

# **Aleister Crowley's *White Stains*: Pornographic Occult Poetry as Shadow Confrontation and Cathartic Liberation.**

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Pornography has had a tendency to be thought of as marginal, seedy and deviant, yet it can also be seen as a natural result of a collectively repressed sexual shadow. This bifurcated state is similarly present in the Oxford Concise English dictionary definition of pornography in which eroticism and raw sex are separated from notions of beauty and aesthetics. This paper shall look at Aleister Crowley's pornographic work *White Stains* as a form of shadow confrontation and psychological catharsis. From the perspective of the theories of analytical psychology, confronting those unconscious aspects of our psyche is a necessary prerequisite for self-development. Part of this confrontation can be accomplished by analysing the seemingly rigid separation of pornography and aesthetics and sex and divinity until they are blurred and ultimately broken. As we shall see, the pornographic poetry contained within this work can be seen as reflective of a process of psycho/spiritual liberation.

Aleister Crowley is an interesting phenomenon. Since his birth in 1875, there has been as much energy invested in attempts to warn the world of his inherent perverted and satanic nature as there has been in proselytizing his role as the Prophet of the New Aeon of the Crowned and Conquering Child. Arguably Crowley's most balanced biographer, Richard Kaczynski, concisely summarises Crowley in his paper "Taboo and Transformation in the Works of Aleister Crowley" as: "Spiritual polymorph, sexual omnivore, psychedelic pioneer, and unapologetic social misfit, Aleister Crowley cut a scandalous figure in his Edwardian heyday." (Hyatt, 2000, 171)

We shall unfairly ignore a great deal of autobiographical and biographical data and focus on only two of Crowley's primary passions: Magick and poetry. Magick, as a system of spiritual development not unlike Eastern systems of Yoga, and poetry were two writhing and interpenetrating forces in Crowley's life. It is impossible to distinguish which took precedent in his life as one was constantly influencing the other. His poetry can be seen as a spiritual sacrifice with the philosophy and ritual of Magick acting as, in a sense, a fluid poetic expression and manifestation of those spiritual passions. Underlying and informing both of these twin pillars of Aleister Crowley were the issues of sexuality, lust and the necessity of destroying the personal repression of these issues. With this mindset we now turn to *White Stains*.

*White Stains* was first published in 1898. The poetry, though labeled pornographic by various agencies, falls under the literary aegis of Decadent Poetry. The work was written by Crowley but was attributed to George Archibald Bishop, a pseudonym bearing his uncle's family name, who is described as "a neuropath of the Second Empire." The poems which comprise the book were written, so Crowley tells us, to refute the findings of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's (1840-1902) 1893 *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Crowley, 1989, 139). The thesis of von Krafft-Ebing's book was that sexual aberrations were the result of physiological disease.

Crowley was of the opinion that any such aberrations were psychological in nature and turned to artistic expression to make his point. Crowley states: "I therefore invented a poet who went wrong, who began with normal innocent enthusiasms, and gradually developed various vices. He ends by being stricken with disease and madness, culminating in murder. In his poems he describes his downfall, always explaining the psychology of each act." (Crowley, 1989, 139) Despite his scientific minded endeavor Crowley soon realised "the most personal relations could be taken by filthy minds as the basis for their malicious imaginations." (Crowley, 1989, 139)

Crowley indicates that he had no biographical inspiration for the poetry. (Kaczynski, 2002, 42) Be that as it may, Crowley was bi-sexual and it is likely that those poems involving homosexual and heterosexual eroticism may have had some basis in reality. However, the more outrageous forms of sexual "deviance" reflected in the poems if *White Stains* are certainly fictitious. With subjects including paedophilia, bestiality and necrophilia we can assume that Crowley was, in fact, approaching the poems as a way to place himself or his perspective, in each of the "poet's" experiences rather than recounting actual biographical experiences. The poems then can be seen, despite their consciously intended poetic expression, as a means to bring to consciousness the severely repressive childhood Crowley had as a

member of the ultra orthodox Plymouth Brethren and the influence of the waning Victorian period. However, Crowley's shadow content may also be ours and it is this possibility which makes these poems useful. Sexuality, usually of a so-called deviant variety, is not the only subject matter evident within the poems; there are also the seemingly conflicting issues of spiritual and religious liberation.

