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The Horror of Fangs: The Celebration of a Counter-Cult

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Abstract

A scrutiny of the vampire literature surely reveals to the reader an attempt to uphold a machinery of opposition by the Gnostics, a fraction of Christianity, subjected to sectarian animosity, in a strategic confrontation with the larger and the more widely accepted section of Christianity. Though ultimately all English vampire stories of the nineteenth century overtly or suggestively proclaim the victory of Christ over the dark forces, they never fail to suggest the existence of a binary opposition to prevalent dogmas and doctrines within Christianity by the marginalized, the stigmatized, and the victimized. This is how vampire-fiction timelessly contains the spirit of the Armageddon where the act of designating 'goodness' or 'evilness' to the bellicose sides often does not conform to what religion expects us to believe.

Keywords- Gnostic, Sectarianism, Gospel of Judas, Nag Hamadi, Tenets, Manicheanism

Texts like William Polidori's 'The Vampyre' (1819), Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), Bram Stoker's classic, *Dracula* in 1897 or other vampire literature written in the nineteenth century follow the same paradigm that involves an undying war of the evil against the holy where the vampire characters are positioned in opposition to Christ to challenge the basic tenets of Christianity and also to be scared of some church-accoutrement finally to reinforce the supremacy of Christ. The root of this conflict can be traced back to the early days of Christianity and even before, when Christ was not yet crucified and Judas was still to be labeled 'a traitor'. In the chapter 'Roots of Gnosticism' in her book *The Everything Gnostic Gospels Book: A Complete Guide to the Secret Gospels* Meera Lester observes:

Aspects of Gnosticism were present from the earliest beginnings of the Christian faith and spread rapidly throughout Palestine, Syria, and elsewhere in the Near East. It developed into a coherent system of thought during the second through the fourth centuries. Gnosticism likely predated Christianity and borrowed ideas and themes

from Greek philosophy (especially Plato) and Judaism, synchronizing or merging them with ancient myths and Christian stories. Biblical historians believe that Gnosticism, as a growing movement, originated in the Hebrew-Christian environment because many names, ideas, and idiomatic expressions that occur in Gnostic writings have Semitic origins. (n.p.)

In the same book in a different chapter entitled “Top Ten Interesting Facts You’ll Learn about the Gnostics” she has shortlisted her observations on the basic principles of Gnosticism and the growth and decline of Gnosticism in proximity with the mainstream Christianity :

1. Gnostic heresies prompted early Christian leaders to refine their beliefs.
2. The Gnostics believed that God the Father of Jesus was not same as the God worshipped by the ancient Hebrews.
3. The earthly realm and physical universe were created in error by a lesser god called the Demiurge, the Gnostics believed.
4. Salvation, the Gnostics believed, did not come from the death and resurrection of Jesus but rather through secret self-knowledge, or gnosis.
5. The Gnostics believed that the physical world has entrapped those beings who possess sparks of the divine light (or divine nature) within them.
6. Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi library has stimulated worldwide interest in the origins of Christianity and the role played by the Gnostics.
7. Scholarly interpretations and commentary of the recently discovered ancient texts have led to a clearer understanding of the diversity of the early Christian communities, including those of the Gnostic Christians and the tumultuous period in which they emerged.
8. The Gnostics did not discriminate against women in their worship services or fellowship sessions.
9. Valentinus founded a system of Gnostic belief that flourished and posed a real threat to orthodox Christianity.
10. Gnostic traditions flourished between the second and fourth centuries but the movement all but died out by the middle of the fifth century. (Lester n.p.)

It is absolutely obvious that some of these tenets contain a note that could be deemed rebellious to Christianity. Gnosticism, believing this physical world being a prison, Salvation not having come from the death and resurrection of Jesus but rather through secret self-knowledge, or women’s being in the same status as men certainly made the early church fathers full of frowns to the Gnostics. So, as history tells us, the Gnostics had to face persecution to the extent of being reduced to such an abominable, insignificant, adversely propagandized and consequently dreaded fraction within Christianity that mainstream Christians ceased to regard them as Christians at all. Rather they thought of them as descendants of Devil himself. As a result of this not many people nowadays know about the

