



4-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Porter, Adam L. (2017) "Satanic Humans: Using Satanic Tropes To Guide And Misguide The Audience," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 , Article 40.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/40>

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Satanic Humans: Using Satanic Tropes To Guide And Misguide The Audience

Abstract

One of the differences between Christ and Satan is that the former is clearly described in the Gospels, but the latter is not. Rather, a large number of different stories grew up around the character of Satan over the last 2000 years. Authors and artists can dip into the pool of Satan myths and find different versions of the character they can adapt for their own purposes. I am interested in identifying what satanic symbols have become popular in Hollywood films, so in 2013 I wrote an essay that analyzed several films featuring *super-human characters* and identified several traits beyond “evilness” that seem to come out of the traditions about Satan. This essay continues this analysis by examining five films featuring *purely human characters* who exhibit a similar set of satanic traits. In the entirely mundane realm, these traits have been diminished and rationalized, but they are still evident. The other noteworthy difference from the super-hero films is that those films include a Christ-figure who defeats the satanic villains. These films exhibit a similarly conservative theological position, especially evident in those films where the satanic villain escapes: one cannot help wonder whether a Christ-figure would have prevented the antagonist’s victory.

Keywords

Satan, Satanic, Devil, Lucifer, Verbal Kint, Keyser Soze, Max Cady, Hannibal Lecter, The Usual Suspects, Silence of the Lambs, Hannibal, Sherlock Holmes, Cape Fear

Author Notes

Dr. Adam Porter is a Professor of Religion and Dean of Faculty at Illinois College. Trained in Second Temple Judaism, he has become increasingly interested in Satan and the portrayal of Satan in popular culture (film, TV, and comic books). An initial draft of this essay was presented to the Jacksonville Literary Union on October 26, 2015. I appreciate the feedback I received from the other members of the Union. Its most recent version has been improved enormously by the feedback I received from my colleague and wife, Dr. Nancy Taylor Porter. I also appreciate the comments I received from two anonymous reviewers. Final responsibility is solely mine.

Scholars have discussed cinematic Jesuses and Christ-figures frequently. Films about Jesus (as Jesus) are less common than films that feature a Christ-figure. This stands to reason: if Jesus is a character, the film is generally set in first-century Judaea and is (purportedly) based on biblical materials. This obviously limits what film-makers can do with the character and invites controversy, no matter what choices the director makes.¹ Christ-figures, on the other hand, can be set anywhere and in any time. A list of Christ-traits can be generated by examining the New Testament, which describes his characteristics and activities. Lloyd Baugh suggests the following list of traits for Christ-figures: (a) a mysterious origin, (b) attraction of disciples, (c) commitment to justice, (d) conflict with authority figures, (e) suffering for others, (f) death (often in a cruciform pose) or the appearance of death, and (g) resurrection or re-awakening.² Once one starts looking for characters exhibiting these traits, they can be seen in *many* movies.

Cinematic Satans and Satan-figures are, point-by-point, almost the exact opposite. Satan is poorly described in the Hebrew Bible and hardly clearer in the New Testament.³ Over centuries, both high culture (such as educated church leaders) and low culture (common people) have told stories about Satan, generating a wide variety of images and ideas about him. Is his skin red or black? Does he have horns and hooves or does he appear in the shape of a dog or is he a dapper dresser or can he shape-shift? Does he seek to overthrow God's throne or does he help God (even indirectly) by punishing sinners or try to purchase human souls? Is

he wily and smart or can he be tricked and deceived? People have told all these stories (and many more) about Satan.⁴ Without a clearly defined Satan, authors (and film makers) dip into this pool of ideas and images and use those that fit their purposes. It is easier to analyze characters who clearly are Satan (as in *Little Nicky* (2000), *Devil's Advocate* (1997), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), or *Bedazzled* (1967, 2000)). Indeed, Kelly Wyman⁵ has analyzed representations of Satan in film, noting how they fit traditional representations of Satan (as human or animal-like, with horns and hooves, etc.) and traditional Satanic plots (such as trying to buy human souls and losing, trying to overthrow God or bring about the apocalypse, etc.). But Wyman does not discuss the parallel to Christ-figures: how does one recognize a satanic figure who is not Satan? Thinking about traditional satanic traits and examining cinemagraphic villains who are paired with opposing Christ-figures, I argued⁶ that satanic figures exhibit four traits including a) an ability to shape-shift and/or change appearance; b) being physically and/or mentally superior to other humans; c) an association with fire and torment; and d) frequently being rather dapper, well-dressed and elegant, often with a widow's peak hairline. This was demonstrated by studying a number of science fiction and superhero movies (*The Matrix Trilogy* (1999, 2003a, 2003b), *Terminator 2* (1991), *Superman Returns* (2006), and *Dark Knight* (2008)). These movies' satanic characters are either non-humans or super-humans, and are paired with Christ-figures, who bring about their defeat.

