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### ***La Belle Dame Sans Merci*: Cultural Criticism and the Mythopoeic Imagination in George MacDonald's *Lilith***

#### **Abstract**

Examines MacDonald's critique of capitalism in *Lilith* as well as its spiritual and psychological elements—especially the theme of dying-to-self.

#### **Additional Keywords**

MacDonald, George. *Lilith*—Moral and religious aspects; MacDonald, George. *Lilith*—Social criticism; Self in *Lilith*; Social Criticism in *Lilith*

# La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Cultural Criticism and the Mythopoeic Imagination in George MacDonald's *Lilith*

Kath Filmer

From earliest times, myths and stories have used as a focus for fear, for uncontrolled power, and for unrestrained evil, the image of the beautiful but deadly woman. From the oldest myths of the Vagina Dentata to the Jungian concept of the dual-sided anima, the devouring female figure is evoked in all kinds of realistic as well as fantastic writings. A brief overview of such fearsome women include the Gorgons, the monster Grendel's mother, Morgan le Fay, Christabel and of course Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. More recently, Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* offers Auntie and Arga Waga; the third Mad Max movie, *Beyond Thunderdome*, featured Auntie Entity, and the manic female played by Glenn Close in the movie *Fatal Attraction* also evokes the same potent mythological icon.

In juvenile literature, the same figure appears in many different guises as ogresses and giantesses, as wicked stepmothers and ugly stepsisters, as bad fairies, wicked witches and as Hans Anderson's Snow Queen. C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* is under the threat at different times from a White Witch – a close relative of Anderson's Snow-Queen – and a Green Witch who are both examples of the flawed female figure. Lewis Carroll's Red Queen and Queen of Hearts are examples from *Victoria juvenilia*. It is not surprising, then, to find the same image appearing in the work of Carroll's friend and contemporary, George MacDonald. What is interesting, however, is the use MacDonald makes of the image, and how a work of immense mythopoeic power with deep spiritual and psychological insight, and of social criticism takes shape around it.

When one speaks of social criticism in the Victorian age, one thinks immediately of George Eliot and Dickens and of the fantasies of William Morris and of the imaginative writings of Jack London. George MacDonald, however, is known to have been a devout Christian (albeit one persecuted and sacked from an incumbency because of his heterodoxical views). The temptation exists to dismiss MacDonald as an allegorist and Christian apologist, but although allegory and apologetics are present in his fantasies they by no means impede the mythopoeic and critical social vision which plays such an important role in the shaping of his novels, in particular of his final fantastic novel, *Lilith*.

As a social critic, no writer was better placed to comment upon the hardships endured by the poor, or upon the icy charity extended to them by the wealthy. MacDonald's already small salary was cut by the wealthy Church Board which was offended by his "heresy" that salvation would

be extended to the heathen, so that the clergyman – a married man – was compelled to live on an income considerably less than the original stipend of £150 per year. After an impossible struggle to do so, MacDonald resigned his position at the dissenting chapel at Arundel where he had been stationed, and for the rest of his life, another 42 years, he lived on the proceeds of his writing, lecturing, tutoring and occasional preaching. Such an income was unreliable, to say the least; but when MacDonald writes of the social inequalities of his age, he does so as a member of the most disadvantaged section of that society, the poor and the diseased (MacDonald suffered recurring bouts of tuberculosis) (Lewis vii-viii).

Like better-known social reformers, George MacDonald believed that the inequalities and injustices prevalent in society were caused by a canker in the human condition, a "black spot," as it were, on the integrity of humanity. This "black spot" or area of disease and decay is in essence, the refusal of humanity to "die to self," to acknowledge that everything is a provision of God which is to be shared freely among all. Until humans learn that true wealth is to be found in freely yielding the rights of ownership, the canker would be manifested in greed, acquisitiveness and meanness. Even the desire of some of the wealthy to extend "charity" to the less unfortunate is part of the soul's canker, for the result of such gratuitous interventions is not relief for the poor, but smug satisfaction for the wealthy benefactor. These cogent arguments are presented in three ways in the novel. Firstly, through the persona of the angel-vampire *Lilith*, the *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* who inspires terror in the mirror-world into which the protagonist, Mr. Vane (surely a symbolic name) is drawn. *Lilith's* rule over the city of Bulika brings about a waterless wasteland of existence, where humans are sterile and the few children who are born there are exiled in a deep forest.

