ARCHETYPAL FRATRICIDE IN UNAMUNO'S ABEL SÁNCHEZ[1]

Abstract: *Miguel de Unamuno's* Abel Sánchez *(1917) explores the Cain and Abel archetype. The protagonist of Unamuno's novel, Joaquín Monegro, undermines the traditional dichotomy between good and evil, as well as the biblical image of Cain as sociopath. Although he is forever envious of his friend Abel, Joaquín yearns for transformative knowledge, like Byron's dramatic character Cain. This article examines the spiritual rupture of a man that is at once noble and base, and whose inner torment may be his saving grace.*

Key words: *Unamuno, Abel Sánchez, Cain, archetype, fratricide, jealousy, Byron.*

Miguel de Unamuno's *Abel Sánchez* (1917) explores the Cain and Abel archetype in various contexts, an archetype that Unamuno had already outlined in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida (1912)*:

> Tremenda pasión esa de que nuestra memoria sobreviva por encima del olvido de los demás si es posible. De ella arranca la envidia a la que se debe, según el relato bíblico, el crimen que abrió la historia humana: el asesinato de Abel por su hermano Caín. No fué lucha por pan, fué lucha por sobrevivir en Dios, en la memoria divina. (*Sentimiento* 182)

The very first sentence of *Abel Sánchez* reinforces its mythical and transhistorical dimension: "No recordaban Abel Sánchez y Joaquín Monegro desde cuándo se conocían" (13). The remainder of the first paragraph establishes how Abel and Joaquín came early to define themselves in relation to one another, foreshadowing their rivalry over a woman whose name recalls Helen of Troy.

In his prologue to the second edition (1928), Unamuno notes the spiritual dimensions and political overtones of envy:

> En estos años que separan las dos ediciones de esta mi historia de una pasión trágica – la más trágica acaso – he sentido enconarse la lepra nacional, y en estos cerca de cinco años que he tenido que vivir fuera de mi España he sentido cómo la vieja envidia tradicional – y tradicionalista – española, la castiza, la que agrió las gracias de Quevedo y las de Larra, ha llegado a constituir una especie de partidillo político. (12)

At the time that he wrote these words, Unamuno had gone into exile in France because of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. The allusion to Mariano José de Larra (1809-1837) and Francisco de Quevedo (1580-1645) situates Unamuno within a tradition of exiled Spanish satirists and gadflies detested by petty mediocrities in their times.

Unamuno died in 1936 at the start of the fratricidal Spanish Civil War. Two months before his death, Unamuno publicly criticized General José Millán Astray and was removed as the rector of the University of Salamanca. His commentary on war in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* defines the national tragedy: "La guerra es, en su más estricto sentido, la santificación del homicidio; Caín se redime como general de ejércitos" (403).

[1] Ali Shehzad Zaidi, State University of New York at Canton, zaidia@canton.edu

BDD-A6152 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:58:48 UTC)

Joaquín, the first name of the protagonist of *Abel Sánchez*, comes from a Hebrew word that means "created by God" (Hanks and Hedges 177-178). Monegro, his family name, combines the French 'mon' and the Spanish 'negro' into something like "my dark one" or "my dark side." Within the narrative context, the two names together suggest that our talents and creations are not our own but are on loan from God. The first name of Abel Sánchez recalls the Cain and Abel story in *Genesis* and denotes breath, vanity, fading away, that which is passing (Smith 1). Abel's family name means "son of Sancho" and is, like Unamuno's, of Basque origin. The name recalls Sancho Panza, Don Quijote's earthy servant, who was a kind of spiritual complement to his master.

Mario J. Valdés notes that the convention of a discovered manuscript, namely Joaquín's posthumous confession, allows Unamuno to shift between the first and third persons and thereby convey the social and emotional ambience of Joaquín's inner conflict (92-93). Unamuno portrays Joaquín through interactions with the women in his life. Joaquín unsuccessfully courts his cousin Helena. Although they know each other well, Helena remains cold and distant towards Joaquín. Helena becomes all the more alluring because she is unattainable. "¡Y cuanto más fría y más desdeñosa se pone, más hermosa!" exclaims Joaquín to his friend (18). Joaquín confides to Abel his anxieties regarding Helena and complains that her reserve perplexes him. Abel jokingly quotes Oscar Wilde's saying that every woman is a sphinx without a mystery, suggesting perhaps that Joaquín has projected his frustration on to Helena.

