

## Article

# The Occult as a Rejection of Darwinism in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* and H. P. Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*

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## Abstract

In this paper, the issues concerning manifestations of Darwinism and the occult in Gothic fiction will be explored. *On the Origin of Species* was published by Charles Darwin in 1859. His study of biology and the development of the theory of natural selection called into question Christianity's established beliefs on the creation of mankind. This rather more prosaic determination of the origins of mankind was difficult for some Christians to accept. This brief study will examine the relationship between occult and Darwinism in two examples of Gothic horror fiction.

**Keywords:** Lovecraft, Machen, Occult, Darwinism, Christianity, Gothic.

## 1. Introduction

This investigation proposes a brief analysis of some of the issues concerning the literary relationship between components of mysticism and science; specifically, by juxtaposing occultism and Darwinism in two prominent examples of Gothic literature, Arthur Machen's 1890 novel, *The Great God Pan* and H.P. Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, published in complete form in 1943. Initially, these two novels will be explored through the relationships between oppositions and their implications. That is to say, the direct relationships tradition and modernity, knowledge and ignorance, and subjective and objective, between the subject matter of these two novels. Furthermore, instances of conflict in terms of faith and identity shall be explored. Finally, there will be a short consideration of how the occult manifests itself in Gothic literature, including the schism between traditional, pastoral attitudes and the change in beliefs caused by the onset of modernity.

## 2. Occultism and Darwinism

It is worth considering, momentarily, the origins and definition of occultism and Darwinism, for defining their significance and considering their implications is interesting in regard to what it may reveal about the narrative form of these two novellas. Needless to say, belief in the occult predates Darwin, which is a product of 19<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment values. Occultism has origins in the late middle ages, and unlike Darwinism, which is a theory based on scientific research, occultism has its origins in mythology and folklore. Occultism, or the belief in the occult, is defined in the Cambridge on-line dictionary as "...relating to magical powers and activities, such as those of witchcraft and astrology..."<sup>1</sup>, with alchemy, the forerunner of modern chemistry, completing the discipline of renaissance meta science<sup>2</sup>. In terms of chronology, where occultism precedes Darwinism, it permits the association of literary narratives including science, tradition and religion, as developed in Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. Within Lovecraft's novel, there are two consecutive narratives: the first being a pre-Darwinism narration of the criminal activities of the novel's principle antagonist, manganate Joseph Curwen, which are dated from around 1692, and a contemporary post-Darwinism narration of Curwen's descendent, Charles Dexter Ward, dated around 1928. Darwinism, which is of course the direct application of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, that is to say *natural selection*, earned its eventual acceptance among the scientific community, and later wider public, as a consequence of Charles Darwin's application of the post-renaissance scientific method (itself a product of Descartes's advocacy). In short, of hard science and independent observation. This may be contrasted with belief in the occult, which, being practised by only a comparatively small community of alchemists, astrologers, and necromancers, draws from the earlier traditions of folklore and religion. In relation to *Dexter Ward*, Curwen, the practitioner of occultism, is forced to relocate from Providence, where the nearby Salem witch trials threaten both his studies and his well-being, since occultism, or *witchcraft*, were allegedly the work of heretics and witches, and accordingly punishable by death. Nevertheless, and in contrast to modern-day science, occultism has thus far more creative and literary value than scientific credence.

It is evident that writers of Gothic narratives, including Lovecraft and Machen, depend upon studies of the occult as a method of learning and whose protagonists endeavour to seek wisdom beyond that of pure academic erudition and scientific application in to retain credibility or advance personal wealth. This is often realised through the literary convention and agent of the mad doctor/scientist or obsessive scholar who will be familiar with pseudo-medical jargon and arcane and inevitably, non-approved practices. In *The Great God Pan*, Machen employs Dr. Raymond to facilitate a psychiatric experiment inspired by his knowledge of the occult, even the protagonist himself acknowledges some of the most common judgements reserved for occult studies: "I have devoted myself to transcendental medicine for the last twenty years. I have heard myself called quack and charlatan and impostor, but all the while I knew I was on the right path."<sup>3</sup>. Importantly, whilst the doctor of the occult (or transcendental medicine) and the doctor of science largely share an experimental approach to their subject, the doctor of the occult is seeking to discover spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge University Press *Cambridge Dictionary* 2019 [online] available from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/occult>

<sup>2</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, *Encyclopædia Britannica* 2019 [online] available from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/occultism>

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan*, (London: Creation, 1993). p31.

rather than purely scientific knowledge, which within the novella is Dr. Raymond's desire for his subject, a young woman called Mary, to have a spiritual experience. Indeed, Dr. Raymond's experiment is in this respect a success – at great cost to the scientific, real-world, wellbeing of Mary (she is left in a permanent stupor). Mary's spiritual experience and resulting stupor exemplify that within occult fiction, the objectives of occult and scientific studies mutually reject each other: it is impossible for either discipline to be seen as inclusive of all observed phenomena.

