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The City of Nightmares: Occultism, Ecstasy, and the Literature of Late-Victorian London

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**The City of Nightmares:
Occultism, Ecstasy, and the Literature of late-Victorian London**

In her book *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (1992) Judith Walkowitz refers to the literary representation of London as “a dark, powerful, and seductive labyrinth [...]” (Walkowitz 16) What she seems to have in mind is the genre of the urban gothic in which city spaces are imbued with a sense of menace that also suggests moral, and often explicitly sexual danger. The monstrous figures who, at the end of the nineteenth century, populate the gothic bear this out. Dracula, Dorian Gray and Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde all correlate, albeit in different ways, sexual transgression, and monstrosity. At least in the case of Dorian Gray and Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, they locate this confluence- with grander or lesser emphasis- in the city of London. For this reason, as in Walkowitz’s book, the city itself can take on the ambiance of monstrosity. By the late 1880s, as London was convulsed by the Whitechapel murders, the sense of the city as a site of diffuse moral danger that we find in a slightly earlier writer like Charles Dickens had given way to images of monstrosity with much more precise definition but similar intersection with city space. What distinguishes late nineteenth-century gothic forms from works of narrative that belong to other proximate genres like the detective novel is, of course, the supernatural underpinning of monstrosity instead of mere criminality. In all of the works I have hitherto mentioned- *Dracula* (1897), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)- the confluence of sexual transgression and monstrosity hinges on supernatural or other worldly characteristics that anticipate contemporary notions of horror. In this work the supernatural invites us to suspend disbelief but it never moves beyond the realm of convention.

But not everybody understood the supernatural merely as a literary device or pretext. Welsh author Arthur Machen's work provides a window into an almost forgotten aspect of literary history that helps us ground the urban gothic and its anxieties about sexuality in an occult sensibility and invites us to recontextualize the supernatural aspects of the late-Victorian gothic literature in regard to forms of credulity that inform the occult. Machen is known for his investment in the occult and was a member of the influential occult organization Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (S. J. Graf 1). For Machen, and many other late-Victorian authors, the supernatural was by no means merely a convention or the basis of a marketable kind of popular fiction. His investment in the occult assumes a level of credulity, that compels us to rethink the status of the genre.

In his book *Hieroglyphics* (1902), Machen outlines his poetics which depend on what he calls "ecstasy", a concept that suggests the occult in that it refers to an ungraspable power that can be present in literature. In the same text, he analyzes *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as a means to distinguish his own views on literature from prevailing norms. Against this background, Machen's novella *The Great God Pan* (1894) can be read as a revision of Stevenson's novella, one that attempts to convey the genuine sense of ecstasy that, according to Machen, is the core of genuine literature.

Sexuality and the City

In *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) Richard Krafft-Ebing presents modern cities as spaces amplifying moral decay: "It is shown by the history of Babylon, Nineveh, Rome, and also by the 'mysteries' of life in modern Capitals, that large cities; [sic] are the breeding-places of nervousness and degenerate sensuality" (Krafft-Ebing 7). Krafft-Ebing's book is, however, not a text against sex or sensuality, but rather promotes sex in the framework of heterosexual marriage. It is precisely what falls outside of this norm that he finds threatening. He sees sensuality within its appropriate

limits as enabling, but sensuality that exceeds these limits suggests something deviant and even bestial.

In coarse, sensual love, in the lustful impulse to satisfy this natural instinct, man stands on a level with the animal; but it is given to him to raise himself to a height where this natural instinct no longer makes him a slave: higher, nobler feelings are awakened, which, notwithstanding their sensual origin, expand into a world of beauty, sublimity, and morality. On this height man overcomes his natural instinct [...] (Krafft-Ebing 1)

In this respect, Krafft-Ebing consolidates a framework that has had a significant impact on how we think about the sexual politics of the late nineteenth century. Although Krafft-Ebing understands sexual instinct as “natural”, he also considers it as something that needs to be disciplined or circumscribed in a way that insulates it from its own potential for excess. And while he admits that sexuality can be a positive creative force, he insists that “in its sensual force” it also harbors “the danger that it may degenerate into powerful passions and develop the grossest vices.” (Krafft-Ebing 2) By this reckoning, there are two sides to sexuality: On the one hand, there is controlled sexuality that brings with it creative potential as well as moral superiority; on the other hand, he discerns excessive sexuality that has destructive potential and is linked to degeneration. In fact, Krafft-Ebing directly refers to “excess among the masses” (Krafft-Ebing 6) as a factor that “undermines the foundation of society” (Krafft-Ebing 6) and constitutes moral decay. To avoid such a decline, Krafft-Ebing argues that “a constant struggle between natural impulses and morals, between sensuality and morality, is required” (Krafft-Ebing 5). Morality and the constraint of sexual instinct thus become synonymous and “natural”, whereas excess generates “monstrous perversions” (Krafft-Ebing 7) which seem to run counter to nature.