This article examines another set of movies that feature satanic characters, examining characters who are entirely human. It argues that many satanic traits found in the antagonists of the science fiction and comic book movies are also exhibited by the human satanic figures, although often in a subdued or less overt manner, appropriate for mortal characters.⁷ These characters are *not* paired with Christ-figures and, interestingly, the satanic figure sometimes “wins” the conflict. To make this argument, I will examine *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Hannibal* (2001), *Cape Fear* (1991), and, briefly, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009).

My primary selection criteria for this analysis was to analyze films which were successful at the box office.⁸ I am interested in examining films that are popular because it suggests that they resonate, in some fashion, with the audience. Oftentimes films are successful because they echo contemporary concerns. Two recent examples demonstrate this: *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) has been read as a commentary on US government surveillance and drone strikes⁹ and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) has been read as discussing how to keep Americans safe in the post-9/11 world.¹⁰ Since *Silence* and *Cape Fear* were released in 1991 and *Usual Suspects* in 1995, they may reflect a response to the “Satanic-Panic” that gripped the United States in the late 1980s,¹¹ although I am not familiar with anyone who has developed this argument fully.

My analysis starts with *The Usual Suspects* (1995), because it demonstrates the satanic traits mostly clearly. The film tells the story of a group of career criminals engaged in a series of small heists. But when Verbal Kint is arrested, he mentions the name “Keyser Soze” to the detective investigating the case. Keyser Soze is a criminal legend, and the detective interviews Kint closely. The director, Brian Singer, effectively uses the trope of the unreliable narrator:¹² Verbal, as his name hints, is a gifted storyteller and spins an engrossing tale to the detective who has arrested him. But in the final moments of the film, a “twist” ending casts doubt on the veracity of his story (and, indeed, the entire narrative of the movie), as it becomes apparent that Verbal Kint *is* Keyser Soze. Kint and Soze each exhibit different satanic traits; combined, the character(s) have almost all traits mentioned above, as well as some other traits associated with Satan.

One common satanic trait is the ability to shape-shift. Kint / Soze demonstrates this, while incorporating yet another medieval satanic trope: limping. As the Church sought to discredit pagan religion, specifically Pan and satyrs, it assigned their most notable characteristics to Satan: the horns, legs, and hooves of a goat.¹³ Because of his hoofs, people imagine that Satan has trouble walking, so limping can be associated with Satan.¹⁴ In *The Usual Suspects*, Verbal Kint has cerebral palsy, so he drags his left foot and struggles to control his left hand.



Figure 1: Verbal Kint struggles with his left hand and left foot

At the end of the film, Kint limps out of the police station, but then begins to walk normally and flexes his “crippled” left hand, shifting his form and revealing that his handicap has been faked. Thus, he shape-shifts from being “the cripple” Kint, to the able-bodied Soze.

His handicap is important to the film and the shifting emotions we feel while viewing it. Kint evokes sympathy from the audience, even though we know him to be a murderer, a thief, and a con man. We may even admire him; we think his refusal to become a snitch in return for police protection endangers him, as Soze may try to assassinate him, as he has all other witnesses. Kint is willing to endanger himself because he has (jailhouse?) honor and is loyal to his fellow thieves. Of course, the “twist” at the end of the movie turns our emotions on their heads and confuses us; we’ve been led to sympathize with the semi-pathetic criminal and worry about what will happen to him when he returns to the street, but suddenly,

we realize that the “cripple” is actually the terrible boogy-man of the criminal under-world, Soze, who kills all the surviving members of Kint’s band of thieves.

The physical markers of Kint and Soze are, thus, important in this film. That the villain, Soze, is left-handed is significant, since tradition, reflected in medieval art, says that Satan is left-handed.¹⁵ Cerebral palsy forces Kint to use his right hand and he cannot control the left side of his body. But Soze is left-handed, as is especially apparent when he shoots his final victim, when the camera lingers on him to make it clear that he holds his gun in his left hand.



Figure 2: Soze shoots a witness left-handedly

The Usual Suspects features fire prominently. The movie opens with a night-time shoot-out on a boat and its subsequent burning and explosion. The gang comes together when they are all arrested by the NYPD, but, following Kint’s plan, they get revenge on the NYPD and burn one of its patrol cars. In the middle of the film, Soze’s origin story is described in a flash-back. The predominant palette of the screen is orange and yellow; indeed, the whole screen appears to be on fire.



Figure 3: Soze's fiery origin story

The story concludes with Soze walking towards the viewer, with burning buildings behind him. At the end of the movie, we return to the boat, to see it explode and burn once again. Thus, fire connects Kint and Soze, a clue to their joint identity for the viewer, but it also signals their affinity with Satan.

Another group of scenes repeats this color palette towards the end of the film, when two of Kint's associates search a boat for cocaine. They wander through dark rooms and passageways, generally lit only by dim red lights, reminiscent of hell. They eventually descend into the bowels of the boat, ending in the hot and noisy engine room. The colors and the descent motif are reminiscent of stories about descending into hell. (A similar example appears in *Silence of the Lambs*, discussed below.)

This search is another example of Soze's deception. Kint's associates never find the drugs and (perhaps) begin to realize they have been duped. While they are

conducting their search, Soze finds and murders *his* target: a single witness. Afterwards, he also murders Kint's associates, as they are trying to get off the boat.

