


Black Magic and White Guilt: Voodoo in Angel Heart

by Douglas Keeseey 

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[abstract](#)

On first viewing, Alan Parker's 1987 film *Angel Heart* may seem like just another in a long line of films that equate voodoo with Satanism, blacks with the black arts. However, the film also struggles toward an acknowledgment of white guilt, an admission that evil resides within the self. Evil's repression and projection onto the "black other" must be understood as a defensive strategy for denying one's own guilt. The difference between good whites and bad blacks must be redefined as a difference within, the capacity for good and evil inherent in each of us, regardless of skin color or religious faith. *Angel Heart* gains psychological depth and social relevance if we view it as the lead character's internal struggle with his desires and fears regarding blacks.

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Because *Angel Heart* has a remarkably complex plot to which I intend to refer in some detail, a summary of the film's events may help to orient the reader for the analysis which follows. The film is set in New York City in 1955. The mysterious Louis Cyphre (Robert De Niro) hires private eye Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) to find Johnny Favorite, a singer who owes Cyphre an unpaid debt. Harry goes to a hospital where Johnny is supposed to have stayed since his injury in World War II. By withholding drugs from a junkie doctor, Harry finds out that a man and a woman secretly took Johnny from the hospital on New Year's Eve, 1943, and that his absence has been covered up by the doctor ever since. Harry pauses during his interrogation of the doctor to go out for some food, only to find the man dead upon his return—an apparent suicide who shot himself in the eye using bullets from a hollowed-out Bible. Following various leads, Harry discovers that the woman who took Johnny from the hospital was a mistress, Margaret Krusemark (Charlotte Rampling), and the man accompanying her was her father, Ethan (Stocker Fontelieu).

Harry tracks this pair to New Orleans where, after questioning Margaret, he returns later to find her dead, with her heart cut out. Further clues lead Harry to a black blues guitarist named Toots Sweet (Brownie McGhee), who once played in a band with Johnny. Toots resists Harry's persistent questioning by slashing Harry's hand with a razor, but Harry takes possession of the weapon and uses it to threaten Toots. Later, Harry is told that someone cut off Toots's genitals and stuffed them in his throat, suffocating the man to death. Using information he got from Toots, Harry discovers that Johnny had another mistress, a black voodoo queen named Evangeline Proudfoot, who died after Johnny stole her heart and left her. Harry meets and is attracted to Johnny and Evangeline's mixed-race daughter, Epiphany (Lisa Bonet), whom he witnesses dancing in a voodoo ceremony and cutting a chicken's throat.

Later, Harry tracks down Ethan Krusemark, who reveals the remainder of this complex story: Johnny had sold his soul to the Devil for stardom as a singer, then tried to evade the debt by picking up a random soldier in Times Square on New Year's Eve, 1942, and by cutting out and eating the man's heart, thus taking on his identity in order to escape the Devil. However, Johnny was then drafted, went off to war, and came back injured—a shell-shocked amnesiac. Margaret and Ethan Krusemark took Johnny from the hospital and released him in Times Square exactly one year later, hoping to jog his memory, but Johnny wandered off into the crowd. Recovering the dog tags of the unknown soldier whose identity Johnny stole, Harry is horrified to read his own name: Harry Angel. Harry is Johnny; the detective is himself the man he was seeking. Moreover, the detective is actually the murderer whose crimes he was trying to solve: Harry himself killed all those people in an attempt to keep his identity as Johnny a secret—both a secret from others and a secret from himself! Louis Cyphre appears, reveals that his real name is Lucifer, and claims Harry/Johnny's soul. Harry returns to the hotel room where he had earlier made love with Epiphany, and discovers her bloody corpse, his gun in her vagina. Harry confesses to the cops that he will burn in hell for his sins, including the rape/murder of his own daughter.

Certainly, it is easy to view *Angel Heart* in the way that Isabel Cristina Pinedo does—as part of "a film tradition of monstrifying voodoo" (128). Leo Braudy agrees, mentioning *Angel Heart* in connection with other racist voodoo movies, such as *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943). These "horror films were often preoccupied with a fear of a primitive world erupting into ordered social space. Nature had an often anthropological inflection that barely veiled a social fear that 'darker' races would blight daytime and well-lit America. Such films were often filled with tribal rituals (usually voodoo)" (Braudy 284). Harry witnesses one such ritual, the voodoo ceremony in which Epiphany dances orgasmically and cuts a chicken's throat. Bryan Senn sees this scene as typical of Hollywood's tendency to demonize voodoo by casting it in a "violent and lascivious," "savage, even sinister light" (13, 206). However, a closer look at this voodoo scene, and at the entire relationship between Harry and Epiphany, shows that things are not so simple.

