

Dualism & horror

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 18 Oct 1998

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Peter T. Cash — 18 Oct 1998, 23:04

from alga:

...

Manichaeism: But Sarge, that's just exactly what Mani cobbled together, a ragbag of a religion, borrowing from everything he knew of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Marcionism (Marcion taught that there were two gods: capricious old Yaweh of the OT was similar to the Gnostic Demiurge, while Jesus was son of the True God whose time would come). If he'd known about Thor, he'd have thrown him in too. Mani would have been a great scriptwriter for "Xena: Warrior Princess." And so would Dr. Talos, if he got a decent editor.

I know. Mani was the L. Ron Hubbard of the third century.

Mani's dualism came from the Zoroastrians (who supplied Meschia and Mechiane to Dr. Talos) and he added the concept of Light vs. Darkness, so beloved of gothic writers. Alex, you can't say that there is only Dark in Lovecraft, for opposed to that is the normal world, represented, in Hollywood versions, by pretty suburban streets. If you don't have a norm--Innsmouth or Arkham before the horrors came--where's the scare? The Amurican Way of Life, that's the Light. At least in novels.

Alga, your thesis that horror is inherently (will that do instead of "necessarily"?) dualistic is so thought-provoking that I hate to spoil things by finding fault with it. However, I would venture that if suburbia is the light that opposes the Great Darkness, then we've got a pretty weak dualism. This light is a dim bulb, this divinity is one of communion by water and not wine. It is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob illuminating this place. It's George Westinghouse.

I will back-pedal a bit on "necessarily," but only a bit. Since the end of the 19th century, the Dark is not necessarily a Christian dark, in fact most often it isn't. Despite the crucifix hocus-pocus, we do not think of vampires as demons of Satan; they inhabit their own Dark. Werewolves are folkloric, not Christian. Hyde, though a demon, is a metaphor for what Freud would call the id, not a damned soul. Dorian Grey hides Hyde's face behind his own (sorry about that sentence), but again it's extra-Christian.

"How about "pagan" instead of "extra-Christian"? I don't think this darkness is anything new; perhaps after the 19th century it becomes "neo-paganism", that's all. I would argue that any work that doesn't have a Christian dimension but does deal with supernatural evil is pagan; any dualism is strictly secondary and quite uninteresting. (I'm not saying that pagan works necessarily lack value or interest, of course.)

Nevertheless, if only for convenience of term, I would argue that the gothic tradition is Manichaeic--with all the implicit messiness. Writers like C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, who tidy up the mess, have made this even clearer, but they are far outnumbered by the others. King now, a dualist to the Dark Untidy Core.

Never having read King and having not the slightest desire to do so, I'll have to withhold judgment. I do believe you're helping me understand why I've always despised the horror genre. Since I do believe in the God of Abraham, this "supernatural evil" stuff seems a trifle silly to me; I just don't get it. I know that God permits evil in the world--but it's evil done by us humans--it is not supernatural. If Satan exists, he's void, in the sense of having no substance--I believe the common metaphor is say he is like a shadow. (Hmmm....shadows in Wolfe's works...not an uncommon theme. Hmmm.)

But nevertheless, Dr. Talos and his play do represent apocalyptic dualism, Armagedon, Ragnarok, whatever. And it may be a mess, Sarge, but it belongs too.

I never meant to say it doesn't. Just that it's a mess, and maybe a bit of self-parody contained within the larger work.

Sgt. Rock

Michael Straight — 19 Oct 1998, 08:46 · follows Peter T. Cash

On Sun, 18 Oct 1998, Peter T. Cash wrote:

Alex, you can't say that there is only Dark in Lovecraft, for opposed to that is the normal world, represented, in Hollywood versions, by pretty suburban streets. If you don't have a norm--Innsmouth or Arkham before the horrors came--where's the scare? The American Way of Life, that's the Light. At least in novels.

Alga, your thesis that horror is inherently (will that do instead of "necessarily"?) dualistic is so thought-provoking that I hate to spoil things by finding fault with it. However, I would venture that if suburbia is the light that opposes the Great Darkness, then we've got a pretty weak dualism. This light is a dim bulb, this divinity is one of communion by water and not wine. It is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob illuminating this place. It's George Westinghouse.