Satan is commonly regarded as deceptive and this trait is found in all the films, to varying degrees. But Kint / Soze's deception is the device that makes *The Usual Suspects* work as a story. At the end of the film, after Kint leaves the police station where he was questioned, the police detective (and the audience) realize that Kint's story was a fabrication, drawing on the names he spies on materials in the detective's office. The detective realizes this and rushes out, trying to catch Kint. As he does so, a police sketch arrives via fax, clearly showing Verbal's face with his distinct widow's peak hair-line. Thus, at the end of the film, the detective knows that Kint is a liar, but the audience's knowledge that Soze is Kint forces them to reassess the whole film.

In addition to the hints or allusions to satanic traits described above, there are clues in the film's dialogue suggesting that *both* Soze and Kint are satanic. After Kint's arrest, his lawyer calls in political favors, prompting a detective to remark—strangely mixing metaphors—that “This guy is protected from up on high by the prince of darkness.” Later, the only witness to the massacre on the boat, a Hungarian, is terrified because, his translator reports, “He saw the devil, looked him in the eye.” Who is this devil? Keyser Soze. Later, when speaking of Soze, Kint asks the detective, “How do you shoot the devil in the back?” Finally, Kint paraphrases Baudelaire¹⁶ when he says to the detective, “The greatest trick the

Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist." Has Soze convinced the world he doesn't exist and Kint is real? Or perhaps he is foreshadowing Kint's disappearance; does he have *any* existence outside of the story told to the detective? Or perhaps it means that they both disappear, as Kint / Soze gets into a car at the end of the film and disappears from the detective. Whatever this phrase means in the context of the *Usual Suspects*, it is another hint in the characters' dialogue connecting Kint / Soze to Satan.

I have chosen to start my examination of mortal satanic characters with *The Usual Suspects* because Kint / Soze displays all the satanic traits identified in my earlier article. Two points are worth reiterating: first, Kint / Soze acts far more deceptively than the satanic characters in the *Terminator* or *Matrix* films. In the latter films, the principle deception was shape-shifting or imitating humans. But *The Usual Suspects* is completely dependent on Verbal Kint deceiving the police questioning him; without this deception, there wouldn't be a movie. And his deception isn't just shape-shifting, which he can do only to a limited extent (at least compared to the T-1000 or Agents in the *Terminator* or *Matrix* films). Rather, he spins a web of lies and deception, which the detective believes until the finale; it is so successful, that the audience isn't sure what parts (if any) of the movie they have just watched are "real" and what can be attributed to Verbal's verbal artistry.

Second, the villain in this film (Kint / Soze) "wins," escaping the police. At the end of the film, he drives off with "Mr. Kobayashi," who may be his lawyer,

leaving the police detective frenetically looking for him in front of the police station. Satanic figures are defeated when opposed by a Christ-character (as in the *Terminator*, *Matrix*, and superhero films), but the more human satanic figures, opposed and surrounded by purely human characters, sometimes triumph.

The victorious satanic figure is also found in the second set of films, those featuring Hannibal Lecter. Lecter has appeared in a number of films (*Manhunter* (1986), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Hannibal* (2001), *Red Dragon* (2002), and *Hannibal Rising* (2007)).¹⁷ The most famous and critically acclaimed of these is *Silence of the Lambs*,¹⁸ and I will focus primarily on it, with some discussion of its successor, *Hannibal*. In *Silence*, we are first introduced to Lecter when his prison psychologist Dr. Chilton leads Clarice Starling, an FBI agent in training, to his cell. Lecter is kept in the bowels of the earth, and Starling has to descend many staircases and pass through three gates to get to him. The last gate is lit with a red light.



Figure 4: Starling passes through gates, descending to meet Hannibal

This trip brings to mind the idea that Satan lives in the underworld. More specifically, the fact that Starling passes through several gates before encountering Lecter evokes Dante's *Inferno*: Hell is entered via a gate (famously inscribed with "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here" (*Inferno*, 3.9) and Dante locates Satan at the very bottom of Hell. That we should draw this connection is suggested by the fact that Lecter decorates his cell with pictures of Florence, Dante's home. It is further emphasized in *Hannibal*, when Lecter actually travels to Florence and studies Dante. In Florence, Lecter adopts the alias "Dr. Fell," another reference to his satanic nature.



Figure 5: Hannibal decorates his cell with memories of Florence

Since Goethe's *Faust* appeared (first published in 1808, revised 1829), "literary Devils ... [have taken] the suave, ironic, and ambiguous shape of Goethe's Mephistopheles."¹⁹ Satanic figures tend to be well-dressed and smooth talkers; in films, they often have widow's peak hairlines.²⁰ Kint does not dress as well as some

of his comrades, but he does have a prominent widow's peak. In *Silence*, Lecter mostly appears in prison garb, which is hardly flattering. But in comparison to the inmates in the adjacent cells, Lecter is neatly groomed and polite. He greets Starling wearing a blue jump-suit and standing at attention. He, too, has a widow's peak, although it is less pronounced than Kint's. When free to dress as he desires, as seen in *Hannibal*, he carefully coordinates his wardrobe, wears a flower in his lapel, and favors a pinky ring: a very suave fellow.

