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Brent Yergensen
The University of Texas at
Tyler 3900 University Blvd.
Tyler, Texas, USA

Enticement, demons, and deliverance: Goethe and American transcendence

Brent Yergensen

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Abstract

Intertwined with religious narratives are the dark stories centered on confrontations with devil figures. This study suggests a framing of the sinister demonic presence within narrative as part of the responsiveness to cultural revolutions that defy traditional conventions in the American religious narrative. A key oration in Latter-Day Saint leadership is President Hugh B. Brown's timely response to the 1967 Summer of Love movement. In the speech Brown describes his supernatural visitation by an evil spirit that sought to disturb and discourage him. To contextualize personal and communal meaning in the religious versus cultural revolution experience, this study situates the devil figure's visit in Brown's lived experience to resemblances in Goethe's Faustian tradition of the devil's arrival and enticements. Brown's experience resembles the Faustian visit in three ways: the arrival of timely temptations, evil's torture of the protagonist, and the protagonist's suppression of evil and transcendent victory.

Keywords: Demon, devil, haunting, Faust, Goethe, American history, religion, transcendence, latter-day saints, social movements

Introduction

From the outset of the biblical narrative, the works of God are immediately plagued with the devil's plots to frustrate, complicate, and upend those plans. Adam and Eve are immediately confronted by the devil ^[15]. This intertwined duality of the devil and religious narrative is permanent, demonstrating the perpetual gothic presence within religious narrative ^[5]. Thus, part of the religious experience is to engage in the macabre that is levied against faith and the optimism promised in religious discourse. With the historical religious nature of American identity, accompanying the American experience is the presence of the devil's arrival, menacing influence, and presence in the American religious identity. Michael Cuneo identifies this as the long tradition of *American Exorcism* ^[12]. *The Washington Post*'s Mark Dery describes the current, contemporary religious battle against the devil as "the charismatic ministers and renegade priests [who] are casting out the demons of social change: feminism, the sexual revolution, New Age spirituality and the loss of faith in traditional institutions" ^[13]. Thus, in the eyes of the American religious effort, demons take on new forms as time passes. This study identifies that traceable theme.

As part of this religious experience, I make the case for a consistent element of the devil's sinister influence as part of the religious narrative, where religion's enemy is brought to the forefront to enable religious victory and necessity. This is because "Both good and evil act as counter balancing forces" that are "valuable to our existence" ^[31]. In the religious victory, the presence of the devil figure is a permanent staple of the religious experience—particularly when religious figures are tasked with grappling the evils of their own contexts, such as Dery's description of contemporary exorcism amid social progressivism. I demonstrate this case with a landmark speech delivered by Latter-day Saint leader Hugh B. Brown within the context of the Hippie and Summer of Love movements, which juxtaposed the church's lifestyle laws of chastity in sexuality and its health code against addictive substances. At the heart of this address, Brown mentions his battle with a demon that overcame him for two days just before he received his invitation to join the church's highest-ranking body as an apostle.

Corresponding Author:
Brent Yergensen
The University of Texas at
Tyler 3900 University Blvd.
Tyler, Texas, USA

Informing this study, I spell out the parallels between Brown's described experience with a devil and the temptations describes in Goethe's *Faust* by a similar plotting evil. Thus, from the origins of the biblical narrative, to the explicit descriptions of Jesus casting out demons ^[25], to the religious celebratory victory against visiting devils in *Faust* and culminating in the American religious experience in Latter-day Saint teachings, the devil is a chronic presence.

Brown's speech and its use of narrative demonstrate the then-emergent polarities of church teachings in opposition to the cultural trajectory toward sin. Brown's use of narrative brings a vividness to the confrontation with the devil's archetypal arrival, making his "Father, Are You There?" address a masterpiece in the Latter-day Saint polarization from non-religious perspectives on human appetites (8). Further, his use of lived experience with the devil functions as a rousing rhetorical charge for his audience to stand against the then-changing world. This study is demonstrated in description of the Latter-day Saint narratives of the devil's presence in key moments of religious history, the context surrounding Brown's experience as response to social progressivism, the Faustian the matics evident in the Brown experience, and the necessity of understanding the American experience as a religious history and embedded with a perpetual recognition of the devil. I conclude with discussion that the devil's presence and loss to religious heroics enables the religious narrative to serve as transcendent in the vivid battle between devils and God in the religious narrative.

