

**CHARACTERIZATION AND SYMBOLISM
IN NEIL GUNN'S
THREE HISTORICAL NOVELS:
*SUN CIRCLE, BUTCHER'S BROOM,
AND THE SILVER DARLINGS***

Master's thesis (Mémoire de licence)

submitted by

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FOREWORD

The end of the twentieth century sees a revival in the interest people show in things such as local and universal history, legends and traditions, long forgotten recipes, or natural medicines. The same interest can lead to the study of a writer like Neil Gunn. He is indeed deeply aware of the traditions of his birthplace, and even finds in them a possibility of regeneration for modern man. He is also very close to nature, and attaches great importance to outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing.

I had to make a choice among Neil Gunn's twenty novels. Like most readers, I began with the most famous two: *The Silver Darlings* and *Highland River*. *The Silver Darlings* appealed to me from the start, and I thought it might be interesting to study it in relation to two other novels of Gunn's: *Sun Circle* and *Butcher's Broom*. This would allow me a deeper insight into the writer's purpose and way of writing. My choice was influenced by the critical writings of Francis Russell Hart, who groups them as "three ambitious earlier narratives, broadly historical and densely documented"¹. They have in common the fact of being the writer's only historical novels and belonging to his early period of writing.

Characterization and symbolism are two subjects in which Gunn's originality can best be shown. The two main parts of this study are devoted to them. The aspects considered within each part were chosen according to their importance in the novels, and this study does not in any way claim to be exhaustive.

¹ Francis Russell Hart, „Beyond History and Tragedy, Neil Gunn's Early Fiction“, in: David Morrison (ed.), *Essays on Gunn*, Thurso: Caithness Books 1971, p. 61.

INTRODUCTION

Neil Gunn's life

Neil Miller Gunn was born in Dunbeath, Caithness, on November 8th, 1891, the son of a crofter-fisherman. During the first thirteen years of his life, he spent a lot of time wandering on his own, hunting, or fishing, which he greatly enjoyed. This experience of nature and freedom comes out in most of his books. He then went to live with his sister in Galloway, and his education fell under the responsibility of a private tutor, a great admirer of Lord Tennyson. At the age of fifteen, on his own initiative, Gunn sat the Civil Service examination, succeeded, and got his first job as a clerk in London. There, he discovered socialism, and began to read the scientific writings of Huxley, Darwin and Haeckel. After two years, he was sent to Edinburgh, and passed the Higher Examination for permanent employment in the Customs and Excise Service. Between 1911 and 1921, he was assigned to various temporary posts in the Highlands. He enjoyed these years as a period of great freedom. During World War I, he was in charge of routing ships across minefields. After the war, he worked for various distilleries. In 1921, he married Daisy Frew. They did not have any children, but they lived happily together until her death in 1963. Gunn was transferred to a station in Lybster, a few miles north of Dunbeath, and in 1923 to Inverness.

In the 1920's, he published short stories in various British magazines. While working in Inverness, he began to write novels in his spare time. His second novel, *Morning Tide* (1931), was chosen by the London Book Society as their Book of the Month. His next successful novel, *Highland River* (1937), won the James Tait Black Prize. At that time, Gunn became involved in Scottish nationalist politics, acting as a conciliator between the divergent views. Politically, Gunn defines himself as a "natural anarchist"².

In 1937, he decided to leave his Civil Service job in order to devote himself entirely to writing. His new life started with a journey with his wife on a small fishing boat, which he describes in his book *Off in a Boat*³. For a few weeks, he enjoyed complete freedom. They then rented a farmhouse near Brae, in a very isolated setting. Every morning, Gunn would set

² Quoted in Alexander Scott & Douglas Gifford (eds.), *Gunn: The Man and the Writer*, Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood 1973, p. 41.

³ Published in 1938.

to work for a few hours. After lunch, he would go for a walk with his wife. In the evening, he would read. In 1948, the Gunns left Brae and, after moving several times, settled in Kerrow in 1950. There, Gunn developed an interest for Japanese art and poetry, as well as for the work of Ouspensky, a Russian esoteric, in whose writings he recognized some of his own beliefs.⁴

In 1956, as his autobiographical book *The Atom of Delight* remained more or less ignored by both public and critics, he decided to stop writing novels. The 1960's were years of serious illnesses for the Gunns, with intervals of fishing trips and holidays, especially in Southern Europe. At that time, Gunn was fully recognized as a writer. He died on January 15th, 1973.

His birthplace

Neil Gunn's childhood in Caithness left a deep impression on him. Caithness is a county in the north-eastern end of Scotland. There, the landscape is amazingly smooth, with rolling hills. All the villages are along the coast, whereas the inland areas seem to be deserted. Today, Dunbeath consists of just a few houses, scattered in three main groups. There is about half a mile between the post-office and the "main part", where one has to go downhill and cross a river. The landscape is dominated by two elements: the sea – wild, desolate, with dark cliffs inhabited by all sorts of gulls – and the land, green and gentle, but empty and lonely as well, with ruined cottages.

Living in this area, the boy Neil had the opportunity to be "off and away"⁵ whenever it pleased him. This brought him very close to nature. The human milieu in which he grew up is that of a small community, where people know each another, help one another, where the possibilities of going astray morally seem to be limited, and where evil seems to be non-existent – altogether a kind of sheltered, protected milieu. Highlanders are said to be dreamy, more inclined to sing or tell stories than to deal with technical things, to theorize about something disturbing rather than consider it practically.

⁴ Peter Demianovitch Ouspensky (1878–1947), a Russian philosopher and mystic, is the author of *In Search of the Miraculous*. In this book he tells how, as a journalist, he travelled through Egypt, Ceylon and India in 1914, looking for another reality beyond the "false reality" that people commonly perceive. The "miraculous" was for him the penetration of this other reality. When he came back from his journey, he made the acquaintance of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, the founder of a spiritual school in Moscow. Through the teachings of Gurdjieff, Ouspensky came to know himself and discovered his permanent Self. Among other influences on Gunn, one can list: William Wordsworth, Marcel Proust, Carl-Gustav Jung and Zen Buddhism.

⁵ These are key words for the boy in Gunn's autobiography, *The Atom of Delight* (1956).

Impressions of Dunbeath (summer 1985)



First sight of the village



In the middle: Gunn's birth house



Dunbeath Water



View of the seashore

Neil Gunn's place in Scottish fiction

The novel in Scotland started about a century later than in England. Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, a first group of novelists, called the "Blackwoodians" from an Edinburgh magazine, wrote in the manner of Gothic romances. Eminent among those is Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), whose early novels belong to this period. Scott is also the father of the historical novel, and history plays a special part in Scottish fiction: the Scots seem to be very much interested in history, and their heroic past, in particular, is used to feed a certain nationalism, which is omnipresent in Scotland.

The Victorian period saw the rise of the "Kailyard"⁶ novelists (1880's). They wrote pastoral idylls, influenced by Wordsworthian Romanticism. This movement had its counter-reaction, or "Anti-Kailyardism", whose writings were more realistic and more critical. Their best representative is George Douglas Brown's *The House with the green shutters* (1901).

Scottish novelists seem to have always been attracted by romance. This may be because their national feeling could never attach itself to any actual nationhood, and ideal never coincided with fact. The result of this is an ambiguous attitude, where historical fiction can coexist and mingle with romance, where history is seen as both attractive and repulsive. Neil Gunn himself wrote about the subject: "The Scots are pretty good at history, which, perhaps, is why most of them mistrust it. For it is full of facts, most of them ugly."⁷

The Scottish romance-writers seem not to have been influenced by the development of the social-psychological novel in England. The position of the Scottish novelist is more like that of a traditional story-teller, who establishes history as a shared property of the collective imagination to which it belongs. This romance-writing has lasted well into the twentieth century.

The late 1920's saw the beginning of what is known as "the Scottish Renaissance", under the leadership of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid. It involves all the great writers of that time, like Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Neil Gunn, Eric Linklater, Naomi Mitchison, Edwin Muir and Willa Muir. They all share certain beliefs: they see what occurred in the last thousand years of Scottish political and social history as mainly bad for Scotland. Politically, they show a left-wing and nationalist bias. They believe in a regenerative "Golden Age" myth. They use local

⁶ „Kailyard school, from 'Kail-yard', a cabbage patch such as is commonly attached to a small cottage, a term applied to writers of a class of romantic fiction, affecting to describe, with much use of the vernacular, common life in Scotland" (*The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Fourth Edition, 1975).

⁷ *Off in a Boat*, p. 179.

legend and folklore, as well as dream and the supernatural, in a subtle and complex way. The novel was then a well-liked form of expression because it suited the creation of national epic or myth (cf. George Blake, Compton Mackenzie or Lewis Grassie Gibbon). Some writers also turned to archaic recreation, like Naomi Mitchison or Neil Gunn in *Sun Circle*.

According to Francis Russell Hart⁸, there are three groups of motifs which recur in Scottish fiction: history, community and character. This is also true of Gunn's fiction. He is considered as one of the greatest twentieth-century Scottish writers, often compared with Lewis Grassie Gibbon, the author of the trilogy *A Scots Quair* (1932–1934). They both wrote outstanding, unique novels.

Neil Gunn's novels

The titles of Gunn's first and last novels, *The Grey Coast* (1926) and *The Other Landscape* (1954), seem to point to a dominant concern with the Highlands. But the notion of landscape changes and broadens considerably from one work to the other. The earlier novels, up to World War II, are mainly concerned with Highland life, whereas the later novels deal with more general themes, contemporary matters and questions, and philosophical views. Gunn's novels can be grouped in the following way: *The Grey Coast*, *The Lost Glen* (1928) and *Second Sight* (1940) are about the contemporary situation of the Highlands, their economic depression, depopulation, and social decay consequent to the loss of traditional ways of life. *Morning Tide* (1930), *Highland River* (1937) and *Young Art and Old Hector* (1942) are novels of boyhood, dealing with the development of individual visionary boys. *The Serpent* (1943) and *The Drinking Well* (1946) are extensions of Highland boyhood into critiques of Highland culture and economy. *Sun Circle* (1933), *Butcher's Broom* (1934) and *The Silver Darlings* (1941) are historical novels, in that they are set in a non-contemporary Highland background. *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (1944) is an anti-utopian parable, in which Gunn's themes are expanded and displaced into the urgencies of a mid-twentieth-century world. *Wild Geese Overhead* (1939) is about physical and intellectual violence in a modern setting, and prefigures the later books of violence, *The Shadow* (1948), *Blood Hunt* (1952), *The Key of the Chest* (1945) and *The Lost Chart* (1949); these novels all show the murderous side of modern world, the latter two making use of popular plot motifs. Finally, *The Silver Bough* (1948), *The Well at the World's End* (1951) and *The Other Landscape* (1954) are

⁸ Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel*, London: Murray 1977, p. 400.

about an aging modern intellectual's quest for his own renewal, placed in a primordial and atavistic setting. The eight post-war novels can be said to be more universal in their appeal, more mature philosophically, with a touch of mystical preoccupation that may irritate some readers.

Characteristics of Gunn's early novels

The environment in which Neil Gunn grew up appears in most of his early novels. *Sun Circle*, *Butcher's Broom* and *The Silver Darlings* are all set in a place not unlike Dunbeath. There is definitely a regional element in these novels, which show the particularities of a landscape that can easily be identified as Scottish. Whole passages deal with how various characters perceive this landscape, with its distinctive plants, animals, or weather. This environment can act on the characters' mood. The universe described is not man-centred, but it is animated by various forces. Dark forces are showing to be active inside the characters, but also outside, for example in the wilderness or at sea.

The stories are usually about some young characters and their daily experiences with others, and on their own. In the course of the novels they learn something about life, such as the two classical truths of love and death. Therefore, these novels can be called *Bildungsromane*.

The novels feature small communities, with characters who are defined not only as individuals, but also in relation to their family and the people of their village. There are many secondary characters, who matter because of their function in the community.

As far as style is concerned, the prose has a symbolic quality, far remote from nineteenth-century realism. A lot of dialogues have an exemplary character, picturing scenes of daily life. They do not usually have a dramatic function in the plot, but can bring humorous relief to the narration. Some characters have an inclination for story-telling, others for making speeches or preaching. Therefore, some characters can occasionally be said to convey the author's philosophy of life.

Gunn's language contains quite a few Scottish words, and the influence of Gaelic appears in its rhythm and in certain turns of phrases.⁹

Treatment of history

The three novels studied here all portray a Scottish community at a time of transition resulting from historical causes.

Sun Circle is about a Pictish village in the ninth century. The characters are discovering the Christian religion, and their traditional values are decaying. At the same time, they experience raids by the Northmen. In this particular case, the community's whole organization is destroyed through the loss of its leaders. This novel is an attempt at archaic revival, such as can be found in the novels of another Scottish writer, Naomi Mitchison.¹⁰

Butcher's Broom deals with the Highland Clearances, perhaps the most bitter tragedy in Scottish history and a subject that inspired several novelists.¹¹ The Clearances can be defined thus:

The reorganisation of Highland estates, mainly in the first half of the nineteenth century, involved an expansion of sheep farming, and the consequent removal of tenants from their previous holdings, mostly to other holdings elsewhere on the estates.¹²

The Highland Clearances are seen by Scottish people as a tragic episode, involving treason on the part of the landlords, violence in the process itself – as is well exemplified in *Butcher's Broom* –, the contempt of anglicized people for a way of life they thought to be uncivilized, and, finally, its destruction. Crofters were evicted to give place to sheep, and had either to make a living in the barren setting of the coast, or to emigrate. The process extended over many years. In *Butcher's Broom*, there are several allusions to the Napoleonic wars, the first being about Napoleon's landing in Fréjus on October 9th, 1799 [cf. BB¹³, p. 21]. The timespan of the book is about fourteen years, ending in 1813.

⁹ For indications about the influence of Gaelic on Gunn's style see: Tokusaburo Nakamura, "Neil M. Gunn: A spiritual survey", in: *Studies in Scottish Literature* 12 (1974–75), pp. 79–91.

¹⁰ Born in Edinburgh in 1897, she wrote, among other books, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1930).

¹¹ For example Fionn MacColla, *And the Cock Crew* (1945), and Iain Crichton Smith, *Consider the Lilies* (1968). F. R. Hart devotes a whole chapter of *The Scottish Novel* (London: Murray 1977) to the Highland Clearances (pp. 325–335).

¹² Gordon Donaldson & Robert S. Morpeth, *A Dictionary of Scottish History*, Edinburgh: John Donald Publ. 1977.

