mysterious world of the unconscious mind, is a memorable image” 14. As a result he returns to an incomplete life where he is mentally retarded. Due to Winton’s depiction of the spiritual significance of the water, Fish is explored as the ‘ Lamb’ of God and the embodiment of spirituality.

Fish is constantly drawn to the water “ which comes to be seen on a symbolic level as a place of healing, a place of achieving oneness” 15 where he finds the source of his spiritual sustenance and regeneration. “ Fish is in two worlds – apprehending and passionately desiring the place on the other side” 16. The novel begins and ends with Fish’s death. His divine emancipation of the retarded Fish suggests that “ In water, as in death, there is life” 17. “ For there is nothing more certain than that we are formed from nature and return to nature” 18.

In a biblical reading of the novel, Fish is seen to be symbolically cleansed through his watery death, and united with not only his real self, but his Lord. Baptism is a Christian act which symbolizes a new spiritual birth, as one dies to their old self and is reborn in Christ. This idea of new birth can also be linked to Christ's resurrection and simultaneous triumph over all evil and even death itself. Fish too is able to overcome evil and death through his purification in "the beautiful, the beautiful the river" (178).

For Winton the environment has a spiritual life and force of its own, one which places human concerns within a wider perspective... the water which confines can also open new worlds" 19. The power of the water, as a spiritually charged catalyst for healing, is employed by Winton to convey spirituality through the landscape of his novel Cloudstreet. Winton presents surreal elements in Cloudstreet, as "he seems to be asking us to consider [the spiritual] aspect of life. He is a writer who is trying to keep alive the rumour of God and the rumour that there is hope and meaning to be found" 20.

His characters are "totally affected" by the landscape, which is spiritually embodied by the symbols of Winton's house, Blackfella and water. They are guided to come to terms with the divine presence in their lives. "There is a powerful sense of some extra human force present" 21 which interacts with the characters in their journeys to spiritual discovery and acceptance. Winton essentially suggests that "the burden must be squarely on each person to become obedient to a greater awareness of 'being' in life, and to accept a changing view of God" 22.