It is not difficult to see the paradox in this argument: while sexuality is natural, it also harbors a potential for excess that brings it to the threshold of perversion, beyond which nature,

precisely because it follows its own inclinations too faithfully, becomes unnatural. This paradox - a nature that runs against itself- is what drives Michel Foucault's discussion of the "Moral Monster" in his 1974/1975 lectures published under the title *Abnormal*. Foucault traces the development of the perception of criminality in relation to the idea of monstrosity. He argues that at the end of the eighteenth century, the political shift away from feudal societies led to "monstrosity [being] systematically suspected of being behind all criminality" (Foucault 81). Foucault's argument centers around the role of the sovereign. In feudal societies, a crime was an act against the sovereign, and the punishment a form of personal revenge that has to exceed the magnitude of the crime so as to demonstrate the sovereign's power (Foucault 82-84). According to Foucault, in such a society "it is not necessary, not even possible, for outrageous crime to have anything like a nature" (Foucault 85) since crime revolves simply around a power conflict between criminal and sovereign (Foucault 82-85). In feudal society, any crime is a direct affront against the sovereign and an expression of a conflict with this one specific person, not with society as a whole. The power dynamics change with the invention of new surveillance and governmental structures (Foucault 88-89). In this new medical and juridical regime (of which Krafft-Ebing's encyclopedic account and catalog of sexual perversion is exemplary) criminality assumes a "nature" (Foucault 90) that is supposedly observable. The figure of the moral monster makes that nature legible.

The way Foucault develops this opens out onto the paradox we find in Krafft-Ebing's work: nature against itself. On the one hand, the subscription to the social contract is seen as natural but requires a taming of one's individual desires. On the other hand, the "man from the forest" (Foucault 92) breaks the social contract and therefore behaves unnaturally, paradoxically by giving in to his natural instincts (Foucault 91-92). Foucault explains that the monstrosity of the criminal

lies in him “prefer[ing] his own interest to the laws governing the society to which he belongs” (Foucault 92). The excess of nature is what makes the “man of the forest” unnatural and therefore monstrous (Foucault 101).¹

What Foucault finds in the figure of the monster is the paradox Krafft-Ebing presents: nature naturally exceeding or turning against itself. What he offers is a genealogy of the medical/juridical discourse that, by the end of the nineteenth century, will encompass anyone from harmless fetishists to violent, sexually motivated killers. The general sense of degeneration underpinning all of this appears in a wide range of late nineteenth century discourses. In the wake of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), a fear of the degeneration of humans to earlier evolutionary stages became prominent. The works of Cesare Lombroso, Havelock Ellis, and Max Nordau are all part of a larger European discourse linking devolution to criminality. Lombroso is an especially central figure since he analyzed the skulls of criminals and made an argument for "criminals [being] throwbacks to humanity's savage past" (Arata 233). Lombroso clearly draws a connection between criminality, physicality, and earlier stages of human evolution.

That Krafft-Ebing links degeneration to the modern city is particularly telling because it anchors deviancy in something like a poetics of urban life. Lynda Nead's exploration of obscenity in nineteenth century London suggests how this conflation came about. She explains how in order to pass a law against obscenity that would exclude art that was displayed in churches and galleries, obscenity “had to be recast as a modern phenomenon [...]” (Nead 193) She claims that obscenity was framed to refer to “sex in mass culture” (Nead 193), thus connecting transgressive sexuality to the notion of the masses, which manifested in London specifically. William Sharpe notes that

¹ Notably, Foucault describes two types of moral monsters. He sees Louis XVI as the first monster and pathologizes him as the prototypical incestuous king. The other type of monster stems from a ruler who abuses his power and is found in the cannibalistic rebel (Foucault 95–104). The moral monster is thus intrinsically linked to deviant sexuality from the onset.

“[o]ver the course of the century London’s population expanded sevenfold, from one to seven million.” (Sharpe 120)² According to Nead, obscenity as one form of transgressive sexuality “was a moral poison” (Nead 200), which hints at the transmissibility of moral decay throughout the city. The masses therefore became threatening since it was their moral transgressions that had the potential to spread across the entire city. It is thus not surprising that it was the East End as the space of the working class and the poor who lived cramped together, that was perceived as the center of this threat. As Tina Choi notes, “Victorian representations of city are almost interchangeable with, and nearly always collapse into, Victorian representations of lower-class space.” (Choi 563) The perception of London was thus constructed around imaginations of the lower classes. Krafft-Ebing’s claim of the city as the center of degeneration and deviant sexuality, in fact, be read as referring to the masses and therefore the poor lower-classes as the center of moral decay.