¹³ Following abbreviations are used from here on:

SC for *Sun Circle* (the page numbers refer to the Souvenir Press edition of 1983);

The Silver Darlings is about the herring boom in the North Sea and the changes brought by this new wealth to the very people who had been driven away by the Clearances. Therefore, the characters portrayed in this book can be seen as the children of the characters of *Butcher's Broom*. Chapter IV, which is a flashback of two years in the plot, is set in 1815: "Waterloo was still a few weeks ahead" [SD, p. 71]. The book ends when the main character, Finn, is twenty, i.e. in 1837. Herring fishing flourished in the North Sea for about a century, and reached its peak in the 1830's.

None of these novels is historical in the classical, Lukácsian¹⁴ sense. In contrast to authors like Tolstoy, Gunn was not interested in presenting the universal process of history, or in explaining the development of a whole age. He rather tried to recreate the way people lived and thought at a certain time and place. These people have become affected by a brutal change in their external circumstances. Gunn shows how they cope with it and how they manage to survive – mostly whole and happy – thanks to deeply-rooted traditional values.

Interestingly, the treatment of history is inseparable from the narrative technique used. As historical elements are often part of the background, a special consideration will be made of the way this background is presented in the three novels.

Very little is known about the historical context of *Sun Circle*. There exist no written records to which one could refer oneself; all one knows is through archaeological research. Therefore, the novel does not make any precise reference to dates, places, kings, etc. The author could therefore work with great freedom from the material he had. He could give free rein to his imagination, in combination with his notions and ideas about the primitive mind. Significantly, the action in *Sun Circle* is presented through the characters' different points of view.

The Highland Clearances in *Butcher's Broom* is a much more precisely defined subject, about which a lot of information is available, from oral and written sources. The narrative technique, here, is that of the omniscient narrator, whose point of view is contemporary with the time of writing. The focus shifts frequently from the village of the Riasgan to the decision-makers in London, or to the general situation of Europe. This is achieved by presenting characters of different status, e.g. landlords, factors, and tenants, living in different places. Napoleon is often mentioned in the book. So is the landowner called "the Great Lady", who lives in

BB for *Butcher's Broom* (Souvenir Press 1977);

SD for *The Silver Darlings* (Faber and Faber 1969).

¹⁴ Cf. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, London: Merlin Press 1962.

London and does not know much about her clansmen. The factor of her estate is called Heller, and he is not unlike Patrick Sellar, the historic factor of the Sutherland estates. A big tenant, Captain Grant, is shown as caught between the London people and the small crofters, despised by both and belonging to neither. *Butcher's Broom* is Gunn's novel with the largest historical perspective.

According to its author, *The Silver Darlings* is the most densely documented book. In it, there are two definitely central characters, Finn and his mother Catrine, and their points of view prevail in the novel. Therefore, informative passages are always subtly linked with the main current of the action, following, for example, the meeting of two characters, or one character's coming to a place. As in *Butcher's Broom*, a lot of information is conveyed through the conversations between the different characters. The events that are emphasized are those related to the herring boom on Scotland's north-eastern coast, a limited geographical area. It seems that the author was not interested in showing, for example, the technical development of the fishing industry. His emphasis lies rather on how people are affected by these changes, in their way of life and their manner of thinking.

PART ONE

CHARACTERIZATION

Introduction

Characters are a fundamental element in any novel. Indeed, very often, the characters involved in a book determine the type of the novel, as is the case with psychological novels, social novels, *Künstler-* or *Bildungsromane*. The interest aroused by Gunn's characters is not primarily a psychological one. His characters are not neurotics, ambitious people, or bored aristocrats, but just plain "normal" human beings, with their own personalities and problems. The interest they arouse is not primarily anthropological either, although most of the characters described do definitely belong to Caithness. The issues and problems they face in the novels originate from both personal and historical circumstances. The reader sees them live, work, love, die, and is sometimes allowed a glimpse into their subconscious. The characters are defined as individuals in relationship to a community, in which they have a part to play and which can sustain them in moments of distress. Furthermore, in the course of the novels, some of them acquire a special meaning, becoming archetypes of the human race. These two levels will form the two chapters of Part one.

CHAPTER 1: CHARACTERS AS INDIVIDUALS

Although the characters differ from novel to novel, it will be interesting to group under the following headings: old women and men / mature men / girls and young women / boys and young men / the community. The similarities thus highlighted will be relevant for the study of archetypes in Chapter 2. A choice had to be made among the three novels' numerous characters, and some were arbitrarily dropped.

A) Old women and old men

Old people are important for Neil Gunn because they are the receptacles of knowledge, wisdom and tradition. Therefore, the novels contain some very interesting and well-depicted old men and women. The knowledge each sex possesses is not quite the same – the men being rather versed in poetry and instrumental music, the women in practical skills and songs.

Grannybeg, a secondary character in *Sun Circle*, knows everything about a woman's body and provides the girls with information according to their needs. Her knowledge reaches back into long forgotten times:

This old woman could cast their fortunes and tell them strange stories, and use words of the old forgotten language in referring to certain parts of the body and to acts of love and generation. [SC, p. 63]

Her body also takes primitive attitudes, as if responding to the rhythm of her words:

When they peered at Grannybeg again, her wizened old body was doubled and slightly swaying. [...] Then Grannybeg's voice caught the high inflection as she intoned, "How should I know? How should I know?" [SC, p. 65]

Kirsty, in *The Silver Darlings*, is a different type of old woman, more modern, with nothing primitive about her. Her knowledge consists of family history and genealogy. Like Dark Mairi in *Butcher's Broom*, she is very keen on asking questions about everybody and in talking for hours. In that, she may be seen as a typical Highland character. Like many secondary characters in Gunn's novels, she is first described in one sentence, which summarizes her personality:

[Her eyes] were grey, keen, and searching, for Kirsty was a practical woman, given indeed at times to a precision of manner that many thought hard and unsympathetic. [SD, p. 63]

Her rather hard outlook hides a generous heart, which appears, for example, when she first welcomes Catrine, and later on her deathbed. She remains the same throughout the book, acting sometimes as a mediator between Catrine and Finn. She does not have the same kind of emotional involvement as Catrine with the sea, and her most important function in the economy of the novel is that she releases Finn from the interdiction of the sea, by telling his mother:

“You’ll never keep that boy from the sea. If you wish him well, don’t try. [...] More ugly deaths on this land now than ever on sea. If you put boy against his nature, you’ll warp him. Remember that.” [SD, p. 239]

Because of the position she holds in *Butcher’s Broom*, **Dark Mairi** can be considered as one of the novel’s main characters. But there is something disturbing about her as a heroine because of her primitive qualities. The fact that the narrator does not reveal how her mind works and the high degree of symbolism about her make it difficult to grasp her as a very convincing character. Moreover, she does not undergo any evolution in the course of the novel, due to her very nature and to her age.

She was rather like a little woman from the hills, from any of the small inland glens, and her kind was not uncommon even in townships near the sea. Only Mairi seemed to have in her an older knowledge than was common to the rest of her ancient kind in these places. [BB, p. 11]

Dark Mairi was like a bit of the earth that was given hands and eyes; that took from the earth and the edges of the sea healing weeds and herbs; Dark Mairi of the Shore. No one thought of her as a witch, yet there was an odd half-hinted, half-jocular conception of her as a being that went in and out of the earth, as a dark sea-beast can go out and in the caves of the ocean. Her shadow was sometimes seen when she wasn’t there herself; and often her still face frightened boys in the wood. [BB, p. 150]

This portrait technique is often used in *Butcher’s Broom*. Dark Mairi is always described in the same attitudes, for example “staring mindlessly” [BB, p. 390]. Much emphasis is put on her capacity to endure. There is an unfeeling air about her that irritates the other characters:

There was no easy response there, rather a hart remoteness, cool and strong like a stone, or like a bit of the earth one had loved. [ibid.]

She cannot pour out her feelings, and always talks in short, direct sentences. Her mind is not rational. She has an “unthinking self” [BB, p. 9], and “apart from what she was unthinkingly she was very little” (ibid.). Like some of Gunn’s visionary characters, she knows about things which are going to happen. She guesses, for example, that Elie is pregnant. And she knows that the Clearances will take place:

There was no doubt now in Mairi's mind. They had been forewarned of this, and though they had not believed somehow that it would happen to them, yet now lo! it was happening. [BB, p. 325]

Her knowledge is precious to the community. She knows about herbs and medicines. She goes on errands to heal people, and she does people good by making them talk. She is even able to prepare a philtre that can cure Elie's new sterility, having the same kind of knowledge as Grannybeg. She also has a few traits of Kirsty, being very keen on news and having a sense of hospitality. Her practical sense never abandons her. For example, just after the Clearances, she has the presence of mind to collect the oatmeal that had been spilled as her chest was thrown into the river.

She bears in herself a treasure of legends, songs, rhymes and rhythmic chants which come from very old times. These have a soothing effect on the people who listen to them, making them aware of the universality of the human condition. Her voice has a primitive quality, monotonous and high-pitched, producing a "nasal reedy sound" [BB, p. 60]. As a character, she would not be out of place in the universe of *Sun Circle*.

A few traits can be added in order to show her as a more convincing, human, character. Money, for example, does not really matter to her, and she looks at Anna's coins as a child would, fascinated by their glittering aspect: "'They are pretty to look at,' she said with her thin smile, and made to give them back" [BB, p. 232]. One thing she cannot understand at all is that a tinker woman was able to steal Elie's money. Her knowledge of human kind is baffled by this intrusion of evil. She also shows her human side when she gets cross with her grandson Davie for being out late or for having a good laugh with Elie. And she feels comforted by his concern for her when he tells her in the dark "Watch your feet there" [BB, p. 59].

In two of Gunn's novels, *Young Art and Old Hector* and *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, an old man is a central character. This is not the case in any of the three novels considered here, although the old men's role remains the same in all books: they are ceilidh-masters¹⁵ and story-tellers and, in the course of the novels, they transmit their knowledge, which is very ancient, to the young characters. In *The Silver Darlings*, the **drover** at Dale and **Finn-son-of-Angus** in North Uist recognize the hero as the inheritor, incarnation and informant of legend.

¹⁵ A ceilidh is an informal gathering of people, with songs, music, dances and story-telling.

Physically, the old men are often small and have lively faces and eyes. These two portraits of **Old Angus** and an **old man in Lewis** are rather similar:

Angus was a small man, neat in his hands and clean in his person. His face had a natural simplicity and kindness, caught up by a twinkling cunning of expression in the eyes, that looked for fun round the corner. [BB, p. 55]

Finn recognized at once that it was a regular ceilidh-house, for the man had little peculiar mannerisms, the eyes of a boy, a tongue for anything that was going, and if it was fun he was happy. [SD, p. 398]

These old men's qualities are their understanding of the young and their generosity. Old Angus is more developed as a character than the old men in *The Silver Darlings*. He also appears as an inventor, and later as a man who has been broken by the Clearances. He loses his *joie de vivre* and begins to think about his death:

"I'm old, Kirsteen. That's all that's wrong with me. Maybe I wouldn't have noticed my age and one day I might have slipped away from you; but you see we are now to be driven away and I realise that I'm done." [BB, p. 348]

In *Sun Circle*, **the Master** and the Christian missionary **Molrua** have the function of instructors. They appear mainly as conveyors of ideas, and little emphasis is placed on their personality, although the Master once shows his affection for his disciple Aniel.

B) Mature men

This category of person may be the least important in the three novels. The figure of the father is almost absent in *The Silver Darlings*, which could be an interesting subject for psychoanalysts. The men described in *Sun Circle* are warriors, who argue, have fun, fight and... die during the Viking invasion. None of them is a developed character. In *Butcher's Broom*, there is no man in Mairi's household. This absence of the men, who are soldiers abroad, is one of the components of the Clearances. The only man who is slightly interesting as a character is **Rob the Miller**, who appears as a sexually frustrated and at times violent man, the latter characteristic being shared by **Roddie** in *The Silver Darlings*. In this novel, there are several men in the background, for example the members of Roddie's crew. They do not have any special function in the novel apart from being an entertaining lot, each of them being nicely differentiated. **Tormad** is important because of his function in the meaning of the novel – he stands for the first generation of fishermen – and because of his place in Catrine's heart. But he can hardly

be said to belong to the category of mature men, for there is something immature about him, a youthful, playful innocence.

The only mature man developed as a character is **Roddie**. Physically, he looks like a Viking:

He was twenty-five, fair, with blue eyes and tiny reddish freckles on the backs of his hands and here and there on his face. His expression was pleasant, slightly aloof perhaps and critical, but friendly. [SD, p. 58]

He was chosen by Hendry to sail his boat because of his outstanding qualities: “You are a real seaman and the best of the young men” [SD, p. 73]. All through the book, he appears as a very skilful skipper.

Roddie’s most characteristic feature is his repressed violence, the sign of which appears on his face in a “narrowing of the eyes” [e.g. SD, p. 76]. “There was an inexorable quality in his quiet voice, a restraint that suggested a terrible strength, a strength balked and turned in on itself” [SD, p 235]. At the same time, Roddie is proud and susceptible. When his susceptibility is kindled, all the violence that was under pressure explodes.

Although the reader hardly has a glimpse into Roddie’s consciousness – he is usually presented from an external point of view –, he is interesting because of the complexity of his feelings towards Finn and Catrine. When Finn is a child, Roddie is at the same time a big brother and a father substitute to him. There is a fellowship between them, and Roddie is also a model for Finn. Their first conflict breaks out when Finn wants to climb the cliff of the Seven Hunters. One may assume that Roddie’s attitude is prompted by the fear that something might happen to Finn, whom he likes very much, and because of Catrine, who he is in love with. By and by, an atmosphere of rivalry gathers around Roddie and Finn, for they are equally strong and gifted, and have passionate feelings for the same woman. Their fellowship is finally restored after they have successfully faced together several hardships at sea.

Roddie’s love for Catrine is made of devotion and a chivalric, courteous attitude, which is hard to believe for what is known of his temperament. He is a familiar of Catrine’s household and a reliable friend to her. For years, he does not declare his love, but Catrine is aware of it through his attitude. The narrator shows Roddie’s love through impressions such as: “Her eyes were so bright, with such a warmth in her face, that his tiredness went over him in a soft wave” [SD, p. 131]. To Finn, there is something unclear and impenetrable about Roddie: “His pleasantness was a mask, the sort of mask one did not try to penetrate” [SD, p. 395]. Even

Catrine “was never sure of Roddie” [SD, p. 464]. As a human being, Roddie is still incomplete.

He waits until he is sure about Tormad’s death and Catrine is psychologically ready for him, and then takes her violently in his arms. After their marriage, he goes out less often to sea and gets absorbed in his home life. “His marriage had had a deep effect upon him, far deeper than ever he had conceived possible” [SD, p. 503]. But this change is not really developed in the novel. The reader sees Roddie as gentle and patient during the rescue of Duncan – but he could also be very gentle before. He is shown with his little baby in his arms, but he also played with Finn at the beginning of the book. The last image the reader gets of him is one of happiness and paternal bliss.

