

# Umberto Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*: A conduit for culture, consciousness and cognition

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*Eco's novel describes the popular culture of the Italian fascist period, by deconstructing signs, symbols and signals from a particular period in the lives of both the author and his protagonist. In this sense, the novel can be regarded as a cross-over between two genres, the literary and historical. However, the mixture of art and text as a medium for storytelling, or for making references to the human condition, places it in the genre of the graphic novel.*

*This article explores the novel on three levels. A surface reading establishes it as an historical construct, which prioritizes unofficial memory and popular culture. On a deeper level, however, the protagonist's search into his past can be regarded, in a Jungian sense, as an archetypal journey of discovery. On a third level the ancestral home, Solara, can be regarded as a metaphor for, on the one hand, the collective unconscious, where recurring symbols and motifs act as transformational metaphors and often serve as links between states and levels of consciousness and, on the other hand, for the human brain.*

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## Introduction

There has been much debate over the last decade in academic research circles on the status of postmodernist literature as a literary movement. One of the main reasons for this debate is a general lack of agreement on the characteristics of postmodernist fiction, and the difficulty to formulate a precise definition of the concept. The broad consensus, according to Keep, McLaughlin and Parmar (2000) is that postmodernist fiction is generally marked by one or more of the following:

- its playfulness with language
- experimentation in the form of the novel
  - lesser reliance on traditional narrative form
  - lesser reliance on traditional character development
  - experimentation with point of view
- experimentation with the way time is conveyed in the novel
- mixture of 'high art' and popular culture
- interest in metafiction, that is, fiction about the nature of fiction
- suspension of the barriers between reality and fiction.

Umberto Eco's novel *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, measured against the characteristics listed, is a postmodernistic novel. By way of intertextual references based on graphic images reprinted from books, magazines, comics and newspapers from a specific era, he explores popular culture by dissecting popular fiction. However, the huge collection of historical artefacts from Italy under Mussolini's reign and World War II which forms the backbone of much of the narrative, places the novel within the postmodernistic historical genre (Danyté, 2007). As a postmodernistic historical novel it has many features in common with the characteristics listed, yet it also differs in significant ways by using a narrative formula and combining historical events with purely fictional ones. According to Danyté, historical fiction makes use of a new kind of historical research that allows for the combination of intertexts and writing to record 'popular' or 'unofficial memory'. In Eco's novel this memory is a personal one, as well as one which he uses to describe the popular culture of the Italian fascist period. In an interview the author stated that although the images portrayed in the novel are the images from his personal memorabilia, he did not want to write his own biography, but rather that of a nation (Danyté, 2007:38). He analyses its internal contradictions in order to probe the extent to which ordinary Italians became collaborators in fascism after Benito Mussolini came into power in 1922. It is in this period that both Eco and his protagonist Bodoni were born and went to school.

In this sense, the novel can be regarded as a cross-over between two genres, the literary and historical. However, the mixture of art and text as a medium for storytelling, or for making references to the human condition, places it in the genre of the graphic novel, which is often regarded as a sub-genre of the postmodernistic genre.

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## The graphic novel

According to Eisner (1985) the graphic novel deploys images and words, each in carefully balanced proportion within the limitations of the medium, so that the reader not only has to contend with the elements of fiction (plot, character, setting, theme) but also the syntax or grammar of graphic art, ie perspective, symmetry, colour, font, etc. A concise definition of the graphic novel, according to Bertens and De Haen cited by Burger (1994), would be its capacity to consolidate differing influences into a graphic and literary format. These influences range from folkloric elements to mythical and legendary history, often incorporating folk beliefs with related beliefs and characterizations. The graphic novel, according to Eisner (1985), is often regarded as a museum of art, literature, and history all rolled into one. From this it follows that it will be impossible to find one, true, meaning in a text. The active participation of the reader is therefore required, as proposed by Eco (1979); that he engages intellectually and imaginatively and as such becomes co-creator of the text.