The Latter-day Saint Battle Against the Devil

A central narrative in the American religious response to its implied and natural evil presence is the American origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where founder Joseph Smith's narrative is an intimidating battle against a demon figure who overwhelmed him in his attempt to pray about what religion to join ^[22]. Smith describes the figure as "the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being," which was accompanied with "Thick darkness" that "gathered around me" and led to the feeling that "it seemed for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction" ^[22]. The church's version of the Moses story is similar, where the "burning bush" experience as described in the Old Testament is instead, in the Latter-day Saint version, also riddled with the devil confronting and intimidating Moses ^[29]. From ancient interpretation to contemporary lived experience, the American-born religious faith is an automatic confrontational narration with demons being key characters.

Thus, the church's teachings and narratives utilize a dialectic ^[31] of good versus evil being permanently at odds with each other, with the responsibility of good defeating evil in religion as a significant element of Latter-day Saint teachings, particularly its concept of the "pre-existence" when everyone who is ever born on Earth joined God in a war against Satan before the earth's creation ^[28]. From that event, one third of the "hosts of heaven" were cast out of God's presence, sent to Earth as fallen spirits, and have been tormenting and tempting the children of God ever since. Therefore, the description of evil haunting the good in religious narrative is an origins doctrine, an origins story ^[33]. As Christians, Latter-day Saints' narratives of confrontation

with devils coincide with the New Testament focus on Jesus casting out devils, and which the *Book of Mormon* describes as happening in the Western hemisphere by a prophet while Jesus was simultaneously performing the same miracles in the Judean world ^[1].

This tradition continues, not only in 1967 with Hugh B. Brown's responsiveness to both drug and sex culture but also with a demon that visited him before his own leadership appointment. More recently demonstrating this dialectic against devil figures in the Latter-day Saint experience, famous convert to the church and former cable newscaster Glenn Beck described on his podcast a dream he had about running into Satan who was masquerading as a government official ^[16]. In his telling of the story, Beck then suggests that he was serendipitously invited to visit a church leader—implying that the man was a high-ranking Latter-day Saint leader—who had a foreknowledge of Beck's dream, invited him for a visit, and warned Beck to not forget the dream about seeing the devil in disguise. Thus, part of the Latter-day Saint experience—the American born faith—is the automatic element within the dialectic of demons intruding upon religious enlightenment.

Religious use of narrative is crucial because stories assist as a response to human problems. This is because rhetorical leadership naturally creates a "wedge" between an audience and their threats ^[21]. In the address Brown carefully bifurcates good versus evil through his ongoing use of narratives, each becoming increasingly longer and more serious. This role of narrative was identified by Aristotle in his treatment of audience emotion being affected through storytelling craft.

As we are a narrative-driven species, or "homo narrans" ^[14], we gravitate toward stories that have "meaning for those who live, create or interpret them." Narratives are humanity's "persuasive" pattern that also offers the "aesthetic" emotional experience ^[14]. Brown had a capacity for using this human appeal to his advantage to teach principles. His gripping narrative drives his capacity for highlighting the dialectical polarities in Latter-day Saint faith -namely the notion that the world is a battlefield for good's fight against evil, and that evil must be avoided at all costs. The following analysis focuses first on Brown's narrative that captures the Faustian struggle against devil figures who work against religious authority. The study then considers Brown's use of dialectical polarity to underscore the intensifying contest between good and evil that is longstanding and still ongoing in the American religious experience.

Faustian Demons as Dialectic Template

The dialectic of good versus evil, light versus darkness, and the gothic macabre versus the religious transcendent gives particular value to the American religious experience as authoritative and conclusive. Reason for that finality comes with the assumption that "Without the pairing of good and evil the world we live in would be in extreme chaos" ^[31]. American religious theology suppresses that chaos. Capturing these themes of haunting, enticement, fear, and the dialectic of God versus the devil is enriched through referencing the themes and lessons in Goethe's *Faust* ^[17].