C) Girls and young women

There are many more young women than old ones in Gunn’s novels. Young people are of special interest to a novelist, since they are very likely to change and go through all the emotions of love, for example. Little girls, young girls and mothers will be considered here.

It will seem obvious to the reader that the main characters of *Sun Circle* are Aniel and Breeta. But **Nessa** is important, too, in that she represents a temptation – or at least an alternative – to Aniel. She is eighteen and the chief’s daughter, therefore of a high social position. Her mother is a Christian and a foreigner, and Nessa is quite different from the other girls of the community. Encountering her is “like coming against a brighter light than the sight was accustomed to, light gathered in a girl with eyes sky-blue and wanton-quick and imperious” [SC, p. 38]. With her friend Breeta, she is often in a playful, defiant mood. She looks and acts as a queen. Her boredom draws her to Aniel. She becomes really interesting when she meets Haakon, experiencing love at first sight and a real physical attraction. She is then able to leave aside all moral principles and give herself to an enemy. Nothing more counts apart from the man she loves. Her appearance and queenly attitude match Haakon’s. Interestingly, the whole scene of their meeting is seen from the point of view of Sweyn, an old misogynist, in whose eyes Nessa is a wanton woman. She is the most passionate of Gunn’s heroines, as is evident when Haakon is wounded: “A cry came out of her, and, body swelling upward, fists rising, she swept upon Rasg” [SC, p. 335]. Later, when she has recovered her senses, she makes use of her charm in order to induce Aniel to betrayal, so that her lover might be saved.

Physically, **Breeta** is the opposite of Nessa.¹⁶ When she first appears in the book, “the shadows of the outer birch leaves fleck her ardent sun-brown face, as the dark eyes dart and flash” [SC, p. 11]. She is small and dark, a Pictish type. Although she is already nineteen, she appears as a young girl, whose woman’s body is just awakening. The searching hands and mouth of the baby she is looking after leave her troubled.

She discovers in herself that she is not indifferent to Aniel. He haunts her thoughts, and she gets pale at the mention of his name. At first, she is frightened by him, for he not only represents to her the unknown world of man, but he is also the Master’s disciple, someone in touch with the “dark forces”, which he even tries to defy by making representations of them. Breeta also feels attracted to Leu, whose pipe has an enchanting power. From the moment she appears in the book, she goes through all kinds of emotions, caused by her meeting with the Master and then Aniel, the rumour of the Vikings’ landing, Grannybeg’s stories, Leu’s music, and the terrifying wilderness. The sum of these leaves her in a state of elation and physical excitement, so that she feels ready to surrender to the embrace of a figure in the dark. Breeta was born in the wilderness and, in some way, belongs to it:

She, Breeta, had always feared the forest and the moor places, but she knew, too, that in desperation she could give herself to them – whatever that might mean of terror in the beginning. [SC, p. 149]

When she meets Aniel, just after he has saved her from the Viking, she can at last feel at ease with him, because he has lost all mannerism and shyness. Their love can flow freely and be consummated.

The next important moment for Breeta is the one preceding her would-be sacrifice. She finds it impossible to rebel, and her love is mixed with religious feelings for the same man: “Their priest; *her priest*” [SC, p. 261–262]. As she accepts her fate, she is able to transcend herself and see herself as the bearer of her people’s hopes: “She was now not herself but someone else; or, rather, she was herself in a legend” [SC, p. 262]. Her life will be saved by the fire. From then on, her role in the book becomes less central.

If Nessa is the most passionate, **Elie**, in *Butcher’s Broom*, is the most loving of Gunn’s heroines. She is made for loving and, because of that, she will be doomed. Her body is all softness and mellowness:

¹⁶ The fair vs. Dark opposition is developed in Part Two, under the headline „light“.

Elie's breasts were soft and full; her shoulders tilted upward or drooped, her body had a flowing movement that would come at one with an intimate wheedling voice wanting the fun of breaking away into pieces of teased laughter. [BB, pp. 25–26]

At the mere thought that Colin might come to their meeting-place, “an odd expectancy and excitement beset her” [BB, p. 81]. Their love is perfect, until Colin announces her his departure. Then, she has something like premonitory tears. But she loves him so much that she is able to understand him: “He would *like* to go. The deep craving in a boy's breast to do what other boys are doing” [BB, p. 95]. She does not protest. Her crying is resigned.

When she comes back from the South, her face does still look soft behind her misery, and she has to become completely tough. The warmth of the inhabitants of the Riasgan gives her back some confidence. When she meets Rob, “her joints eased and melted” [BB, p. 196]. Every man, even the youth Davie, craves for her body. Because of that, “she was certain she carried a curse” [BB, p. 239]. She becomes detached from herself, possibly “beyond disappointment” [BB, p. 200].

The next stage is her married life with Rob. She lets “herself fall away into complete self-abnegation” [BB, p. 319]. Her husband gets estranged from her, because she cannot give him a child. She becomes more and more introspective. At the end, the reader sees her talking cheerfully to her old pal Seonaid, but something has definitely been broken in her:

Elie's health had improved and in many ways there was about her a quiet happiness, often a deep tenderness, but it seemed to have no centre, no core. [BB, p. 422]

Una, the girl Finn falls in love with in *The Silver Darlings*, is a very shadowy figure. The reader never knows about her own feelings, whether she prefers Finn or the clerk Jim. She is always seen through Finn's eyes. From the start, he is fascinated by her: “To Finn, her clear face seemed so vivid, so unusual, that he wondered how others did not want to stare at her” [SD, p. 184]. She always haunts his thoughts and dreams at sea:

It faded before it had quite formed, into the loneliness of himself, the secret companionship of himself with himself, where no-one intrudes – except... and there were her dark eyes and the dark hair shadowing the white neck. (ibid.)

At the end, she is ready for Finn: “She struggled against showing what he would find in her face. But he found it and the world went blind against her mouth” [SD, p. 568].

This underdevelopment in the characterization may appear as a fault in the book, all the more so as other girls are presented in a very convincing way. Finn's cousin **Barbara**, for

example, is vividly present when they go together to Helmsdale. They have established between themselves a kind of brother-and-sister relationship, where teasing plays a great part:

“You think I’m silly,” she said.
 “No, I don’t,” declared Finn. “Honestly”.
 “You’re a great ass,” she said, with emphasis.
 He laughed, delighted. “That’s better!” [SD, p. 439]

The Silver Darlings starts with the story of **Catrine**, and, at the beginning of the novel, her point of view is predominant, so the reader gets to know her quite well. She is first described as a young, newly married wife, always running and laughing, and violently in love with her husband Tormad. She has fair hair, “of that even fairness that would not draw a second glance” [SD, p. 51], and brown eyes that are “her loveliest feature” [SD, p. 15]. Her appearance does not change much in the course of the novel:

Catrine was now thirty-eight, a fully-developed woman, her shoulders rounded and firm, her chest deep, her face more full than it had been in the old days but with the eyes still large and the mouth red. The texture of her fair skin retained much of the smoothness of youth, of girlhood. [SD, p. 458]

She has premonitory dreams that warn her about the catastrophes which will happen to the ones she loves. Her passion bursts out when she takes leave of Tormad on their last night. Afterwards, she is able to keep her grief within herself, assuming a grave and calm appearance. Her decision to leave her house shows her determination and courage, which will also become visible when the plague comes. At that time, she refuses to see anybody, but her practical sense gives her the idea of flag signals. When it is all over, her laughter, which is so natural to her, is heard again.

One of the only things that frighten her is the sea. This element is completely strange to her, and she sees it as a man-eating beast, which took first her uncle and then her husband. She herself is totally at ease with the land and belongs to it. As a young mother, Catrine is very close to her son Finn:

There were passages of communion between them when she felt the very texture and essence of this little boy, who was her son, in moments of indescribable ecstasy. [SD, p. 115]

She answers his questions patiently and forgives him for being so adventurous and upsetting her. Her son will be drawn away from her because of Roddie, which she has difficulties to accept:

Finn was jealous of Roddie; and Roddie was intolerant of Finn. Because of her! Her heart began to beat in an extremely agitated way, accompanied by an emotion of outrage, such as had never before touched her. [SD, p. 475]

She suffers under the situation, but cannot help it. After her second marriage, she talks to Finn in a very formal way, “as if he were a stranger” [SD, p. 560]. She is moved by his presents, but their old intimacy is for ever broken.

There are three different stages in her life. The first one lasts until her arrival at Kirsty’s house. Even though they are married, she and Tormad still consider themselves as children. Then she realizes that something has changed:

Suddenly Catrine knew that an end had come to the vision of her running childhood that she now saw in her mind as if it were far outside. [SD, p. 64]

The second stage is when her life runs parallel to Roddie’s, and lasts up to the moment when Ronnie, Tormad’s old companion, confirms Tormad’s death. Catrine knows at once that her relationship to Roddie is going to take a definite turn, after years of irresolution:

Suddenly her thought accepted the full meaning; this was the end of another chapter in her life. [SD, p. 465]

From the start, she has felt attracted by his handsomeness, his kindness, and the feeling of security his strength gave her. “Roddie was strong and reasonable” [SD, p. 229]. She desires him, and yet she is afraid of putting an end to her tranquillity. “She did not know what she wanted” [SD, p. 230]. The complexity of her feelings is well shown by the reported thought device. “She could not read Roddie; she had no certainty about him” [SD, p. 474] – also because he belongs to the sea. At last, she willingly gives in to his strength, and they become lovers:

In the crush of his arms, she felt herself fainting, and lifted her hands and gripped him behind the neck. [SD, p. 478]

The character of Catrine becomes even more convincing with the rendering of some typical attitudes, such as her urge to do the housework:

It was suddenly both intimate and vacant, and over her came an urgent impulse to work. Chairs and stools she whisked aside; the beds were stripped and armfuls of blankets spread to the sun; everything was shifted or taken down, until the whole household was in an uproar. [SD, p. 457]

As she is left alone, she becomes aware of the passing of time, discovering at once that she be getting old: “The clear picture was blotted out like a piece of sentiment. *Too late – too late – for you, Catrine*” [SD, p. 466]. But on the whole she feels young and full of energy, and the

last picture of her in the novel is that of a happy new mother, feeling at peace with everybody, including her own grown-up son. This is the beginning of the third stage in her life.

D) Boys and young men

Boys are privileged characters in Gunn's fiction. All readers will remember the boy cracking hazelnuts in *The Atom of Delight* or Kenn catching "his" salmon in *Highland River*. Childhood is the time in which man lives the most important experiences of his life. Like Gunn himself, the boys in his books have the urge to be "off and away". Col in *Sun Circle*, Davie in *Butcher's Broom*, and Finn in *The Silver Darlings* all go on poaching expeditions. Aniel, Davie, Colin II¹⁷ and Finn all learn things from old men and inherit respectively religious wisdom, the art of playing the bagpipes and the art of story-telling.

The three boys mentioned in *Butcher's Broom*, Colin I, Davie and Colin II, differ from one another. **Colin I** is hardly developed as a character. He is just here to show how a young man might be motivated to become a soldier. He is a "gay daring youth" [BB, p. 41], liked for "his compact strength, his clean assurance" [BB, p. 67], an impulsive boy who would make a good soldier. Therefore, it seems natural to everybody, including himself, that "Colin Sutherland, whoever else, would obey the call to arms" [BB, p. 83].

Davie, as a child, is a small dark boy. "He was like a gnome, his eyebrows slightly tilted" [BB, p. 27]. He has a tendency to disappear out of Mairi's sight, in order to go on adventures on his own. He is often seen at night, haunting the surroundings of his own house. But he is quite brilliant at ceilidhs. Later, he becomes a secretive young man, lonely, proud and sensitive. The troubles of adolescence leave him ill at ease. He regains confidence after he has come to terms with Kirsteen and he has finally taken the decision to emigrate. His personal development is summarized in one sentence:

There had been three phases in Davie's growth: the boy who loved the neatness and the excitement of the proverb game; the youth who became rather reserved and secretive, if occasionally fierce enough; and now the young man breaking defiantly through, crushing sensitiveness with a laugh. [BB, p. 405]

Colin II is a little boy with a terrible past. He is not even eight and yet has been working for over two years in the mills. This experience has given him a reserved, solemn air. But the good atmosphere of the community makes him grow "into an active lad" [BB, p. 238].

¹⁷ "Colin II" designates here the son of Elie and Colin (I).

Moreover, the boy develops an “abnormal curiosity” [BB, p. 244] for legends and traditions, of which he becomes the inheritor. Thanks to the company of Mairi, “the one person in the world to whom he talked freely” [BB, p. 328], he becomes fully integrated into the community, so that Davie can tell him: “You’re one of us” [BB, p. 400].

In *Sun Circle*, there are two young men who have to face different issues. **Haakon** is a born leader, “a splendid young fellow of imperious bearing” [SC, p. 158]. He is full of energy, courage and ambition, and “could go on for ever” [SC, p. 289]. When he meets Nessa, it is also for him love at first sight, a mainly physical attraction for somebody resembling him. “Nessa was to be his first woman” [SC, p. 333]. Like Aniel, Nessa and Breeta, he goes through the experiences of love and death.

Aniel is slightly younger, and of a very different temperament. If Nessa and Haakon are the golden lovers of legend, Breeta and Aniel look quite different: “Neither of them was tall, and she was just about his own height. Both were slim-bodied and dark” [SC, pp. 27–28]. Being the Master’s pupil, Aniel has a knowledge that makes him different from the youths of his age. He has elected Breeta as worthy of seeing his works of art, but he likes to tease her and to play at frightening her. Later, the reader discovers that this is because of his shyness.

Breeta’s reluctance pushes him towards Nessa. He is fascinated by her beauty, although he somehow knows that she is not made for him. The attraction of her body will bring him to the verge of treason.