The story unfolds on more than one level and in different time spans; the narrative investigates popular culture and is supported by illustrations from various sources, including comic books, pulp fiction, movies, and extracts from popular songs of World War II. The main time frame places the story in contemporary Italy and within the author's lifetime. An exploration of his past takes place through the experiences of the novel's protagonist, so that the secondary time frames cover his childhood and a specific period of Italian history. The main character is aptly named Giambattista Bodoni, the same name as a famous creator of typography in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Bodoni is a highly cultivated 60-year old bookdealer, who has a stroke and then loses a vital part of his memory. He no longer has access to his episodic or autobiographical memory; in short, those experiences that encapsulate his identity and his sense of self.

To his friends and family Bodoni is known as Yambo, a name taken from an Italian cartoon character. The reader is therefore confronted with the biographical nature of the novel (Eco's own childhood in Italy), and a fictional character, Yambo, who due to his loss of memory is compelled to journey into his past by way of reminiscences from his childhood in order to recapture his identity. His wife, Paola, suggests that he visits Solara, the ancestral home where Yambo spent all his childhood summers and vacations, as well as two years during World War II. It is here, Paola feels, that he will regain his memory. Yambo's search into his past by way of his grandfather's collection of books, movie posters, postcards, old magazines and other memorabilia indeed becomes a route to recall, and in the process his most significant memories and deepest feelings are revealed.

## 'Fog' and 'flame' as unifying themes

The novel is divided into three parts: Part One: *The Incident*; Part Two: *Paper Memory*, and Part Three: *OI NOΣΤΟΙ* (Greek for *The Return*, as 'a return to excellence', referring to Odysseus' return to Ithaca (Piccone, 2004).

A recurring theme in all three sections is Yambo's preoccupation with fog. In Part One he wakes up after the stroke ('the incident'), 'suspended in a milky gray' (p.1). He remembers snippets of information from literature describing fog in a variety of situations, and also uses it to express his dilemma: 'But I don't know who I am, you see? There's fog in Val Padana' (p.16), referring to a geographical location but also metaphorically to his mind. His wife informs him 'You were fascinated by fog. You used to say that you were born in it.' (p.32). In Part Two, during his exploration at Solara of the many rooms and stacks of memorabilia (his 'paper memory'), he finds that 'at every turn I would approach a revelation, and then I would come to a stop on the edge of a cliff, the chasm invisible before me in the fog' (p.256). He realises that, like Sherlock Holmes, in his search he would have 'to combat the fog' (p.152).

Another intentional recurrent repetition is a mysterious flame which occurs as a flare of recognition. In Part One he describes the flame as 'if someone were to come here from the fourth dimension and touch us from the inside – say on the pylorus. What does it feel like when someone tickles your pylorus? I would say ... a mysterious flame' (p.67).

In Part Two, at Solara, he experiences the flame when he enters his parents' bedroom, and again when he finds the image of a beautiful, blonde woman in a magazine (p.104). Later he finds an illustrated magazine of 'pallid damsels'; one of these images causes a 'very' mysterious flame (p.104), as if he has seen it somewhere before. It is when he discovers a magazine entitled *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* that he finds the explanation for the mysterious flames; that he was 'on the cusp of some final revelation' (p.251).

Part Three starts with a chapter entitled *You're back at last, Friend Mist*, and ends with *Lovely thou art as the Sun*. He has regained his memory, but is enveloped in 'real' fog, a coma. He thinks, feels, recalls (p.309) but is unable to communicate. However, everything is now clear to him: 'in the coma's silence, I understand better all that has happened to me' (p.323). Finally, as he experiences the flame of Queen Loana once more, he realises that a 'faint, mouse-coloured fumifugium is spreading'; he 'feels a cold gust', and that 'the sun (is) turning black' (p.449). Hence, in his dying moments, the 'mist' (fog) and the 'sun' (flames) reassert themselves as guiding, central elements within the plot, which not only motivate Yambo's actions but also dictate his choices.