I thought it amusing that in Stephen King's book Salem's Lot, the good almost seems to draw power parasitically from the evil. I seem to remember a scene where the good guys pour holy water on their limbs or tools or something and when they get to where the coffins are hiding find that they have the extraordinary strength necessary to break in.

My first thought was, "How come that doesn't work when building a church or a homeless shelter?"

My impression is that horror is not dualist because either there is no comparable Good to oppose the Evil or the Good is so far superior to the Evil that it doesn't need to stoop to the same methods to oppose it.

I haven't read much horror, however. Are there many horror novels that have both a supernatural Good and Evil but the Evil wins? (Not counting stories where the apparent "Evil" turns out to be morally superior to the apparent "Good".)

-Rostrum

Mark Millman — 19 Oct 1998, 10:16 · follows Michael Straight

On 19 October 1998 at 6:04 AM GMT,
Sergeant Rock (Peter T. Cash) wrote:
"How about "pagan" instead of "extra-
Christian"? I don't think this darkness
is anything new; perhaps after the 19th
century it becomes "neo-paganism",
that's all. I would argue that any work
that doesn't have a Christian dimension
but does deal with supernatural evil is
pagan; any dualism is strictly secondary
and quite uninteresting. (I'm not saying
that pagan works necessarily lack value
or interest, of course.)

While I'll grant you that Islamic and Zoroastrian
works aren't typically of great importance in our
culture, Sergeant, I'd hesitate to suggest that
Judaism is either pagan or contains Christian
elements. If you want to argue that supernatural
evil in Judaism is a relic of pre-Jewish Semitic
paganism, I'll agree with you; but then I'll insist
that Christian supernatural evil derives from a
much wider variety of assimilated and co-opted
pagan sources. As for high theology, which can
be far removed from Christian folk belief, and
even a great deal of doctrine . . . I can't speak
to that.

Sergeant Rock continued:

If Satan exists, he's void, in the sense
of having no substance--I believe the
common metaphor is say he is like a
shadow. (Hmmm....shadows in Wolfe's
works...not an uncommon theme.
Hmmm.)

If Satan is void and without substance, there's
a strong implication that all the other members
of God's heavenly hosts are as well; the book
of Job makes Satan's existence, if not his
exact role, quite explicit. And, while it's not
clear whether God gave Satan only the man-
agement or the actual performance of Job's
misfortunes, there is more than a suggestion
of agency.

But I do very much like your observation on
shadows.

Mark Millman

Tony Ellis — 19 Oct 1998, 16:27 · follows Mark Millman

Apologies for prolonging a thread that steered due west of topic some time ago, but this is getting interesting:

Alga wrote:

Alex, you can't say that there is only Dark in Lovecraft, for opposed to that is the normal world, represented, in Hollywood versions, by pretty suburban streets. If you don't have a norm--Innsmouth or Arkham before the horrors came--where's the scare? The American Way of Life, that's the Light. At least in novels.

I'm on Alex's side. I don't think you can say that the normal world "opposes" the Dark, in a dualistic sense, because in Lovecraft's fiction the normal world is the Dark. What we think of as normality is invariably revealed to be a delusion, or merely the narrowest slice of a much bigger, scarier universe. As for "Innsmouth or Arkham before the horrors came", it's another basic tenet of the stories that the horror was there first, inhabiting this world long before humanity turned up. Any pretty suburban streets are just a part of a transient blip in reality, cosmically speaking.

Sgt. Rock wrote:

...I do believe you're helping me understand why I've always despised the horror genre.

Interesting choice of pejorative there. <g>

Since I do believe in the God of Abraham, this "supernatural evil" stuff seems a trifle silly to me;

Well, the usual expression is "supernatural horror" rather than "supernatural evil". Most of the more highly-regarded horror writers long ago grew out of the simplistic good\evil trap.

Rostum wrote:

I haven't read much horror, however.

You should! There's some great writing out there. (And an even huger amount of crap, naturally.)

Are there many horror novels that have both a supernatural Good and Evil but the Evil wins?

Off the top of my head... none (but there must be a few). The rule seems to be that if you have a supernatural Good, it has to win. That's probably why the horror I prefer doesn't have such feeble concepts in it in the first place.

Alex David Groce — 19 Oct 1998, 14:23 · follows Tony Ellis

Continuing the dualism & horror thread (it's not off topic--one of the essays in Castle of Days talks about the issue, so there's our Wolfe link. I don't remember the essay in detail, but one part goes something like "Fantasy has the gods under God, while in horror Satan kills and is killed by Cthulu."