His spirit is troubled by the recent introduction of the sun-god into their religion, and later by Molrua’s words about the Christian faith. He is open-minded, and has an ability to grasp at once the meaning of what happens. For example, as the Master speaks, he understands that Haakon and Breeta might (have) become the leaders of his people. In the course of the novel, something extraordinary happens to him:

That a youth should kill a man and win a woman – his first man and his first woman – all in a morning, is something for his legs to put into their stride and for his head to balance. [SC, p. 197]

Aniel’s father dies, as do the leaders of his people. Only he is left, and he is no leader. All this teaches him things about himself and about the world:

Each man was a lonely being in that battle. He had to hold the gods and demons at bay by propitiation, by sacrifice, but even more by the strength within himself. Let him be as one in his circle. [SC, p. 388]

In *The Silver Darlings*, the main character is a boy called **Finn**, whom the narrator describes thus:

There was a wise humour in the smile, that moved his sensitive mouth and crept up around brown eyes which, unlike his mother's, had one or two pin-point grey flecks in them. He was tall for his fourteen years, going lightly on his feet, his face up. The face had the same kind of distinction that he himself had found in his Granny's, but the clean-cut regularity of bone was less noticeable, more smoothed over. When his eyebrows gathered in swift concentration all his features came vividly and arrestingly alive. His hair was dark-brown rather than black though to a first glance it looked dark enough. [SD, p. 206]

The reader first meets him as a four-year-old pursuing a white butterfly, and thus trespassing the territorial limits set to him by his mother. In the course of his first adventure, he kills the butterfly and becomes aware of death and guilt. This is followed by a moment spent at the House of Peace¹⁸, where he finds comfort and calm. In his next adventure, he is given a trumpet, which will allow him to ascertain himself in the world of men. Finn is an audacious boy. He becomes a hunter and a fisherman, and feels more and more drawn to the sea: “And when I'm big I'll go to sea, too, and be a skipper” [SD, p. 144]. During the plague, he shows courage and initiative, and appears to Roddie's parents as one “touched by fate” [SD, p. 227]. The rescue of his mother brings on a new feeling of community between the two of them. The plague marks the end of Finn's childhood- and land-period.

Afterwards, Finn will have opportunities to show his outstanding qualities again, both intellectually – he is the schoolmaster's “most promising scholar” [SD, p. 276] and could have gone to university – and physically: “With his big toe and the one next to it, he could always pick up a stone and throw it farther than any other boy” [SD, p. 312]. During his adolescence, he comes into conflict with Roddie and Catrine. Roddie, from the model he once had been, becomes a rival. Finn feels the urge to measure himself against him, which culminates in the fight in Stornoway. He feels that his mother has been estranged from him because of Roddie. This conflict will extend to the whole world of women.

In the course of the novel, Finn gets moved by several girls. This always starts with a fascination for the girls' faces, for their dark hair and eyes; it is accompanied by a feeling of trouble in his body, and followed by obsession. Una particularly haunts his dreams at sea.

Often he was to awake like this in the future, and then, half-asleep, have a dream in which he could to some degree command the actions of the figures but more particularly his own actions.

¹⁸ The meaning of the House of Peace will be developed in Part Two.

Now he saw Una before him, and so clearly that the suppressed excitement, which always bothered him in her presence, got such a hold upon him that he could not think of one clever or cutting thing to say (...). [SD, p. 288]

He is more daring with the girls in Stornoway, and the girl Catrine makes a deep impression upon him: “There was a half-scared, expectant something in her that he preferred to any thing in any other girl” [SD, p. 400]. When he is with Una or Catrine, he cannot get rid of “all the emotions that were supposed to surround a girl” [SD, p. 425], but with Barbara or Betz it is different; he can see them as human beings – Barbara because she belongs to his family, and Betz because she “made no claims” [ibid.]. Finn’s relations to girls are typically adolescent – vague, shy and awkward –, until his body finally meets Una’s. Even then, not a word of love is uttered.

Before this could occur, Finn had to be reconciled with the world of women. His conflict with them had been amplified by his meeting with Alan and his two nagging sisters. At one time, Finn feels like a wreck:

In this last month he was conscious of having aged a lot. He was barely twenty, but it was as if the very flesh on his bones had lost its softness and drawn taut and sinewy. There was a similar change in his mind, and where formerly he would have been deeply moved to sympathy or emotion he now could harden his eyes and know only an impulse of intolerance. [SD, pp. 500–501]

Soon after, Finn is said to have “entered with clear consciousness upon the estate of manhood” [SD, p. 502]. He feels lonely and abandoned, until he hears a song by a girl called Matili, which gives him a vision of the condition of woman:

The effect upon Finn was deep and self-revealing. Love for his mother cried out in him, the love that now understood the withdrawn fatality of the mother. [SD, p. 544]

Finn begins to understand her totally:

He was fond of her, would ever have for her a natural affection, but he saw her now as a woman under the spell of her own destiny. And that somehow was eternally right, like the movement of a figure through the mesh of fate in one of Hector’s old stories, or like a swan in the Irish sea in the legend by Finn-son-of-Angus. And this brought to him, beyond understanding, a cool aloof relief. [SD, p. 549]

After that, Finn is able to become part of the community and contribute his own song. In the course of the novel, he has developed an interest for legends and songs and become a good story-teller. At the end, he has a vision of himself in the heart of “the circle of sanctuary” [SD, p. 580], with his future awaiting him in the form of his new boat and his wife-to-be.

E) The community

Communities play a central role in Gunn's novels. All the characters examined up to now belong to one of them. This is made evident by the number of characters involved in the novels – several different households and families – and the links existing between them. In *The Silver Darlings*, several communities are presented beside Dunster, such as Stornoway, Dale and North Uist. As the study of the three novels might be redundant here, only *Butcher's Broom* will be considered.

Most of the novel is about the way of life before the Clearances, and emphasis is put on the working of the community. This community may be said to be centred on Old Angus's household. His house is the place where ceilidhs are held, which gather most of the villagers together. There, people talk about their problems, argue, and, above all, have fun together:

There were old men and young men, women and girls and boys, about a peat fire at the centre of a room as simple as Mairi's but larger. The greatest gaiety pervaded the scene; for folk had not yet settled down, and men exchanging news had now and then to shout above the youthful din. [BB, p. 34]

After having worked together in the harvest, they tell stories, sing and dance in the evening. In the winter, Angus serves whisky. The community members are always ready to help each other when someone is in need. When Elie comes back, for example, Angus gives food to Davie, and Mairi bleeds her cow. By and by, Elie finds herself reintegrated into the community. She feels comforted by the warmth emanating from them all. Finally, her son becomes one of them, too. The working of the community also appears when they decide to share the money sent by "their boys" into twelve parts, although two of them have died. Furthermore, Mairi establishes a link between the community members by going from house to house on her healing errands.

They not only live and work together, but they are also bound by their cultural patrimony, a body of legends and songs in which they recognize themselves and find their identity:

As Angus went on with that ancient poem, his listeners came under its enchantment. [...] Now, however, his expression held a gravity softened by memory, as though the streams and the Sun, the primrose and the green bank, had been enjoyed by him in that land that could be seen back in time – as any man can see his own childhood. It was the land of the Aged Bard, who was a man like Angus. [BB, pp. 55–56]

Behind the Aged Bard was the eternal earth and over it the Sun. In instinct and in heart they delighted and worshipped her. [BB, p. 57]

Although at such moments Gunn's characters feel strongly connected to a pre-Christian spirituality, their Christian religious culture does also contribute to bind them together: they say the "Grace before meat", recite their catechisms together, and read from the Bible before going to sleep.

CHAPTER 2: CHARACTERS AS ARCHETYPES

Archetypes will be understood here as eternal types of the human race.¹⁹ A distinction will be made between the case where characters acquire an eternal meaning through legend, and the case where characters are presented as archetypes proper. In both instances, the characters transcend their current time and place and become universal.

A) Characters of legend

Like song, legend has the function of connecting contemporary people with eternity, making them see the universality of their condition. The universal types which appear in the three novels are the enduring woman, the heroine, the lovers, the wise old man, and the hero.

The enduring woman

Through her story-telling, Mairi establishes a link between women of all times, whose tragic destinies build the fabric which holds the world together:

She even went back into legend, until Elie saw herself as one of innumerable women whose suffering and endurance were like little black knots holding the web of history together. [BB, p. 321]

The heroine

The moment of highest spiritual experience for Breeta is when she mentally feels ready to be sacrificed. At that time, she transcends herself and identifies herself with a figure of legend:

She was now not herself but someone else; or, rather, she was herself in a legend. The women she had known in legend and shivered at; the chief's wife who slew herself upon her husband's body; the girls who were changed into swans and lived for centuries singing their sorrows on cold hungry seas; the girls stolen and encaved by giants; but, more than all the legends, the maidens who gave themselves to the dark gods for the salvation of their people. [SC, p. 262]

Some time ago, Breeta had been at the origin of a legend, but rather as a witch than as a heroine:

¹⁹ This is my own definition. For C. G. Jung, an archetype is „a pervasive idea, image or symbol that forms part of the collective unconscious” (*The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Fourth Edition). The following definition may be closer to the meaning Gunn gives to it: “In general terms, the abstract idea of a class of things which represents the most typical and essential characteristics shared by this class; thus a paradigm or exemplar” (J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, London: A. Deutsch 1979).

“Did you hear about the witch on the moor?” “When?” “Last night – and then again in the grey dawn – *at the very time.*” Who saw?... It was the beginning of the legend of Breeta. [SC, p. 110]

The lovers

The vision of Haakon and Nessa strikes Aniel as a vision of love, at a time when his sentimental education is being made:

Then Aniel saw their faces, saw their bodies, and he knew in the same moment that he had seen the final picture of all desire.

Here were the lovers of legend, beyond good and evil, beyond treachery and honesty, beyond the laws of family or tribe, splendid in bearing, alive like fire, selling all the world, father and mother and home and honour, for their love’s pleasure. [SC, p. 333]

The wise old man

The old men described in the three novels have similar features, having accumulated goodness and wisdom in the course of their lives. They resemble each other, and they resemble the Aged Bard of legend. For example, their passions have been reduced to their essence:

[Catrine] had gone in to see Kirsty’s father, who was now committed to his bed and who, they both knew, was dying. Perhaps it was because she had known him in this final stage of his life that she had grown to love the old man, he was so gentle, with that strange, far-away look that pulled the strings of the heart. Gaunt his face had grown, too, and his patience was beyond belief, beyond what was natural in human being, and now and then expressed itself in gentleness, in a faint smile of regret at having to trouble anyone. He was like a man out of whom long ago the heart had been taken but who now had received back the essence of the lost heart’s kindness. [SD, p. 154]

The old man has a special affinity to Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil... [SD, p. 67]

This bears similarities with the following passage about the Aged Bard in *Butcher’s Broom*, when one admits that green pastures and still waters have the same echo as little streams:

And this Aged Bard was not a simple or uninstructed man, but on the contrary was a man grey with years of experience of life, rich in knowledge, who had faced all things and exhausted all passions, but who in the end prayed to be placed by the little streams. [BB, p. 56]

The hero

Roddie and Finn, in *The Silver Darlings*, are two heroes about whom a legend is built. Roddie is seen by two old men as somebody with a messianic mission:

“Do you know, man, Lachie, when I saw that lad Roddie, tall and fair, with his blue eyes and his quiet ways, I had the sort of feeling that he had come himself up out of the sea like – like one sent to deliver us.” [SD, p. 85]

Later, he is identified by Mr Gordon, the schoolmaster, as “one of the old Vikings” [SD, p. 281]. In the people’s minds, he becomes “Roddie, the terrible East-coaster, the mad Viking, the spiller of blood, the curse on Stornoway” [SD, p. 389]. The legend develops further on:

The story of the Sloop Inn was already growing fabulous. The mass of the Lewis fishermen were glad that Big Angus had got it where he deserved it – in the jaw. But this man’s mythical strength, his defiance of superstition, his touchiness over what now was retailed as an incredible feat of seamanship in the Western Ocean, and – confronting them here – his triumph over the fish of the sea itself!... [SD, p. 390]

Finn’s identification with legend is more evident and more precise. He is presented as a reincarnation of Finn MacCoul, the hero of a Celtic legend. Finn was born on the evening when Kirsty’s father died, so he might be said to have taken the old man’s place on earth. As it often occurs in Celtic legends²⁰, an animal – in this case a calf – was born at the same time:

Bel threw her head round, showing the whites beyond her great liquid eyes. Her calving time was upon her. [SD, p. 155]

Finn’s childhood is told in a succession of adventures, such as “Finn and the butterfly” and “Finn blows his trumpet”. In his first adventure, as in Celtic legends again, he follows a white animal (a butterfly), that leads him into a strange world. Later, he receives a trumpet, which is seen as “the great curved horn of Finn MacCoul”²¹. The legends says that “the great heroes, the Fianns are slumbering in their mountain halls, awaiting the call on Finn MacCoul’s trumpet which will rouse them to life, to aid mankind in its eternal battle against evil”²². In a dream, “the first dream he ever had remembered” [SD, p. 158], Finn is given a mission: he has to tumble down a great wall – which may stand for Caithness’s economic depression:

“Go forward and sound the trumpet!” cried a great man behind him, who was Moses, though he looked like Sandy Ware. There were many people behind, as Finn went forward. The trumpet hung from the branch of a tree, as Finn had sometimes hung his own trumpet, but this was a much bigger trumpet than Finn’s, and not straight but curved like one of the great horns on a Highland cow. [SD, p. 158]

²⁰ See, for example, Pierre-Yves Lambert, *Les littératures celtiques*, Paris: PUF 1981.

²¹ Douglas Gifford, *Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon*, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd 1983, p. 134.

²² *Ibid.*

The identification goes further, since the two dogs Finn has in the novel bear the same names as Finn MacCoul's²³: Bran and Oscar.

During his first trip at sea, Finn accomplishes a deed that will save his fellow-travellers, make his reputation as a hero, and provide material for the narration of his legend. The epic quality of the episodes appears in the chapter-heads: "Storm and precipice", implying danger, and "The golden cask", reminiscent of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. Afterwards, as his fame spreads, Finn becomes a model and a hero to younger boys:

Then one day Finn got a slight shock. A boy of twelve had fallen over a rock and broken his leg. That he had not fallen a further fifty feet to his death seemed a miracle. Two boys of fourteen had brought off a daring rescue. And all this, Finn discovered, was a direct result of his exploits on the Seven Hunters, though he himself had never made any reference to them. [SD, p. 412]

After Finn has discovered "the power of the story-teller" [SD, p. 448], old men recognize him as a reincarnation of the great hero: "You gave me a vision – of the youth of Finn MacCoul himself" [SD, p. 449], says the old drover at Helmsdale. A similar relationship is established by Finn-son-of-Angus, an old man to whom Finn feels a special connection:

Much knowledge Finn received from this old man, who was one of the three story-tellers of the district. He could have listened to him for hours on end, because as he listened something in himself that had hitherto been dry, like dry soil, was moistened as by summer rain, and became charged with an understirring of life and with an upper movement of wonder like fragrant air. There was perhaps some special concentration of the self in it, too, for the old man's first name was the same as Finn's, which was likewise Finn MacCoul's, the great hero of the noble Fians, whose marvellous exploits were this story-teller's province in learning and art. [SD, p. 538]

The old man acknowledges:

"You told the story well. You brought us to the far deeps of the sea and we were lost with you in the Beyond where no land is, only wind and wave and the howling of the darkness. [...] It was done, too, with the humour that is the play of drift on the waves. And you were modest. Yet – all that is only a little – you had something more, my hero, something you will not know – until you look at it through your eyes, when they are old as mine."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Finn.

