

The Gripping Lore of Magic

by Carl Teichrib

Without question we are living in a magic saturated society. Be it the “Harry Potter” phenomena, the rising interest in fantasy-occult role playing games—now well imbedded in the digital age, or the popularity of supernatural-based television programs and cartoon episodes; our culture is enamored with the occult, the supernatural, and magic.

Demonstrating this current Western religious trend towards a “magical society” is relatively easy. All anyone has to do is contrast today’s cultural norms with those of the middle years of the last century—the late 1940s up until the mid-to-late 1960s.

During that particular time period (and the history preceding it), talk of magic and the occult was relegated to the fringe elements of society. Even though spiritualist organizations and occult philosophical groups existed, they were not considered part of the mainstream. The only esoteric Order that was recognized as common to western culture was Freemasonry, and like today, the average member back then understood little or none of his Order’s more arcane aspects. (See endnote)

Today, all you have to do is walk into any major bookstore and look for the section labeled “Religion,” “New Age,” or “Occult.” Odds are you’ll find a huge array of texts promoting witchcraft, New Age philosophies, occultism, and a host of related topics. “Magic” is everywhere.

And it’s not just new books on magic; older texts on the history and workings of occultism and magical lore have been reprinted to meet the insatiable appetites of the reading public. Hence, it is a self-evident truism to say that what was once hidden and rarely discussed is now open for sale and readily available. We’ve come a long way...

But what is “magic”? Eliphas Levi, a very significant occult philosopher during the mid-1800s, defined magic as “the traditional science of the secrets of Nature which has been transmitted to us from the Magi.” Levi explained, “By means of this science the adept is invested with a species of relative omnipotence and can operate superhumanly—that is, after a manner which transcends the normal possibility of men.” (*Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*, Bracken Books edition, p. 36).

Some have explained occult magic as a “science of the invisible.” Andre Nataf, the author of *The Wordsworth Dictionary of the Occult*, writes that “It is the invisible with which the magician is concerned. He believes he can affect the invisible, or essence, and bend it to his will. True magic works by ritualizing the space around the magician, within which the ‘powers’ are to appear or to work” (p. 53).

Understand, this isn’t the type of magic you’ll see employed at birthday parties or circuses. While entertainment magic may be very interesting to watch, it’s actually not “magic” in the traditional style of the ancient mystery religions or occultists. Rather, entertainment magic is

usually just that, entertainment—card and coin tricks, making items disappear and reappear—each of these “hat tricks” represents a physical “sight of hand” or a specific form of physical illusion. Occult magic is another matter altogether—it’s the attempt to harness spiritual powers for one’s own use.

Nataf explains,

The magician lives, or believes he lives, in a world inhabited by spirits over which he has power. This power is initiated by ritual and by spells: a word correctly spoken becomes more than itself, expressing physically the being, or essence, of the thing it describes...

...He seeks not only to join with spirits and collaborate in the divine work, but also to act on his own account and pursue his personal designs. (pp. 52, 53)

But what about “white magic”—magic used for positive purposes— isn’t there a difference between this form of magic and black magic?

Nevill Drury’s *Dictionary of Mysticism and the Occult* gives the appearance that this separation between the magical arts is real. “If the purpose is beneficial it is known as white magic, but if it is intended to bring harm to others, or to destroy property, it is regarded as black magic” (p. 161). While this is the popular stance of many occult advocates, at least a few esoteric scholars admit that this line of thinking is seriously flawed.

Paul Foster Case, a leading figure in Western mysticism, comments in his landmark work, *The True and Invisible Rosicrucian Order*,

...though it is perfectly true that black magic depends on some sort of physical connection between the operator and the victim, it is equally true that the same law works in the opposite direction. In white magic this same path is the one that enables the operator to establish the connection whereby he heals and helps a sufferer...Remember always that the black magician uses the same forces and operates by the same fundamental laws as the operator engaged in white magic. What distinguishes black from white in magic is the intention of the operator, and the purposes for which the subtle forces are applied. (p. 198)

Arthur Edward Waite, a prominent Masonic philosopher and authority on esoteric traditions, inferred a similar position when discussing the literature of magic. Concerning black and white magic, Waite penned, “The history of this distinction is exceedingly obscure, but there can be no question that in its main aspect it is modern...” (*The Book of Black Magic*, p. 27: first printed in 1898). From Waite’s perspective, this technical differentiation emanated from a more contemporary framework, and had little historical backing.

Further elaborating on these two paths of occult lore, Waite explained that while the distinction seems clear enough—with white magic an attempt to “communicate with Good Spirits for good” and black magic an attempt to “communicate with Evil Spirits for an evil purpose”—the separation isn’t as sharp as it first appears (p. 28). According to Waite, “there is no sharp distinction between the two branches of the Art.” Indeed, he undermines the idea of a separation of powers by devoting an entire chapter to “composite rituals,” that is, to rituals which jointly employ what would be generally regarded as white and black elements.

White magic, black magic—it all emanates from the same shadowy source. But what’s the appeal? Why has the lore of occult magic gripped our Western culture so powerfully?

Nevill Drury’s definition of magic, as expressed in his *Dictionary of Mysticism and the Occult*, gives us a window into the reason why our society is so enamored with magic; It’s a “Technique of harnessing the secret powers of Nature and seeking to influence events for one’s own purpose” (p. 161). Longtime practitioner Barbara Haislip reiterates. “Power and its uses have long been the aim of many occult practitioners” (Haislip, *Stars, Spells, Secrets, and Sorcery*, p. 14).

In other words, magic—the manipulation [real or attempted] of the supernatural within the confines of the natural world—is chiefly about obtaining power for oneself. Aleister Crowley, one of the most legendary of all modern occultists (born 1875 and died 1947), defined “Magick” as “the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will” (*Magick: In Theory and Practice*, p. XII; Dover edition). Indeed, this was summed up in Crowley’s ultimate motto: “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.”

Regardless if it’s called White magic or Black, the desired result is personal potency. It’s about self.

Wielding supernatural power certainly appeals to today’s occult-fed society, but occultism is nothing to fool with. Even Madame Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society and “mother” of the New Age Movement, understood that grave dangers lurked in the shadow-world of the supernatural: “...*there are secrets that kill* in the arcane of Occultism, and unless a man *lives the life* he cannot be entrusted with them” (H.P. Blavatsky, *Studies in Occultism*, p. 25, italics in original).

Blavatsky makes a very important point—the occult is a deadly place to deposit your mind and soul. But she also misses an essential reality—*living the life* places one directly in harm’s way, and it makes no difference whether that individual is a dabbler or a long-time practitioner. You may think you’re in control of the powers that arise through the use of occult magic, but it’s in control of you. Ultimately, the occult kills.

No wonder Deuteronomy 18 clearly warns that the occult world is something to steer clear of.

When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 18:9-13, NKJV)

Endnote:

Consider the words of two of the most eminent Masonic historians and philosophers: “...few Masons of today know or appreciate the mystic meaning concealed within these rituals.” Manly P. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry*, p. 14; “The Blue Degrees are but the outer court or portico of the Temple. Part of the symbols are displayed there to the Initiate, but he is intentionally misled by false interpretations. It is not intended that he shall understand them; but it is intended that he shall imagine he understands them. Their true explication is reserved for the Adepts, the Princes of Masonry.” Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma*, p. 819.