

Something Wicked This Way Comes

Francis X. Maier August 2, 2024

Here's a fun fact: Keith Richards is 80. His bandmate, Sir Michael Philip "Mick" Jagger – yes, the baddest of Bad Boys was knighted in 2003, against the wishes of Queen Elizabeth II – is an overripe 81. Their prance and wriggle days on the world stage have largely passed though they're still doing live performances. But a few of their tunes do stick in the memory. Theology, to put it kindly, was never the Rolling Stones' strong suit; [*Their Satanic Majesties Request*](#) ^[1] (1967) is an eminently freakish and forgettable album. And yet, for me at least, their song [*Sympathy for the Devil*](#) ^[2] (1968) is as fresh as it was nearly 60 years ago. In fact, its lyrics could easily serve as the theme for our current cultural season.

Here's a sample:

Just as every cop is a criminal,
and all the sinners saints;
as heads is tails
just call me Lucifer,
'cause I'm in need of some restraint.

True, they're not exactly words of genius. But whatever one thinks of octogenarian rock stars, the insight of those few lines is striking.

Evil is an inversion of the good. The philosopher Jacques Maritain likened it to **a parasite clinging to a healthy body; it draws its lifeblood from the repudiation of all things wholesome. It feeds itself by attacking the people and standards that hold it accountable to higher obligations and virtuous behavior. Thus, evil speaks eloquently of tolerance and compassion *when it's weak*, but switches effortlessly to *intolerance and contempt when it gains the upper hand*. It cannot bear to be “tolerated.” *It demands to be affirmed and its critics punished*.** Evil can never live peacefully with truth and sacrificial love because their very existence is scalding, an ongoing indictment of evil’s destructive perversity.

The American writer Matthew Crawford captured the undercurrent of so much of today’s self-described “**progressive**” thought in a recent [Substack posting](#) [3]: It’s anti-white, anti-male, anti-“straight” sexuality (unless abortion is involved), cynical toward religion, and anti-normal. Normalcy – the everyday lives of average people doing ordinary things informed by a broadly Biblical moral sense and a simple measure of contentment – is the target of a peculiarly venomous hatred.

Nietzsche called it *ressentiment*. Thus modesty is mocked, and the normal is cast as “weird.” Meanwhile, Democratic political luminaries hobnob with drag queens. As Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* might say, “we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

How best to understand our present moment?

Humans have a hunger for stories. It’s in our DNA. A good story can teach about the nature of the world and our lives in it more effectively than any classroom. Like a lot of young boys growing up, I had an appetite for works of fantasy and science fiction: the storytelling of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, obviously, but also of Ray Bradbury. I devoured Bradbury’s

Martian Chronicles, Dandelion Wine, There Shall Come Soft Rains, and Fahrenheit 451.

But the Bradbury book that left the deepest impression on me was his *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. He borrowed the title from a line spoken by a witch in Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, and the plot is simple. A lightning-rod salesman shows up one late October day in a small Midwestern town. He warns that a storm is coming, and a traveling carnival promptly arrives in the night. But it's no ordinary circus; Halloween has come early. **The carnival owner is a demonic Mr. Dark with a taste for the grotesque and an appetite for capturing and ruining souls.**

Mr. Dark has an uncanny ability to read people's deepest desires and grant them – for a price. Every selfish wish is satisfied, and every selfish wish is a trap. A woman desperate to be younger is returned to her childhood. . .but left friendless and miserable. Along with its blandishments, the carnival turns everything it touches into division, conflict, and despair.

Look around at American life as we now know it. If we don't see at least a few grasping and fractious parallels, we haven't been awake.

Reflecting on the stories of Tolkien and Lewis, the writer [N.S. Lyons noted](#) ^[5] the following:

The disenchantment and demoralization of a world produced by the foolishly blinkered “debunkers” of the intelligentsia; the catastrophic corruption of genuine education; the inevitable collapse of dominating ideologies of pure materialist rationalism and progress into pure subjectivity and nihilism; the inherent connection between the loss of any objective value and the emergence of a perverse techno-state obsessively seeking first total control over humanity and then in the end the final abolition of humanity itself. . .Tolkien and Lewis foresaw all of the darkest winds that now gather in growing intensity today.

But ultimately the shared strength of both authors may have also been something even more straightforward: a willingness to speak plainly and openly about the existence and nature of evil. **Mankind, they saw, could not resist opening the door to the dark, even with the best of intentions. And so they offered up a way to resist it.**

Bradbury had a lighter touch and less moral substance than either Tolkien or Lewis. **But in *Something Wicked* he offered up the same way to resist evil. It's the deliberate choice to love when it's easier to hate; to be grateful; to take joy from the gifts we already have in life despite its burdens and disappointments – these are what defeat Mr. Dark.** These are the things that give us peace, make us happy, and keep us fully human. Which is why they're so infuriating to the chronically restless and dissatisfied.

Something wicked this way comes. It's been coming for decades, pushed along by our appetites, choices, and the leaders we've selected. But we can change. It's now another election cycle. **The carnival is already in town, open for business, and eager to hear every detail of our grievances and wants.**

But if we claim to be Christians, let's remember who we really are and what we really need before entering its tent.

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URLs in this post:

[1] *Their Satanic Majesties Request*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Their_Satanic_Majesties_Request

[2] *Sympathy for the Devil*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sympathy_for_the_Devil

[3] Substack posting: <https://mcrawford.substack.com/p/the-flight-from-normal>

[4]

Two Satyrs: https://www.thecatholicthing.org/wp-content/uploads/PETER-PAUL-RUBENS_ZWEI-SATYRN_CC-BY-SA_BSTGS_873-1.jpg

[5] N.S. Lyons noted: <https://theupheaval.substack.com/p/a-prophecy-of-evil-tolkien-lewis>

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