This conflation of sexuality, degeneration, and the city is also exemplified in the way the *Pall Mall Gazette* embedded the Whitechapel murders of 1888. “[B]loodthirsty cruelty” is one of the strongest images within the text, evoking a sense of excess and monstrosity. By mentioning the “progress of civilization”, the article clearly positions its worldview as one where the development of humankind is seen as linear towards a more and more advanced species, and evokes a sense of teleology that drew on contemporary discourses of evolution and degeneration. Any reversion back towards previous developmental steps was seen as a threat and unnatural. Not only does this article link Jack the Ripper to “Red Indian savagery”, a note that ties in with anxieties about devolution I just described, since different races were seen as less developed, but

² Please note that there is a wide array of different numbers regarding the scope of London’s population growth circulating in academic literature. Daly, for example, claims that “London grew from under a million inhabitants in 1801 to 4.5 million in 1901” (Daly 2) Still, there is consensus that London’s population exploded during the 19th century.

it also suggests that the urge to commit such crimes is present in everybody. The article explicitly states that the potential to commit similar crimes “lie[s] latent in man”, thus implying that this potential is somehow suppressed. The urge itself is seen as natural; it is acting upon the urge that is rendered unnatural. The notion of a “nature” of crime is explicitly evident within the text, with the term itself appearing multiple times. The notion of the overcrowded East End as a place of moral decay is evident since the article refers to the “slums” as a space in which people capable of committing these crimes are raised “by the hundred thousand.” The following passage underlines the confluence of nature, sexuality, and monstrosity even further:

The nature of the outrages and the calling of the victims suggests that we have to look out for a man who is animated by that mania of bloodthirsty cruelty which sometimes springs from the unbridled indulgence of the worst passions. We may have a plebeian Marquis DE SADE at large in Whitechapel. If so, and if he is not promptly apprehended, we shall not have long to wait for another addition to the ghastly catalogue of murder. (“Another Murder-and More to Follow?”)

The term “unbridled” suggests a lack of measure and thereby links the idea of excess to the crimes. Krafft-Ebing refers to sadists as “monstrum per excessum” (monstrous through excess) (Krafft-Ebing 153) and the *Pall Mall Gazette* clearly sees Jack the Ripper as a sadist by referencing Marquis de Sade (Krafft-Ebing 71), thus conflating notions of transgressive sexuality, excess, and monstrosity. By referring to Jack the Ripper as a “personification of Mr. Hyde”, the article conflates the criminal with a literary representation of monstrosity underpinned by these late-Victorian theories of reversion and degeneration.

In Stevenson’s text, Dr Jekyll develops a potion that can take his scruples away and turn him into the monstrous Mr Hyde, who commits the crimes Dr Jekyll would not dare to. Ultimately, Dr Jekyll is unable to turn back into himself and commits suicide to free the world of Mr Hyde. Stevenson’s novella was of course a touchstone for the ways in which late nineteenth-century literature embeds a vision of moral monstrosity- nature against itself- in urban space. London’s

geography and socioeconomic context are central for understanding the contemporary anxieties Dr Jekyll, or respectively Mr Hyde, embody. Nick Freeman refers to London not as a uniform singular city but as a "plethora". London had become so big and multifaceted that the name of the city had become more of an umbrella term for different aspects of London, thus accounting for the city's diversity (Freeman 72). Nevertheless, as much as the city was diverse, it was also split in two: The famous capital of the empire, on the one hand, a place of poverty, "overcrowding, disease and perceived degeneration" (Eastlake 473) on the other hand. Interestingly, precisely this dualism of London was at the heart of Victorian imaginings of the city. The wealthy West End was understood as a representation of the rational, respectable side of the city, and the working-class East End was commonly associated with transgressive sexuality (Wiseman 34) "and an internal Gothic threat" (Wiseman 14). The implication is clear: Dr Jekyll, whose house is in the West End and who is a representative of science and bureaucracy, is associated with this part of the city, whereas the fact that Mr Hyde heads east when Mr Enfield first encounters him (Stevenson 7) clearly associates Hyde with the moral decay and "fearsome degenerative forces threaten[ing] to emerge" from the East End. Although it is never explicitly addressed, the large sums of money Mr Hyde uses and the address in Soho he gives Utterson both suggest that he is linked to prostitution, further emphasizing his monstrosity. Mighall calls Soho "an enclave of poverty and criminality [...] residing within the [...] Western End of London" (Mighall, "Introduction" xxxii).