### Heroic fiction as an archetypal journey to self-discovery

Modern literary criticism, according to Fishbane (1989), acknowledges that a person's inner world is created by fragments of different texts, which live together in the mind, one qualifying another. The moral universe is thus shaped by *King Lear*, *Moby Dick* or *Madame Bovary*, just as much as by the Bible. The human mind rarely absorbs texts whole but rather as isolated images, phrases and gobbets that live in the mind in myriad, fluid groupings, acting and reacting on one another. Very often these memories are the products of archetypal stories of encounters between heroic figures and human beings, which help the reader or listener to see attributes such as self-control, moral courage, generosity or noble deeds as ideal dimensions of their own lives. Heroic tales of physical courage and exciting events, according to Waggoner (1978), allow the reader to identify with the hero not only because he is good, but because he is strong, clever and resourceful.

To access one's inner world, one needs to be able to connect to autobiographical memories which, according to Singer (undated) cited by Chaudhuri (2008), are vital in piecing together identities. They provide clues to subconscious desires; how one sees oneself, and how one wants to be seen. Self-defining memories are those that refer to the turning-point moments in life, such as meeting a partner, or the birth of a child, and reveal not only how identity has changed and developed over time, but also how past experiences are framed. People remember most vividly events that happened to them between the ages of 10 to 30, when the most 'firsts' occur. This is also the time of strong emotions, triggering activity in a part of the brain called the amygdala, which makes memory more active. It is between these two ages that the process of defining oneself takes place. The stories that a person tells about his past give clues to better understanding himself. To recover forgotten memories is therefore vital in order to reconnect one to the future.

Yambo, having lost his autobiographical memory, immerses himself in paper memories of his childhood stacked away in the many rooms at Solara. As he progresses from room to room and from one stack of paper memories to the other, he begins piecing together images, phrases, sounds and smells of his forgotten past. He finds that much of his 'first' memories are linked to the world of fantasy, adventures and deeds of heroism, played out by a variety of fictional characters. One of these characters is Ciuffettino, created by a certain Yambo. Ciuffettino is described as a boy with 'an immense quiff' (much like the young Bodoni's own quiff), whose adventures take place in fairy-tale settings such as dark, brooding castles, with wolves in magical forests and underwater visions (p.134). Bodoni identifies with the character as the time and place where 'the Yambo I am now, and the one I wanted to be, was born'.

As a hero figure the young Yambo played out Ciuffettino's adventures; as an adult he again traverses the route of discovery. His first intimation that his search for his past also involves a treasure is the comic book characters Clarabelle and Mickey Mouse, and their search for a long-buried treasure (p.71). Yambo instinctively knows that in order to rediscover his past, like the comic book characters, he will have to 'triangulate' and 'redo the triangulation', until he finds 'exactly in that spot, the treasure' (p. 71).

Yambo's search into his past, in Jungian terms, can therefore be regarded as not only to restore his memory, but ultimately to find the treasure – his spiritual, inner self. After the stroke he finds that although he had retained his encyclopaedical memory, '(W)hatever feelings I once had were no longer mine ... I had lost my soul' (p.21). The search becomes a retracing of a journey to manhood which, according to De Laszlo (1959) cited by Brozo (2002), is associated with a kind of 'right inner passage to become fine young men and honourable adults'. Positive male archetypes are an adolescent boy's guides along this interior journey. Jung (1964) found evidence for these archetypes in the nearly identical motifs and tales of manhood that appear in widely separate cultures, captured in the tribal stories, songs, poems and fairy tales of different cultures.

Using archetypes to interpret literature is a highly common practice in literary criticism (Cowden, Vidars & Lefever, 2000). Brozo (2002) identifies ten male archetypes which, he suggests, can be helpful to guide adolescent boys through the archetypal world of the male psyche. These images of masculinity, derived from the work of Jung (1964) and Arnold (1995), 'may be thought of as signposts along a boy's psychic journey to claim or reclaim an honourable masculine identity' (Brozo, 2002). The archetypes are Pilgrim, Patriarch, King, Warrior, Magician, Wildman, Healer, Prophet, Trickster, and Lover. As Yambo relives his childhood during his research into his paper memory, he evokes many of these archetypes through the fictional characters that he identified with while growing up. The Lover archetype, for instance, is induced by Yambo's re-introduction to Sibilla, his beautiful, blond assistant at his place of work, after his first stroke. She sparks the 'mysterious flame' through thoughts and fantasies of her (p.68). He feels that he may one day be able to penetrate the fog 'if Sibilla was there to lead me by the hand' (p.62).

