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

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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
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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 duel-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 Aunty and Arga Warga; the third Mad Max movie, Beyond Thunderdome, featured Aunty 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 stepisters, 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 allegoricist 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 clergymen - 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 Meri 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, Lola, 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 cour­
tesies, 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, deferentialy, 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 Mac­
Donald 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 come,
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 per­
terver 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 pasture
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 in­
habitants in constant terror, and doing what she can to
keep them from multiplying. Yet they boast and believe
themselves a prosperous and certainly area a self-satis­
fied 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 despfising
every one they get to better of; never doubting them-sel­
ves 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 misguided 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,
al 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 nur­
turing females in Robertson Davies' The Manticore; I men­
tion this to illustrate that the use of La Belle Dame Sans
Merci is not an anti-feminist device but rather an explora­
tion 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, ans 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 ans
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 wall 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 me, who refuse to die. In such a world one might expect to be placed 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-worshiping 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 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 unreality; 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 also was 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 Balkean 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. Mac Donald'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 lustrs 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.

Works Consulted

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