Crowley's later teachings, such as found in his opus *Magick*, emphasize personal liberation from unconscious controlling factors, whatever they may be. Kaczynski's "Taboo and Transformation" quotes a letter from long time Crowley confidant Gerald Yorke: "Crowley didn't *enjoy* his perversions! He performed them to overcome his horror of them." (Hyatt, 2000, 171) This is not to imply that "perversion" and "enjoyment" are mutually exclusive. He indulged in many "perversions" solely for the sake of pleasure. Yet he also consciously indulged in those "perversions" which he feared rather than attempting to avoid them or repress them. His approach was to embrace and experience that which is naturally repellent. This approach to self-development is not unique to Crowley's spiritual path and is evident, perhaps with a little less fervor, in various methods of shadow confrontation found within analytical psychology.

However, Crowley did not fully endorse psychoanalysis in general or analytical psychology specifically as we see in his "An Improvement on Psychoanalysis":

...we should all study Jung. His final conclusions are in the main correct, even if his rough working is a bit sketchy; and we've got to study him, whether we like it or not, for he will soon be recognized as the undoubted Autocrat of the 1917 dinner table. Just ask your pretty neighbour at dinner tonight whether she has introverted her Electra-complex; because it will surely become one of the favorite conversational gambits of the coming social season!" (Crowley, 1998, 81)

Though Crowley may have found little merit in Jung's early writings, the Beast is long dead. That being the case a jaunt through *White Stains* with an eye open for shadow material, in the form of the more deviant forms of sexuality, should be met with a minimal number of witty quips from beyond the grave.

What is first evident from several of the poems of *White Stains* is the theme of breaking of social norms and imposed taboos. For example, in "A Ballad of Passive Paederasty" we find the "poet" write:

Boys tempt my lips to wanton use,  
And show their tongues, and smile awry,  
And wonder why I should refuse  
Their buttocks on the sly,  
And kiss their genitals, and cry:  
'Ah! Ganymede, grant me one night!'  
This is the one sweet mystery:  
A strong man's love is my delight! (68)

In this primarily homoerotic poem, the "poet" lusts after "a strong man's love" finding the love of women or the potential for the sexual embrace of young boys unsatisfactory. Earlier in the poem the "poet" finds non-anal, heterosexual sex unsatisfactory. He then entertains the idea of the enthusiasms of young boys ultimately culminating in participation in the passive role of a homosexual encounter with an adult male. Both homosexuality and paedophilia have obvious social stigmatism attached to them. By placing himself within the drama of the poem, Crowley dips into the collective sexual shadow of humanity and faces it on an intimate level.

In "With Dog and Dame: An October Idyll" we again find the "poet" delving deeper into sexual taboo. The poem begins with the protagonist's mistress binding her hair and singing to herself, setting a mood of joy and happiness:

Autumn is on us as we lie  
In the creamy clouds of latticed light  
That hint at darkness, but descry  
A rosy flicker through the night,  
My mistress, my great Dane, and I. (94)

I think we can guess where this will end up. The protagonist is watching his mistress falling asleep:

...and my eyes  
 Catch rapture, as upon the bed  
 He licks her lazy lips, and tries  
 To tempt her tongue. My fires are fed.

Her heavy dropping breasts entice  
 My teeth to jewel them with blood,  
 Her hand prepares the sacrifice  
 She would desire of me, the flood  
 That wells from shrines of Paradise

Her other hand is mischievous  
 To bid the monster Dane grow mad,  
 His red-haw gaze grows mutinous,  
 Her eyes have lost the calm they had,  
 My body grows all amorous. (95)

The poem continues on to describe the tripartite relations that follow. Despite the legal and moral issues that may arise from such an encounter, the fact remains that this poem succeeds in bringing to the light of consciousness, through the artistic manifestation of poetry, that which would otherwise be repressed under “normal” circumstances.