But the old man shook his head and turned away. "Go to your sleep, my boy. Many a one may come," he muttered to himself, "in the guise of the stranger." [SD, p. 540]

Finn is the new hero, the hope of his people. He gets to know tradition, he perpetuates it by his own exploits, he gives the people joy and an intensive sense of being alive when he tells his stories, and he finds his place in the modern, economic society as a young, successful

²³ Ibid.

skipper. The character of Finn acquires its signification through a combination of individual and legendary features.

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The characters mentioned here all have a close relationship to legend. Some recognize themselves in a legend, like Breeta. Others, like Haakon, Nessa and Finn, are recognized by a third person as characters of legend. Others, still, resemble legendary figures, like the old men, the identification being suggested by the narrator and eventually made by the reader. Finally, some characters become the heroes of a new legend, like Breeta, Roddie and Finn.

For all the communities described in the three novels, legend has a vivid tradition, which can constantly be renewed. The identification of characters with legend establishes the continuity between the earliest times of mankind and the present moment of the narration. Moreover, especially in *The Silver Darlings*, it gives the characters the roots they need in order to experience the fullness of life and meet the challenges of modern times.

B) Archetypes proper

Archetypes proper are not as frequent in Gunn's novels as are characters of legend. Characters are identified as archetypes either by another person, as in *The Silver Darlings*, or by the narrator, as in *Butcher's Broom*. Five archetypes can be recognized: the girl, the mother, woman, the boy, and man.

The girl

Kirsteen in *Butcher's Broom* once appears as an archetypal girl:

Kirsteen was whirled into a dance. She was extremely light on her feet and soon her gaiety and quick-witted fun, flashing hither and thither, ordering, condemning, provoking became the night's centre. Many a youth got a vision of girlhood that troubled his peace for long enough. [BB, p 296]

The mother

Some passages of *Butcher's Broom* and *The Silver Darlings* portray the mother. Different images are given:

[Seonaid's] condition, however, was obvious, for she was very heavy with child. As she stood before her doorway, with her three children round her, she looked the vengeful mother of all the tribes of men. [BB, p. 360]

Seonaid is described as a mother who is ready to do anything in order to defend her children. Dark Mairi, "the black earth mother that bore and nourished them, with love under her crooning mouth" [BB, p. 151], is quieter and more resigned, and has a close relationship to the earth:

The human mother carrying on her ancient solitary business with the earth, talking good and familiar sense with boulder and flower and rock, and now and then following a root below the surface; in easy accord, the communion sensible and so full of natural understanding that silence might extend into eternal silence, for wind and sun to play upon. [BB, p. 426]

In the three novels, all mothers sing, and their songs link them to the mothers of all times:

The tired hour when [Catrine] took [Finn] on her lap and sang the old lullaby, so old that it must have made itself out of the heart of a mother in the beginning of time, and so new that it was Catrine's own heart in its deepest fondness – carrying them both away, together, close together, until she had to stop singing and bring them to a warm huddle in the lap of the living moment. [SD, p. 157]

Woman

On one occasion, Catrine is seen by Roddie as the archetype of woman:

He saw her features against the red glow, warm and soft, not only with her own beauty, but with all women's beauty. It was a picture a man might glimpse once in a lifetime, and have a vision of women afterwards in his mind that time or chance, good or evil, would never change. [SD, pp. 101–102]

The characteristic which strikes him, here, is beauty. The role of woman appears in the following passage, where the characters seem to be fixed for eternity:

In the centre of this gloom was the fire, and sitting round it, their knees drawn together, their heads stooped, were the old woman, like fate, the young woman, like love, and the small boy with the swallow of life in his hand. [BB, p. 31]

The place of archetypal woman is near the fire, at the centre of the home and domestic, land-based life. Her role is all-important in this traditional, matriarchal society. In providing for the basic needs of life, woman makes the same gestures as her ancestors, in a kind of ritual.

The boy

The boy in the previous quotation is the holder of life. The characteristic of the archetypal boy is his readiness to make all kinds of experiences. To Gunn, a boy is “more than halfway between the savage and modern man” [*The Atom of Delight*, p 265]. In the following passage of *The Silver Darlings*, the narrator gives an image of the boy as a free, joyful, and daring being:

On his feet, Finn looked down at them and waved, laughing, like an immortal youth; then he turned away and went on up the steep rock with ease, until it gave on grass and he felt the rush of the wind. [SD, p. 316]

Man

At the end of *The Silver Darlings*, Finn thinks about a vision he had:

And that somehow was eternally right, like the movement of a figure through the mesh of fate in one of Hector’s old stories, or like a swan on the Irish sea in the legend by Finn-son-of-Angus. And this brought to him, beyond understanding, a cool aloof relief. This was the way in which he had seen Roddie, once when he was at the tiller, upright as if carven, during the storm in the Western Ocean, and again in the moment on the cliff-head, when eternity had put its circle about them, and he had known the ultimate companionship of men, had seen the gentleness, profounder than any crying of the heart, at the core of male strength. [SD, pp. 549–550]

In this passage, Finn remembers different experiences in which he had grasped something eternal. The first is an image of Roddie, the seaman, facing the storm upright. The second is the discovery of the gentleness in man’s heart. This is the only statement about archetypal man in the three novels. Significantly, the character who embodies it is Roddie, a man of action and a fisherman. His archetypal function is to bring food from the rough element of the sea to his home.

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In all the passages examined, a glance of eternity is conveyed through characters who are also known as individuals, belonging to a specific time and place.

Concluding remarks to Part One

The three novels present different communities at different times, and the narrative technique varies accordingly.

The Silver Darlings deals with definitely modern characters. Various processes commonly found in fiction are used to characterize them. The reader gets to know them through their actions, their speech, their thoughts, their dreams, as well as through other persons' statements about them and occasional descriptions by the narrator. This is what can be expected in a modern novel. The main characters are Catrine and Finn, whose development can be witnessed in the course of the novel. The two of them are therefore round²⁴ characters. The characterization of Roddie, another important character, is somewhat unsatisfactory. For example, the change that takes place in him after his marriage is not really developed. All the other characters are flat, in that they are not many-sided and do not undergo any evolution in the novel.

In *Butcher's Broom*, the narrator is much more present, which means that there are more descriptions of people and less reports of what is going on in their minds. The main characters are Elie, Mairi, Davie, and Colin II, who are to some extent round characters, although their characterization is not as elaborate as Finn's or Catrine's. The characterization of Mairi is a special case, for she is intended to be a representative of the primitive mentality and is therefore described in a repetitive, unchanging fashion.

In *Sun Circle*, all the characters are depicted as primitive. The reader gets to know them through occasional descriptions by the narrator or by entering their point of view. Aniel's and Breeta's points of view prevail in the novel, occasionally replaced by someone else's, such as Sweyn's or Molrua's. Aniel and Breeta are round characters, whereas the others are flat.

In presenting primitive characters, the author had to make the reader enter into a different kind of consciousness. This requires an effort of imagination from both the author and the reader. This consciousness is characterized by its perception of myth. Characters mix myth and reality, as is evident in their animistic perception of the environment. This environment influences their feelings and their moods. These primitive characters have a prevalent uncon-

²⁴ "Round" and "flat" characters were distinguished by E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). For a short definition, see M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, New York & Chicago: Holt Rinehart & Winston 1957, p. 21.

scious self, which differs considerably from our modern, reasoning, and society-concerned self.

In Chapter 1, characters were grouped into several classes. Significantly, these classes are based on age and sex, the two main distinctions that exist in traditional rural communities, where individuals may be said to resemble each other. They all do the same work (crofters-fishermen / housewives), receive the same education and share the same leisure activities.

A division was made between individuals and archetypes. Actually, the point is that characters can be both, because an archetype can be seen in any of them. As a direct consequence, a character cannot be an eccentric individual, for he must have the primary features that most people of his class share. This was facilitated by the kind of characters Gunn chose to portray: people who are deeply-rooted in the Scotland or Caithness of their age. At the same time, these characters can appeal to any reader anywhere in the world, because they are archetypes and, therefore, can find an echo in every human being.

Dealing with this kind of characters, the reader may get the impression that they are not sufficiently developed to be convincing. Such may be the case of secondary characters, like the old men, who all seem to be interchangeable. But also characters like Roddie and Mairi appear to be underdeveloped considering the importance they have in the novels. Another example of literary underdevelopment is Una, Finn's love. This might be explained by the fact that there is already one main female character in the novel, Catrine. If Una had been more present, there would have been a shift of attention from the main triangle formed by Finn, Catrine and Roddie, who together have a historic importance, standing for the first two generations who were successful at sea after the Clearances.

On the whole, these few flaws are largely compensated by the quality of the characterization of people like Finn, who appear in all their complexity and subtlety.

PART TWO

SYMBOLISM

Introduction

Apart from his treatment of characters as both individuals and archetypes, another feature characteristic of Neil Gunn's way of writing is his use of symbols, images, and metaphors, in order to suggest a reality beyond what the eye can perceive, beyond the here and now. In the three novels examined here, there are different kinds of symbols, some of which may not even be symbols in the traditional literary sense.

Each novel has one dominating symbol, which, through its recurrence, helps to shape the novel and is linked with the book's major theme. Thus, in *Butcher's Broom*, which was originally to be called "Dark Mairi", the dominant symbolism is the one used around Mairi, connecting her with the whole universe, and especially with the earth. The main symbol in *Sun Circle* is the circle, which is associated with Aniel's search for his Self. In *The Silver Darlings*, the dominant symbol is the "House of Peace", which is also central to Finn's development and search for identity.

Some symbols are peculiar to one novel, such as the light vs. darkness opposition in *Sun Circle*, the rowanberries in *The Silver Darlings*, and the symbols featured in the titles of the books.

Other symbols recur throughout Gunn's work, as do, to some extent, the circle and the identification of woman with the earth: birds, the serpent, and also the symbols suggesting the unity of man, animal, and landscape.

The three chapters of Part Two deal with these different uses of symbolism.

CHAPTER 3: SHAPING SYMBOLS

A) Woman and earth

All mythic traditions associate woman with the earth, through the idea of fecundity²⁵. And it is not unusual for primitive people to believe that they were born out of the earth, as for example in the following passage of the Bible:

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return. [Genesis 3, 19]

The same concept appears in *Sun Circle*:

There was something in [Rasg] so much older than they, deep as the primeval dark, out of the black earth, blind-eyed and hidden as the earth – on which the golden daylight walked. They walked on the earth's body, on his body, the body of his tribe, on those who had worked in the earth, the earth into which they poured their blood; they walked on them, the rulers, the golden conquerors, the sword-killers – the sea-swine! [SC, p. 339]

This passage is about the old Pict's view of the fair-haired conquering race. His own race clearly belongs to the earth, and there is an allusion to fertility rites, in which blood is poured into the earth. Similar ideas are found in the following two passages:

[...] sweeter to the earth's black mouth than all other blood was the blood of one's own tribe out of the body of a virgin or a youth. [SC, p. 255]

This earth, cool and dark, out of which [Aniel] has come himself, out of which all things have come and back into which all things must go, though indeed they never separate rightly from it but are as its thoughts, springing for a little into being and action, then fading back even as thoughts fade. [SC, p. 372]

In *Butcher's Broom*, which is set about a thousand years later, the concept of the earth is less primitive, but there is still a strong connection between the earth and femininity. This appears, for example, in the description of a landscape with definitely feminine attributes:

A smooth shape of slender flanks and fluent spinal ridges, of swelling breasts and wandering arms, brown-skinned except where the region of its fertility lies softly grey-green with grass. Here men and women are at work, concerned forever, too, with fertility in that place and in themselves; turning the earth over and sowing grain seed in it, harvesting, and rearing flocks and herds; making love in youth and story-telling in old age,

²⁵ For further explanations about the traditional meaning of symbols see: Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, Amsterdam & London: North Holland Publ. Company 1974, and Claude Aziza, C. Olivieri & R. Strick, *Dictionnaire des symboles et des thèmes littéraires*, Paris: Nathan 1978.

with a music distilled out of it all as singular and memoried as dark-brown honey. [BB, p. 12]

The beginning of this passage is full of words designating parts of a woman's body. This is used in order to describe a civilization which has developed by working with the earth, in perfect harmony with it.

The identification of the novel's main woman character, Dark Mairi, with the earth takes place through the use of metaphors like "a stone" [BB, pp. 9, 26, 88, and 390], "a bit of the earth" [BB, pp. 150 and 390], or "an earth outcrop" [BB, pp. 26 and 60]. This metaphor can be applied to Mairi because of her physical appearance (dark, small, and upright), her character (hard and unemotional), and her occupation (she collects herbs and pebbles). Furthermore, the community of the Riasgan and the earth are linked together by the person of Mairi:

It was no phantasy that gathered the Riasgan in Mairi's brow or set Mairi wandering for the roots and lichens of colour in the brow of the Riasgan. [BB, p. 267]

Elie thinks Mairi behaves as if she were a kinswoman of the earth:

"She was talking away to the earth she was turning over. 'Now you lie there,' she would say, patting down the clod. 'That's you, my dark one.' You would think the earth was a family she was keeping from rolling down the hill!" [BB, p. 424]

Later on, the narrator gives another description of Mairi as a woman in complete harmony and understanding with the earth:

The human mother carrying on her ancient solitary business with the earth, talking good and familiar sense with boulder and flower and rock, and now and then following a root below the surface; in easy accord, the communion sensible and so full of natural understanding that silence might extend into eternal silence, for wind and sun to play upon. [BB, 426]

At one time, Mairi is even clearly seen as a personification of the earth. This happens when Elie, as she is accustomed to do, takes refuge in the earth at a time of distress:

[Elie] clawed into the earth. "I'll die. I'll kill myself. Listen to me." Then as if the earth were indeed listening, it put a hand on her shoulder. In the dark, when she had scrambled to her feet, she saw the quiet figure of the earth; it was the figure of Dark Mairi. [BB, pp. 150–151]

Dark Mairi stands for an ageless, matriarchal society, which has remained close to the earth. Both Mairi and the earth are mothers, and both are in danger:

Up there on the edge of the wood, Mairi had sat with Elie's head against her breast, rocking her and crooning to her as to a child, crooning out over the Riasgan the pain and

the tragedy of women, over the wide earth – from which on its winds came the stench of men’s wars and the sound of their machines grinding out starvation and disease and death for the poor. [BB, p. 151]

In *The Silver Darlings*, which deals with much more modern characters, the earth also offers shelter and comfort to Finn when he is a little child: “The earth’s bosom was warm with the sun and soon little Finn was sound asleep [SD, p. 95]”.