Gnostic sectarian paraphernalia. Phillip David in his *The Wheel Broken at the Cistern: The Divergence of Orthodox Christianity from Gnosticism* tells the reader how Gnosticism was subjected to an apathy that the early church-fathers prescribed for true Christians to follow. Penned by the early Church Fathers—the men who, out of fear of religious contamination, propagated orthodoxy —books like Irenaeus’s five-volume *Against Heresies* characterized Gnosticism as the “refuge of perverts; of insane, depraved, life-hating freaks who held orgies, practiced promiscuity and homosexuality, aborted and devoured fetuses, and refused to bear children.” (David n.p.) By delineating the Gnostics in most sinister colours People like Irenaeus provided their followers a negative picture of a religious practice which was hideous and repulsive and so exactly what true followers of Christ should always try to keep a safe distance from.

The portrait of Gnostics as dangerous counter-Christians, a portrait painted by power and enshrined as truth, survived for sixteen hundred years. And then in 1945 an archaeological find known as the Nag Hammadi Library was discovered inside a cave in a mountain in upper Egypt to change the scenario, or at least to question the arbitrariness with which certain issues had been addressed by the early Christian ecclesiasts. Roger Pearse in his article, *The Nag Hammadi Discovery of Manuscripts* narrates the yarn of the accidental discovery of an ancient piece of Christian history (n.p.). And Peter Kirby in his article, *Gospel of Mary* refers to Karen King as saying in her introduction in *The Nag Hammadi Library*

The confrontation of Mary with Peter, a scenario also found in *The Gospel of Thomas*, *Pistis Sophia*, and *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, reflects some of the tensions in second-century Christianity. Peter and Andrew represent orthodox positions that deny the validity of esoteric revelation and reject the authority of women to teach. *The Gospel of Mary* attacks both of these positions head-on through its portrayal of Mary Magdalene. (Kirby n.p.)

Karen King has made it clear that the early Christian patriarch was adamant in doing away with “the esoteric revelation” which can also unmistakably be associated with Gnosticism, and any proposition of women being at the spearhead of Christianity in its promotional stage – the two objects of antipathy which later, together with aspects like racism and classism, formed an axis to gyre up the vortex of horror to baffle the mainstream animosity.

The documentary film entitled *The Gospel of Judas* (National Geographic) shows that in the year 1978 an Egyptian Shepherd found a codex inside a cave, that codex contained the Gospel of Judas. The discovery was quite similar to the Nag Hamadi discovery in the year 1945 which had brought to light the story of Mary Magdalene. The documentary film tells us that in the early days of Christianity many Christians were in fact Gnostics and very interestingly, apart from the four renowned gospels, namely the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John there were thirty more Gospels of which one was the Gospel of Judas. Each of

these Gospels had its ardent followers. Naturally, The Gospel of Judas was revered by a considerable number of early Christians. And these people regarded Judas their hero. Because Judas was the only one who used the ploy of deception to liberate the soul of Jesus from his bodily confinement. Another Biblical documentary film, *Who Killed Jesus* (Bible Mysteries, BBC) presents to us evidence of the fact that the crucifixion of Jesus could be ascribed to three persons – Pontius Pilatus, the then Roman Governor; Kayafas, the Head Priest of Jerusalem; and most surprisingly, Jesus himself. The film tells us that Jesus requested Judas for the most infamous betrayal of history. The film entitled *The Gospel of Judas* shows Jesus as appealing to Judas's Gnostic inclination and saying to Judas: "You will sacrifice the man that clothes me." In fact this is the spirit that pervades the philosophy of the Gnostics wherefrom they abhor engaging themselves in the act of procreation. To the Gnostics being born is just the not-so-happy occasion when a free spirit happens to get confined in a perishable container. However, Irenaeus thought it best to minimize the number of Gospels and minimized them to four. In the year 180 A.D. he banned the Gospel of Judas along with many other Gospels on charge of heresy.

