

## **Ties that Bind, Dreams that Liberate:**

### **Escapism and Patria in Domingo, El Abuelo Astral**

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All America lies at the end of the wilderness road, and our past is not a dead past, but still lives in us. Our forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed, we live, and what they lived, we dream.

T. K. Whipple

Often our personal reality is clouded by our perception of that reality. We act and react in accordance with the obstacles, real or imagined, which line our daily path. In his latest novel, Domingo, El Abuelo Astral, Milton shows us that when our perception of reality does not distance us enough from reality itself, we turn to other methods of escape and we dream.

The novel revolves around two principle characters, a grandfather and his grandson, who are locked in to an intimate relationship. This relationship exists in part because the entire remainder of the family has left them behind, but also because they grow to have more in common with each other than they do with anyone else. Leopoldo and Domingo find themselves spiraling through their existence locked in a double-helical escape that extends even beyond life itself.

Domingo, *el abuelo* or the grandfather, escapes from the realities and limitations of his age in *viajes astrales* or astral journeys. These journeys take him vicariously to the carefree days of youth where his wisdom now brings him the control he lacked and he can rectify the faults that were once his own. These escapes even survive death and he

continues to escape from the reality of the afterlife by keeping one foot firmly planted in the land of the living.

Firmly planted in the carnal land of the living is his *nieto* or grandson, Leopoldo. Leopoldo escapes from the trials and tribulations of life through what become the complex simplicities of rum and sex. In a restrictive society that limits both thoughts and goods for consumption, the people search for something over which they have control. This may even be something as simple as the pleasures of their own flesh. While this loveless satisfaction may be bringing about their own destruction and downfall, they continue because it allows them to escape from a life without choice.

Alcohol, here in the form of rum, becomes an escape from memories. It allows this same society to forget the friends and family that have left them behind. They can also begin to forget about the society that constrains their actions. Once again, this escape into the bottle may be bringing about their own destruction and downfall, but together rum and sex become the panacea for those members of the novel who feel a need to escape. This is especially true for Leopoldo who becomes obsessed with both. They not only provide him with a means of escape but they also bring him to a level that his grandfather must continually return to save him from.

Milton also uses the characters in the novel to illustrate the internal conflict that remains for ex-patriated nationals, not only from Cuba but from any homeland to which they are unable to return. There is a strong sense of nationalism and connection to the homeland associated with Domingo. This sense of nationalism is illustrated early in the novel as Leopoldo recalls his grandfather's characteristic phrases. "I will never leave my homeland to go and live where I am not wanted. I will go when Fidel goes.(page 4)" To

confirm that this is a connection to the homeland, Leopoldo goes on to recall memories of his great-grandfather which were passed down to him by Domingo and precede the changes brought about by Fidel and the revolution. Domingo acts as a rudder to stabilize the novel and bring about a sense of safety and order. As long as Leopoldo remains in contact with his grandfather and his island, he remains savable regardless of the depths of depravity to which he may descend. Several examples are also provided of family members, including Leopoldo's mother, who have left the island. These escapes end in tragedy when they become betrayed by false friends, resulting in an existence that is much worse than the one they left behind in Cuba. Eventually, Leopoldo finds himself carried into situations beyond his own control and the influence of his grandfather. The reader learns of the limitations in the saving powers of nationalism and the internal conflicts that come when Leopoldo tries to leave his past behind in search of a brave new world.

In the end, this novel demonstrates the intimate relationships that bind a family together. The novel should not be thought of as an example of Cuban nor Cuban-American literature as this will prove to be far too restrictive. The issues and perspectives go beyond these geographical, philosophical, and political limitations. They transcend social and cultural boundaries, introducing the reader to an unfamiliar experience through unfamiliar settings which together ring very familiar bells. Most importantly, the reader is introduced to *literatura de joda*. Loosely translated, this would be literature that messes around with your brain. Domingo, El Abuelo Astral is certainly a novel that will do that for you.