London can thus be interpreted as dualistic in the same way as Jekyll and Hyde are: one representing the good, respectable side, and the other the dangerous, degenerate, criminal side. This psychic duality is already reflected within the space of Dr Jekyll's home. Robert Mighall reads Dr Jekyll's house as an allegory for the dichotomy between Jekyll and Hyde. He argues that the well-kept façade of Dr Jekyll's house stands out in his neighborhood since he is hiding his true

identity behind it, whereas his neighbors' houses reflect the multiple parts of the inhabitants' identities. Dr Jekyll's house, in contrast to that, functions like a mask that hides Mr Hyde behind the respectable image of Dr Jekyll (Mighall, "Introduction" xxxii–xxxiii). The textual construction of London clearly fits the narrative but if we take the socioeconomic study of Charles Booth into account, it certainly does not reflect the reality of London at the time. As Nick Freeman and Sam Wiseman point out, Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London*, published subsequently after 1889, is a crucial text when it comes to understanding the socioeconomic situation of London at the fin de siècle (Freeman 75, Wiseman 38–39). Booth conducted a mapping of London that reflected the socioeconomic status of its inhabitants by sending researchers to every household to classify them, and therefore the district they inhabit. The result was a color-coded map of London (Freeman 75) that revealed the "uncomfortable proximity" of wealthy and poor districts (Wiseman 38).

The cartographic impulse, however precarious, to map and make known these fault lines is undermined by the novel's stress on moral duality. In *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the bestial aspect literally *hides* behind or within the respectable upper-middle class professional. This play on words goes even further since the word is also closely linked to *hideous*. At the same time, *hide* as a noun refers to animal skin and immediately characterizes Mr Hyde as an "animalistisches Ungeheuer" (animalistic beast) (Brittnacher and May 470), tying him back to discourses of monstrosity. Although Mr Hyde's physicality is barely described in concrete terms, the notion of animality, especially concerning the connection to apes as mentioned before, clearly implies an atavistic quality to his appearance. The fact that he seems to be younger than Dr Jekyll (Stevenson 19, 58) can be interpreted as a reflection of the developmental stages of humankind they respectively represent. Dr Jekyll's gradual loss of the ability to turn back from Mr Hyde into

himself has to be interpreted as a sign of inevitable permanent degeneration (Brittnacher and May 470).

What Krafft-Ebing calls the “mysteries” of modern cities seems to gesture at this literary conflation of moral monstrosity- and its sexual dimension- with city space. He seems to suggest that the city serves as the medium that enables sexual transgression and thus monstrosity. It grants a sense of mysteriousness and obfuscation that allows for the actualization of deviance. We can see this relation when Utterson investigates Mr Hyde’s address in Soho. The description of darkness and light clashing can be read as a metaphor for Dr Jekyll, representing the good respectable aspects of the character and Mr Hyde representing the dark and evil. Overall, the description of Soho leans more towards a creation of literary ambience than spatial specificity:

The dismal quarter of Soho seen under these changing glimpses, with its muddy ways, and slatternly passengers, and its lamps, which had never been extinguished or had been kindled afresh to combat this mournful reinvasion of darkness, seemed, in the lawyer’s eyes, like a district of some city in a nightmare. (Stevenson 23)

We are in the midst of something supernatural, or otherworldly and nightmarish. This conflation of moral monstrosity, urban space, and the hint of the supernatural forms the urban gothic. This is by no means a marginal phenomenon. Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Stoker’s *Dracula* and many other late nineteenth-century texts are understood as belonging to this genre. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example, correlates transgressive sexuality, moral monstrosity, and urban space by portraying Dorian as a flaneur, who on his walks through London, and specifically the East End, engages in acts of deviant sexuality and crime.

In all these texts the supernatural is what takes us away from something like naturalism or the sensation novel into the space described as gothic. The question of the supernatural, however,

also needs to be understood in relation to the groundswell of interest in the occult. What Krafft-Ebing refers to as “mysteries” perhaps also needs to be understood in this context.

The occult was by no means a marginal phenomenon in the late nineteenth century (Pokorny and Winter 1). For example, *The Occult Review* was “a monthly magazine devoted to the investigation of supernatural phenomena and the study of psychological problems” (Shirley) published authors like Rosa Praed reporting about experiences they had at seances (Praed). Such texts were not regarded as fictional but taken rather seriously. How seriously the investment in the occult was, becomes evident looking at the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a magical order practicing ritual magic and alchemy that had many high-profile members, most famously W.B. Yeats (Owen 3–4). As Alex Owen notes, “Personages famous, infamous, and obscure circulated through its ranks.” (Owen 3) Men and women alike were members, coming from different spheres of society. The artist Henry Marriott Paget, theater patron and manager Annie Horniman, and actress Florence Farr are just some of the examples Owen cites. Overall, the members were educated, often Freemasons, and at least middle-class (Owen 3–5). Occultism was not a phenomenon of the outer spaces of Victorian society, rather it was at its core.