Now, the tenets of Gnosticism, if compared to the prevalent notions about vampirism, will certainly seem to have something in common and in doing so it would usher a reader into the domain of hypothesis regarding whether this cult of the vampire has been used as a ploy against the Gnostics to stigmatize them, socially, and henceforth to facilitate the growth and expansion of the main-stream Christianity. Irenaeus' railing against the Gnostics brings forth certain supposed attributes of the Gnostics which fit into the slot of our perception or idea of what these vampires are like– "perverts; of insane, depraved, life-hating freaks who held orgies, practiced promiscuity and homosexuality, aborted and devoured fetuses, and refused to bear children." (David n.p.) Thus disowned by the mainstream Christianity, it seemed all too natural for the Gnostics to wage war against it in every way possible. And in vampire fiction we may find that equipped with the parameters of hatred, the Gnostics guised as vampires are challenging the established religion. It begins with denying the supremacy of Christ. Of the ten tenets of Gnosticism, as arranged by Meera Lester and shown earlier, tenet no. 2 and tenet no. 4 have got direct relation to this. The origin of Gnosticism is believed to have taken place in ancient Greece and then it has had its heyday even in the early days of Christianity in the Eastern European region where the perception of the East regarding soul and its immortality must have had a direct bearing in the formation of the Gnostic tenets. In vampire-literature, therefore, there is inevitably an association of the East. In Polidori's *Vampyre* the eastward journey has been suggested very crisply: "Having left Rome, Aubrey directed his steps towards Greece, and crossing the Peninsula, soon found himself at Athens." (14) Carmilla's mother is of an "old Hungarian family." In Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' too, the association of the East is obvious. Towards the very beginning of the novel Jonathan Harker's journey into the Transylvanian reeks with 'East': "The impression I had was that

we were leaving the West and entering the East; the most western of splendid bridges over the Danube, which is here of noble width and depth, took us among the traditions of Turkish rule.”(Stoker 5) Again, the vampire-slayers have to undertake a perilous journey to the East to kill the Count. The Gnostic connection of vampires is confirmed as in the novel Abraham Van Helsing provides us with a rather inclusive list of nations and cultures believed to be the dominions of vampires:

For, let me tell you, he (Dracula) is known everywhere that men have been. In old Greece, in old Rome, he flourishes in Germany all over, in France, in India, even in Chermosese, and in China, so far from us in all ways, there even is he, and peoples for him at this day. He have follow the wake of the berserker Icclander, the devil-begotten Hun, the Slav, the Saxon, the Magyar.(Stoker 184)

This inclusiveness appears to be an echo of the idea of universality as once propounded by Manicheanism, a Gnostic sub sect. This unifying spirit of Manicheanism, as one finds it in Encyclopaedia Britannica, can be conjectured to have been encoded in the cross cultural, cross religious existence of vampires:

Mani sought to found a truly ecumenical and universal religion that would integrate into itself all the partial truths of previous revelations, especially those of Zoroaster, Buddha, and Jesus. However, beyond mere syncretism, it sought the proclamation of a truth that could be translated into diverse forms in accordance with the different cultures into which it spread. Thus, Manichaeism, depending on the context, resembles Iranian and Indian religions, Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism. (Britannica n.p.)

Thus vampirism, founded strongly on a philosophical basis, has gone for a concrete image of the Anti-Christ. As a result we have come across a dreadful being that has assumed the shape of Lord Ruthven in William Polidori's *The Vampyre* ; Carmilla in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*; and Count Dracula in Stoker's *Dracula*. They opt for others' blood. So, in a way, vampires opting for others' blood, placing themselves in the functional stand, contradictory to what Christ is worshipped for—giving His blood for humanity, is a gesture of avenging a long-observed religious segregation and disparagement. And here if one considers the prize of someone's giving oneself to the thirst of a vampire, one might find the vampire-cult strong enough to challenge the power of God. Bitten by a vampire, one would gain the status of the 'undead' – which is but a variant of immortality. And God does not allow human beings to be immortal. Therefore, the bite, which is supposedly fatal from a conventional-religious perspective, can be seen as a part of the ritual of initiation. This would take us to the important aspect of spreading of belief through conversion where once again vampirism markedly deviates from Christianity. In *Dracula* in the chapter entitled 'Jonathan Harker's Journal Continued' the three succubae along with Dracula himself show some of the features of the Gnostics specified by Irenaeus:

The other added, “He is young and strong. There are kisses for us all....Then the Count turned, after looking at my face attentively, and said in a soft whisper, “Yes, I too can love. You yourselves can tell it from the past. Is it not so? Well now I promise you that when I am done with him, You shall kiss him at your will...” (Stoker 31-2)

