

The Angels & Demons of *The Water Knife*

The Water Knife (2015) by Paolo Bacigalupi (hereafter TWK or the novel) opens with Angel, an enforcer for the Southern Nevada Authority (SNWA), looking down at a Cypress arcology, an urban oasis in the Las Vegas desert. The novel's arcologies share traits with the Garden of Eden drawing inspiration from Paolo Soleri's design 1970 blueprints, biblically titled, "Arcology: The City in the Image of Man" and Arcosanti project where a beautiful garden community was constructed in the Arizona desert (Arcosanti). Through Carver City and Phoenix, we are shown it is a world where the well has run dry, hell-like, with water processing facilities engulfed in flames and cities in dust storms. Using a maze of legal loopholes provided by Charles Braxton on behalf of his boss, Catherine Case, Angel allows Las Vegas to hoard water, providing it to those oblivious to his protection while destroying the water facilities of rival states. Although the idea of a violent future over water might seem unreal, the author stated in an interview that water scarcity is a reality, and the book is a possible "what-if" scenario where peace has disappeared with water (Eveld).

Water instead has been replaced by a thirst for sweat and blood, similar to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) where the metaphorical desert is hell, "The desert upon which so much blood has spilled is little more than a container. Its thirst is a beast which cannot be watered" (McCarthy 121). In TWK, the setting is a period which shares historical similarities with the 1900s-1920s, a period shaped by water wars (Plumguru). The novel visually portrays that "War is hell" (Sherman), with this metaphor through violent destruction in its opening chapter. In this not-too-distant future, military enforcers contracted by state governments mercilessly ignore pleas for nonviolence, cracking jokes about destruction while laughing like devils. It is only until we juxtapose the setting of the southwest today that we see references to the novel's setting and a biblical hell. Instead of litigating and buying water rights, along with building dams, states still litigate but also use Apache helicopters to blow up water processing plants of entire cities. The setting of TWK is one where the scarce water that remains is an oasis of life in a dry desert of death.

The theme of angels and demons plays out in the novel through Angel and similarly in history through Los Angeles, which shares similarities with the character in both name and characteristics. Los Angeles, translated to "The City of Angels" has a history of destroying other cities such as Owens Valley to secure their water supply ("How Los Angeles Got Its Nickname"). Similarly, in the novel, Angel, as the "water knife," uses any means necessary to secure water for Catherine Case, a woman symbolizing life or the Virgin Mary for Vegas and the skinny lady or La Santa Muerte for other cities. This theme of Santa Muerte, the patron saint of death, is used to add a sense of foreboding and danger to the story when Case orders Carver Cities' destruction. Case a fallen civil servant now engaged in acts of evil may even be tied to the biblical Lucifer, when she says the phrase "If they can't police their damn water mains, they can drink dust", being the equivalent to "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (Milton, Book 1, line 263). The Virgin theme is also present, as the city of Las Vegas is referred to as "Our Lady of the Desert," emphasizing the importance of water to the people who live in this harsh environment.

Water in TWK takes on mystical and religious aspects being referred to as "Godwater". Baptism in water has been religiously symbolized by rebirth in scripture, "Baptism...now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience..." (Bible, Peter 3.21). Similarly, the character Lucy dreams of receiving the blessing of water with it shedding away her difficulties, it being an all-encompassing force which makes everything else insignificant. This is further shown when Angel remains amazed by the Colorado river, reflecting that the Hindus had once worshiped rivers. In TWK, Vegas is a symbol of life, with its glimmering lights because of plentiful

water supplied by their guardian angels Angel and Catherine Case. Meanwhile, the absence of water in a collapsed Texas causes its former residents, known as Merry Perrys and modeled after Rick Perry's 'pray for rain,' to cling religiously to their hope for water (Fritz, "Texas Prayed for Drought-Busting Rain"). TWK's theme regarding water is that, although significant, it is not an unlimited resource and it can slow to a trickle as seen through the Colorado River in real life and in the novel (National Geographic).

The theme of religious martyrdom is also present in TWK, where characters suffer for their communities. Jaime is a character who dies seeking to improve the life of others, mainly himself. Although not a Saint Jesus and motivated by profit, Jaime had a religious faith that senior water rights could change the world and whose sacrifice pushed others, such as Lucy, to adopt this belief. Another example is Simon Yu, who nearly martyrs himself trying to protect the water facility. This ties into the theme of water as a sacred and life-giving resource, and those who try to manipulate it for personal gain are punished. There is a power dynamic at play in the story where those who control the water hold immense power over the lives of others and will stop at nothing to maintain that control. The novel is a reminder and warning about our history and a possible violent future over the fight for water.

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