Catrine, with her phobia of the sea, is definitely a creature of the land, where she finds her place and comfort:

Presently she sat upright again, listening to the sounds of the croft. She knew them all and at first they were strange, but in a moment like little living things they came running into her heart, and she got up, went outside, looked around the croft, at her beasts, at the fields, found she had the whole place to herself, and set about her cleaning with a renewed strength of body and arms. [SD, pp. 461–462]

The earth is linked with femininity in the three novels. In *Sun Circle*, there is the primitive concept of the earth mother. In *Butcher’s Broom*, the novel in which the theme is best developed, an actual woman, Mairi, is connected to the earth by metaphors, reports of beliefs about her, and the nature of her work. In *The Silver Darlings*, Catrine finds herself completely at ease with the earth, for she likes above all to work on the land. Moreover, in this novel, the land-woman association is opposed to a sea-man association.²⁶ Through the pictures of different ages in the three novels, one can trace the evolution of the myth of the feminine character of the earth. This is not a symbol in the proper sense, i.e. a word which “refers to something which suggests a range of reference beyond itself”²⁷, for the earth does not really symbolize femininity (or vice versa), but the association of the two is symbolic of a basic relationship between human beings and the earth.

B) The circle

The circle is, traditionally, a figure of perfection, all its points being at the same distance from its centre. It is a closed figure, without end or beginning. In *Sun Circle*, and in Gunn’s fiction in general, the circle is used to give an image of man’s identity, as something that circumscribes the self and within which the self is impregnable.

²⁶ Douglas Gifford, in his various writings on the subject (cf. Bibliography), distinguishes three parts in *The Silver Darlings*: the first land- and woman-based, the second sea- and man-based, and the third with the four elements in equilibrium.

²⁷ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, New York & Chicago Holt Rinehart & Winston 1957, p. 168.

The image of the circle first appears when a character needs protection:

Footsteps put a circle three times round the house, a sunwise circle of soft padding sound. Breeta lay at its core, curled in a circle of her own. [SC, p. 77]

Here, the circle belonging to the ritual of making a new fire circumscribes Breeta's own circle. Another rite involving circular movements is the killing of a hare, the first sacrifice Aniel witnessed as a little boy:

Slowly the man moved away with his spade in his hand but presently began to circle back, and soon he was walking round and round in an ever-narrowing circle, and when at last he came to the centre of the circle he swung his spade violently and at the same moment a brown beast leapt from its lair and was struck down. [SC, p. 355]

The Grove, which is the place of the initiated people and, more particularly, of the Master, is described as a "magical circle where those who acquired curious knowledge were not troubled by friends or relations" [SC, p. 206]. Here again, the circle acts a spiritual protection.

The moment in which Aniel first feels entitled to sacrifice is important in his personal development. This is induced through an actual circle of dark men, out of which a collective will emanates, which is then transmitted to Aniel's mind:

Breeta and Aniel stood within the pale rim of the circle, behind them the small dark figures of the Finlags. [...] No one greeted them, no one moved, and yet it was as if the ring opened to them. [...] Aniel stood looking from body to body. What had been on his tongue went from it. The dark circle was round him like a band about his forehead, making him stare. [SC, pp. 257–258]

When the pain was drawn away, his mind was a mind in the circle, but more important than other minds, because its clasp opened the circle to sacrifice. [SC, p. 260]

Later on, Aniel comes to understand the Master's truth:

Each man was a lonely being in that battle. He had to hold the gods and demons at bay by propitiation, by sacrifice, but even more by the strength within himself. Let him be as one in his circle. Then the Gods will respect him and the demons fear him, and he will know that joy which gives the only vision. [SC, p. 388]

Vision provides the key to all this:

That was all the Master's teaching in the end: to see clearly. [...] The Sun, at the centre of his circle. And the Moon was at the centre of her circle, the moon that had her own moon seasons, governing the tides of fertility not only in the sea. [...] As the sun put a circle round the earth and all that it contained, so a man by his vision put a circle round himself. At the centre of this circle his spirit sat, and at the centre of his spirit was a serenity forever watchful. [SC, pp. 365–366]

So Aniel not only finds out how his Self can be preserved, but also how he can experience “moments of delight”²⁸, in which he is in total communion with nature and eternity.

The image of the circle recurs throughout the novel. One could even say that the opening image, “the outline gathers about them, wavers, and disappears” [SC, p. 10], is a description of a circle ever narrowing, until it is reduced to its centre. And the novel closes on another circle image:

She met his look and saw in it such an intense happiness that nothing lived outside the circle it put around them, and she was caught by it as by an enchanted snare. [SC, p. 391]

The symbol of the circle is also present, to a lesser degree, in *Butcher's Broom* and *The Silver Darlings*:

Elie' story of her last night at the Riasgan had been a story like that. She had been up on the edge of the wood where Colin and she had so often made love. The bushes, the scents, the memories, the silence, were all around her, and then in the heart of them, as in the heart of a circle, her mind cried, “No more.” [BB, p. 150]

In this passage, Elie finds herself in a kind of circle, a hollow, in which she often takes refuge and which has a reassuring, comforting effect on her. Under the protection of this circle, she can come to terms with her own Self.

The idea of a protecting circle also appears in *The Silver Darlings*. As Catrine and Tor-mad, newly married, read out from the Bible for the first time, their experience is described as “shyly establishing them in manhood and womanhood, encircling them about with strength and assurance” [SD, p. 68]. Years later, Catrine wishes she could “find peace for herself and her body inside the circle of [Roddie's] strength” [SD, p. 230]. The novel's last chapter is entitled “Finn at the heart of the circle”. In it, Finn takes refuge in the House of Peace, and experiences how a material circle of stones circumscribes his own mental circle:

When he was assured that no-one was after him, he performed the mental act of describing the circle of sanctuary around the ground on which he lay. Then his eyes fell on the circle of low flat stones and he crept into its heart
At once the hunted look caught a gleam of cunning relief. They would never find him here. [SD, p. 580]

The circle motif is central to Gunn's work. Like the symbolic association of woman and earth, the circle, which is a proper symbol, is present in all mythologies. To Gunn, it symbolizes the characters' finding of their Self. This experience makes them whole and protects

²⁸ “Moments of delight” in Gunn's fiction are the equivalent of William Wordsworth's “timeless moments” (see *The Prelude*, 1805) or James Joyce's “epiphanies” in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

them. The truth which Aniel discovers has to do with a man being in his own circle. What exactly this truth looks like, is not made explicit, for each individual has to make his own quest. In *The Silver Darlings*, the meaning of the circle merges with another symbol, the House of Peace.

C) The House of Peace

Unlike the first two symbols considered, the House of Peace is not derived from the background of universal myths and traditions. It is the name the people of Dunster give to the ruins of an old monastery. Standing stones and high places are traditionally reminiscent of man's wish to reach heaven. Furthermore, ruins are important because of their historical associations and the weight of past culture they carry. Just as, in *Sun Circle*, the circle is connected with Aniel's development, so is, in *The Silver Darlings*, the House of Peace associated with Finn's evolution. Finn's visits to the House of Peace coincide with the different stages of his growing-up. This is how the House of Peace is first described:

Presently [Catrine and Roddie] came to a high stone wall, very thick at the base, and running back from the river to a large knoll on their right. There were other evidences of similar walls about this knoll, as though in times long past it had been a fortress or strongly protected place of some kind now fallen upon ruin. [SD, p. 60]

The characters in the novel react differently to the House of Peace. Only Catrine, Roddie and Finn are not afraid at it; Catrine is even moved by its very name:

“You like that name?” “Yes,” she answered, confused slightly, for the name had been like a benediction sounded softly in her mind. All in the moment her eyes had brightened and a quickening come to her skin as if the far, soundless echo of peace had entranced her. [SD, p. 61]

And it is indeed peace which this place will bring to Finn every time he visits it. He first comes to it after having chased the butterfly [SD, p. 95]. He passes it while hunting a rabbit with his friend Donnie [SD, p. 187]. He takes a rest in it during the episode of the plague [SD, p. 213], and, later, when his love for Una leaves him restless [SD, p. 418]. He once pays it a drunk, impious visit [SD, p. 430], and comes back another time, before going to sea, to wash out the shame of his previous visit [SD, p. 479]. He then goes to it when he is about to receive his new boat, but has not yet come to terms with Una [SD, p. 563], and, finally, just before his wedding, running away from his joking, conspiring companions [SD, p. 580]. Each visit has the same soothing and revitalizing effect upon him:

This was relief and in a few moments he came into the core of himself, where he was alone, and felt strangely companioned, not by anyone or anything, but by himself. The rejected self found refuge here, not a cowed refuge, but somehow a wandering ease; as if it were indestructible, and had its own final pride, its own secret eyes. [SD, p. 419]

Like Aniel's Self in his circle, Finn's Self gathers strength at the House of Peace. It is a place out of time, out of the world of men with its ordinary means of communication, "as if one existed here not in words or even in silent thoughts but in states of mind" [SD, p. 480]. The House of Peace is where Finn comes to terms with himself, where his body and spirit are restored, where his Self is ascertained. It is the place where he experiences his epiphanies, his "moments of delight":

And in fact there was one thing of which he could involuntarily catch a queer glimpse. It was the vision he had had in form and colour (especially in green, a brightness of soft green) when, after hunting the butterfly, he had fallen asleep, and then, in that "lost" moment of awakening, did not recognize this place, but saw it as another world. [SD, p. 213]

Now, as he fell asleep, he dreamed, though never in after life could he quite satisfy himself that it was really sleep and a dream, for everything about him was exactly the same, the trees, the situation and the evening light; it was the same moment; and yet like that instant which had preceded the coming of the known world when he was a little boy, so now he seemed to be awake when he saw standing by the near cell the tall figure of an old man in a white cape with the front part of his head quite bald. [...] The face did not speak to him or move: it just looked, the body standing still in a natural way. [...] It knew all about Finn, and told him nothing – not out of compassion, but out of needlessness. [SD, p. 214]

Finn discovers that this world has within it hints of a timeless harmony, a supra-natural state of delight, peace and wholeness. His epiphanies link him with the past, with his ancestors, and, thus, with his community.

As an actual geographic place, the House of Peace provides refuge for people who want to temporarily withdraw from communal activities. But it is above all a place where a person can meet his own Self. This symbol is peculiar to *The Silver Darlings*, but it has its analogues in the circles found in other novels.

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The symbols examined in Chapter 3 all have a structural function in the novels they appear in. They recur from the first to the last chapter, giving the novel its unity, like the motifs of a symphony. They are the novels' main symbols, and are also related to the themes which can

be found elsewhere in Gunn's work: the harmony that should exist between man and nature, and the quest of a young individual for his identity. Chapter 4 will consider symbols with a more limited scope.

CHAPTER 4: SYMBOLS PECULIAR TO ONE NOVEL

A) Light in *Sun Circle*

The roles of light, the sun, fire, and the gold colour will be examined under this headline. All these elements are closely interconnected. Traditionally, light is a symbol of purity, morality, and knowledge. *Sun Circle* deals with a primitive culture, in which the sun is still an object of adoration and wonder, as well as a vital element.

A light vs. darkness opposition exists between the characters of the novel. Most of them are small and dark. So are the Finlags – especially Drust’s mistress, the “Black Hind” –, so are Aniel and Breeta. Only a few are tall and fair-haired, and they are in the positions of leaders: “Drust, the golden Drust, the splendid one” [SC, p. 306], his wife Silis, their daughter Nessa, from whom “a brighter light than the sight was accustomed to” [SC, p. 38] emanates, her Viking lover Haakon, whose “eyebrows and eyelashes [the sunlight turned] to a fine golden transparency” [SC, p. 167]. These four people, with whom the sunlight can play, do not belong to the same category as the others. They do not belong to the earth, as the dark-haired common people do.

The same opposition exists between the gods described in the novel:

The Red One, who is at times the Grey One, who is also the Skygod, and who, to Gilbrude, was the All-father, does not always know of them, for they are the old small Dark Ones who have never been finally conquered. They are of the night that was before the first morning of the world [SC, p. 311]

The names of the first god mentioned evoke fire and the sun, making him appear as an old, cosmic sun-god. And, finally, there is the new sun-god, “the young golden-haired god of the Greeks”, “a splendid human hero” (ibid.), about whom the Master teaches Aniel.

To Aniel, Nessa and Apollo represent a temptation, the temptation of vanity, of the man-god. As he feels attracted to Nessa, he also feels attracted to this new god: “And one day in an awful secrecy he had tried to draw the Sungod” [SC, p. 207]. For this purpose, he had made colours “ever more bright, especially one luminous yellow” [SC, p. 208]. Both enterprises will prove to be wrong. Aniel will find the truth in remaining with his own kind, in loving Breeta, who, being a woman and dark-haired, is close to the earth, and in following the Master’s teachings.

The new Christian religion is also surrounded by light. This is how Morlrua remembers the moment he joined the community of the Christians:

That community became a memory always bright as it had been on that first morning. The brightness of it had, too, the extra brightness of his conversion, having beams in it of a golden light in which everything on the earth was seen as for the first time. [SC, p. 177]

But Aniel is not yet a Christian, although the reader understands that the seeds of this religion have already been sown in his mind.

In the course of the novel, all the “golden”, solar characters are sacrificed to the dark gods, for the benefit of the dark people. A big fire runs throughout the novel. The Northmen set fire to the Grove, and the first flames frighten Breeta:

She saw first the rising arc of the sun, and then below it and before it she saw leaping reddish tongues of flame. [SC, p. 74]

Later, fire turns to sacrifice:

And so the holocaust was set in a silence which was magical and terrible. The fire, too, has its effect as fire, as flame; monstrous and outblown, it had a greater effect than ever before. It was the sacrifice of nightmare, of a demon’s dream. SC, p. 266)

Finally, fire extends to the whole area and gets far beyond man’s control. It is viewed as a vengeance of the gods, as the indomitable forces of nature rising up against the men:

All the emotions before the simple fire of sacrifice and cleansing were intensified a thousandfold, for here was Fire itself at last, the fire of the gods, sacrificing and cleansing the world, catching up animals and birds and men and shrivelling them to nothing in a moment as a leaf is shrivelled. [SC, p. 382]

Fire, light, and the sun are linked together as personae of the almighty sky-god. They symbolize man’s craving for something higher, which oscillates between the temptation of the man-god and the new religion. Light is also the attribute of the leaders, reflecting perhaps the old belief that they had to be appointed by the sun-god. By choosing Breeta instead of Nessa, Aniel will be reminded of darkness, the darkness of his own people, of the forest, of the earth, and of the small gods who can be dangerous if neglected.