In addition to the experiences of the medical subject, within the genre the credentials of the doctor are also called into question often by the narrator or protagonist, as Dr. Raymond's acquaintance, Clarke remarks: "Are you perfectly sure, Raymond, that your theory is not a phantasmagoria – a splendid vision, certainly, but a mere vision after all?"<sup>4</sup>. In the case of Dr. Raymond, the reader is invited to debate whether he is a qualified medical practitioner, or is merely an enthusiast with some peripheral medical knowledge. We witness that, Dr Raymond has nevertheless some basic surgical skills as a minimum: "Yes; a slight lesion in the grey matter, that is all; a trifling rearrangement of certain cells..."<sup>5</sup>, yet we are left with no strong impression that he is a practising surgeon, or indeed practising psychiatrist. Dr Raymond is presented as an alchemist, individual who, in more modern parlance, could be described as a pharmacist rather than a surgeon, not least because his surgical experiment with Mary involves him administering peculiar liquids, some of which cause his acquaintance Clarke, who is visiting his laboratory, to be overcome and lapse into a thankfully temporary stupor. Thus, the doctor of the occult is someone who, perhaps by necessity, remains outside typical medical practice; he is either a loner or a member of an exclusive clique which reveals its findings only to other members or trusted bystanders. The secretive behaviour of the doctor and his associates can be read as the occultism's necessary rejection of mainstream scientific methodology and values; that the study of the occult is by definition esoteric and requires a different, non-standard approach to theory and practice. The doctor of the occult, like the inventor, is proud, yet frequently paranoid and fearful that his invention (or creation) will be perfected by someone else. Within occult fiction, this 'someone else' would typically be another agent who will have plagiarised the doctor's published works and used them as a basis for his own success. Consider this instance in *The Great God Pan* where Dr. Raymond and Clarke discuss prior research regarding the coming live experiment on Mary. Clarke, an interloper between the realms of science and pseudo-science, drifts between doubt and credulity in relation to his stance towards the occult and hard science because he represents an individual of practical sense and yet finds himself overpowered by curiosity. Initially he is depicted as a stoic, middle-class, British figure "...he [Clarke] thought of the unusual and the eccentric with undisguised aversion..." yet finds himself drawn to that he is supposed to want to avoid "...there was a wide-eyed inquisitiveness with respect to all the more recondite and esoteric elements in the nature of men."<sup>6</sup> Machen frequently presents the opinion or regard of the study of the occult to the reader through the eyes of a hobbyist or enthusiast (Raymond's friend, Clarke), and though serious in terms of dedication, the studies and experiments are not represented as a serious academic discipline. Concerning the occult, only a doctor or scholar may be truly committed to the esoteric aspect of mystical discoveries, and this is

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p43.

quite often a manifestation of individual hubris, mental decay or madness. Though obsessive, Dr Raymond is not an insane figure or mad scientist, and in fact, he embodies a medical entrepreneur: he functions, thus not as a wizard or other satanic agent of the occult, but as a satirical figure or parody of modern science. Dr Raymond is a contemporary scientist of Darwin in the Victorian era, who in his pursuit of knowledge and recognition unleashes something terrible over which he has no control. Specifically, Raymond's experiment succeeds in that his subject, Mary, is able experience a vision of Pan, the Greek god of the wild, and who then proceeds to rape her. Aside from its use as a plot device to drive the narrative, this unexpected consequence of the experiment provides reason for Clarke's misgivings and demonstrates the 'lack of control' aspect of practising the occult. Consequentially, the motif of man's hubris, his misguided belief that he can act with impunity, is as relevant to modern science as it was to occult literary conventions as published at the end of the nineteenth century.