### Solara, place of light (or enlightenment)

Fantasy, according to Jung, Adler and Hull (1981), is the living union of the inner and outer worlds, 'the well of our collective unconscious', that is, recurring symbols and motifs that act as transformational metaphors and often serve as

links between states and levels of consciousness, bridging different domains of reality. Yambo's journey similarly takes place on different levels of reality: a research of the memorabilia stored away in the immense rooms at Solara, with 'attics like the Postojna caves' (p.33), and a retracing of his journey from childhood to manhood, all the while activating the archetypes which mark his progress, including that of sexual awakening. He reads a passage from the *Confessions*: 'memories gather all this in its vast cavern, in its hidden and ineffable recesses ...' (p.38). 'Your cavern is in the country house,' his wife suggests (p.73). The 'caverns' at Solara thus become not only a place but also a state of mind, or a conceptual metaphor, as proposed by Lakoff and Turner (1980).

The home as a metaphor was experienced by Jung in a dream which he later described to Sigmund Freud (Swart, 2007). In the dream Jung finds himself on the top floor of his home and on his way down he investigates each level. Each conspicuous item, each observation, represents a perception. He systematically descends to the lower floors and eventually reaches the cellar. The descending levels each mark an older era; the building material used in the lower section is older than that of the level above. He is literally moving towards earlier stages of a younger, forgotten and unconscious self. Each room in the house thus represents an emotional and psychological compartment of the mind that upon investigation reveals aspects of not only the psyche, but also the internal structures and processes that are involved in the acquisition and use of knowledge.

Specific regions in the brain play a role in the processing of emotional and cognitive events. Cognitive functions involve the mental process of knowing, including sensation, perception, attention, learning, reasoning, language, thinking and memory (Sci-Tech Encyclopaedia). Memory, according to Edelman (1990), is the biology that creates consciousness by recovering the past in the present. If no comparison took place between value and past categorizations to form a special memory, consciousness would not appear.

The actual physiological processes involved in Yambo's loss of memory are therefore pivotal to the understanding of the home as metaphor. He suffered a stroke that affected areas in the brain where memories are stored (p.12-13). His physician describes the physiological processes involved: two cerebral networks are affected; the one implicit that regulates automatic recall, like the brushing of teeth, the other explicit, with two parts, the semantic memory and the episodic memory. Semantic memory involves categories, words, its meanings and associations as strategies for communication and for the ordering of society, while episodic memory establishes the link between the past, present and future. Yambo has not lost his semantic memory, but the episodes of his life. He can thus remember all the things he read in a book somewhere, but not the things associated with his direct experience.

Autobiographical memories are distributed over many neural systems: from frontal regions involved in retrieving episodic memories to posterior regions involved in sensory processing (Rubin, 2005). The amygdala, for instance, is involved in emotion, and the hippocampus in episodic encoding and retrieval. Visual memory plays a central role in autobiographical memory: the strength of recollection of an event is predicted best by the vividness of its visual imagery. On the advice of Yambo's physician that he returns to a familiar environment to '(L)ook around, touch things, smell them, read newspapers, watch TV, go hunting for images' (p.26), he returns to Solara. He wanders up and down stairways, in corridors and through the many rooms, analogous to the neural systems involved in memory retrieval, and experiences mysterious 'flames' triggered by an image, a smell, or a sound. His brain is thus constructing a new profile of neuronal excitation, that is, the seeking of new neural connections that will reveal his identity.

### Exploring the caverns

As he arrives at Solara, Yambo defecates in the vineyard (p.86) which marks the entrance to the main house. He often did this as a boy, and now finds the act comforting, akin to the triangulation process performed by Clarabelle in her quest for the lost treasure: it was 'an instant of reuniting with my old, forgotten self'. He sees the act as a symbol to mark the re-entering of the world of his childhood, the beginning of his journey, and a pathway to the treasure that is waiting to be discovered.