Joaquín imagines slights at every turn. When Helena asks about his patients, he retorts, "¿Tanto te importa eso?" (20), as if his medical practice could not possibly interest her. Joaquín is skeptical when Abel suggests that Helena is distant because she is studying Joaquín. "¿Qué puede ella estudiar?" Joaquín asks, to which Abel retorts, "te estás rebajando y la estás rebajando" (18). Aware that Joaquín's testiness conceals his vulnerability, Abel describes Joaquín to Helena as "reconcentrado, altivo por dentro, terco, lleno de sí mismo, pero es bueno, honrado a carta cabal" (22). Joaquin's sense of inadequacy repels Helena. During a portrait session, Abel tells Helena that Joaquín suspected that she was in love with someone else. Helena replies, "Pues si se empeña… Que acabará por conseguir que me enamore de algún otro" (23). Helena may be drawn to the artist Abel not only because of his charm, but also out of a wish to spite Joaquín.

Joaquín never ceases to try to impose his ego on the world and to recast others in his own image. He is convinced that Abel and Helena married not out of love but out of a desire to humiliate and denigrate himself. It is questionable whether Joaquín could have dispelled his gloom had Abel not taken Helena from him. What is certain is that this event consumed the life of Joaquín whose seemingly inevitable and rancorous misery made him unable to love, to fulfill others, or to overcome his envy of Abel.

Joaquín wants to be free from needless self-laceration and "mind-forg'd manacles" (Blake 454), but he is unable to overcome or sublimate his envy. This will to dominate destroys any incidental happiness that might come his way. After losing Helena to Abel, Joaquín dreams of possessing her next to Abel's best friend. Joaquín suffers because he knows better, because there is a chasm between what he wants and what he knows. When Abel falls sick shortly after his wedding, Joaquín understands that as a doctor his honor and integrity are at stake in Abel's recovery. Still, he hopes to eclipse Abel by excelling in medicine.

At the heart of his pain is his inability to love. After learning that she will marry Abel, Joaquín tells Helena, "no es lo peor no ser querido, no poder ser querido; lo peor es no poder querer" (38). When Joaquín marries Antonia, the daughter of a

BDD-A6152 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:58:48 UTC)

deceased widow, he seeks the warmth and love that would save him from jealousy. Antonia intuitively senses the extent of his remorse which she believes could only come from a good man. She tries to nurse him to spiritual peace: "Antonia había nacido para madre; era todo ternura y todo compasión. Adivinó en Joaquín, con divino instinto, un enfermo, un inválido del alma, un poseso, y sin saber de qué enamoróse de su desgracia" (39). Her self-sacrifice does not redeem Joaquín and only deepens his anguish, for he realizes that he does not love her: "¡Pero no me curó de Helena, no me curó de Abel! Su santidad fue para mí un remordimiento más. Su mansedumbre me irritaba. Había veces en que, ¡Dios me perdone!, la habría querido mala, colérica, despreciativa" (41).

Although he perceives the love and kindness of his wife, Joaquín, being self-centered, would rather see only himself. Hence his desire to project his own traits on to others, such as his wish that Antonia were more "despreciativa." Joaquín despises humility and virtue in others because he himself lacks those very qualities. After Helena, already the mother of Abel's child, rejects his advances, Joaquín proceeds, in an act of displaced rage, to berate his servant for her deference and modesty, forcing the poor woman to leave the house in distress.

Joaquín believes that his negative self-image is an objective reality, an essence that will define him forever. He asks Antonia, when they first meet, to confirm this: "yo soy un antipático, ¿no es así?" (40). Her reply reveals that love is the best means of cognition: "¿Usted? Usted es un desgraciado, un hombre que sufre" (41). Antonia sees worth in Joaquín, which perhaps says as much about her as it does about Joaquín. By contrast, Helena belittles Joaquín at every turn, sometimes deservedly, such as when she disparages his wedding gift of a pair of dueling pistols, telling Abel, "Son para que te pegues un tiro cuando te cansas de mí" (31).

Unable to act on his better instincts, Joaquín cannot be a caring husband: "Sentía Antonia que entre ella y su Joaquín había como un muro invisible, una cristalina y transparente muralla de hielo. Aquel hombre no podia ser de su mujer, porque no era de sí mismo, dueño de sí, sino a la vez un enajenado y un poseído" (47). Nor can he be a good father. Since childhood, Joaquína, the daughter of Antonia and Joaquín, senses the tragic destiny of her father. Like her mother, she tries to redeem Joaquín. Once, when Joaquín wishes that Abel would envy him in return, he hugs his daughter as if she were his salvation, saying, "¡Reza por tu padre, hija mía!" Joaquína asks her father whether he is sick and he responds, "Sí, estoy enfermo. Pero no quieras saber más" (91).