### 3. Manifestations of the Occult

#### 3-1. Virgin Birth

Manifestations of the occult vary considerably. *The Great God Pan* represents the classical mythology of the occult; as the title suggests, this originates from the Greek deity, Pan. Other motifs typical of the occult include the demonian, experimentation with obscure chemical properties, and witchcraft. Other Gothic devices include mysterious deaths and supernatural powers that are evident in the narrative. C. L'Estrange Ewen observes in his book *Witchcraft and Demonianism* when referring to the demonian that: "...A most widespread and yet enduring belief is that discarnate spirits enter into living fleshy bodies, animating and controlling them."<sup>7</sup> Demonic possession can be seen in the character of Helen Vaughan, employed by Machen as a type of 'demon child'; a product of his experiment with Mary. Helen's being is a direct consequence of Dr Raymond's irresponsible actions, of Mary's vision and union with the god Pan. It would be easy to suggest that Machen chose the name 'Mary' because of the Christian religious significance and the resulting 'virgin' birth of her daughter, Helen. Mary's delivery of Helen without any external evidence of a father, draws a parallel with the immaculate conception and the birth of Jesus Christ, with the following caveat: whereas Jesus represented the saviour, Helen's arrival represents the parturition of a demon succubus, whose deliverance will claim numerous male victims. The name Helen, itself a name closely associated with classical Greek stories including Virgil's epic, *Aeneid*, is suggestive of spectacular female beauty. Significantly, this heretical inversion of Machen's, whereby the virgin begets the Devil, is teasingly suggestive that Christianity itself is also a part of the occult, and furthermore, that, contrary to popular belief, God (Pan in the novella) is not perfect, not benevolent, and that he is capable of producing evil as the counterpart to good. With this inversion in mind, Machen is arguably exploring the loss of faith and belief that practising Christians had in divine creation that had been heralded by the arrival of Darwinism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For reference, Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species by Natural Selection* was published

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<sup>7</sup> C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1970), p98-99.

in 1859, some thirty years before *The Great God Pan*. If Darwin succeeded in questioning the biblical definition of creation, then Machen's inversion of the virgin birth is knowingly provocative to the nominally Christian readership of the late nineteenth century, undeniably forming an even greater torment to the loss of what was once considered a historical certainty with the representation of evil as the mirror image of good. Darwinism, the other, and later accepted view upon the creation of humanity, which came to the public's consciousness in the late nineteenth century is that biblical creation is a fallacy, or alternatively that if good can be born, so can evil, indicate an assault upon the Christian faith. Whether *The Great God Pan* represents Machen's own tussle with faith and modernity is uncertain, but it is clear that at the time of writing the novella, a crisis of faith was beginning to take root amongst Britain's Christians.

### 3-2. Witches and *Femme Fatales*

The witch, later to become more familiar to readers of genre fiction as the *femme fatale*. Mary's daughter, Helen Vaughan represents another staple of the occult: the devil woman or witch. Helen is not a traditional witch, who is generally an elderly woman who keeps the company of familiars and, with similarities to the alchemist, develops potions and spells, but a succubus. She, in contrast, has a wanton sexual desire to corrupt and waylay unsuspecting men who, having encountered her (naturally) meet an early demise. Machen seemingly finds inspiration in the Bible once more; Helen being a nineteenth century Delilah or evil twin to Eve in the book of Genesis. The hallucinations Clarke experiences while waiting for Dr Raymond to finish preparing for the experiment on Mary evoke an image of a veritable Garden of Eden: "...there came to his nostrils the scent of summer, the smell of flowers mingled... the scent of the good earth, lying as it were with arms stretched forth, and smiling lips, overpowered all."<sup>8</sup> To contemporary Christians, familiar with the teachings of the Bible and with the vicar's Sunday sermons, Machen's sources are far more accessible to the contemporary reader than the allusion to the occult would suggest.

In the novella, *The Great God Pan*, Machen constructs relatively few direct references to archetypal occult figures, with the notable exception of the mad doctor and witch. His figures of the occult are twisted creations from classical mythology and the Christian Bible scriptures. With this in mind, David Punter argues that Machen's books "...are the best in the rather sickly field of genre work which took up Darwinian anxieties as a base for terror."<sup>9</sup> This observation becomes evident when Helen's suicide is confirmed by Clarke: "...I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being."<sup>10</sup> Punter rightly acknowledges Machen's exploitation of public concerns about the theological effects of Darwinism yet fails to note that Machen was also exploring and exploiting the consequences of Darwinism: the uncertainty and loss of faith.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan*, (London: Creation, 1993), p38.

<sup>9</sup> David Punter, *The Literature of Terror Volume Two*, (London: Longman, 1996), p22.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan*, (London: Creation, 1993), p114.