Lecter has refined taste in music, wine, and food. At the end of *Hannibal*, he sniffily tells a fellow airline passenger he always brings his own food (caviar, sweetbreads, and fine wine), because "airline food isn't really food, as I define it." Similarly, Starling discounts the possibility of Lecter being in Las Vegas because "it would be an assault on his sense of taste." His senses are acute and he is familiar with expensive perfumes and hand lotion: although locked up for eight years, he still can identify Starling's perfume and hand lotion by scent. He enjoys art and his memory is impressive, as he can draw detailed images of the Duomo in Florence's skyline from memory. When living in Florence, he surrounds himself with sculpture, artwork, and a grand piano.

But these elite attributes are twisted to bizarre and horrific ends. He enjoys food and drink, but he eats people. He cooks portions of an FBI agent's brain and feeds it to him. After murdering the police officers trying to imprison him, he takes the time to artistically arrange their bodies. In *Silence*, he kills the officers jailing

him in Tennessee and, before escaping, arranges one corpse to hang from the ceiling, decorated with bunting. When the other officers approach the glass-paneled door, his silhouette looks angelic. Similarly, in *Hannibal*, when he kills Commendatore Pazzi, the Italian police officer tracking him in Florence, he stages his death to recreate the execution of one of the officer's ancestors. In this case, he kills Pazzi by disemboweling him and then hanging him from the balcony of the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence's old town hall. Both these murders are arranged as public spectacles, appealing to Hannibal's refined (but disturbing) aesthetic sense.



Figure 6: Hannibal's artistry in death

Lecter claims to value civility and when “Multiple Migs,” the inmate in the adjacent cell, is disgustingly rude to Starling, Lecter punishes him by talking him into swallowing his own tongue and killing himself.²¹ Starling is so convinced of Lecter's civility that, when he escapes, she reassures her frightened fellow FBI trainee that Lecter wouldn't harm her, because he would consider it rude. In *Hannibal*, Barney, the prison guard who knows him best, says that Lecter did not kill indiscriminately; rather, he preferred to kill (and eat) rude people (“the free-range rude”). Nonetheless, while Starling and Barney are convinced that Lecter

mostly kills rude people, the majority of his victims in these two films are not rude, but those who threaten his freedom or stand between him and freedom: county sheriffs who keep him in jail, an Italian detective who tries to capture him, the FBI agent who tries to arrest him. Lecter has persuaded some characters of his civility but he has deceived them; he may prefer to kill rude people, but he slays others quite facilely.

Like Kint, Lecter has a limited ability to shift his shape, but he uses it to successfully escape from the police in Tennessee. As mentioned above, after killing his jailers, he rigs one body to look like an angel. Lecter skins the second guard, removing his face, and dons it as a mask. Diabolically disguised, he feigns injury, and is taken from the prison in an ambulance. In the back of the ambulance, he rises, pulls off the guard's face, and reveals his own face, covered in blood and



Figure 7: Hannibal's shape-shifting skills demonstrated

gore. After killing the EMTs, he drives to the airport and flies to freedom. He continues to disguise himself; in his last shot, he wears a blond wig, sunglasses, and fedora while waiting for Dr. Chilton to alight from a plane. Thus, his ability to shape-shift, while limited to the mortal realm, proves powerful enough to gain his freedom.

A commonplace in Satan stories is making a deal with the devil. Frequently in medieval folklore, when a non-elite person made a pact with the devil, the story ends happily with devil duped by the mortal's guile.²² This plot forms the basis for films such as *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) and *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1941). These films feature a character who is clearly Satan and follow this traditional plot; the human always outwits the Satan.

Since Lecter is *not* Satan, but rather a human exhibiting satanic traits, the pact with him follows a different trajectory. Agent Starling and her boss, Agent Crawford, offer Lecter a deal to move him to a penitentiary that would include a cell with a window. He realizes they are trying to trick him, although he does admit that locating the penitentiary on Anthrax Island is a "nice touch." Instead, Lecter offers a deal to Senator Martin, whose daughter has been kidnapped by Buffalo Bill. Lecter tricks the Senator by never revealing Buffalo Bill's true identity. He also mentally torments her while en route to his new cell. Ultimately, the deal with Senator Martin is disastrous as it allows Lecter to escape. Thus, this pact with the devil (or satanic character) turns out in his favor.