Joaquina cannot quite understand her father's illness but can feel it. Joaquín attributes his illness to a definitive *bebedizo* of original sin. That is why he tells the priest that he does not believe in free will. However, he goes through the exercises of religious ritual all the same. Envy hauls him down dark spiritual causeways, negating the imaginative freedom that is necessary for a creative artist. Joaquín is doomed to envy his friend Abel, the artist, and to resent the Creator.

Although he tries to bring up his daughter well, Joaquín transmits his gloom to her. When he hears that his daughter, now a young woman, will enter a convent, he exclaims, "¡Sí, huye de mí! Me ha adivinado!" (110). Joaquín asks his daughter to marry Abelín, the son of Helena and Abel, instead of joining a convent. However, this attempt to reconcile the two families will fail, as will the attempts of Antonia and Joaquina to dispel Joaquín's self-torment. Joaquín lives a degraded or conditioned life in which he constantly makes invidious comparisons between himself and Abel. Furious that his grandson prefers Abel, his paternal grandfather, Joaquín, in a fit of rage, chokes Abel who dies from an attack of angina.

BDD-A6152 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:58:48 UTC)

Gayana Jurkevich points out that "although it bears the words 'Abel Sánchez,' the book is actually about Joaquín Monegro, the character meant to represent the ego personality whose tortured life the novel intends to chronicle" (350). The title of *Abel Sánchez*, which points to this lacunae or region of darkness, asks us to take a second look at Abel and even casts him in an accusatory light. Abel's involvement with Helena is disloyal to his friend, especially given that Abel had earlier said to Helena about Joaquín, "te quiere con delirio" (22). Something is amiss when Abel tries to justify his seduction of Helena by telling Joaquín that he did not act but was acted upon:

- ¿Es tu novia, acaso?
- ¿Y es ya la tuya?

Callóse Abel, mudándosele la color.

- ¿Lo ves? – exclamó Joaquín, balbuciente y tembloroso -. ¿Lo ves?
- ¿El qué?
- ¿Y lo negarás ahora? ¿Tendrás cara para negármelo?
- Pues bien, Joaquín, somos amigos de antes de conocernos, casi hermanos…
- Y al hermano, puñalada trapera, ¿no es eso?
- No te sulfures así; ten paciencia…
- ¿Paciencia? ¿Y qué es mi vida sino continua paciencia, continuo padecer?... Tú el simpatico, tú el festejado, tú el vencedor, tú el artista.. Y yo…

  Lágrimas que le reventaron en los ojos cortáronle la palabra.
- ¿Y qué iba a hacer, Joaquín, qué querías que hiciese?...
- ¡No haberla solicitado, pues que la quería yo!
- Pero si ha sido ella, Joaquín, si ha sido ella…
- Claro, a ti, al artista, al afortunado, al favorito de la fortuna, a ti son ellas las que te solicitan. Ya la tienes, pues…
- Me tiene ella, te digo. (25)

When Abel tells Joaquín, "No te sulfures así," it suggests that Abel is not merely aware of Joaquín's spiritual torment but is consciously heightening it. Abel's seemingly disarming observation, "somos amigos de antes de conocernos, casi hermanos," is in fact a provocation. So too is his decision to tell Joaquín about his new art project on the murder of his Biblical namesake. In preparation for his painting, Abel reads *Genesis* and Byron's play *Cain* (1821). He tells Joaquín that he wants to reveal the souls of Abel and Cain:

- ¿Y cómo se ta ocurrido eso?
- Muy sencillo – contestó Abel, sin haberse percatado del ánimo de su amigo –; es la sugestión del nombre. Como me llamo Abel… Dos estudios de desnudo…
- Sí, desnudo del cuerpo…
- Y aun del alma…
- ¿Pero piensas pintar sus almas?
- ¡Claro está! El alma de Caín, de la envidia, y el alma de Abel…
- ¿El alma de qué?
- En eso estoy ahora. No acierto a dar con la expresión, con el alma de Abel. (54-55)

This inability to delineate the soul of his Biblical namesake suggests either that Abel lacks understanding or that he is disingenuous.

BDD-A6152 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:58:48 UTC)

When Abel reads to Joaquín a passage from *Genesis*, Joaquín wonders why God had spurned the fruit of the land that Cain had gathered while accepting the sacrifice of Abel's sheep. Abel, observing that the Bible was silent on the matter, suggests that God might have rejected Cain's offering perhaps because He foresaw that Cain would murder his brother. This explanation only confirms Joaquín's view that the Biblical Abel was also guilty of fratricide and that Cain murdered not by choice but by the design of God. Joaquín finds the self-righteous insufferable in their sense of entitlement and superiority.