Apart from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley was a dominant figure during the fin de siècle, underlining the cultural importance of the occult and in specific, magic. Crowley brought together aspects from the spheres of Western European magic and meditation and yoga to form his own occult practice he named “magick” (Bogdan and Starr 3). What is notable about Crowley’s magick is that it included sexuality as a magical component. Crowley thus forms a direct connection between the occult and sexuality. In contrast to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Crowley was polarizing and his interaction with the former short-lived (Bogdan and Starr 5). Upon his death, Crowley’s life was “framed by accounts in

American newsmagazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* as that of a fringe religious eccentric” (Bogdan and Starr 5), and Crowley only regained cultural traction during the 1960s in the emergence of Satanism. Crowley’s occultism was direct, outspoken, and filled with explicit sexual content, however, he was still a well-known name and influenced contemporary occultism (Bristow 777–78).

Occultism was a serious practice during the fin de siècle and hinged on the mysterious and thus combines notions of urbanity and deviant sexuality. As Owen notes “obfuscation was standard practice in this kind of Victorian magical documentation [referring to reports about experiences during rites]. Secrecy was all.” (Owen 2) The mysterious can thus be understood as an index of the occult and a credulous investment in the occult, as Arthur Machen suggests in *Hieroglyphics* (1902).

Arthur Machen and Ecstasy in Literature

Today, Arthur Machen is understood as a fairly marginal figure in late-nineteenth-century literary life, largely because he is overshadowed by figures like Stevenson, Wilde, and Stoker. He is a fascinating figure though, largely because his version of the urban gothic blurs the line between the supernatural as a popular literary device, and a genuine, credulous investment in literature as a medium in touch with the otherworldly. His 1902 text *Hieroglyphics* uses a frame narrative that claims that what is presented in the book stems from conversations he had with a “literary hermit” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 5). However, although the frame grants Machen plausible deniability, it seems like Machen’s own poetics and I will therefore treat it as such.³ In *Hieroglyphics*, Machen analyses what constitutes “fine literature” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 18) in contrast to trivial

³ Since Arthur Machen analyses and criticises texts written by contemporary authors, the frame allows him to claim that he is not judging his competition.

literature. It is a critique of the genre and a gesture towards another, more abstract power: ecstasy. Ecstasy is the decisive feature of fine literature for Machen (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 18). He outlines that neither emotional impact, sensationalism, nor how interesting a text is can be a measure of the artistic merit of a text; he does so by providing examples in which these categories are fulfilled, yet which nobody would call literature (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 20–24). Furthermore, Machen argues that “plot and style” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 25) must not be considered in isolation from other aspects of a text, but that the “atmosphere” of a text is also important, since it may contain “hints of the presence which [the hermit/Machen] ha[s] called ecstasy” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 25). Additionally, he argues against literary realism by claiming that “life is not art” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 26), by which he means that the mere depiction of everyday life, no matter how beautifully articulated cannot constitute art since it does not “penetrate the surface of life” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 26). He, therefore, calls for a “withdrawal from the common life and the common consciousness” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 18–19) as an inherent feature of fine literature and defines it as “the expression of the eternal ecstasy in the medium of words” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 61). One synonym for ecstasy Machen provides is the “ancient eternal desire of man for the unknown” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 40). He thus understands ecstasy as intrinsically connected to that which goes beyond human understanding and thus the occult is by definition linked to the term.

Furthermore, Machen refers to ecstasy as a “philosophy of life (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 63), thereby extending the notion beyond the realm of literature and connecting it to spirituality and mysticism (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 63) and even offering “mystery” as a synonym for ecstasy (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 78). He understands fine literature as “an expression of the eternal things that are in man” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 64), thus suggesting that fine literature is an expression

of mysticism that is inherent to humankind. One of Machen's key examples is *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Surprisingly, he claims that the text "just scrapes by the skin of its teeth [...] into the shelves of [fine] literature" (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 70). He explains that after having read the text once, readers are unlikely to read the book another time, since, after the mystery of Mr Hyde's identity has been solved "all the steps which lead to the disclosure become, *ipso facto*, insignificant" (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 71). For Machen, keeping the secret a secret is thus crucial since a disclosure renders the plot insignificant and therefore almost destroys notions of ecstasy. However, Machen claims that *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* "is certainly in its conception, not in its execution, a work of fine art" (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 47). By that he does not refer to the plot itself- he explicitly states that it does not matter if the events could occur in reality (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 77)- but rather to the idea of plurality within a human being, which Machen interprets as a hint towards "the mystery of mankind" (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 72). This is the only level at which Machen identifies a mystery and thus ecstasy within Stevenson's text. Although *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* certainly gravitates towards the supernatural, it does so on the level of allegory (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 72-73). However, it does not enter the realms of the occult if we understand the term in the context of credulity, which is central for Machen. Ultimately, it is the occult that is at stake for Machen when he differentiates between fine art and "mass literature" (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 17). Regarding William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847) he writes:

[H]e was never for a moment aware of that shadowy double, that strange companion of man, who walks, as I said, foot for foot with each one of us, and yet his paces are in an unknown world. (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 42)

Yet, although he thinks Thackeray was unaware of it, Machen claims that Thackeray was able to capture the occult in his work (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 42-46). He sees the occult as a sense of the inexplicable, a power beyond human understanding, that is ever present, yet not part of this world.

For Machen, such power is clearly real. The occult is to be taken seriously. Thus, by providing an explanation for Dr Jekyll's transformation that refuses a grander power and anchors the transformation in science, albeit fictional science, makes it human and mundane. Occultism has nothing to do with the crimes even if the structure of the story, until the final revelation, allows for this possibility. It is this final revelation that prompts Machen to attest that the story is "not linked at all with the really mysterious, the really psychical" (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 72). Only the idea that humans are not one uniform entity but might be considered "a polity with many inhabitants" (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 72) is what qualifies *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as fine literature.

Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894), although predating *Hieroglyphics*, reads like an attempt to successfully incorporate this idea of human multiplicity into a literary text. And it is this text that is at the core of my argument since in its striving for occultism it fuses sexuality and the city. *The Great God Pan* depends on the "mysteries" of the city Krafft-Ebing referred to in order to create a space in which a plot centered around the occult can operate. It also depends on the tropes of the urban gothic- the city as a labyrinth and as a stage for chance encounters colored by an ominous atmosphere of sexual threat. *The Great God Pan* thus fuses deviant sexuality and the city to enable ecstasy and therefore occultism in literature.

The Great God Pan and the Mysteries of London

The Great God Pan is an urban mystery. A series of suicides occurs in conjunction with a woman named Helen Vaughan in London. When Helen's identity is discovered, Clarke and Villiers, the protagonists of the story who investigate the cases, force her to commit suicide. Upon dying, it turns out that Helen was not entirely human. Ultimately, the reader learns that Helen was the daughter of a woman on whom an experiment that required brain surgery was performed. In

the first chapter, Clarke attends this surgery that leaves the mother permanently disabled. In contrast to *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the origin of the evil that haunts the city cannot be easily pinned down in the case of *The Great God Pan*. With its urban setting and its orientation towards sexual monstrosity and foreboding, as well as a loosely connected community of professional men as the center of the story, the structural similarities between both texts are evident- the ending being the decisive difference. The text unfolds as a series of urban encounters and partial testimonies which ensure that the reader is often as baffled by the mystery as the characters are. The structure of the text withholds knowledge of the occult until the final revelation of Helen's supernatural origin. In the meantime, the narrative dynamic hinges on the labyrinthine fragmental structure of the text. We are presented with episodes that only come together as the narration progresses. The beginning of the text only becomes relevant at its very end. The report about Helen's childhood only gains weight once it is implied that it is her, who is behind the deaths in London.

As confusing as the plot of the novella is, is the representation of space within *The Great God Pan*. Mary, the woman who turns out to be Helen's mother, was "rescued [...] from the gutter and almost certain starvation, when she was a child" (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 4). It can thus be assumed that she stems from one of the less respectable districts of London, but we do not have more information. Similarly, we do not know where Dr Raymond's house is. Again, we can make assumptions based on class, but the text provides no details. Upper class in the form of the doctor and lower class (Mary) collide in this experiment, that evades spatial positioning. Helen is thus associated with the in-between. She is neither upper nor lower class. She is neither East End nor West End. She seems to be "between two worlds, the world of matter and the world of spirit"

(Machen, *The Great God Pan* 4), as Dr Raymond described the occult sphere he wanted to enable Mary to access.

This spatial ambiguity in the first part of the novel is juxtaposed with spatial precision in later chapters. We do not know the exact location of the laboratory, Dr Phillips does not give the exact “Place where these Extraordinary Events occurred” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 10), referring to the events in Helen’s life as a teenager. It is hinted that the area is rural, since “the nearest station [is at] a town some seven miles away from [Mr R.’s] house” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 11). We are also told that the village used to be important during the Roman occupation, but now has no more than 500 inhabitants (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 11), thus suggesting a link between Helen and ancient Roman culture.⁴ Additionally, we are told that the village is “on the borders of Wales” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 11). Again, this implies an in-between space, a space of transition, therefore associating Helen further with transitory spaces. Her status as a being that is in-between worlds is mirrored in the spaces she is associated with. Ambiguity regarding Helen’s origin is a constant in the novella. Later on, we learn that people assume she is from South America (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 36). However, this notion of spatial ambiguity is replaced by the very precise descriptions of spaces that dominate the events after the second chapter. Villiers’s encounter with Herbert is dominated not only by description of the area but also by precise street names. “Shaftsbury Avenue” and “Rupert Street” are specifically referenced (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 17) and the district the encounter takes place in is clearly identified as Soho (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 21). Whereas Helen is associated with ambiguity, the men investigating her case seem to be preoccupied with spatial precision.