He enters the house and wanders from room to room, recognizing objects and paraphernalia, reliving the memories attached to them. The left wing is familiar and comforting, to be equated with the implicit process of automatic memory recall as well as with the left hemisphere of the brain, which presides over rational relationships and verbal language. The right wing is the older part of the building and needs a set of keys, one for each door that he opens. This part of the house not only represents Yambo's lost explicit episodic memories which can only be rediscovered through reconstructing his past, but also the right hemisphere of the brain, which deals with emotion and the visual universe (p.275). He finds keys, or triggers, to these memories: on a stairway, for instance, a painting of the *Stairway to Life*, with images of a cradle and babies on the first step, then step by step, figures to radiant adulthood, descending to old-age and the image of Death. In the other rooms are prints with faces and costumes depicting all the races and people of the world (p.95). In his parents' bedroom which is also his birthplace, he experiences the 'mysterious flame'; this experience, together with the images on

the stairs, serve as markers to his personal history that places him within an immediate family circle and the extended global community. The neural connections to the basic tenets of his existence, from birth to death, are thus re-established.

The study, which he remembers as a vast repository of books, is strangely empty, 'its sobriety...deathly' (p.99). The shelves now only contain atlases, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and French magazines. Thus the 'storehouse', the treasure rooms (p.103) of his explicit memories, is empty. In one of the French magazines, though, he finds the profile of a woman with long golden hair, like a 'fallen angel', and suffers not a flame, but 'an actual tachycardia, this time' (p.104). It is an image, he finds, that has been with him as a child, a boy, an adolescent, and on the threshold to adulthood; it was Sibilla's profile. The search at Solara from that moment takes on a new valence – he not only needs to know what happened before Solara, but also afterwards.

Amalia, the housekeeper, informs him that the contents of the study have been moved up to the attic. Yambo compares the attic to a cellar: the latter subterranean, dark, damp, always cool, with natural underground passages, where one needs a candle or a torch. The attic, on the other hand, extends over the three wings of the house, just beneath the roof. It is hot and humid with light coming from a series of dormer windows and skylights, barely filtering through the piles of junk. He had always thought that cellars symbolized the primordial, or the mother's womb with their amniotic dampness, but now realises that 'If a cellar prefigures the underworld, an attic promises a...paradise' (p.120), a region that can be regarded as one of 'supreme felicity or delight'. The attic is 'an endless labyrinth' with many recesses and shelves for storage (p.119), reminiscent of the neocortex, or newer portion of the brain, with billions of cells arranged in layers, and millions of meters of wiring. It serves as the centre of higher mental functions which permit vision, touch, hearing, movement, and every other feat of cognition (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Yambo spends many days in the attic in frenzied reading, intent on retracing and reconstructing remote events. He (re)discovers his elementary and middle school years between 1937 and 1945, as well as the civic and historiographic details of the war and fascism, and with it his first intimations of good and evil and a social conscience shaped by events captured in books, propaganda postcards, street posters, and songs.

The attic had taught Yambo a lot about history and the world at large, but he still could not remember – he 'was still missing some link, perhaps many links' (p.211). He was missing the details of his emotional development during a crucial stage of his boyhood; he needed to re-establish the 'firsts' that defined his life as an adult. He therefore had to find his own schoolbooks, comic books and comic albums. Was he the Yambo shaped by school and (fascist) public education, the Yambo of the many voyages and adventures, of Cuiffettino, or all of them (p.212)?