Secondly, Mr. Vane is invited by the Raven who turns out to be the redeemed Adam, to "die" to himself. Vane resists, and tries to help the community of orphaned children in his own philanthropic way, only to cause more chaos and misery in the process. And thirdly, the "black spot" or canker on society is imaged in the diseased side of *Lilith's* body, and in the black spots on the panther whose form she assumes, contrasted with the pure white panther who defends both Vane and the children from *Lilith's* attacks. The "black spot" is also depicted in the behavior of the Giants into which some of the innocent orphaned children evolve when they indulge in greed and selfishness. As *Lilith's* rejected daughter, Lona, tells Mr.

Vane, "The giants were not made always... If a Little One doesn't care, he grows greedy, and then lazy, and then big, and then stupid, and then bad..." And as one of the Little Ones begins to eat the Giant's apples, Lona adds: "He is a glutton, and there is no hope of him. — It makes me sick to see him eat!" (65). Having shown the process by which a human is seduced by greed, MacDonald has Lona indict the whole race of giants, while Mr. Vane identifies the tenor of the symbol for which the other-worldly Giants are the vehicle:

"... When they grow big they care for nothing but bigness; and when they cannot grow any bigger, they try to grow fatter. The bad giants are very proud of being fat."

"So are they in my world," I said; "only they do not say 'fat' there, they say rich."

"In one of their houses," continued Lona, "sits the biggest and fattest of them — so proud that nobody can see him; and the giants go to his house at certain times, and call out to him, and tell him how fat he is, and beg him to make them strong to eat and grow fat like him" (66).

There is a certain discomfiture to be felt by any reader who recognizes the world of commerce and trade, complete with the trappings of power which the bloated plutocrat enjoys. One thinks, perhaps, of Dicken's *Gradgrind* who refuses to give his workers the most basic of human courtesies, deriding any requests for consideration as demands for turtle soup. Or perhaps in today's society, we can consider the business moguls who play with paper money in the business of takeovers, bringing human misery in the wake of "rationalizations" which destroy the livelihoods of employees — all for the sake of being "fat," in order to be told, deferentially, how very "fat" they are. The metaphor is possibly more effective in today's society, where to be literally fat is to be despised. For MacDonald, the wealth which was generated by greed and self-aggrandizement was equally despicable.

At this stage in the development of the plot, the canker on the human condition is depicted in allegorical and easily decoded images of greed, laziness, fatness and giant-size. The giant-image suggests power, but power with a certain gaucheness and clumsiness. When MacDonald finally introduces readers to the character of Lilith, he does so with much more subtlety and consequently with greater effect, for the marred female image is both a psychological and a literary archetype which works at a much deeper level of readerly perception than the more obviously didactic device of allegory.

Mr. Vane first discovers Lilith lying in a deep coma, shrunken and wasted and cold, and very near to death. He has heard of her from a daughter of Eve, the redeemed Earth-Mother who offers rest to those who would learn the way to die the good death of repentance and self-denial. Eve's daughter, Mara shelters Mr. Vane; like her mother Eve, Mara is an Earth-Mother figure, and it is she who takes the shape of the White Panther. Mara is called The

Cat Woman by the children, who do not understand that she protects them. From Mara, Mr. Vane learns that Lilith is a capitalist, a despoiler of the countryside, and a perverter of the common people. She has, we are told, "taught them to dig for diamonds and opals and sell them to strangers, and made them give up tillage and pasturage and build a city" (75). There follows a passage of some of the most bitter social criticism to be found in Victorian — or indeed, in any era's — literature:

"...the princess has lived in Bulika, holding the inhabitants in constant terror, and doing what she can to keep them from multiplying. Yet they boast and believe themselves a prosperous and certainly a self-satisfied people — good at bargaining and buying, good at selling and cheating; holding well together for a common interest, and utterly treacherous where interests clash; proud of their princess and her power, and despising every one they get to better of; never doubting themselves the most honourable of all the nations, and each man counting himself better than any other. The depth of their worthlessness and height of their van glory no one can understand who has not been there to see, who has not learned to know the miserable misgoverned and self-deceived creatures" (75-76).