The fire motif is modernized and far less pronounced with Lecter than with the other satanic characters discussed in this article. But Lecter, especially in *Hannibal*, seems to prefer candles to electric lights, both in the library in Florence, and at FBI agent Paul Krendler's house. A fine chef, he prepares food *flambe* for Krendler. Finally, it is noteworthy that Lecter smokes. This is surprising for a medical doctor, especially one who values his sense of taste and smell so highly. But understood as a sign of Satan, it makes sense; indeed, all the satanic characters discussed in this essay are smokers.²³

Finally, where the audience feels sympathy for Kint, even while he is a criminal, the attitude towards Lecter is more complex. He charms and repels the audience simultaneously. *Silence* features him less prominently than *Hannibal* and his antagonists, like Dr. Chilton, are morally compromised. In *Hannibal*, he plays a much larger role, and his code of ethics becomes clearer; he kills those who threaten him directly or who anger him (often for being impolite).²⁴ In this film, most of his victims deserve, in some sense, to die. For example, Mason Verger hunts him in *Hannibal* because years before Lecter drugged him and encouraged Mason to cut off his own face. But since Verger was a pedophile, the audience is supposed to dislike him. Finally, at the very end of the movie, faced with harming Agent Starling or himself to escape from the police, he chooses to harm himself. In short, by the end of *Hannibal*, the audience may have more than respect for Lecter; they may even like him.

The two satanic characters examined so far—Kint / Soze and Lecter—have been charismatic. Those in the remaining two films are unsympathetic villains. The first of these is Max Cady, in *Cape Fear* (2001). Cady, recently paroled after serving 14 years for rape and assault, seeks revenge against Sam Bowden, the attorney who defended him poorly when he suppressed exculpatory evidence that might have exonerated Cady (or at least lessened his prison sentence). Cady quotes the Bible extensively,²⁵ interpreting it idiosyncratically to support his own perverse world-view. Adele Reinhartz has argued that Cady highlights his identification with Satan when he advises Bowden to read the book of Job and to prepare to learn about loss.²⁶



Figure 8: Max Cady with a burning red flare

Cady exhibits some of the same satanic traits as Kint / Soze and Lecter. The first time Bowden sees him is in a movie theater, when Cady is sitting just in front of Bowden's family ostentatiously smoking a cigar and blowing clouds of odious

smoke into the air. Satan is often associated with fire and malodorous smoke (sulfur or brimstone). The connection to fire is more strongly made towards the end of the film, when Cady invades the Bowden's houseboat. Cady brags about his ability to withstand pain and fire, demonstrating this by holding a burning red flare and allowing its hot residue to flow over his hand. Moments later, Danielle, Bowden's daughter, douses Cady with lighter fluid while he is lighting his cigar, so that he catches fire.²⁷

Cady's color palette is also associated with fire and reddish hues. When he is spying on Bowden's house, Leigh Bowden (Sam's wife), sees him illuminated by fireworks, which, although white in the sky, appear red on her house and in her bedroom.



Figure 9: Sam and Leigh see Cady amid the fireworks

When he leaves prison, he wears red pants. He also drives a classic Ford Mustang, which is fire-engine red. In many scenes -- especially those where he interacts with

women -- he wears red shirts. When arrested and strip-searched, we discover he wears red underwear. Red symbolizes not only fire, but also passion and seduction.

Satan is associated with temptation and seduction and Cady is a tempter and seducer. He seeks out, charms, and deceives women who are important to Bowden. He woos Lori Davis, Bowden's young law-clerk and would-be lover, picking her up in a bar and then brutally assaulting and raping her. In one of the tensest scenes in the film, which fills the audience with fear at its potential violence, he impersonates Danielle's drama instructor and persuades her to meet him alone in the high school theatre, where he tempts her with marijuana. He also persuades an airline ticket agent to divulge confidential information to him about Bowden's travel plans. He accomplishes this by dressing nicely in the first two cases and appearing in bandages, limping, and using a crutch, eliciting pity in the third case. These simple disguises are the limit of his shape-shifting ability, but combined with his charm, they suffice.

Like Kint / Soze and Lecter, Cady exhibits abilities superior to those of the other characters in the movie. He (and his car) appear and disappear at will. He is able to kill Bowden's dog, although how he does so is never clear. When assaulted by three goons, Cady withstands their attack and eventually defeats them. Bowden hires a private detective to protect him, but Cady evades his alarm system and kills him. And towards the end of the film, he ties himself to the underside of Bowden's truck and so follows the family to their houseboat.²⁸

At the end of *Cape Fear*, Cady, like Lecter, alludes to Dante's *Inferno*, when he announces to Bowden that he is Virgil, guiding Bowden through the gates of Hell, and into its ninth circle. This is the circle for traitors and Cady accuses Bowden of being a traitor to his profession.²⁹ Cady claims to be Virgil, but he is wrong; the center of the ninth circle is where Dante places Satan. Both the traitors and Satan are buried in the ice formed by their (and Satan's) tears. At the end of the film, Cady dies, buried in the water of the Cape Fear River, screaming and raving.

Russell argues that stories about Satan have been popular in the Western tradition, with the Faust plot and *Paradise Lost* being especially significant.³⁰ Everyone "knows" that the snake in Eden was Satan and that Eve ate an apple. Genesis says neither of these things but Milton does. These traditions have become commonplaces, as reflected in advertising and popular culture.³¹



Figure 10: Examples of Satanic Commonplaces in Advertising

Similarly, everyone “knows” the devil wants to buy human souls, even if they’ve never read *Faust*. This trope has become a commonplace and is the basis for serious films such as *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1941) and the Simpson’s version of that movie (“The Devil and Homer Simpson,” (S4E5, 1993)).



