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May 8, 2017

Narrating Slave Rebellion

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### Kindling the Fire of the Revolution

Revolutions are characterized by disorder, chaos, and renewed hope. In *The Kingdom of this World* by Alejo Carpentier, Ti Noël, the slave protagonist, observes and experiences the rise, the duration, and the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution. His perspective and the imagery within the novel provide the reader with figures to represent the internal struggles of slaves in a historically fictional world of magical realism. One such figure representing the chaos and the cyclical continuity of the revolution is fire. Fire is both a source of destruction and of creation; thus, from the spark of a fire to the dying embers, fire depicts each stage of the Haitian Revolution from the point of view of the slaves, and with each stage, a new interpretation of fire adds to the progression of the revolution as a continual grapple for freedom.

Fire is hard to control, and like a revolution, once it gains momentum, it is hard to quell it down or suppress it. Unlike other elements such as water or wind, fire is an element that humans have historically successfully and unsuccessfully started and tried to contain as humans have done with revolutions. Therefore, due to the parallels between fire and revolution, the novel uses fire as a timeline to mark how the Haitian revolution is developing, starting with when Ti Noël first meets the witch who eventually reconnects Ti Noël to Macandal after Macandal ran away. Ti Noël's first impression of this witch is associated with her immunity to the harms of fire coming from heat. The witch "took her arms from the oil [of a boiling pot and]

they showed no sign of blister or burn, despite the horrible sputter of frying he had heard a moment before” (25). With this scene, the novel reveals the first interpretation of fire as a source of power. Having the power to control fire garners the power to gain respect, admiration, and the fear of others. These abilities are important to the leadership of any revolution, and similar to how Macandal gained the following of his fellow slaves through their admiration of his herbal powers, Macandal would later continue kindling the revolution through his own defiance to fire. For a slave who did not own anything materialistic that could represent power, such as money or land, Macandal’s transcending human capability through a control of something as uncontrollable as fire, a force of nature, was the only means to gain the necessary power to start a revolution.

Fire is a largely mysterious element that can not only be used for creation but also for destruction. In the case of the witch, the fire created admiration from Ti Noël towards the witch. However, in the next stage of fire in the novel, fire is used for destruction. After Macandal began his spree of poisoning animals and people throughout the plantations, the death count toll increased dramatically, and people had nowhere to put the bodies of their dying animals. Therefore, “great fires were kindled at nightfall, giving off a heavy, oily smoke before dying out among heaps of blackened skulls, charred ribs, hooves reddened by the flames” (33). In this destruction of the bodies, the fire marks the start of the revolution as sparked by Macandal. Moreover, the imagery of carcasses implies that for a revolution to begin, sacrifices must be made and drastic actions must be taken. For example, in the French Revolution, the storming of the Bastille in 1789 fueled the subsequent violence that occurred; similarly, the mass murders of animals and people by poison were necessary to rouse the start

of the Haitian Revolution. This interpretation of fire as a destructor for creation points to fire's ability to transform something that was once alive to mere ashes, drawing a flow from the animate to the inanimate and the irreversible consequences of revolution.

This transformative power of fire is something that Macandal actually harnesses for both his own transformations of animorphism and the transformation of kingdoms in St. Domingo instigated by the revolution. As Macandal gained notoriety throughout St. Domingo for his poison that wreaked havoc on plantation owners, the white slave owners set out on missions to capture him. When they finally did, they attempted to use fire to destroy him, similar to how, historically, people would use fire to burn witches and kill people who used magic. Fire is supposed to be an all-powerful entity that even magic cannot escape; however, Macandal is able to escape destruction by fire because he is the master of that fire. As "the fire began to rise toward the Mandingue, licking his legs" (51), Macandal was able to escape his bonds, "and the noise and screaming and uproar were such that very few saw that Macandal, held by ten soldiers, had been thrust head first into the fire, and that a flame fed by his burning hair had drowned his last cry" (52). First, this stage of fire adds another facet to the fire metaphor for the revolution: resilience. Paying attention to the diction, the fire is very much alive and is personified as something that licks Macandal's legs. After Macandal is recaptured after briefly escaping his bonds, the novel states to the reader that very few people actually saw Macandal burn to death, propagating the slaves' theory that Macandal was more powerful than the fire and could escape death. This power implies that Macandal continues to hold a strong grasp on fire and can command it to not only not hurt him but to also supply him with

the energy to escape death, extending Macandal's control and influence over the Haitian revolution since he cannot be killed.

Contrasting to how fire supported and helped Macandal, the next stage of fire in the novel shows how those on the other side of the revolution, the slave masters, are victims to the fire, and by extension, to the revolution. Henri Christophe, the first King of Haiti, subjects the people of his own color to inhumane treatment. Thus, the revolution sought to abdicating Christophe of his power. As the revolution peaked to overthrow Christophe's oppressive kingdom, the uncontrollable fires were what burned down his plantations, "leaping from house to house, from field to field. A flame shot up from the granary... Fiery ash was falling on the Palace terraces" (148) More importantly, in the scene that Christophe kills himself, the novel provides vivid imagery of how "[a]t that moment the fire lighted up the mirrors of the Palace... the flames were everywhere, and it was impossible to tell which were flames and which reflections" (149), illustrating how quick the revolution had spread and how often times, the revolution was a performance of deception because Christophe ultimately did not know who he could trust and who he could not. Since distrust was toxic to Christophe's ability to be a king, the association of fire with distrust links fire and the revolution to the collapse of Christophe's support circle which was the foundation to his ruling.

Interestingly, the concept of fire destruction and that of rebirth are closely related, and even though fire destroyed Christophe's kingdom, it also gives hope to a new and better kingdom. Before Christophe killed himself, he had a moment of reflection in which he realizes that everyone he had once trusted had betrayed him in the course of the revolution. During his contemplation, Christophe "stopped before the canopy adorned with his coat of arms. Two

crowned lions upheld a shield displaying a crowned phoenix, with a device reading *I rise from my ashes.*" (146) Even when Christophe was admitting to himself that his kingdom was doomed, his coat of arms, the quintessential symbol of a dynasty or kingdom, shows the image of something alive rising from the dead ashes, implying a continuation of structural kingdoms and life beyond destruction. Using fire, the novel paints the picture that even though "Fiery ash was falling on the Palace terraces" (148) as referenced in the previous paragraph, the cycle of kingdoms and revolutions will continue as another kingdom takes the old one's place. This stage of fire goes beyond the revolution metaphor to show that the temporal nature of fire is applicable to the temporal power shifts between kingdom and revolution.

In conclusion, not only is fire hard to control, but it does not want to be controlled; it craves freedom as the slaves crave for their autonomy and freedom in an oppressive sovereign kingdom, the means of which to obtain this freedom being revolution. Marking each stage of the revolution, fire is constantly changing in its meaning and influence and should be analyzed as a separate character within the novel, one that is dynamic and dependent on time. This observation is important because it shows how fire is more than just a natural element. Fire is a source of magic that represents the slaves' anger and need for vengeance, and with this magic comes the power that levels out the initial power imbalance in a master-slave society. With each stage of the fire and appearance within the novel, Macandal progresses in his stages as a revolutionary leader and the revolution gains more traction. However, the stages of the life cycle of fire also represent the rise and fall of kingdoms and revolutions, a cycle that ultimately tries to balance the power between slave and master in search for freedom and humanity. Therefore, the figure of fire suggests that the cycles of kingdoms and revolutions ridden with

human rights abuses and murders may only ever realize the freedom that one seeks in a Utopian world, but even though the platitude recommends that one shouldn't play with fire, one must play with the idea of hope with the initial kindling of the revolution.