This passage ensures a careful identification of the evils of capitalist enterprise with the evil, castrating, devouring female. She is the dark *anima* of every soul — not merely of the female, but also of the male. As Jung has demonstrated, all humans have within them the Anima (female) and the Animus (male), and the Anima itself has within it the elements of dark and the light. A recent book which shows the male anima projecting images of devouring and nurturing females in Robertson Davies' *The Manticore*; I mention this to illustrate that the use of La Belle Dame Sans Merci is not an anti-feminist device but rather an exploration of the archetypes which inform the human psyche and which must be recognized as reconciled in order to bring about healing, individuation and wholeness in the human soul.

Though MacDonald anticipates Jung, there is no doubt he is working in the same space. He was much influenced by German philosophy — indeed that was the accusation flung at him by the Church Board which forced him to resign by cutting his salary. Therefore when Mr. Vane finally meets Lilith he meets, not a terrible giantess, but an emaciated, comatose figure whose weakness arouses in him immense compassion. Mr. Vane spends many months tending Lilith, and when she recovers consciousness at last, we receive the first imitation of her vampiric nature. Mr. Vane has been bitten regularly by a white leech which he never sees, but which Lilith claims to have caught and tossed away. It is "not far from six feet tall" — and Lilith is extraordinarily tall — a "giantess." Her strength is growing as Mr. Vane's is fading; above all, she lies to him; or at very least, she is a shape-shifter, she conceals the truth about herself. But Mr. Vane is enchanted — in the full sense of the word — and Lilith's spell hold him in thrall.

In the episodes which follow, although Lilith is clearly

a vampire, her attacks have about them an erotic and indeed an orgasmic quality, and it is plain that Mr. Vane is willing enough to submit to her. Despite her warnings, he continues to follow her. Although she is evil, there is a very real pleasure in his submission to her. The eroticism of the vampiric attacks is clear from the following passage:

Did I love her? I knew she was not good! Did I hate her? I could not leave her! I knelt beside her

.....  
Her arms...closed about my neck, rigid as those of the torture maiden. She drew down my face to hers, and her lips clung to my cheek. A sting of pain shot somewhere through me, and pulsed. I could not stir a hair's breadth. Gradually, the pain ceased. A slumberous weariness, a dreamy pleasure stole over me, and then I knew nothing.

.....  
All at once I came to myself... My cheek smarted; I put my hand to it, and found a wet spot. My neck ached; there again was a wet spot! (110)

Well, this is all very racy stuff – an explicit sex scene legitimized for Victorian readers by shifting imagery to a Vampire's attack. But that is not the main business of MacDonald's novel; rather he wants to depict the seductiveness of capitalism along with its terrible scorn for those who are seduced, but who lack the power and the wealth to merit acknowledgement. Therefore Lilith, a the walls of her city, becomes imperious and sneers at the devotion of the spellbound Mr. Vane. "Set foot within the gates of my city, and my people will stone you: they do not love beggars!" she jeers (111). For those who are seduced by power are also its victims, just as those who are, like Mr. Vane, seduced by the Lilith-figure, her victims also, deprived of the essence of their beings as she sucks their blood. The sexual imagery is clear despite its transference to vampirism; indeed it has been said that the Vampire is indeed a sexual image, whether it be the male who preys on young women, or the female who preys on young men. For Mr. Vane, at the time of the narration, is a very young man, just down from University.