When Harry first meets Epiphany, he is strongly attracted to her color. The film depicts his desire in a slow-motion shot of Epiphany washing her hair, letting the water run down the nape of her neck and soak her dress. Alan Parker's screenplay is even more explicit: "Very young. Very beautiful. Mocha colored skin. EPIPHANY. ...He admires her slim body through the white cotton dress" (Parker, Screenplay 45). Harry's interracial attraction is a potentially positive transgression of social taboos, even as Epiphany herself is the product of miscegenation, the conjoining of white Johnny and black Evangeline. Elsewhere in the film, a character comments that "Evangeline was [Johnny's] real love. 'Course no one knew that. She was colored, see, and there was no crossin' the line them days." Both Harry and Johnny were born on Valentine's Day, and the lyrics to one of Johnny's songs haunting Harry, "Girl of My Dreams" ("You are so sweet / If I could just hold your charms / Again in my arms / Life would be complete"), describe the desire leading a white man to cross the color barrier and find completion by joining with otherness. Epiphany's name means divine incarnation or sudden enlightenment, and by coming into contact with her, Harry might achieve a spiritual wisdom beyond society's benighted racism.

But Harry's fears of otherness overcome his desires. His dream of achieving oneness with spirit turns into a nightmare of being taken in by evil. In the original novel on which *Angel Heart* is based, *Falling Angel* (1978), William Hjortsberg describes the sex between Harry and Epiphany as a hope for transcendence betrayed by animal hunger: Harry "knelt before her, a fervent acolyte, and gripped the altar of her open thighs, but the mood was broken when she closed the distance like a limbo dancer and swallowed [him] up. The rainbow turned into a tigress" (154). Harry's fear of sex with a black woman is expressed in the vagina dentata image of a swallowing tigress. Epiphany's spiritual purity is blackened by the taint of physical desire: "She looked like a little girl. Her innocent expression bore no resemblance to the ecstatic grimace masking her features when she arched howling beneath me like a tigress" (Hjortsberg 156). In Harry's eyes, sex changes Epiphany from an angelic innocent to a satanic succubus. Interestingly, the film emphasizes the shock of this change by casting former child actor Lisa Bonet in the sexually explicit role of Epiphany. As Gary Arnold has said, "For an American public accustomed to Miss Bonet's role on *The Cosby Show*, the sight of her as a wanton little bayou temptress involved in voodoo abominations and coupled with bewitched and bedraggled Mickey Rourke in the year's most notorious, weirdly visceral sex scene is going to seem a shocking intrusion of the profane on the wholesome" (336).

When Harry witnesses Epiphany's actions in the voodoo ceremony, he is overwhelmed by the same fear of her physicality that terrifies him in their lovemaking scene. His otherwise angelic Epiphany seems possessed by the Devil, sexualized by the throbbing drums, turned savage by their primitive beat: "It's Epiphany Proudfoot. All dance. Frenzied, crazed shadows. Demonic heartbeat of the drums" (Parker, Screenplay 56). As when he first met Epiphany, Harry is again excited by her blackness, fascinated at how her "dress clings to her wet body" (Parker, Screenplay 56), but this desire soon gives way to a dread of otherness, a fear of her black female sexuality as a threat to his white manhood. When Epiphany sacrifices a chicken in the voodoo ceremony, Harry is overcome by castration anxiety. In his mind, it is as if she had taken the razor to his own red phallus: Epiphany "reaches into a basket, pulls out a chicken, its blood red comb vivid in the moonlight. She rubs it against her breast as she dances. She takes a razor and deftly cuts the rooster's throat. Drains the blood. The rooster screams. ...Harry goes back to his car and reverses out into the road and is away" (Parker, Screenplay 56).

Harry's understanding of voodoo is filtered through the distorting lens of dread and desire. As David C. Estes notes, Euro-American accounts of voodoo ceremonies typically classify them as "orgies rather than as authentic worship rituals. Outside observers depict Voodoo women as erotic objects and overlook their dynamic spirituality" (160). Harry may be compared to Robert Tallant, author of one of the most popular and notoriously biased accounts of the subject, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946). In one passage, Tallant's eyewitness report of a voodoo ritual is as ambivalently overexcited and negrophobic as Harry's: "While the wild chanting, the rhythmic movement of hands and feet, and barbarous dance, and the fiery incantations were at their height, it was difficult to believe that we were in a civilized city of an enlightened republic...it was so wild and bizarre that one might easily imagine he was in Africa or in hell" (30). Like Harry, Tallant conflates black religion with black magic. For him, voodoo is a primitive physicality, a satanic sensuality threatening to overcome white Christian civilization.