The light vs. darkness opposition appears throughout the novel and allows the reader to enter the spiritual universe of ninth-century people.

B) The rowanberries in *The Silver Darlings*

In Neil Gunn's fiction, there is a tree symbolism, derived from the Gaelic tradition. It is made explicit in the following passage of *Sun Circle*:

Especially was this the case with one aged rowan whose bowl was thick and whose arms twisted out and up. The rowan may keep off evil spirits, but Breeta and Col made a detour round it. The birches, however, were shady, and their slim silver bodies and graceful arms might easily have given rise to a myth on their own account, were it not perhaps that innocent young women were more the stuff of dreams and laughter and everyday. But the hazel carries the nuts of divination and wisdom. Not that that means the hazel is only for the old. The hazel is also a boy's tree, because no other tree sends up such straight young shoots of fine tough wood. [SC, p. 52]

In *The Silver Darlings*, however, the rowanberries are not used in their traditional symbolic sense. For the uprooted people at the beginning of the novel, and especially for Catrine, this originally beneficent object has acquired an evil meaning. The association of the rowanberries with blood comes to Catrine in the dream that warns her about Tormad's death:

In this wood, the tallest trees were rowans, heavy with clustered berries of a menacing blood-red, the clusters leaning slightly towards them, as watching faces might lean. [SD, p. 35]

Afterwards, she has a vision of Tormad standing and asking for forgiveness, and she hears the following words:

Blood: rowan-red. The words were soundless, a haunted rhythm, but their colour was bright as rowan berries or arterial blood. [SD, p. 43]

This image will haunt her for years. At one time, the symbol and the thing symbolized become inversed in Catrine's mind:

She stared at the blood, as at a terrifying portent, for she did not know how strongly she had bitten her lip when the dog had yelped. This bright red occasionally affected her because of its colour link with the rowan berries. [SD, p. 468]

So the symbol itself has become an object of terror.

Without being aware of the meaning of their acts, Ronnie and Finn help to release Catrine from her past. Ronnie suggests that Finn should bring Catrine some rowanberries, as a souvenir "from her beloved strath" [SD, p. 455]. Finn first wonders at the meaning of the berries:

They were quite valueless, and it seemed to him amusing that they yet could convey something. But they did, and he would produce them with a smile. [SD, p. 480]

The effect is overwhelming, for the sight of the berries makes Catrine collapse [SD, p. 482]. This brings in Finn a surge of affection and a sense of responsibility towards her. Finally, he crushes the berries in his hands, and buries them under a bush. From then on, Catrine's past will no longer torment her.

This is a very personal symbol, with a highly specific meaning. To Catrine, it symbolizes her own past and Tormad's death. On a more general level, it can also be seen as a symbol of the difficult start of the community on the seashore, which is subsequently wiped out by the success of Finn's generation.²⁹

C) The books' titles

Sun Circle

The meaning of these two symbols has been made clear in the previous pages. Put together, they allude to the circle which the sun puts round the earth, and to its microcosm, the circle man puts round himself. These two words are also reminiscent of the old stone circles, vestiges of a past about which little is known and in which the sun was an almighty god. This period corresponds to the time in which the novel is set, and which is known elsewhere as the "Dark Ages".

Butcher's Broom

Unlike the other two titles, this one is not developed into a recurrent symbol. But it symbolizes the main event of the novel, the Highland Clearances. "Butcher's broom" is the name of a shrub, also called box-holly, which figures in the badge of the Sutherland Clan. Furthermore, "butcher" alludes to the massacres committed, and "broom" to the sweeping effect of the evictions on the land.

The Silver Darlings

This affectionate term for the herring recurs throughout the novel. The fish are much more than potential food. During the "first hunt for the silver darlings" (as Chapter IV is entitled),

²⁹ Finn is sometimes seen as representing the community: "The novel is essentially an allegory, the main characters being representative of the community and the social tensions that were set up during this period. The central character, Finn, is a hero-figure (as his name suggests) and the story of his growing-up is the story of the development of the herring industry" (Donald Campbell, True imagination: *The Silver Darlings*, in: Alexander Scott & Douglas Gifford [eds.], *Gunn: The Man and the Writer*, Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood 1973, p. 144).

the fish appear as a miracle because of their abundance, their glittering aspect of precious metal, and their graceful movements. This first successful hunt is reminiscent of the miraculous catch of fish in the Bible (Luke 5, 1–11):

“It’s herring, boys! Herring! Herring!” The net was so full of herring that it had pulled the floats under the surface, all except the end buoy, which was half submerged. They forgot all about the ship; they forgot everything, except the herrings, the little silver fish, the swift flashing ones, hundreds and thousands of them, the silver darlings. [SD, p. 26]

Soon, the name is in all people’s mouths, and they also see its economic equivalent:

“Creels of silver herring will turn into creels of silver crowns” became the joke that never lost its gleam. [SD, p. 81]

Roddie is particularly dedicated to fishing: “‘Boys,’ he said softly, fondly: ‘To the silver darlings!’” The terms of this toast are marked with the usual affection the novel’s fisherman show for their game.

The “silver darlings” finally appear in the vision coinciding with Finn’s first “stroke of luck” [SD, p 574]. The description is preceded by an imagery of death:

Now the last blood-flush was dying from a cloud in the east, slowly draining out of it, as Finn looked, until nothing but the leaden death-hue remained, and the cloud run cold and still. [ibid.]

Finn had sailed farther west than all other fishermen, passing Una’s cottage and daydreaming about her, when the following happens:

He was brought back to his normal self, however, by a curious phenomenon, which his eyes had been staring at without consciously seeing. It was a light patch of glassy light on the dark sea. To his staring eyes it was like a window let into the blackness of the water. Not that in form it was square. On the contrary, it was irregular, but rounded, too, into a clearly defined shape. It was when this shape took the likeness of a woman’s head and shoulders that Finn was wakened by the finger of wonder. [SD, p. 575]

Here, the two conditions of Finn’s future – his private life with Una and his professional life as a fisherman – are merged. The herring imagery reaches the peak of its beauty:

And now the silver bars formed in banks, banks of show that swayed in living mass, throwing off spindrift of elfin-green light. The crew’s excitement increased as the weight called forth their strength. Slowly and carefully, now, steadily. Here they come! And they came in their companies, fluttering up out of the sea, the silver darlings, dancing in over the gunnel with small thin cries. [SD, pp. 576–577]

Then everything returns to darkness.

The “silver darlings” is a motif which recurs throughout the novel, but it does not have the same scope as the symbols examined in Chapter 3. This expression symbolizes the men’s love for their job, the new wealth they will gain, and the miracle this all represents to them. The origin of the name may be found in a fishermen’s superstition, which forbids them to mention fish by its name at sea.

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The symbols examined in Chapter 4 are limited to one particular novel. They do not necessarily correspond to basic themes in Gunn’s fiction. The books’ titles are highly significant and indicative of the main subject-matter of each book. All three are allusions to the historical period in which each novel is set. Among them, only the “silver darlings” have the function of a motif, similar to the symbols described in Chapter 3; this novel has often been praised for its architecture, and has been compared to a symphony.³⁰

³⁰ “Music is an important element in Gunn’s development of theme and the term ‘symphonic’ is entirely appropriate to *The Silver Darlings*. Gunn has an overall theme or movement to which the lesser parts of movements are related and subservient” (Douglas Gifford, *Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon*, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd 1983, p. 117).

CHAPTER 5: SYMBOLS RECURRENT IN GUNN'S FICTION

A) Birds

Traditionally, birds are symbols of purity, and messengers between earth and heaven. In Gunn's fiction, birds appear primarily as symbols of life, and, more specifically, they are the symbols of delight. In *Butcher's Broom*, in particular, the green linnet is developed into a recurrent motif, whereas birds only make occasional apparitions in the other two novels.

In *The Silver Darlings*, Catrine becomes aware of birds during the period of the plague, the time when death is the most present in the novel. The singing of larks in the grey dawn reminds her that life still exists outside:

She could not feel anymore, could not think. For two nights she had had no real sleep. The sunless dawn was grey silver over the still land. She listened to the singing of two larks. Only now and then did one become conscious of bird-singing, because the place was alive with larks, and for months the air was rarely free of their mounting wings. In the grey of a spring morning they became possessed and all the upper air was a quilted ecstasy. Robins and wrens had their clear, ringing songs, and chaffinch and greenfinch their quieter melodies. [SC, p. 233]

The surge of life within Catrine echoes the liveliness of the birds, at a time when Kirsty's death is imminent. Everything in Catrine and in nature refuses death. As usual, the birds make a transient apparition:

Life was so strong in Catrine, she had so healthy and vigorous a body, that fear for the moment touched her and she leaned against the door-jamb, breathing the cool air off the heather. Two peewits started crying up towards the edge of the moor, a restless, anxious crying, urgent with life. They drew near and she heard the silken beat of the wings. They filled her with inexpressible sadness, a sense of beauty for ever lost; their wings beat in her breast. They passed over her, and fell away towards the moor. [SD, p. 240]

By the way, quite different ideas are evoked in the novel by seabirds. They belong to the cold universe of the sea and have little to do with people:

"Perhaps so," said Finn, but with a smile, because his mind was made up to call [his boat] *Gannet*, the white bird that lives in far and stormy seas and is a great fisher. Not a warm name, perhaps: cold and white and distant, but of the sea's core. [SD, p. 528]

In *Sun Circle*, birdsong also appears at dawn, reaching Breeta through her terror and bursting out in the greyness:

She listened as she trembled and pushed her head up, now ready to leap. For she had lost a sound, a cry. A rosy light caught the nipple of the distant mountain. A bird from a

valley tree sang across the morning. And all at once there was birdsong in the sky, interwoven and invisible, weaving down. [SC, pp. 73–74]

As her nerves are calming down, birdsong is one of the things which give her comfort.

In *Butcher's Broom*, two special birds are worth mentioning. One of them is the “swallow of life” [BB, p. 31], which the small boy Davie is said to hold in his hand:

Sometimes he carried it on his sleeve, often enough it twittered out of his mouth, and when he got a fright it gulped down his throat into the cage of his breast. But it could wing swiftly too. [BB, pp. 31–32]

The bird, here, is a symbol of the boy's liveliness, his adventurous spirit, his wit, and his feelings. The reference to the boy's emotions is even stronger in the following passage:

His mind floated in a curious clear coldness, but the swallow of life was beating against its ribbed cage in an excitement that was faintly sickening. [BB, p. 53]

As everywhere else, the emphasis is put on the bird's propensity to fly away and be always a passing visitor.

The other bird is the linnet imprisoned in Old Angus's cage:

[Angus] was very knacky with his hands, built cages out of thin birch whities, and bread singing linnets in his barn. [BB, p. 36]

In Gunn's fiction, linnets are not just like any small birds. In *Highland River*, for example, the green linnet is developed into the symbol of the elusive “moment of delight”, for it is the only bird, which the hero, Kenn, is never able to catch, but can only glimpse. There is also a poem by William Wordsworth called “The green linnet”:³¹

A Life, a Presence like the Air,
Scattering thy gladness without care,
Too blest with any one to pair;
Thyself thy own enjoyment. (II, 21–24)

These four lines convey the image of a being that has reached a state of inner contentment, of delight.

In *Butcher's Broom*, the linnet is to Old Angus what the primrose is to the Aged Bard: “The Aged Bard did not love them; he loved the primrose” [BB, p. 56]. It is the symbol of nature's beauty and perfection, a nature human beings are still a part of. In the following passage, all this perfection is contained in the linnet's beak:

³¹ Published in 1803. William Wordsworth, *The Poems* (ed. by John O. Hayden), New Haven & London: Yale University Press 1981, vol. 1, p. 533.

The linnet let out a note or two and hopped, trilled and steadied. The twin bills when they opened were like the husks of an oat. How delicate, how frail! But this frailty was irradiated with light, almost transparent, when turned with its song to the sun.

The old man's eyes gathered light and a touch of that cunning pleasure which may sometimes be seen in the glance of a craftsman. His eyes, too, seemed to have dwindled and got rounder with the years; and somehow there was all at once a greater kinship between him and the caged bird than between him and his kind. [BB, p. 345]

This passage describes something like an epiphany, experienced by Old Angus and witnessed by his granddaughter Kirsteen. When the bird starts to sing, there is a transfer of light from the sun into its beak. The singing appears as a miracle. The pleasure in the man's eyes is the result of the delight he is experiencing. This ends with a physical identification of man and bird. Symbolically, the bird is killed when the Clearances take place:

“They threw my cage with the cock linnet right into the heart of the flames,” said Angus. “Many a time he sang where he perished.” [BB, p. 368]

At the same time as the bird, the people's traditional way of life and spiritual universe are destroyed. But a bird can be replaced by another one, re-establishing a continuity out of which hope and fun can reappear:

Little Colin led grey Angus to a linnet's nest in that spring of poverty with its thin lovely sunlight of hope. “It's good,” said the old man, “to be out of the cage”. [BB, p. 415]

Angus's granddaughter Kirsteen also has a special relationship to linnets. “She was his great human ally, particularly in the matter of linnets. She was a linnet herself” [BB, p. 177]. The old man, the girl and the bird are linked through a system of metaphors. To Kirsteen, linnets and other birds are a call to life, as they are to Catrine in *The Silver Darlings*:

The notes of the linnet had now the extra magic of distance, and all at once she was aware of larks overhead, interweaving their songs until the upper air was alive and invisibly patterned with them. The haze on the mountains was like a smoke-bloom on ripe blaeberreries. The air was quick with the smell of newly turned earth and manure. All was suggestive of the awakening of life, and the coldness in the sunlit depths of the sky was the coldness of a drinking well. [BB, p. 350]

Throughout the three novels, birds appear as messengers of spring, reminders of life, embodiments of youthful liveliness, and transient images of delight.

B) The serpent

In all mythologies, the serpent is a sacred animal. It renews its skin yearly, and therefore symbolizes regeneration. It is a very earthy animal, living in an underworld, and therefore close to

man's buried ancestors. It is also the symbol of the sudden manifestations of the unconscious, and a phallic symbol. Furthermore, the serpent with its tail in its mouth is equivalent to a circle, with all its symbolic associations, among which is the idea of perfection. Finally, it is the symbol of evil in the Christian tradition.