Figure 11: Ned Flanders as the Devil has goat's feet and a tail, as well as horns

That these satanic traits are part of our common popular mythology and that they are symbolically strong, even for people who are unaware of their connection to Satan, can be demonstrated by examining a second film with an unsympathetic satanic villain, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009). The villain, Lord Blackwood, and director of the film, Guy Richie, each assume that their audiences—19th-century Londoners

and 21st-century movie viewers, respectively—are familiar enough with satanic commonplaces that they can be used to mislead them into believing in the supernatural.

The main villain, Lord Blackwood, seeks to become the leader of a secret society, “The Temple of the Four Orders,” and from there, to control Parliament and the Empire. Many of the leaders of London are members of the society, including the Home Secretary, Lord Coward; the Chief Justice, Sir Thomas Rotheram; and Ambassador Standish. There are suggestions that Temple members engage in some fertility rites, necromancy, and believe in magic.

Thus, the opening scene of the film features Lord Blackwood apparently engaged in a ritual human sacrifice. This takes place underground, in a space that resembles a church.



Figure 12: Lord Blackwood’s “church”

Blackwood has a young woman on an altar, surrounded by his disciples, who watch as she prepares to kill herself at his behest. He is condemned to death for killing five people and for “practicing black magic.” Rotheram tells Holmes that Blackwood has killed many, which has increased his power.

Blackwood self-consciously performs satanic tropes. He dresses extremely well, preferring black leather overcoats, elegantly trimmed with fur, and a red brocade vest. Like Lecter, he demonstrates his wealth, high levels of education, and is clearly upper-class. He has a prominent widow’s peak, probably the most prominent of all the villains discussed in this essay.



Figure 13: Lord Blackwood addresses Parliament

Lord Blackwood is associated with fire. Most notably, he sets on fire his rival to lead the Temple of the Four Orders, Ambassador Standish, apparently by magic, while simultaneously demonstrating that he has nothing to fear from bullets.

Standish, aflame, plunges through a third-floor window before plummeting to his death in the building's courtyard. Later, Blackwood tries to kill Holmes, Watson, and Irene Adler in series of massive, fiery explosions.

Like Cady, Blackwood does not shift his shape, but he, too, appears and disappears apparently at will. Thus, Blackwood appears in the private chambers of Rotheram, to savor his "magical" death; he similarly appears in the headquarters of the Temple of the Four Orders to kill his rival and to take over leadership of the Temple. Richie often shows a raven in flight just before Blackwood appears (or disappears). He may be suggesting to the audience that, just as Dracula can transform himself into a bat, Blackwood has similar transformative powers.

As noted above, Max Cady misappropriates Biblical texts, twisting them to his own ends. Blackwood does likewise. As Blackwood awaits hanging for attempted human sacrifice, Holmes visits him in jail, finding him reading the portion of Revelation 13 that describes the Beast, which is associated with Satan. And later, explaining his apparent resurrection, he cites Rev 1:18. Ironically, this passage refers to Christ, not an evil human and Blackwood gets it wrong anyway, adding a conclusion to the passage not found in the Bible.

In short, Blackwood is loudly mysterious, using satanic tropes to persuade many of the residents of 19th-century London that he has mastered black magic. At his hanging, protesting crowds carry signs with apocalyptic slogans. He elicits fear and dread from his fellow prisoners, prison guards, and policemen. He is also able

to deceive members of parliament, who seem to believe he is actually able to do black magic.

But these satanic symbols are flim-flam. An oft-noted feature of Conan Doyle's stories is Holmes' utter rationality and unwillingness to give any credence to supernatural explanations of mysterious events. Thus, when he receives a letter reporting vampirism, Holmes says “. . . It mentions the legend in one of those references. But are we to give serious attention to such things? This agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply.”³²

In *Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes is able to provide rationalistic explanations for all Blackwood's apparent magical accomplishments, revealing him to be a charlatan who has bribed some actors and hired a skilled scientist to develop new technologies to allow him to mystify his fellow Temple members as well as the general public. Interestingly, in Conan Doyle's books, Watson is continually befuddled and confused; in *Sherlock*, the audience plays this role: Holmes describes Blackwood's schemes to Blackwood himself, atop London Tower Bridge. The only audience for this discussion is the camera and the audience in the theater; Watson is not in the vicinity.

Sherlock Holmes works because Richie can be sure that viewers, steeped in the popular culture mythology about Satan, are familiar enough with satanic typology that he can use it to mislead them into believing that Blackwood has

supernatural powers. The directors of the other films draw on the same tropes, but for slightly different purposes. All the other films have villains who might be seen as somehow sympathetic: Cady wants revenge for a perversion of justice, committed by his defense attorney; Lecter is being tormented by a prison psychologist or hunted by a grotesquely disfigured pedophile; and Kint seems to be a (semi) honorable thief, struggling with a significant physical handicap. In this world of shades of grey, the directors signal to their audiences that their villains truly are villains by associating them with satanic symbols.