### 3-3. Comparison with Lovecraft and Conclusion

*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* was first published in 1941, some 47 years after *The Great God Pan*, and furthermore, 82 years after the publication of *The Origin of Species by Natural Selection*. Lovecraft, though of course schooled in Darwinism, was writing in Providence, Rhode Island, far remote from the Victorian Britain of Arthur Machen. Using *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* it will be possible to ascertain just how much Machen was writing as a product of the immediate post-Darwin late nineteenth century, and whether the anxiety of Victorian Christians in Britain came to be felt across the Atlantic. Unlike Machen, Lovecraft writes *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* as a historical journal with two main narratives. As mentioned towards the beginning of the article, the narrative description of antagonist Joseph Curwen is set about two hundred years prior to that of his descendant Charles Ward, making it pre-Darwin. Lovecraft, however, was writing in a post-Darwin world, and it is possible that his character of Joseph Curwen was chosen to pre-empt Darwin in his obsessive interest in the acquisition of biological knowledge. Curwen, and later Ward, occupies the role of doctor/scholar as Dr Raymond does with Machen, however, they differ in that they subject *themselves* to experimentation for personal gain. This becomes apparent in the realisation of alchemy in Curwen's extraordinary longevity: "It was held, for the most part, that Curwen's incessant mixings and boilings of chemicals had much to do with his condition."<sup>11</sup> Whereas Machen's basis for exploration lay in the Bible and classical mythology, Lovecraft was far more interested in the occult. Curwen is a shaman like figure who returns seemingly to possess Ward; a vampire/warlock who has a command of witchcraft and the so-called Black Arts. Other artefacts belonging to the occult are present, for example the portrait of Curwen that has talismanic properties, ancient texts written in code and evil spirits that can be summoned by following arcane practises. Superficially, at least, Lovecraft owes more to mediaeval sorcery and legend than he does theology and science. Neither Ward nor Curwen represents figures of modernity; they have chosen to reject the teachings of the present and seek knowledge from the past, as if there is some hidden 'truth' to be discovered. In addition, it could be suggested that technology, at least, is more accessible and comprehensive than at any time in the past. This is an evolving process with ever more information being available to describe the physical world. To Lovecraft's generation of readers, technology may not have been as universal as it is today, but moreover, the physical world was not mysterious enough to have need of supernatural explanations. Without doubt, technological advance raised questions about tradition, religion and 'given truths', but it could be explained rationally. Lovecraft's then, is like a morbid fairy tale; a story of morality, a stage where discoveries and scientific development herald consequences that science and humanity have little control of "I say to you againe, doe not call up Any that you cannot put downe... Ask of the Lesser, lest the Greater shall not wish to Answer, and shall commande more than you."<sup>12</sup>

Like Machen, Lovecraft suggests that knowledge is powerful, and that an over acquisition of knowledge is harmful and destructive. Mary, Curwen and Ward are driven to madness by their revelations; these result in the death of Mary, and both Curwen and Ward's destruction at the hands

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<sup>11</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, (New York: Ballantine, 1971), p15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p114.

of a third party. Importantly, both *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and *The Great God Pan* are not wholly pessimistic; with the destruction of the demonic protagonists we see the status quo restored. Thus Lovecraft's morality lies with the fear of abused knowledge; that it is possible for the curious to unleash an uncontrollable and destructive power. Interestingly, Lovecraft's attitudes towards transgression and punishment are quite secular, unlike Machen. This could suggest that the America of the 1920s had already lost its touch with God, that the struggle with faith that is evident within Machen had been won by secularism, and the revelation that not all answers are to be found in the church. So, the conflict, instead of being one of faith, had become one of self-identity, and one of purpose. Ward, while looking for answers, loses his identity to Curwen. Darwinism, with its accepted explanation of the origins of man, first caused a crisis of faith (Machen) that progressed to one of identity and purpose (Lovecraft). Whilst neither novella represents an outright rejection of Darwin's theories of evolution, they tend to explore the consequences for the existing status quo. Both Machen and Lovecraft seem to fear that scientific discovery is, in fact, irresponsible, and that each revelation can have severe consequences. Where Lovecraft differs from Machen is in his relationship with God; *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* sees Curwen and Ward effectively 'play God' because the power of creation lies directly with them, to use or abuse as they see fit. Machen, however, seems to try to reconcile evolution with God as witnessed by the metamorphosis of Helen in her death throes "...as a horrible and unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast, was changed into human form..."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan*, (London: Creation, 1993), p115.