Faust's willingness to make a deal with the devil in order to obtain worldly pleasures, especially sexual appetites, is describes as a "wager" between God and the devil in which Faust's decision to sell his soul to the devil is thwarted by a

“an act of grace”^[30]. That victory only comes after the demonic distribution of discouragement and intimidation. The arrival of the devil’s messenger, the demon Mephistophles, comes with his apparent awareness of Faust’s desire for material success, captured by Faust’s celebration of a life that would be enjoyed with “Wealth, house and hall, with acres rich and rare”^[17].

Faust’s temptations parallel the appeal that overwhelmed Brown who, after decades of struggling in different career paths, finally found himself “about to be a millionaire” with recent oil investments. It is at this moment of appeal for wealth that both Faust, who falters but is later saved by grace, and Brown in his own struggle, defeat their demons who have appeared suddenly and with brooding impact. In the speech Brown builds toward his climactic narrative of the “long night” that is a “wrestle with the devil.” This haunting is weighty. Faust cannot resist the appeal for pleasure and Brown, feeling so distraught in the presence of a devil, had a desire to be “wiped out of existence” because of the severe discouragement that overcame him. The presence Brown felt was daunting enough that it caused him to have a severe existential crisis as the demon remained with Brown for two days before prayer finally brought relief.

Brown’s “Long Night” with the Devil

When Brown delivered his 1967 landmark address, “Father, Are You There?,” he was serving in the First Presidency of the Church—the faith’s highest ranking council, carrying a gravitas not only in the eyes of his 1967 audience of students, but with the entire Church body. Brown’s historic speech was given amid the growth of 1960s drug culture, which Brown warns against in the late moments of the speech while calling on his audience to have self-discipline, with Brown’s oratorical leadership illustrating the “self-contained American subculture” of Latter-day Saint conservatism that became increasingly juxtaposed to the time’s growing social movements^[27]. Lee Trepanier and Lynita Newswander describe this as the “barriers” between the Church and the altering culture in the United States^[32]. Delivered as a warning in the same year that is regarded as a peak of the Hippie Revolution^[26], and happening only months after the 1967 Summer of Love events^[18], Brown spoke to a Brigham Young University (BYU) student audience of the need to transcend darkness, which he richly illustrates with his storytelling^[8].

Amid the larger cultural growth of drug and sexual liberation culture, Brown foreshadows the battles of good and evil early in his speech in the narrative of his “long night,” describing how his task in speaking “is at once a frightening and an inspiring situation to be in...”^[8]. His description of polarities center on humility versus non-humility, the protective but also confining nature of fences—metaphors for lifestyles, stamina as response to temptation, wealth versus how money can spoil spirituality, and the acquired alertness of personal revelation compared to the dulling of the senses from drug use. Each polarity contributes to his larger themed narrative of “the night of darkness” that was followed by yet another polarity that he highlights—the subsequently rewarding and transcendent “night of bliss”^[8].

Faust’s fictional agreement to serve the devil eternally after a life of pleasure is adjacent to Brown’s lived experience and delineation of the differences between Latter-day Saint

faith from Hippie culture. Brown’s use of polarities in his story adds to both the aesthetic value and the long-term impact of the speech, centering on how he finally, like Faust, found grace from a demon tormenter. P. J. Botha describes this use of opposites as “The Rhetorical Function of Polarity”^[6]. Brown’s use of polarities in his narrative provides a culminating, high stakes climax at the moment of his “long night” retelling and his desire to disappear from existence because of the discouragement that the demon brought upon him.