Time after time, as Lilith approaches Mr. Vane, he senses her evil nature and feels oppressed by her, but at the same time he feels "a delicious languor... Existence was in itself a pleasure;" at the completion of one such episode, Lilith stands "above" him, symbolizing her power over him, while "her mouth wore a look of satisfaction; she wiped from it a streak of red" (133). Immediately after this, however, Mr. Vane begins to see visions that eventually help him to the realization that Lilith's evil is not absolute or irredeemable; rather, Lilith belongs to the world of the Un-dead – as indeed does Mr. Vane himself – because of her refusal to die voluntarily, to renounce the 'Self' which appropriates all power and worship unto itself. Lilith refuses to be born again, as it were, into the life that denies Self, but in denying it, becomes the true Psyche, the individuated and integrated mind and soul – fully human and reconciled fully with the divine.

Thus Mr. Vane is haunted in his other-worldly exist-

ence by Phantasm – headless corpses, skeletons, skulls and shadows. He experiences Life-in-Death; one is reminded vividly of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Mr. Vane is in the realm of Death, or more properly of the Un-dead, of those who refuse to die. In such a world one might expect to be guided by a Raven; this one, like Poe's, cries "Nevermore":

"Once dying as we die here, all the dying is over... Those who will not die, die many times, die constantly, keep dying deeper, never have done dying, here all is upwardness and love and gladness" (238-39).

These images refer, of course to the spiritual life: but for MacDonald, the spiritual is inseparable from the psychological and the social. "Cold Charity" comes from those who are cold with death – the spiritual death of those who will not die. Mr. Vane's efforts to help the Little Ones led by Lona have succeeded, not in helping them, but in placing them in grave danger from their greatest enemy, Lilith. Mr. Vane's role in restoring Lilith to consciousness after she was made comatose by a special enchantment was to bring evil to the Little Ones. He, like Lilith, is dead – like Lilith, he refuses to die. He has been brought into a mirror in the attic of his house in order that he might see himself in Lilith, and that he might also see Lilith in himself. Again, given the opportunity voluntarily to submit himself to death, Mr. Vane decides to rely on his own philanthropic intentions, and he rides off to deliver the Little Ones from the Spotted Leopardess, the preying cat-form of predatory Vampire, Lilith. The sense of power and domination generated by the self-aggrandizing, self-worshipping soul is expressed in Mr. Vane's boast that, "Rejoicing in the power of my steed and in the pride of my life, I sat like a king and rode" (158). But Mr. Vane's proud ride ends in disaster; his horse, urged on in Vane's mad rush, stumbles and is killed.

But even this tragedy is not enough; Mr. Vane pursues his quest for power, his need to prove the Raven or Adam-figure wrong. At the root of his pseudo-philanthropy is the lust for power. He confesses,

I was not without views of personal advantage, not without ambition in the undertaking. It was just, it seemed to me, that Lona should take her seat on the throne that had been her mother's [Lilith's], and natural that she should make of me her consort and minister. For me, I would spend my life in her service, and between us, what might we not do, with such a core to it as the Little Ones, for the development of a noble state?

I confess also to an altogether foolish dream of opening a commerce in gems between the two worlds... (172-73).

The point which MacDonald is making here is a very cogent and powerful one. If a new state or social order is to be ushered in by those who will not die, it will have the essential faults of the original order – power-lust, ambition and greed. There can be no real change in the human condition. While humans refuse to die to self, all will be done in self-worship. That is the very essence of power; in order to bring in a social order free from the corruption of self, the Self must die.

The Shadow which stalks Lilith is the shadow of unreason; Lilith is being drawn by the Shadow deeper and deeper into the world of the Undead. But Lilith must confront her Shadow, to see herself as she really is, before she can be fully individuated and, in Christian terms, redeemed. Mara, the daughter of Eve, urges Lilith to "be her real self," but Lilith retorts, "I will do as my Self pleases – as my Self desires." Mara rephrases the statement in Jungian terms: "You will as the Shadow, overshadowing your Self inclines you?"