Tony Ellis wrote-

I'm on Alex's side. I don't think you can say that the normal world "opposes" the Dark, in a dualistic sense, because in Lovecraft's fiction the normal world is the Dark. What we think of as normality is invariably revealed to be a delusion, or merely the narrowest slice of a much bigger, scarier universe. As for "Innsmouth or Arkham before the horrors came", it's another basic tenet of the stories that the horror was there first, inhabiting this world long before humanity turned up.

Any pretty suburban streets are just a part of a transient blip in reality, cosmically speaking.

Yes, if anything, Lovecraft's world is a kind of opposite of non-dualist orthodoxy--the only Real Game in Town is the Utter Abyssmal Eldritch Things from the Deep. I agree with Tony that (A) the horrors are, as Lovecraft constantly emphasizes, MUCH older than humanity and (B) even if Innsmouth and Arkham weren't just upstarts, they are hardly a real force for good. The only defense against the horror is ignorance (I think that's a paraphrase of part of "The Call of Cthulu"). If the Dualism is Cthulu & Co. vs. human ignorance, that's a pretty weak Dualism.

Well, the usual expression is "supernatural horror" rather than "supernatural evil". Most of the more highly-regarded horror writers long ago grew out of the simplistic good\evil trap.

Perhaps out of the simplistic version of it--I think there are some good horror writers who still make use of the concepts. Even a supremely ambiguous writer like Robert Aickman (my favorite) often suggests, in his quiet way, that something is evil--the dog in "The Same Dog," or Mr. Millar in "Meeting Mr. Millar" or Parliament in "My Poor Friend." In fact, part of Aickman's genius is the way he subtly equates certain social trends with a kind of invisible and incomprehensible Evil.

Off the top of my head... none (but there must be a few). The rule seems to be that if you have a supernatural Good, it has to win. That's probably why the horror I prefer doesn't have such feeble concepts in it in the first place.

I wouldn't call the concept of supernatural good a feeble concept--maybe seldom well done in a horror novel, but at least outside that context it's been one of the most powerful ideas in history (and in literature). I'd even stretch the definition and say Dante's Inferno is a brilliant work of horror that (in the end, even without the Purgatorio and Paradiso) is based on the concept of a supernatural good--"Divine justice moved my maker."

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." - John 8:32

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Alex David Groce — 19 Oct 1998, 14:36 · follows Alex David Groce

Mark Millman wrote:

While I'll grant you that Islamic and Zoroastrian works aren't typically of great importance in our culture, Sergeant, I'd hesitate to suggest that Judaism is either pagan or contains Christian elements. If you want to argue that supernatural evil in Judaism is a relic of pre-Jewish Semitic paganism, I'll agree with you; but then I'll insist that Christian supernatural evil derives from a much wider variety of assimilated and co-opted pagan sources. As for high theology, which can be far removed from Christian folk belief, and even a great deal of doctrine . . . I can't speak to that.

Yes, Judaic works would be another category. Although I can't really think of a work from a Jewish perspective involving a supernatural evil right off hand... And I suspect that any I could think of would have an attitude to it not unlike some Christian works. Judaism may not have

Christian elements, but I'd be fairly silly as a Christian to deny their are Jewish elements in Christianity... Either way, you have some similarity of the view of evil (not identity, at all, but similarity).

Sergeant Rock continued:

If Satan exists, he's void, in the sense of having no substance--I believe the common metaphor is say he is like a shadow. (Hmmm....shadows in Wolfe's works...not an uncommon theme. Hmmm.)

If Satan is void and without substance, there's a strong implication that all the other members of God's heavenly hosts are as well; the book of Job makes Satan's existence, if not his exact role, quite explicit. And, while it's not clear whether God gave Satan only the management or the actual performance of Job's misfortunes, there is more than a suggestion of agency.

But I do very much like your observation on shadows.

Yes, although evil is a perversion of good, it does EXIST -- Satan has a will of his own--in the end he's "without substance" in one sense, but I think he's an agent capable of action and indeed, in orthodox thought, of great power in the world. Sins, after all, arise out of an improper degree or object of love, but still exist (by drawing substance from the good). This is sloppy language of course, but then St. Thomas can sound sloppy talking about the Mystery of Evil (or Free Will, which is inextricably linked).

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