In *Sun Circle*, the serpent motif appears in the relationships between Aniel and Breeta. Aniel plays at frightening Breeta:

“Remember we were out in a peat bank like this and I hid and wriggled my face round a corner at you and you got an awful fright?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“And the black serpents on my face – you got such a fright!” [SC, pp. 26–27]

Having put serpents on his face, Aniel has assumed the appearance of Rhos, the spirit of the moor, whom Breeta dreads to meet. “When Rhos wants to become invisible and glide nearer, he turns into a serpent,” [SC, p. 31] Aniel says. In fact, what he describes is the way he always approaches Breeta, coming upon her unheard and unseen. The serpent is also one of the things Aniel has made representations of. And when he and Breeta are lost in the bliss of their love, the image of serpents appears again, with its clearly sexual associations: “‘We are curled here like adders on a bank,’ he said at last, smiling to her evasive eyes” [SC, p. 242].

In *Butcher's Broom*, the serpent appears once as a symbol of time, and the embodiment of the Pictish traditions and way of life:

“All that we have done and our forefathers have done, back through time, the very memory of us, is wiped away. In the Word itself there is the saying, the abomination of desolation. It took me to this day to understand it.” [Angus's] head drooped and looked fixedly at his hands; while he still looked at them they began weaving the rope which coiled round him on the earth floor, moving and slithering, coil by coil, like the mythical serpent of his race. [BB, p. 349]

In *The Silver Darlings*, the serpent image is conveyed by the big eel Finn tries to catch, having disobeyed his mother's injunction not to go to sea:

As the baits lay on the sandy bottom, there emerged from the outer forest an eel of such length that fear struck [Donnie and Finn] straight to the heart. It was longer than themselves and its sinuous progress was terrifying to behold. It moved like the father of all serpents. [SD, p. 167]

This eel is extraordinary and comes as a challenge to Finn. In this passage, we have both the Christian meaning of the serpent as the symbol of evil, standing for Finn's wrong-doing, and the Celtic meaning of the serpent as the symbol of the earth spirit and of wisdom, standing for the individual's need to disobey in order to develop his personality.

In the three novels, the symbol of the serpent takes on a full scope of meanings, standing for sexuality and the earth in *Sun Circle*, for time and wisdom in *Butcher's Broom*, and for evil and knowledge in *The Silver Darlings*.

So far, this chapter has considered two symbols which recur in Gunn's work, even though they may just be mentioned once in each novel. One of these symbols, the serpent, even became the title of one of Gunn's novels.³² These symbols have a wide range of meanings, of which only a small share may be developed in individual books. They do not have a shaping function in Gunn's three historical novels, but they belong to his spiritual universe on the whole.

C) Merged categories

Under this title, the imagery in which the categories of man, animal and nature overlap and intermingle will be considered. So far, examples were given of the earth being seen as feminine, of a woman being associated with an earth outcrop, or of two lovers being compared to adders on a bank. The three novels abound with such metaphors and comparisons.

Animated landscapes

In *Sun Circle*, nature, as viewed through the characters' primitive and mythological consciousness, often has human or animal attributes or reactions. Phrases like "the moor waited, silent and flat" [SC, p. 73], and "the moor drew in upon her" [SC, p. 151] express nature's menacing effect on Breeta. The trees, too, frighten her at times: "The trees upreared like rooted stallions whipped by demon riders" [SC, p. 259]. At other times, however, they convey a more peaceful image:

The birches were like little men shrouded in green. Their sides whitened warmly when the wind blew. Their heads were cowed. The leaves were small and occasionally separated in little rifts, as beards separate or the thick coats of animals when the wind is strong. [SC, p. 309]

In *Butcher's Broom*, the village is seen as organic, each cottage being an animal – and therefore no longer a man-made addition to the landscape, but an integrated part of it. The following passage points out the perfect harmony with nature the people of the Riasgan had achieved in the course of centuries:

³² *The Serpent* was published in 1943 by Faber & Faber, next to *The Silver Darlings*.

The round-backed cottages clung to the earth like long animals whose folded heads were always to the mountain. Lying thus to the slopes they were part of the rhythm of the land itself. They grew out of it and merged with it, so that shadow or stillness caught them when it caught the mountain, and the cries of children were no more alien than the sharp cries of moor-birds. In the head of the cottage lived the humans, in the abdomen the beasts, and from the tail-end drained away what the whole ejected. [BB, p. 14]

Furthermore, a thought emanates from this organic entity, making it appear like a person:

But the thought coming out from the darkening hillsides and down the valley seemed earthly enough, as if indeed the Riasgan were contemplating all her children, whose cries and shouts ran along the sky-gleam in the winding stream, about the hillocks, down the waves of the ground and up them and round the cottages, through the birch wood like fingers through hair, growing smaller, lessening, fading out upon the air beyond the hill-crests, where God's thought in its inner brightness could not hear them – or hear them as a human ear the hive-murmur of wild bees deep in the earth. [BB, p. 117]

Finally, in *The Silver Darlings*, the boat, a man-made object, also has human faculties:

But Finn saw the stem of the *Seafoam* caught again in her old wooden dream, launching forward, sheering the water in her hissing song, with invisible eyes not for the boat racing there in front but for the horizon beyond. [SD, p. 380]

Animal-like men

It is quite common for the readers of Gunn's novels to come across people with animal attitudes, for example curled up in their "dens":

[Davie] passed the night under a heather ledge, curled up like an animal, sleepless at first from the cold that gave his vision an extreme clarity but towards morning drugged into a mindless misery. [BB, p. 315]

The characters are often compared to animals: Mairi is a seal [BB, p. 351], Aniel is "the cat student" [SC, p. 222], Breeta is a lynx [SC, p. 224], and when two men fight, it is a "battle of the dogs" [SC, p. 216]. In *Sun Circle*, the tribe has a totem, the raven, which is tattooed on the chief's skin, and with which all members can identify themselves. "The riddle of their tribe was: *What is blacker than the Raven?* The answer: *Death*" [SC, p. 162].

Moreover, some people are believed to have the ability to change their shapes. For example, a witch can turn into a hare, and the Master into an animal or a tree. This can be understood as the druid's shamanic power to detach his soul from his body, thus reaching another state, in which he is in touch with eternity. Aniel understands what the Master means, when his love makes him experience a timeless moment:

Their bodies *were* like adders on a bank; they were like, too, the bodies of furry animals playing on a bank – going back, back into time, until there was nothing but themselves and the bank and the green leaves – tall, up under the sky – and the fanning wind. No responsibility; no dark duties; only the light, and the curled warm bodies. This ecstasy of curled warm bodies that could touch and stretch and lie over and gaze and smile... Had not the Master once said that he could be an animal, even a tree? This then was what he meant! [SC, p. 242]

A third case, in which animals are seen as human, is not really represented in these novels. But one may see it in occasional descriptions of a moody cow, or of these sea-birds:

Whole screaming colonies – with each kind keeping to its ledge! Finn smiled at that. Each to its own township, its own parish. Crowded, shoulder to shoulder, and shouting their rights at the tops of their voices! [SD, p. 318]

Thus, the animal world seems to be the intermediary through which men and nature are linked, mostly by metaphors.

The examples recorded in Paragraph C reinforce the impression that, for Gunn, man and nature should ideally be closely connected and interdependent, working in perfect harmony and forming a whole. This imagery is more developed in *Sun Circle* than in the other two novels, for it deals with primitive people, who as such are very close to nature.

Concluding remarks to Part Two

The material examined in Part Two is not homogenous. Considerations were made of proper symbols, i.e. words referring to something which suggests a range of reference beyond itself, such as the circle, which represents personal wholeness and the integrity of the Self. Furthermore, there is the use of imagery, i.e. a figurative language with metaphors and similes, such as the phrases which identify Mairi with a stone. Symbolism and imagery establish connections between objects found in nature and man's spiritual universe. Man's place in time is suggested by his relations to his ancestors. His place in nature is suggested by his relations to animals and nature. His relation to God may be suggested by his relation to light.

Symbolism and imagery can have a structural as well as a thematic function in the novels. Very often in Gunn's work, the same symbols recur in different books, sometimes with a slightly changed meaning. The examination of the serpent symbol and its different meanings, for example, shows how subtle and complex Gunn's vision can be.

Interestingly, most symbols – with the exception of the rowanberries and the “silver darlings” – are derived from the collective unconscious of man, i.e. they are found with similar meanings in different mythologies and are reflected in the beliefs of primitive societies. For Gunn, these primitive concepts, which have survived throughout the ages, are very valuable, for they express what man primarily is.

Symbols are used to point out a reality that cannot be perceived directly. This reality is related to Gunn's mysticism, which is concerned with the “second self” and the “other landscape”. This world beyond the visible one can be reached in “moments of delight”, in which man is in touch with eternity and encounters the meaning of life.

CONCLUSION

TOWARDS AN APPRECIATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCY OF GUNN'S WRITINGS

Neil Gunn depicts Scottish rural communities, involving always the same kind of characters. These characters are all presented as individuals, with a set of distinct features. Gunn's psychological insight is usually subtle. It can be seen, for example, in his descriptions of the awakening of love in a young girl, of the pride, uneasiness and search for identity in an adolescent boy, of the perception of the environment by a toddler, and in the description of the feeling of getting older in a woman in her late thirties. Characters are also defined on other levels, i.e. as members of a community, and as archetypes. Closely-knit communities can be found mainly in a pre-urban, pre-industrial society, and in a place which is geographically remote from big centres, as was Caithness in the early nineteenth century. The fact that these people have preserved their traditional way of life facilitates their presentation as archetypes, for people with little education may be seen as closer to the genuine essence of man. The characters' archetypal dimension makes them transcend time and place, and renders them accessible also to readers who are not particularly well acquainted with Scotland. The definition of characters as archetypes is never overstressed in the novels, but it is made through occasional glimpses, mostly by the characters themselves – and seldom by the narrator. This dual view of man, as shown in Part One, is rather unusual in literature and is part of Gunn's originality and genius. It reveals Gunn's concern for what is eternal in man.

Symbolism, as shown in Part Two, is much more than an ornament to make the prose agreeable. It is omnipresent in the three novels, being used, for example, in characterization. Most of the time, the characters are aware of the symbols and their meaning, and their personality is revealed through their reactions to the symbols (cf. Finn and the House of Peace, Aniel and light, Elie and the earth, etc.). Symbolism also appears in the description of the natural environment. Furthermore, it is a structural element, which unifies the different parts of each novel, and punctuates the different moments of the plots. Each stay at the House of Peace, for example, marks the end of an episode in Finn's growing-up. Moreover, symbolism reveals

various themes and ideas which are part of Gunn's philosophy or mysticism. It is, above all, a concrete way of making the reader aware of very abstract things and giving him an insight into these things.

Studying symbolism in Gunn's novels reveals the author's interest for primitivism and nature. Indeed, the symbols he uses are mostly drawn from man's collective unconscious. What existed primarily for the first humans was the environment in which they lived. Consequently, Gunn's symbols are all derived from nature, such as the sun, the earth, stones, trees and animals. They often suggest a world beyond, a concern which appears throughout Gunn's work. Therefore, the study of symbolism and imagery is a key to understanding Gunn's spiritual universe.

Sun Circle, *Butcher's Broom*, and *The Silver Darlings* are historical novels, and as such describe worlds which no longer exist. Despite their different plots, characters, historical backgrounds, and narrative techniques, the three novels have in common their setting, a place which closely resembles Gunn's birthplace, and the fact that they feature small rural communities. Interestingly, what is emphasized is not what has changed throughout the years in these communities, but what has persisted, what they still have in common. This consists of certain values, such as hospitality and solidarity, and certain traditions, such as story-telling and music. These communities are pictured in a very positive light, and the traditional Highland clan-system appears to be the author's ideal state of society.

The period up to the Clearances is viewed as a Golden Age by Gunn and by most writers of the Scottish Renaissance movement. Like them, Gunn seems to regret the loss of a basic relationship between man and nature, he uses the supernatural, dream, and local legend in his novels, and he has nationalistic sympathies, as is evident from his choice of local subjects.

Gunn looks for the continuity between the earliest times of humanity and the moment of writing. He is obviously interested in history, but he is even more concerned with the timeless. Like his British, European, and American contemporaries, he tries to find answers to basic questions such as: "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?" Many traditional values got lost during World War I and the financial crisis of the 1930s. Writers such as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, and Neil Gunn look for new values to replace the lost ones. Gunn finds his regenerating values by looking into the past. All his novels show characters looking for the source of life and of man's existence; this is,

for example, the subject matter of *Highland River*. Gunn's characters find this source in their ancestral past, when they become aware of the continuity between themselves and their ancestors. In *The Silver Darlings*, for instance, Finn is introduced into the past through his vision of the monk at the House of Peace. At the same time, he finds his own identity. This, in turn, is inseparable from his experiences of story-telling within the community. Stories, songs, and music establish a link between the ancestors and the present community. Their message is eternal and, therefore, crucial to modern man, too.

There are two components in a man's quest for identity. First, the role of the community is very important, for it can help the individual to find his roots. Second, the individual has to perform, on his own, an act involving primeval gestures. In this regard, hunting and fishing are privileged experiences, because they give people the opportunity to use their instinct rather than their intellect. Most boys and men in Gunn's fiction are born poachers, and, unconsciously, they act and feel as their primitive ancestors did. Big game, like Finn's eel, comes as a challenge that, if met successfully, helps to build one's character.

The same instinct that pushes man to hunt, urges him to go on a quest for something different, something beyond the immediate reality. Gunn's novels are never concerned only with the here and now, however vivid the sense of the here and now may be conveyed. Very often, descriptions are accompanied by one characters' impressions. Through the use of symbolism, the reader is imperceptibly brought to move on to a spiritual level. Therefore, Gunn's mysticism is always attached to things that can be first perceived by anybody.

This mysticism is founded on the belief that there exists something beyond, another landscape. This landscape is out of time, and can be reached by people who have found their permanent Self, like Aniel and Finn. This permanent Self is revealed in "moments of delight", and Gunn shows that the quest for them is worthwhile. An individual who has found his true Self has reached a state of wholeness and integrity. He has a feeling of fitting in perfectly with the world outside. A man should be able to find his Self as an individual and to become a fully integrated part of a community: these are the two conditions for achieving self-realization.

Gunn's philosophy is made of individualism, respect for tradition, and the recognition of a bond between man and nature. Writing in an age of pessimism, he is optimistic, believing that modern man could be saved if he looked inside himself. This is his answer to the questions of his time. Although Gunn's philosophy cannot solve all the world's problems, his ideas will find their adherents, as long as the possibility exists for man to be at one with himself

and his environment, and to come into contact with one authentic tradition, in which he can take root, in order to grow to a fully developed individual, well-balanced and appreciated by others. Moreover, even those who have no sympathy for this philosophy of “natural anarchism” will find undeniable literary qualities in Gunn’s novels and enjoy his highly poetic language.

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