He hints at Abel's culpability by telling of a joke played on schoolchildren who, when asked, "Quién mató a Caín?," respond, "Su hermano Abel" (56).

Abel lends Byron's *Cain* to Joaquín, who readily identifies with the Cain of this play. Cain has a tragic grandeur amidst the despondency that blights his life:

> I live,
> But live to die. And living, see no thing
> To make death hateful, save an innate clinging,
> A loathsome and yet all invincible
> Instinct of life, which I abhor, as I
> Despise myself, yet cannot overcome.
> And so I live. Would I had never lived! (*Cain* 1.1.109-115)

Capable of granting his patients only a temporary reprieve from death, Joaquín envies Abel's ability to grant the subjects of his portraits a semblance of eternal life. As a doctor and scientist, Joaquín shares the yearning of Byron's Cain for transformative knowledge:

> Oh thou beautiful
> And unimaginable ether and
> Ye multiplying masses of increased
> And still increasing lights! What are ye? What
> Is this blue wilderness of interminable
> Air where ye roll along, as I have seen
> The leaves along the limpid streams of Eden?
> Is your course measured for ye? Or do ye
> Sweep on in your unbounded revelry
> Through an aërial universe of endless
> Expansion, at which my soul aches to think,
> Intoxicated with eternity?
> Oh God! Oh Gods! Or whatsoe'er ye are!
> How beautiful ye are! How beautiful
> Your words or accidents or whatso'er
> They may be! Let me die as atoms die
> (If that they die), or know ye in your might
> And knowledge! My thoughts are not in this hour
> Unworthy what I see, thought my dust is.
> Spirit, let me expire or see them nearer. (*Cain* 2.1.117)

Though he aspires to understanding, Joaquín is, as Ricardo J. Quiñones notes, at once repulsive and heroic (181), like Byron's *Cain*. Quiñones points out that "the great

BDD-A6152 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:58:48 UTC)

purpose of the Cain-Abel story has always been – whatever its guise – to address a breach in existence, a fracture at the heart of things (3). Byron's Lucifer tells Cain that he will anticipate his immortality by suffering. Like Byron and other Romantics, Unamuno explores dark and unconscious aspects of personality, rebelling against traditional dichotomies between good and evil.

Unamuno's Abel senses the inner torment of Joaquín, but rather than hide Joaquín's shame, Abel repeatedly exposes it. In a 1905 essay titled "Soledad," Unamuno writes, "Me habría parecido tan falsa y mentirosa la envidia de Caín como mentirosa y falsa la inocencia de su hermano" (885). Could Abel too have been guilty of the crime imputed to Cain in the *Quran,* that of exposing a brother's shame?

In Surah 5:27-32, the *Quran* relates how, after the death of Abel, God sent a raven that scratched the ground in order to show Cain how to hide his brother's shame. Cain was filled with remorse for not having done so, and suffers, like his literary counterparts in Byron and Unamuno. The same Quranic verse states that whosoever kills a person murders all humanity, and whoever saves a life saves all humanity. Hence, for Joaquín, who once nursed his friend Abel back to health, medicine was a saving grace. Joaquín undermines the traditional image of Cain as sociopath, for his envy, as Unamuno tells us in the prologue, is "una envidia que se defiende, una envidia que podría llamarse angélica" (11). For this tragic conception Unamuno is indebted to the Romantics.

References

Blake, William. "London." In *The Book of Georgian Verse*. Ed. William Stanley Braithwaite. New York: Brentano's, 1908: 453-454.

Byron, George Gordon. *Lord Byron's Cain*. Ed. Truman Guy Steffan. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968 (1821).

Hanks, Patrick K. and Flavia Hedges. *A Dictionary of First Names*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Jurkevich, Gayana. "Archetypal Motifs of the Double in Unamuno's *Abel Sánchez*." *Hispania* 73.2 (May 1990): 345-352.

Quiñones, Ricardo. *The Changes of Cain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Smith, Stelman. *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names*. Alachua, Florida: Bridge Logos, 2009.

Unamuno, Miguel de. *Abel Sánchez.* Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1977 (1917).

_____. *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida.* In *Obras Completas XVI.* Barcelona: Vergara, 1958 (1912).

_____. "Soledad." *Obras Completas III*. Barcelona: Vergara, 1958 (1905): 881-901.

Valdés, Mario J. *Death in the Literature of Unamuno*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966.

BDD-A6152 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:58:48 UTC)