⁴ Pan is the Greek name for the Roman god Faunus (cf. F. Graf 5).

Of course, in the context of transitory spaces, Soho cannot be ignored. The text references the village in the beginning but is predominantly an urban text, that gravitates towards Soho as the site of crucial events- a crucial aspect this text has in common with *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. It is in Soho that Villiers first hears about Helen (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 18–19) and she is associated with “a house in one of the meanest and most disreputable streets in Soho” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 50).

The police had been forced to confess themselves powerless to arrest or to explain the sordid murders of Whitechapel; but before the horrible suicides of Piccadilly and Mayfair they were dumbfounded, for not even the mere ferocity which did duty as an explanation of the crimes in the East End could be of service in the West. (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 42)

Whereas ferocity, and thus implicit moral decay, serve as an explanation for the murders of Jack the Ripper, whom I mentioned in my earlier discussion of sexuality and monstrosity, it does not suffice in the West End, indicating that the West End is a space that cannot be penetrated by the monstrous passions of the East. However, there is a monstrous figure within the West End in this text, but instead of a mere criminal, it is a supernatural figure. The criminal space of the East End is replaced by Soho, which crucially is located within the West End. Sam Wiseman admits that “the Gothic threat has symbolically invaded the imperial centre through threshold spaces such as the East End” (Wiseman 38) but interprets the case of *The Great God Pan* as a text representing the “penetration of the places that represent the very heart of British wealth and power.” (Wiseman 38) He further notes regarding *The Great God Pan* that

In such texts, Soho is a kind of liminal space, a hazy borderland between respectability and vice, or the portal through which London’s sources of threat and desire access the city’s heart. Geographically, it is as close as the Gothic can come to the capital’s supposed centres of reason and enlightenment before these areas, too, are penetrated [...] (Wiseman 41)

He interprets Soho as a border space, thus just as Helen is associated with liminal spaces, so is Soho. As I have mentioned before, Soho is associated with prostitution and other forms of transgressive sexuality. This is further emphasized looking at the description of Crashaw when he encounters Villiers in Soho. The “infernally medley of passions” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 48) and the “[f]urious lust” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 48) Villiers’s description strongly suggest a sexual component within the mysterious doings of Helen, that fits within Soho. However, they do not stay within the confines of Soho. Notably, Wiseman uses the term “spread” (Wiseman 41) to describe how the suicides penetrate the wealthy West End districts- a term, that is generally associated with the spread of disease, thus mirroring the anxieties of the 19th century around the infectiousness of moral decay I have explained earlier, which is also evident in the term “epidemic” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 46) used by the newspaper to refer to the wave of suicides. The suggestion is simple: Soho as a place already associated with moral decay is an easy target for Helen, which she uses as a gate into the West End. Wiseman understands this scene in the following terms:

Machen’s emphasis upon the ‘furious lust’ in Crashaw’s expression reflects the strongly sexualized nature of the Gothic threat in his work, suggesting that Soho’s dangerous temptations have now exceeded their geographical boundaries. (Wiseman 41)

He understands Helen less as an active transgressing force but rather as a passive symptom of Soho’s sexual temptations spreading across the city, as if Soho was overflowing, tying in with anxieties around the infectious properties of masses.

Later, when Villiers inquires about Helen in “Queer Street” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 50) he finds out that she had taken up residence there a few years back. Villiers claims he went to Queer Street previously for his “amusement” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 50)- a statement that

remains ambiguous. It can indicate sexual transgressions on Villiers part but at the same time, it was a common practice for the wealthier inhabitants of London to visit the poor districts to see how they were living for their entertainment (cf. Koven). The term “Queer Street” itself remains vague. It seems to indicate a place of sexual transgression; however, it is not an actual street name. Yet, it is implied that it refers to London’s poorest and morally ambiguous place. Villiers claims that “[i]f you see mud on the top of the stream, you may be sure that it was once at the bottom” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 50) when he explains how he thought of investigating Queer Street. This analogy comes, in turn, with a plethora of implications. First, it implies a social hierarchy in which the bottom is bad and associated with Queer Street, and the top is good. Second, if Helen equals mud, she is understood as a natural part of the system, not an abnormality, since mud is a natural phenomenon. Further, it implies that there is a place in society from which Helen originates; figuratively speaking, the bottom, the ground of the river. Villiers again connects deviancy and the gothic threat to the lower classes but also to a fixed area within the city.

