

Dualism and Horror

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 20 Oct 1998

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Tony Ellis — 20 Oct 1998, 09:38

I wrote:

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.

and Alex David Groce wrote:

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."

Now that -is- interesting. I was actually thinking of Aickman when I wrote that! He's one of my favorites too. But for me he's very much a writer of supernatural horror, rather than evil. The dog in "The Same Dog" or the father in "The Stains" scare -me- because they seem representative of an alien, unknowable universe, rather than "evil". I don't know what Aickman's religious beliefs were, if any, but the impression I receive from his books is of a fundamentally pagan worldview, where "good" and "evil" are labels for things we don't understand rather than absolutes.

Alga wrote:

I don't pretend to be a Lovecraft expert (though I have a friend who is; I'm not going to ask him about this, however) but still, you have to have a Light that has beaten the Dark back for a while, don't you? During that blip?

Well... no, actually. Sorry to be so insistent, but this is the essence of Lovecraft's fiction. The Dark is merely sleeping, as the result of certain cosmic cycles - it hasn't been beaten back by anything. Later imitators developed the idea of Good Gods defeating the Bad Gods and imprisoning them, but you don't find that in the original McCoy.

It does seem to me that, as a generalization, Good v. Bad works pretty well for horror. You start with a norm and discover that Things Are Not What They Seem.

Perhaps as a generalisation for a certain kind of horror story, but I'm still not convinced. If you find that the norm turns out to be Not What It Seems, haven't you just collapsed dualism into monism?

Easy to parody. Jane Austen did it in -Mansfield Park- a long time ago.

Northanger Abbey, actually. (Sorry.)

Alex David Groce — 20 Oct 1998, 09:55 · follows Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis wrote:

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Ah. I would tend to agree that they represent an unknowable universe; I've always wondered what exactly Aickman's beliefs were as well (I've never managed to get ahold of a copy of his autobiography...) other than a passionate belief in England's inland waterways (which is parodied in "My Poor Friend"). However, an unknowable can be implicitly evil or good, I think--I would say there are moral judgments very quietly hiding in a lot of Aickman's stories--it's because they are hiding that they are so convincing... I think that the haunting statement in "Larger Than Oneself," (roughly--don't have the book with me) "They got what they wanted; as in the end we all do," has moral overtones--David Hartwell seems to agree, and placed it in the section of THE DARK DESCENT that deals with stories about good & evil. After all, Christian thinking suggests that in this state both good and evil are to some extent unknowable--"now we see through a glass darkly." And a story like "The Houses of the Russians" strikes me very much a good/evil tale, in a Christian sense. While "The Real Road to the Church" would be touching on the Mystery in Good. Not that I'm saying Aickman's a C. S. Lewis of the spooky or anything--I'm not at all sure from his fiction what his beliefs were, but I'd say he makes use of good and evil and even very Christian ideas about them at times.

Hmmm... Probably boring the daylights out of the non-Aickman reading public on the list. Although if you like Wolfe, you should give him a try.

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

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