But the directors, setting their films in the mundane world, have to follow Holmes and reject the supernatural. The characters may be exceptional, but they are within the realm of possibility. This forces the directors to mundanize supernatural satanic tropes: no one descends into Hell, but they do descend into the basement of a psychiatric hospital, the engine room of a boat, or into an underground “church.” Fire and smoke are frequently seen, but they take the form of cigars and cigarettes, candles, explosions, lighters, and flares. The characters cannot shape-shift, but they can act like they have cerebral palsy, wear different clothes to disguise themselves, and use different accents. Thus, as the directors move into the mundane realm, they retain the trappings of Satan but abandon all hope of the supernatural, providing rational explanations for their mundane versions of these older symbols.

Finally, it has been noted that horror films (such as *The Exorcist* (1973)) are theologically conservative, depending on supernatural forces and a belief in God.³³ This was true, in a secularized way, in the superhero movies I analyzed. Those films each paired a satanic character with a Christ character, who always defeated the satanic character. Good and evil were clear in these films and, while the satanic character threatened the hero (or the entire planet), the protagonist/Christ-figure was able to defeat him. *Sherlock Holmes* hews to this model more closely than the other four films analyzed in this article: Holmes is clearly good, Blackwood clearly bad. Although Holmes doesn't exhibit the typical Christ-figure traits found in the other films, the movie concludes with a dramatic fight scene, resulting in Blackwood's justified death. The other four films reflect the world, more as we know it, in shades of gray. In *Cape Fear*, the protagonist, Sam Bowden, is compromised: he suppressed evidence, he has affairs with younger women, he hires thugs to beat up Max Cady, he illegally acquires a gun, and so forth. But the villain is *really* villainous and almost seems like a force of nature. Bowden defeats him, but at the end of the film, he has been reduced to an almost animal-like condition, covered in mud and blood, not washed clean by the rain or the river. Max Cady has dragged him into the filth and almost defeated him.

In the other three films, the lack of a Christ-figure is felt even more acutely, since the satanic villain escapes. While Agent Starling doesn't seem morally compromised, many of the other characters in the Hannibal Lecter films are. And

no one is able to keep up with, let alone defeat, Lecter. In *The Usual Suspects*, the police don't seem to be corrupt or incompetent; they are just unlucky. They have the villain in their grasp and he eludes them. Thus, in the absence of a Christ-figure (reflecting our reality most of the time), the villain is able to elude justice and escape, presumably to continue to do nefarious things. By allowing the satanic figure to "win" in the absence of a Christ-figure, these films affirm a very traditional theological viewpoint: mere mortals cannot defeat satanic figures, only Christ (or Christ-like figures) can do so.

¹ The *Journal of Religion and Film*, for example, ran a special issue (Volume 8, no. 1) in February, 2004, discussing Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004); and when Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) was released, it was met with protests and condemned by both the Catholic Church and Southern Baptists (Kathy Palen, "Baptists React to Screen of 'Last Temptation' Film," *Baptist Press: News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 16 August 1988, 1–3. http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/6645_16-Aug-1988.pdf; John Dart, "Church Declares 'Last Temptation' Morally Offensive," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 2008 1988. http://articles.latimes.com/1988-08-10/local/me-88_1_temptation-morally-offensive).

² Lloyd Baugh, *Imagining the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 205–25.

³ Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

⁴ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 111–28.

⁵ Kelly J. Wyman, "The Devil We Already Know: Medieval Representations of a Powerless Satan in Modern American Cinema," *Journal of Religion and Film* 8, no. 2 (October 2004). <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol8No2/wymandevil.htm>; Kelly J. Wyman, "Satan in the Movies," in *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. William L. Blizek (New York: Continuum, 2009), 300–310.

⁶ Adam L. Porter, "Satanic but not Satan: Signs of the Devilish in Contemporary Cinema," *Journal of Religion & Film* 17, no. 1 (April 2013).
<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/37/>.

⁷ One common trait that *all* the satanic characters share in the films that I discuss is that they are all male. Looking at various fan sites and searching for "best female villains" generates some common hits: Alex Forrest (*Fatal Attraction* (1987)), Maleficent (*Maleficent* (2014)), Miranda Priestly (*Devil Wears Prada* (2006)), Nurse Ratched (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975)), and others. But Hollywood codes female villains differently than males, enacting traditional gender patterns, and these patterns don't (apparently) lend themselves to using satanic signifiers.

⁸ "Silver-Screen Playbook," *The Economist*, 27 February 2016.
<http://www.economist.com/news/business/21693594-how-make-hit-film-silver-screen-playbook>.

⁹ Steve Rose, "Captain America: The Winter Soldier - First Look Review," *Guardian*, 20 March 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/20/captain-america-the-winter-soldier-first-look-review>; Ann Hornaday, "'Captain America: The Winter Soldier' Review: Maybe the Most Grown-up Avengers Movie Yet," *The Washington Post*, 3 April 2014.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/captain-america-the-winter-soldier-review-maybe-the-most-grown-up-avengers-movie-yet/2014/04/03/89bad3d8-ba60-11e3-9a05-c739f29ccb08_story.html.