The notion of nature in Villiers’s statement cannot be overlooked. Pan is the God of Nature and the Outdoors (F. Graf 5) and therefore directly juxtaposed with everything urban space stands for. It is a sense of unrestrained nature that invades the city in the form of Helen. This notion of conquering London is reinforced when Austin notes, referring to Helen’s alter ego Mrs Beaumont, that “she has taken London almost by storm.” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 44) It is noteworthy that the allegory he uses is one of nature, of natural excess, further propelling an understanding of Helen as a natural phenomenon as well as fueling the notion of Pan reclaiming the city. Interestingly, Pan is understood as an “insatiable erotomaniac” (F. Graf 5), which certainly ties in with the sexual implications that dominate the novella. It further emphasizes the idea of excess as a vehicle for monstrosity, since “insatiable” certainly implies excessive sexual behavior and, as I

have already developed, transgressive sexuality was closely associated with the city, not with nature. Since the Pan myth is much older than Victorian concepts of sexuality, this could easily be dismissed. Alternatively, thinking of the city as a space of transgressive sexuality can also be interpreted as a space that Pan conquers not through nature but through sexuality, as the sexual connotations strongly suggest. It can be regarded as a space of absolute sexuality in lieu of nature. Pan fuses atavism, sex, and occultism. His advance into the middle of society and the center of the city is embodied by the urban.

Not only is Pan the god of nature, but he is also the god of nightmares (F. Graf 5). This layer of the deity also finds its way into Machen's text, albeit very subtle. Austin claims he would leave London, since "it is a city of nightmares" (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 46). Helen's deeds in the West End have thus transformed the entire city into a nightmarish vision for Austin. What exactly her transgressions are is never disclosed, however, Aaron Worth argues in an essay about the text that Helen herself is the "embodiment of the kind of terrifyingly expansive past that had forced itself into the Victorian consciousness during the previous decades." (Worth 216) He is thereby referring to anxieties around atavism. He points towards Helen's death scene as evidence since her morphing through different bodily stages can be read as an image of reverse evolution (Worth 216) reinforcing the fear of atavism. Through her connection to the God of nightmares and her representation of crucial Victorian anxieties, Helen herself becomes nightmarish. She does not simply bring about a nightmare, she is the embodiment of a nightmare. If we interpret Helen as the nightmare, Austin's claim that London is a city of nightmares implies that it is Helen's city.

The "city of nightmares" is not the only description of London. It is also referred to as "the city of resurrections" (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 18) and "the city of encounters" (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 18). Before he even knows of the supernatural events taking place in London,

Villiers uses these two descriptions, or rather corrects himself by suggesting that “the city of resurrections” is more adequate as a description. He uses both phrases to describe his surprising encounter with Herbert and his correction insinuates that he had forgotten about Herbert. Through their encounter Herbert is figuratively resurrected. Ironically, this encounter happens shortly before Herbert’s death. However, this moment underlines the power of chance encounter, which is the narrative engine of Machen’s story. Without people running into each other by chance, the story would stagnate. Chance encounter is a recurring theme that spurs the investigation and its resolution likewise. Similarly, if Utterson had not encountered Mr Hyde by chance, if he had not been seen by a maid by chance, and so on, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* would not have a plot at all. Both texts rely on chance encounter, with the city as a medium facilitating these encounters. Indeed, such encounters are a feature specifically of cities. In smaller towns and villages, one runs often into one another. A city of the size of London allows people to go about their lives for years without an encounter, so long, that one forgets about the other. Thus, only cities of considerable size have the power of figurative resurrection.

We can clearly see, how the notion of sexual mystery and unrepresentable horror are at the center of *The Great God Pan*. A fragmental plot, that engulfs us in the mystery in the same way the characters are, chance encounters that move the plot, descriptions that seem otherworldly and nightmarish, a sense of fear, terror, and horror all come together in this text. It is precisely this horror, which links the narrative to the occult and a sense of the demonic and nightmarish, which is represented by Pan or respectively in Helen. Emblematic of this connection to the occult is the labyrinthine representation of the city which conceals and reveals through chance encounters and coincidences. Just as the city is labyrinthine, so is the text. The literary form mirrors its content and thereby evokes a sense of the occult and what Machen understands a higher power in literature:

ecstasy. It is ecstasy that allows us to enter a city of nightmares in both, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and even more so in *The Great God Pan*.

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