In this part it is the promiscuity in vampirism that is manifest. The attitude is undoubtedly a libertine one. But if one reads the three vampire-stories and treats them together as representatives of a gamut of literature, surely one will find something more than mere promiscuity – something which challenges the scrupulous approach of Christianity to women. In a BBC documentary of The *Bible Mysteries* series, entitled *The Real Mary Magdalene* it is recorded that the woman, Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus himself had chosen to be his message- bearer, was denied her due place among Jesus’ Apostles. Records also tell us of a bitter argument that broke out between Peter, the Rock and Matthew regarding whether Mary Magdalene could really be regarded the ‘consort’ (wife) of Jesus Christ. The discovery of the Nag Hamadi text in the year 1945 let us know finally that there had been a Gospel attributed to Mary Magdalene and that the Gospel was, towards the end of the 2nd century A.D., pronounced heretical. In this respect, once again, as vampire literature shows, vampires, the ‘undead’ have enjoyed the privilege of a more or less egalitarian social pattern. If vampirism is held as a sort of faith, in vampire-fiction women have been seen playing apostles in spreading the faith. While John Polidori’s *The Vampyre* has dealt with a male-Vampire, Sheridan Le Fanu in his *Carmilla* deals with a female-Vampire. While dealing with a prominent overtone of lesbianism, Sheridan le Fanu presents his reader with such a vampire-character who sounds like a preacher of some conviction. In Chapter IV entitled ‘Her Habbits – A Saunter’ *Carmilla* addresses the narrator of the story as a mentor would instruct his or her protégée:

Dearest, your little heart is wounded; think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours. In the rapture of my enormous humiliation I live in your warm life, and you shall die - die, sweetly die - into mine. I cannot help it; as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others, and learn the rapture of that cruelty, which yet is love; so, for a while, seek to know no more of me and mine, but trust me with all your loving spirit. (LeFanu 97)

In Stoker’s *Dracula* in Chapter 11 entitled ‘Dr. Seward’s Diary’ Abraham Van Helsing is shown to be endowed with the knowledge regarding this ‘ritual of initiation’:

Arthur bent eagerly over to kiss her, but at that instant Van Helsing, who, like me, had been startled by her voice, swooped upon him, and catching him by the neck with both hands, dragged him back with a fury of strength which I never thought he could have possessed, and actually hurled him almost across the

room. 'Not on your life!' he said, 'not for your living soul and hers!' And he stood between them like a lion at bay. (Stoker 129)

Arthur is here almost ushered by Lucy into a new faith. But Van Helsing intervenes. And his intervention is nuanced. Firstly, this gesture from Van Helsing epitomizes how Mainstream Christianity has stigmatized any potential challenge to its well being by associating it with fear, both mortal and spiritual. And juxtaposed with religious agents like Helsing are vampires like Count Dracula who would emerge with their manifesto to counter the established religion that has been, for them, a contraption for suppression, segregation and denial. And secondly, Van Helsing suddenly finds patriarchal hold on religion to have slackened to pave way for a woman to stride in resolutely to wheedle away the soul of a man through a queer ritual of conversion. All on a sudden Van Helsing assumes the role which Karen King believes that Saint Peter assumed in the early days of Christianity in time of his confrontation with Mary Magdalene with the purpose of gaining authority over the newly formed clan. King believes "Peter and Andrew represent orthodox positions that deny the validity of esoteric revelation and reject the authority of women to teach." (Kirby n.p.) In case of Lucy in *Dracula* patriarchy deems it far more acceptable to castigate her through the obviously brutal ritual of inserting a stake through her heart to make her abjure the new faith and its concomitant privilege of becoming a preacher and revert to the conventional faith to strictly conform to what society expects from a woman – to be preached to and not to be a preacher. Christopher Craft thinks that there is a sexual innuendo in driving a stake through Lucy's heart. It is 'corrective penetration' (Craft 118) to subdue Lucy and her apparent sexual aggressiveness. Now, the thing to take note of is that what Victorian patriarchy finds suitable to apply for the sake of morality, has timelessly been one of the most trusted implements for religious conversion. For the vampire hunters the penetration with a stake is just the option to resort to which is necessitated by the penetration by the vampires with their fangs. Any clan thrives on the number of its followers and initiation is the process to increase number. It is absolutely power-politics that mainstream Christianity has invented cogent stories to engrave in the minds of the majority the distinction between Baptism and contamination– the recommended way to become a Christian and losing one's soul to the lure of a vampire.

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