This poem brings to the fore not only the obvious sexual and, through its publication, pornographic issues, it reveals the underlying social boundaries which are evident between species. Bestiality is problematic on one level because an animal has no ability to give consent to sexual congress with humans. If we take Part 5, Section 160 of the Canadian Criminal Code, as the symbolic arbitrator of social norms, into consideration we see that the animal’s volition or lack thereof is not a concern. Rather, what is at issue is the potential corruption of social norms within the human domain, especially if involving a minor (a citizen in training). Obviously Crowley was not interested in investigating the social or environmental ramifications of our species’ legal system. He was looking to shock and push the boundaries of what is “normal” and “acceptable”. The “Dog and Dame” helps to bring to consciousness underlying prejudices when we ask the question why bestiality is wrong. If we attempt to answer that difficult question without tersely saying “Because it’s just wrong” we can reach various insights regarding our own perspectives and our own biases.

In “La Juive” we see several taboos are infringed upon. In this poem the protagonist, whom we assume to be an English gentleman, has a sexual encounter with a “Jewess.” Underlying this breach in social structure and etiquette are Absinthe induced visions of the Crucifixion of Christ. Here we have the entwining of aggressive intercourse with the Crucifixion of Christ (an ecstatic melding of body and spirit), with the anti-Semitic assumption of Jews being responsible for the death of Jesus. As if this wasn’t contentious enough, the introduction of the reality shifting hallucinatory effects of Absinthe is added to the list of taboos. In this poem God is defiled repeatedly, cast out of a lofty and inhuman heaven and thrown into a raunchy bedchamber of Dionysian ecstasy. What follows is a selection of stanzas that reflect this defilement:

She was of noble birth, and—best—  
 A Jewess; her bad lips enticed  
 My lips to taste; I held her breast  
 Fresh from the crucifying Christ;  
 It seemed her thighs were hot with blood  
 Sucked from the bastard Son of God.

I saw his broken body hang  
 Sweating and bleeding on the cross;  
 I heard his curses champ and clang;  
 I spat on his reeking corpse;

I licked the spear; my feet were shod  
With iron as I kicked my God...

So runs my dream; but what am I?  
A lover by a Jewess' bed,  
A lover waiting wistfully  
For his desires to be fed;  
His only lust—a lover's bliss,  
And with no language but a kiss...

Her breasts are Golgotha to me!  
Her lips, his dripping hands and feet!  
Her secret-cinctured armoury  
Of pleasures seems—how utter sweet!—  
The gaping spear-wound in his side  
Wherein I smote the Crucified...

Ah! thy red lips, and its green glint!  
Its wavy splendour, and the dance  
Thy belly weaves, a triple hint  
Of Hell, and Algiers, and France!  
Ah! Judas-love! this flask we'll drain,  
Kiss hard—and so to bed again! (104-108)

While perhaps not as risqué as bestiality in today's society, this poem does bring out issues of racial stereotypes, as well as the habitual distrust society has of altered states of consciousness. We fight very hard to maintain control over our limited and contrived norms. However, most importantly, this poem and the majority of Crowley's works, attempts to bring together notions of lust and physical ecstasy with notions of divinity and transcendence.

Crowley wrote in his autobiography that he did not hate God or Christ "but merely the God and Christ of the people whom I hated." (Crowley, 1989, 73) The constricting nature of his early Christian upbringing was cause for great pain and yet it was through that pain that Crowley's enthusiastic emphasis on personal freedom and a "this worldly" and "life affirming" approach to spirituality was born. His experimentation with altered states of consciousness through drugs and ritual practices can also be found within the shadowy seed of the Christian world-view. Without that catalyst, Crowley may not have become the person he was—though some would argue that might not necessarily be a bad thing. The final poem we will review has as its subject the most repressed collective shadow component we humans have, namely death.

The "poet" of *White Stains* leads the reader through various degrees of sexual "deviance." The culmination of this descent into perversion is found in the poem "Necrophilia." Here are a few stanzas to give us a flavour of "Necrophilia":

My nostrils sniff the luxury  
Of flesh decaying, bowels torn  
Of festive worms, like Venus, born  
Of entrails foaming like the sea.