However, for its participants, voodoo is something quite different—not devil worship or a demonic parody of the Christian faith, but a syncretic religion, incorporating elements of Christianity. "Voodoo is a religious system born of the contact between the religion Africans brought as slaves to Haiti and the Roman Catholicism that their masters attempted to impose," explains Catherine A. Colton. "Key elements of African religions are beliefs in a spirit-infused natural world, reverence for spirits of ancestors, and a perceived unity between the spiritual and physical worlds" (33). During voodoo ceremonies, participants are not possessed by the Devil, but by saintly spirits who help them to achieve oneness of nature and spirit, body and soul, the living and the dead. According to Charles Frye, voodoo "has as its object spirit-possession.... The voodoo congregation seeks communion with the goddesses and gods of Yorubaland and Dahomey [African homelands] personified in the images of the Catholic Saints. When certain members of the congregation are possessed or 'ridden' by these loas or deities, other members use the possessed's temporary mediumship to address the gods directly: to offer petitions, seek divine advice, speak to dead relatives, and so on" (qtd. in Duggel 160n4).

This is what Epiphany tries to explain to Harry about voodoo. Having been a mambo priestess or voodoo queen since she turned thirteen (the age of sexual maturity), Epiphany says that "when the spirits possess" her, she is "mounted by the gods," adding that it is the "best fuck" she ever had. The sex is so ecstatic because it represents a potent combination of forces often considered as polar opposites—man and woman, flesh and spirit, life and death. In the screenplay, Epiphany tells Harry that "Sex is how we speak to the gods," and that the gods will "journey with" her and Harry as they make love, in a coming together of male and female, black and white, body and soul (Parker, Screenplay 75). But for Harry, sex is the opposite of spirit. To him, a sexually active black woman is the Devil incarnate, and he fears that intercourse with her will not mean the "little death" of orgasmic spiritual ecstasy, but actual death—the cutting off of his life. As Barbara Rosendale Duggel has said in describing the white man's fear of the voodoo queen's sexuality, "This meeting of one's god within the body, especially a woman's body, would seemingly have been a horrifyingly exquisite thing for the voyeuristically inclined Christian white man to witness. He must have been ideologically incapable of viewing sexuality within any legitimate religious construct, much less as possessing a positive 'cosmic power of transformation'" (175).

Harry is afraid that uniting with Epiphany will not lead to the bliss of a higher unity, but instead will mean her destruction of him as a way of assuming greater power for herself—the way she took the life of that chicken during the voodoo ritual. "I'll dance with you," he tells her, "but you got to promise—no chickens." Then, during sex with Epiphany, Harry (in the novel) thinks, "It was madness to have gotten involved with her. Those slender fingers knew how to grip a knife. She sacrificed animals without a qualm" (Hjortsberg 156). It is Satan who has an insatiable desire for more worldly power, and Harry can't help seeing a sexually active Epiphany as a black woman possessed by the Devil, a vagina dentata trying to swallow him up, to cut and drain him of his life force as she did to the chicken during the voodoo ceremony. But Epiphany maintains that he has misunderstood that ritual. The slaying of the chicken is, like sex, about the renewal of life and about reconnecting the physical with the spiritual world. When Harry denigrates her form of worship with a wisecrack—"that's quite a cute religion you people got"—Epiphany retorts that "nailing a man to a cross ain't so cute either." In this way she claims the same legitimacy for voodoo as for Christianity, implying that both religions involve a blood sacrifice as a form of communion linking flesh and spirit. Maya Deren has explained that when chickens are killed in voodoo rituals, the "intent and emphasis of sacrifice is not upon the death of the animals, it is upon the transfusion of its life to the loa [god], for the understanding is that flesh and blood are of the essence of life and vigor, and these will restore the divine energy of the god" (qtd. in Senn 15).