### Into the crypt

A trapdoor in the attic floor leads down into a hidden chamber, a chapel that has been walled up since the war. It is here that Yambo finds the comic books and albums of his childhood (1936-1945) that he had hidden there as an adolescent – Time's Temple, he calls it; his personal history. The trapdoor thus represents a pathway to the earliest stages of a younger, forgotten and unconscious self. He relives the worlds of fantasy and fairy-tale characters – Felix the Cat, the Katzenjammer Kids, Jiggs and Maggie, and the mock-heroic adventures of comic book characters playing out the war in aeroplanes, tanks, torpedo boats and submarines. Flash Gordon provides him with a first image of a hero – 'fighting some kind of war of liberation in an Absolute Nowhere' (p.237). Mandrake the Magician he regards as a 'bourgeois hero', as is Secret Agent X-9. These archetypal characters open up another world to him where the versions of good and evil differ from those that he had found in the attic.

But he also finds here the first revelation of 'the eternal feminine' (p.246). A series of a women's magazine carries illustrations of actresses, which helped him form an ideal, archetypal figure which he now realises he has pursued his whole life. He was assuming the toga of manhood at the time, and had decided to 'conserve in a crypt' a past to which he could devote his adult nostalgia (p.251). Among the many albums he stumbles on is one with a multicoloured cover entitled *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. Therein lay the explanation for the mysterious flames that had shaken him since his reawakening, and his journey to Solara was finally acquiring a meaning. He had forgotten the historical Loana, but had remembered the title, and 'years later, his memory in shambles, he had reactivated the flame's name to signal the reverberation of forgotten delights' (p.253).

He later discovers through an acquaintance in the village near Solara that in his third year at high school he had had a crush on a girl he remembers as Lila Saba, who vanished in the same year. She had blond hair, a face both angelic and devilish, but had died at age eighteen – a fact that Yambo only now learns, as well as that her name was not Lila. Yambo realises that he had been pursuing this lost love all his life, that Lila Saba was a nick-name for Sibilla.

But still the solution lay elsewhere. He had found the links to his past, but nothing to connect him to the present, or the future: 'the mist was thickening', the 'fog pervasive' (p.297). He rummages through a box and to his astonishment

finds an extremely rare and valuable Shakespeare First Edition dated 1623; the treasure, at last. It is an invitation to return to Milan, to the present, to his profession, and to his future. Excitement at the find muddles his thoughts, his face blazes with heat, his heart races – and he suffers a second stroke.

*You're back at last, Friend Mist*

Yambo is in a coma. He has regained his memory, can think and feel, but senses nothing outside of himself, and cannot move a finger or a leg. Although he shows no cerebral activity, he still has interior activity. He is assailed by memories appearing in logical sequence, and is able to put them back in chronological sequence. This process of remembering soon turns into a cascade of paper and real memory, and it becomes difficult for him to distinguish between the two. The mysterious flame of Queen Loana is burning his 'crumpled-parchment frontal lobes' (p.448), and he suspects that he might be dying. At last he would find what he has looked for all his life, from Paola to Sibilla, and be at peace; his search for lost time successful; like Odysseus, a return to Ithaca. The fog envelopes him, and the light fades. He dies of a third and fatal stroke.

## Conclusion

As is the case with Eco's previous works of fiction, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* is a many-layered construct. A surface reading establishes the novel's role as a conduit for culture by combining historical events with fictional ones: Yambo finds that a fascist society allows a child to laboriously construct a social conscience. The novel thus suggests, in accordance with Danyté (2007), that moral knowledge can come from popular culture, even comic book narratives that seem to have no depth or literary merit, but whose profound effect on a child's imagination leads to ethical judgments. On a deeper level, however, it is also an archetypal journey of discovery. The journey coincides with the physical process of discovery at Solara: the heroic adventures of his paper heroes give rise to inward and outer struggles that guided the young Yambo on his journey to manhood. The physical journey involves the physiological processes involved with storing and retrieving memory – 'recovering the past in the present', in accordance with Edelman (1990). The novel therefore also serves as a conduit for consciousness. Solara can thus be viewed as a transformational metaphor (Lakoff & Turner, 1980); on the one hand the house portrays Yambo's psychical condition, in a Jungian sense the disclosure of deeper psychological truths. On the other hand the (re)discovery of aspects of his life involves certain physiological processes that influence his mental capacity. The novel can therefore also be viewed as a conduit for cognition.

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