Lilith grasps the Self; even in the scenes where she begins to experience Self-knowledge, her right hand remains tightly clasped. This is symbolic, perhaps, of the Talmudic tale of the Tempter, whose clenched fist is believed by many to hold what they most desire – and when they die for the right to open it, they find that it contains nothing. Something of the same kind is seen in Lilith's excruciating experience of self knowledge, as she perceives what was created to be, juxtaposed with what she has made of herself:

She saw now what she had made, and behold, it was not good! She was as a conscious corpse, whose coffin would never come to pieces, never set her free! Her bodily eyes stood wide open, as if gazing into the heart of horror essential – her own indestructible evil. Her right hand had been now clenched – upon existent Nothing – her inheritance! (206).

At this juncture, MacDonald adds another ironic and bitter note of social criticism: "But with God all things are possible. He can save even the rich!" (207). The rich ten, are those who chase the empty hand, believing they can buy their heart's desire; they succumb to the temptation to obtain money and power – perhaps even convincing themselves that with such things they can help others; but as more money and power are acquired, the most difficult it is to part with even a portion of them. Lilith and Vane are both victims of the Undead Self – hence Mr. Vane's symbolic name, for Pride is the ultimate expression of the Self.

Once Mr. Vane voluntarily consents to die, he wakes to the realization that he – and indeed that we all – participate in the experience of Life together; and that far from seeking to worship and serve the Self, we are to be alive to our responsibility to others and to the world:

I lived in everything, everything entered and lived in me. To be aware of a thing, was to know its life at once and mine, to know whence we came, and where we were at home – was to know that we are all what we are, because Another is what he is! (243).

Dying-to-self, psychological and spiritual individuation and wholeness, produces an awareness of the transcendent and the immanent Other, and the recognition of that Other is the value of others. Mr. Vane's experience operates, then, on two levels – the personal and the social contexts of his existence. The Blakean imagery in the novel is not accidental, for MacDonald had read *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and other Blakean works. Like Blake, he

believed that "Everything that lives is holy;" but if that is so, there is incumbent on each living thing an awesome responsibility to its fellows. Social change will only come about when each individual is able to die to its Self and to be free from its shadow. Philanthropy prompted by Self-aggrandizement can only do harm; for as Mr. Vane learned,

The part of the philanthropist is indeed a dangerous one, and the man who would do his neighbor good must first study how not to do him evil, and must begin by pulling the beam out of his own eye (71).

The La Belle Dame Sans Merci of this novel, then, is the Lilith – part of the Self, the dark Anima of every human psyche which manifests in the devouring, destructive, self-seeking part of human motivation. The Shadow must be faced and given a name: as Ursula Le Guin has noted in her Jungian, Taoist fantasies, we must call it by our own name. Thus Mr. Vane must be aware that in seeing Lilith, he is really looking into a mirror. MacDonald's theology is based upon the need for self-knowledge and self surrender. In his *Unspoken Sermons*, he writes,

The only terrible, or at least the supremely terrible revelation is that of a man to himself, ... what a horror will not be to him when his eyes are opened to see himself as the pure see him, as God sees him! Imagine such a man waking all at once, not only to see the eyes of the Universe fixed upon him with loathing astonishment, but to see himself at the same moment as those eyes see him! What a waking! ... into the full blaze of fact and consciousness, of truth and violation! (*Unspoken Sermons*, 228).

To see ourselves as the human who will not die, who feeds on the life-blood of others, who lusts for manipulative power and whose competitiveness means a society where acquisition is all and to be poor means to be exploited – either by being scorned or by receiving a charity designed more to stroke the donor's ego that to relieve the misery of the poor – that is the vision which MacDonald offers us in his profoundly disturbing novel. He shows the interplay between personal and social concerns, and between the spiritual, the psychological and the social. And he argues cogently, with the help of his La Belle Dame Sans Merci as the image of the Self-oriented human soul, for social change through spiritual and psychological individuation in the experience he calls "Death."

MacDonald's voice is not that of the orthodox Socialist, nor is it that of the orthodox Christian, though it is concerned with both religion and society. But however you classify the voice of George MacDonald, it is hard to deny its power.

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