But Harry's fear of the black female other impedes his understanding of voodoo and sex, both of which he conflates under the category of the "black arts." At times, it seems as though Harry is not the only one with this distorted view of voodoo. Both novelist William Hjortsberg and screenwriter/director Alan Parker use denigrating language to describe Epiphany's sensual movements during the voodoo ritual. Hjortsberg calls her a "cheerleader of doom" doing a "spastic shimmy" (71), and Parker associates her with another black woman who "writhes on the floor like a snake, her tongue darting in and out," swaying to the "Demonic heartbeat of the drums" (Parker, Screenplay 56). It could be argued that these writers are merely presenting Harry's fearfully flawed point of view, but Parker, despite his claim to have made the voodoo ceremony "as authentic as possible" ("Angel" Part 2: 25), does note a curious coincidence, the description of which casts his own understanding of voodoo into doubt: "Ironically,...the slate number of Lisa Bonet's voodoo dance scene was 666! The focus puller...yelled 'Scene 666, take one!' I couldn't believe it!" (qtd. in Senn 207). But Epiphany is not possessed by the Devil during the voodoo ceremony, so the Mark of the Beast has no relevance. To see Epiphany's sexuality as satanic is to be complicit in Harry's misunderstanding of the ritual. Similarly, the trailer for the film says, "The Exorcist: Possession of the human soul. ...Now Angel Heart," and it cuts from a character saying "The Prince of Darkness protects the powerful" to a shot of Epiphany dancing in the voodoo ceremony. Certainly, viewers can be forgiven if they mistake Epiphany the voodoo queen for a devil worshiper, with so many signs pointing in that direction. Pauline Kael found herself wondering, "Are the black religious sects that keep popping up meant to be scarily exotic?" (287). She asks because sometimes it seems as though "That's all that comes across" (287).

Despite some occasional slips into racist demonizing, the overall tendency of the film is to critique and condemn Harry's benighted views. Sex with Epiphany had offered him enlightenment; a communion with divinity in the flesh; an affirmation of life beyond the "little death"; an ecstatic coming outside of the self to join with another; a loving intercourse of genders, races, and religions. Instead, Harry's fear of castrating engulfment by black female flesh leads him to erect a violent defense. Consensual sex with Epiphany turns into rape, symbolized by a rain of blood, and Harry eliminates the threat to his manhood by shooting her vagina with his gun. In this way, Harry carries on the racist tradition of slave owners who would force themselves upon their black mistresses, using them for the lowly act of sex and then discarding them afterward as unclean animals. It was not unknown for white masters to rape their own illegitimate mixed-race daughters, for if such women were considered animals, then societal taboos such as the one against incest did not apply. This is what Harry has done to Epiphany, his own daughter. (It is interesting to note that the hotel room in which Harry rapes and murders Epiphany was converted by the film's crew from a structure that once served as a "slave quarters" [Parker, "Angel" Part 1: 24].)

Through much of *Angel Heart*, Harry has been the private dick threatened by Epiphany as the dark lady or femme fatale. Harry has seemed to be the upright hero menaced by the maw of this voodoo queen, the monstrous feminine. However, the sight of Epiphany's fatally penetrated body at the end challenges the assumptions we have made about her and Harry up to that point: his "hammerless Smith & Wesson protruded from between her outspread legs, the snub barrel inserted like a lover. Her womb's blood glistened on her open thighs, bold as roses" (Hjortsberg 241). It is Harry's "love" that has proved fatal for Epiphany. Harry the private eye is himself the murderer he has been looking for. The body possessed by the Devil in this horror film is Harry's own. By overturning the generic conventions of the detective and horror films, this movie critiques their built-in racist and sexist assumptions—views that usually go unquestioned, beliefs to which we subscribe by identifying with the hero who holds them. In this movie, we finally distance ourselves from Harry the hero, realizing that his view of Epiphany as evil has been a denial of his propensity for violence and a projection of it onto the other.

Harry's amnesia is actually a repression of the violence he himself committed in the past when, as Johnny, he cut open and ate the heart of a soldier, attempting to gain worldly power by consuming another. This cutting and swallowing is what Harry fears that Epiphany does in the voodoo ceremony and during sex, but it is really his own hunger for power that he refuses to recognize, denying it by projecting it onto her. It is himself he is afraid of, only he won't admit it, because if he recognizes his own capacity for evil, he may have to face damnation for the prior acts he has committed—the Devil might collect his soul. However, by repressing knowledge of his own evil, Harry loses the opportunity to repent, which would be the only way to save his soul. Moreover, he dooms himself to the unconscious repetition of further evil acts because, until he confronts and conquers the violent side of his personality, he will continue to be unwittingly possessed by it. He will continue to act out his violent impulses without even realizing that he is doing so. Finally, since Harry's sense of his own innocence depends on locating evil outside himself in such "others" as blacks and women, he has obviously set them up as something to dread and destroy. His repression of the truth about himself is thus the cause of his violence toward others. His projection onto others leads to his fear of being contaminated by "their" evil, which leads to his violent elimination of "their" threat.