¹⁰ David Edelstein, "The Overstuffed *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* Builds a World, but Is It One We Want?" *Vulture.Com*, 23 March 2016. <http://www.vulture.com/2016/03/review-batman-v-superman-a-confused-epic.html#>; A. O. Scott, "Review: 'Batman v Superman' ... v Fun?" *New York Times*, 23 March 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/movies/review-batman-v-superman-dawn-of-justice-when-super-friends-fight.html>.

¹¹ Jeffrey Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993).

¹² Emily R. Anderson, "Telling Stories: Unreliable Discourse, *Fight Club*, and the Cinematic Narrator," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 80–107; Rachel McCoppin, "Horrific Obsessions: Poe's Legacy of the Unreliable and Self-Obsessed Narrator," in *Adapting Poe: Re-Imagings in Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2012), 105–17.

¹³ Russell, *Prince of Darkness*, 114.

¹⁴ Satan's limp is variously attributed to his cloven hooves or breaking his leg during the fall from heaven. It is notable that several pagan gods (Hephaistos / Vulcan, Thoth, and Loki) limped, so attributing this to Satan also helped the Church associate pre-Christian deities with the devil. Russell, *Prince of Darkness*, 114; Maximilian Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1931, reprinted 1959), 49-50.

¹⁵ Anything Left Handed.com, "Left Handed Myths and Misunderstandings."
<http://www.anythinglefthanded.co.uk/lh-info/myths.html>.

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry*, T. R. Smith (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 82. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47032/47032-h/47032-h.htm>.

¹⁷ Brian Baker, "A Man of Wealth and Taste: The Strange Career of Hannibal Lecter," in *The Lure of the Dark Side: Satan and Western Demonology in Popular Culture*, ed. Christopher Partridge and Eric Christianson (London: Equinox, 2009), 122–34.

¹⁸ *Silence* won five Oscars in 1992, including Best Picture, Best Director (Jonathan Demme), Best Actor (Anthony Hopkins), and Best Actress (Jodie Foster).

¹⁹ Russell, *Prince of Darkness*, 216.

²⁰ When the widow's peak became associated with villains is unclear. Images of Satan from the middle ages, which I have examined in ArtStor, do not represent him with a widow's peak. Luther Link doesn't identify this as a typical feature of late ancient or medieval art (Luther Link, *The Devil: The Archfiend in Art - from the Sixth to the Sixteenth Century* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995].) It seems to be a modern motif, perhaps created by Jack Pierce. Pierce was a notable makeup artist, who worked with horror superstars like Bela Lugosi and Lon Chaney; one of his trademarks was to give his actors a widow's peak. (Victoria Sherrow, "Paul Ryan, Meet Eddie Munster." https://www.salon.com/2012/08/15/paul_ryan_meet_eddie_munster/; Wikipedia, "Jack Pierce [Makeup Artist]." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Pierce_%28makeup_artist%29.) Perhaps because of its association with Dracula and other classic horror films, it has become a more general symbol of villainy, which, in turn, has become associated with satanic characters.

²¹ There is an element of "the punishment fitting the crime" since Migs' sin was to verbally assault Starling, before hurling his ejaculate on her. It is also ironic that Lecter, who feeds on human flesh, persuades Migs to swallow his own tongue: Migs cannibalizes himself.

²² Russell, *Prince of Darkness*, 116.

²³ Alternately, of course, since smoking has become seen more and more negatively (see, for example, Majorie Gutman, *Social Norms and Attitudes About Smoking, 1991–2010*, RWJF *Retrospective Series* [Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2011]. <http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/web-assets/2011/04/social-norms-and-attitudes-about-smoking>), smoking could be a signal of bad morals. Or, especially in the case of Max Cady (in *Cape Fear*), it could be a class / education marker, since smoking rates fall as income and education levels rise (see <http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/resources/data/cigarette-smoking-in-united-states.html>, accessed 17 January 2016).

²⁴ Baker, "A Man of Wealth and Taste," 128.

²⁵ Christopher Deacy, "Cape Fear (2001)," in *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films*, ed. Adel Reinhartz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 55–59.

²⁶ Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 75.

²⁷ Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen*, 77.

²⁸ This could simply be a device to allow Cady to follow the Bowden family as they try to escape from him. It could also be an allusion to the underworld, since when Cady emerges from below the car, he is a grimy mess, blackened by oil and road debris.

²⁹ Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen*, 77.

³⁰ Russell, *Prince of Darkness*, 177–81, 189–204.

³¹ Linda S. Schearing and Valarie H. Ziegler, *Enticed by Eden: How Western Culture Uses, Confuses, (and Sometime Abuses) Adam and Eve* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013).

³² Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire,” in *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, vol. 2, ed. Leslie S. Klinger (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 1556, 1558.

³³ Paul V.M. Flesher and Robert Torry, *Film & Religion: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), Chapter 9.

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