Yeah, thou art dead. Thy buttocks now  
Are swan-soft, and thou sweatest not;  
And hast a strange desire begot  
In me, to lick thou bloody brow;

To gnaw thy hollow cheeks, and pull  
Thy lustful tongue from out its sheath;  
To wallow in the bowels of death,  
And rip thy belly, and fill full

My hands with all putridities;  
 To chew thy dainty testicles;  
 To revel with the worms in Hell's  
 Delight in such obscenities...

To probe thy belly, and to drink  
 The godless fluids, and the pool  
 Of rank putrescence from the stool  
 Thy hanged corpse gave, whose luscious stink

Excites these songs sublime. The rod  
 Gains new desire; dive, howl, cling, suck,  
 Rave, shriek, and chew; excite the fuck,  
 Hold me, I come! I'm dead! My God! (109-110)

Death, the final taboo, holds fast its grip on all of us. We have complicated rites of burial but for whom are they conducted? Is it for the deceased or for the living to take our minds off of our inevitable and fatal emulation? Each of the aforementioned poems can be seen as probing some shadow issues attached to sexuality and pornography and its socially accepted definition. However, they also deal, mainly, with the shattering of imposed sacrosanct boundaries. Here we have the linking of death and ecstasy. The "poet" reaches an ecstatic union with God through an orgasm with an eviscerated corpse. Rather than the resurrected body joining with God in a heavenly afterlife we find the "poet", very much alive, deriving a *unio mystica* in this world with the most taboo of all objects, a corpse. The height of human experience is inexorably entwined with the antithesis of human existence.

As with the "Dane" mentioned above, we find some interesting assumptions within the Criminal Code. Whereas bestiality is a sexual offense, necrophilia, which is not mentioned by name, would fall under the heading "Nuisances". The question is who is the victim? Is the corpse the actual victim? Or is the law more for the family of the deceased and, by extension, society in general? Perhaps one answer is that, like many of the other laws regulating sex, the victim is social conformity and complacency.

At the end of *White Stains* we find the "poet" plunge into an abyss of terror, pain and death...an Absinthe charged hell. The "poet" of *White Stains* began with writing rather benign erotica, reflecting a longing for the ecstasy of pain and pleasure. Soon, as we have seen, he becomes less and less satiated and his lusts compel him to turn to greater taboos. The "poet" of *White Stains* was incapable of separating himself from his fantasies. In a way, Aleister Crowley the poet behind "the poet", was able to summon the demons of his sexual shadow to a manifestation of rhyme and meter found within his poetry. He looked the demons squarely in the eye and surfaced, undoubtedly scarred on some level, with insight into the recesses of his, and our, repressed personality.

This paper has presented an admittedly idealised view of Crowley and his poetry. Crowley undoubtedly had many issues that could not have been resolved, if he had wished them to be resolved, by merely writing a few poems. His life was filled with vitriolic relationships, psychological inflation, and rampant projection. However, those aspects of Crowley are *easy* to find both within his work and from sources hostile toward him. What is more difficult is finding how his life and experiences parallel ours. Somewhere between an idealised and demonised portrait of Crowley is a human being with common human desires, lusts, and repressed shadow content.

The benefit of *White Stains* is not in its literary contributions but in its audacity. How dare Crowley even *think* about having sex with young boys! How dare he fantasize about sexually molesting an animal! How dare he equate graphic sexuality with the Crucifixion! How dare he write of desecrating a corpse! Better he think, fantasize, equate, and write of these things than repress the fact that he, and in extension all of us, might be capable of such actions. The Occult tradition, from which Crowley drew and contributed much inspiration, is about penetrating the shadows, finding what is buried in places others would rather avoid. Convention and social confines help to prevent these types of actions from occurring in reality, but in the process they also carry the capacity to repress and bury potentially powerful and transformative portions of our psyche. Crowley used *White Stains* to bring to the surface of consciousness the dark and shadowy portions of himself. Perhaps pornography, and our relationship and reaction to it can afford us similar insights but we shall never know if we continue to fear the Beast known as Lust, isolate

concepts of beauty from eroticism, and continue to segregate ourselves from ourselves. We may be well served to adopt if not the method of *White Stains*, at least the attitude of fearless shadow confrontation of pornography and “deviant” sexuality. Perhaps we should all strive to find God in the darkest corners of our sexual shadow.

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