Just as Harry refuses to decipher the name of his boss, Louis Cyphre (Lucifer), so Harry also resists the truth about who he is really working for, until the Devil finally forces him to admit that Harry himself murdered all those people—"All killed by your own hand—guided by me, naturally." When Cyphre had said that Harry/Johnny returned from the war as a "virtual zombie," he meant it literally: Harry was a body possessed to do the Devil's work. As Epiphany tries to tell Harry (in the screenplay) after he has been particularly violent toward her during sex, "Some Boko [sorcerer] has put a powerful wanga [hex] on you" (Parker, Screenplay 77). That sorcerer is Satan, whose power over Harry grows stronger the longer Harry refuses to recognize it, for his conscience cannot fight what remains unconscious. After attacking Epiphany during sex, Harry breaks a mirror, trying to deny his own dark side by splitting it off as some "other." Later, Cyphre will warn him of the futility of these attempts at denial—"however cleverly you sneak up on a mirror, your reflection always looks you straight in the eye." Harry has a flashback memory of shooting the junkie doctor in the eye, realizing now that he himself committed that murder and then made it look like a suicide in order to blind himself to the truth about his own evil.

The bullets for the gun he used to shoot the doctor came from a hollowed-out Bible, much as Harry has put on the appearance of goodness and innocence while harboring evil inside. Harry claims to be an "atheist," but "churches give [him] the creeps." Harry's atheism, like his amnesia, enables him to continue his crimes while repressing any vague feelings of guilt. How can he be judged as evil, or held answerable to a higher power, if neither God nor the Devil exists? "He found it inconceivable that he was so gifted at hurting others," Margaret says about Harry/Johnny, revealing the truth about the dark side of himself that Harry has repressed. Johnny seduced and abandoned both his mistresses, Margaret and Evangeline. Epiphany says that when Johnny left her mother, he "stole her heart away." Now Harry/Johnny sees himself in a flashback literally cutting out Margaret's heart, as he had earlier cut out the heart of the soldier. It is only by becoming conscious of what he himself has done that Harry can stop the unconscious repetition of these prior bad acts.

Similarly, it is only by acknowledging his own evil that Harry can stop projecting it onto others and executing them for it. After witnessing Toots Sweet play music for Epiphany during the voodoo ritual, Harry attacks the man, trying to force him to confess his evil. "What's this fuckin' star you wear in your mouth?" Harry demands, referring to the pentagram Toots has embedded in a tooth. Harry assumes the worst, as he does about all voodoo—that the pentagram is a sign of devil worship. He doesn't know—and doesn't want to know—that the five-pointed star is also a positive symbol of the spiritual world. It is interesting that in the screenplay, Toots's answer to Harry's question about why he wears the star is "So's people know I'm a nigger" (Parker, Screenplay 57). Toots's reply is an implicit attack on Harry's racist view of voodoo, and an implicit defense of the legitimate signs and practices of Toots's own black religion. During Harry's violent interrogation, Toots defends himself verbally and physically, using a razor to slash Harry's hand.

But Harry doesn't see this as self-defense. Instead, like the vagina dentata of Epiphany the mambo priestess, Toots the razor-wielding voodoo practitioner is seen by Harry as a castratory threat to his manhood. In Harry's falsely positive view of himself, he simply disarms Toots and discards the razor. However, by

the end of the film, Harry flashes back to the memory of what he really did. Having projected his own evil onto this “black voodoo man,” Harry then eliminated the threat by cutting off the man’s genitals and stuffing them in his mouth—a castration that sometimes accompanied the lynching of blacks by white men acting out their unconscious fears of superior black potency. In the flashback, Harry is forced to confront the fact that he himself is the evil castrator he had assumed the black man to be.

Near the beginning of the film, Harry retrieves a black woman’s hat that has blown off in the wind and returns it to her. Later, he sits without apparent discomfort in the “colored” section of a segregated streetcar. Then, despite the disapproval of volubly racist cops, he sleeps with the mixed-race Epiphany. Harry is not consciously racist. But the film shows how his unconscious fears of black power in the form of voodoo compel him to commit heinous acts. By the time Harry realizes that he has been projecting his own evil onto others—that he is the monster he fears, that his are the crimes to be stopped—he has already committed enough sins to “burn in hell.” The evil does not reside in the black voodoo man or the mambo priestess. The heart of darkness is within Harry Angel himself.

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