As polarities drive a story’s impact by maximizing emotional and aesthetic responses and create bonds with listeners, after his victorious battle with the devil Brown moves toward his more assertive condemnation of social movements that Latter-day Saint doctrine opposed. In sequence of the growing polarity that becomes increasingly personal for him toward his culminating moment of being haunted, Brown’s other use of stories precursory to the “long night” build toward the “narrative of embodied intensities” for the student audience experience as they see their own lives paralleling the battle with demons as described by their religious leader^[24]. This process establishes a heightened emotional state for the audience, which allows them to associate themselves with Brown’s own challenges that he describes as having been so intense and disturbing that it made him “want to cease to exist.”

The seriousness of Latter-day Saint teaching against sexual engagement outside of marriage, as well as drug use, captures the heightening of narrative driven leadership that centered on demonic confrontations. Brown’s assertive warnings through bifurcation of good and evil operates as a battle response against contradictory lifestyles that were growing in the 1960s. Brown’s lively and personally catered narrative was crafted for his audience whose peers—a young generation—were a population heavily engaged in drug culture and sexual liberation movements of the time^[10].

The vivid and serious form in Brown’s storytelling, suggesting that he would have rather died than face the devil that haunted him, provides that wall of warning against his described devilish enticements. Brown provides detail to the horror he faced in riveting detail, describing how after a sleepless night and his wife hearing his all-night pacing about the house, found him and asked “My dear! What’s in this room?” Brown’s response in a tormented state was “The devil is in this room, and he is trying to destroy me” (8). This emergence of religiously-framed grit against enemies and at opportune moments are what rhetoric scholars Nathan Crick and Joseph Rhodes describe as masterful oratory being given the needed “birth” of response to challenges that allows “the type of eloquence that becomes enshrined” in cultural narratives of deliverance from exigences^[11]. That effect on audience becomes weighty through narrative due to the heightened contradictions of cultural revolutions compared to religious teachings.

The canonical element of invading demons in the Latter-day Saint religious experience includes Brown’s described conversation with then-church president David O. McKay’s explanation that one’s wrestling with the devil before being called as a General Authority (high ranking church leader) is a seeming rite of passage to church leadership. Hence, at the outset of great religious responsibility is one’s emergence out of evil’s menacing interruption of God’s work.

After the long night story’s conclusion, Brown’s “wrestle

with the devil” illustrates the Church’s focus on prayer as a tool that provides deliverance from evil, which was the turning point and strategy of his own victory over his long night’s sinister enemy, along with the previously referenced experience of Joseph Smith. Brown’s focus on polarity after the “night of blackness”—similar wording which he also used to describe the horrifying haunting—is answered with his use of similar wording in describing his relief and call as a General Authority the very next day.

Brown’s deliverance upon arriving at work after the “long night” and calling his wife to tell her that the demon had finally left is followed by the phone call from the church president to serve in high level church leadership. Brown’s deliverance and integration into godliness mirrors Faust’s initial concern with Mephistopheles, calling the demon’s offer “With such as you ‘tis dangerous to deal”^[17], seeing the wisdom of what he should have done, which is what Brown, in his clout with his audience, did indeed resist. Conversing with his wife about their new responsibilities to serve in church leadership, the overwhelming feeling of being oppressed was suddenly reversed into a subsequent “night of bliss” when his daunting depression disappeared.

Brown’s lived experience, along with other Latter-day Saint narratives in the American tradition of transcendence, transfers the Faustian explicitness of demons into the American ideal of heaven-assisted American transcendentalism^[19]. Brown exhibits the didactic power of narrative^[4], demonstrated in his ability to interlink his own life with BYU students in a time of significant social change toward drug and sexual liberation.

As narratives can be transferred to audiences^[7], Brown turns his rhetorical focus toward more direct explication as he transfers the speech’s lessons to his young audience. While describing his haunted night he focuses on the permanent polarity that Latter-day Saints face in the “constant war” between “good and evil”^[8], then making the polarity even more vividly apparent as he transfers the “night of blackness” warning to the audience for their personal application: “the war is over you and your soul.”

American Religious Transcendence as Narratological Permanence

The religious burden of defeating evil continues in discourse and narrative, such as Glenn Beck’s recently shared experience with his listeners. This analysis offers the recognition of what is ever-present but still overcome in America’s religiosity: threats toward progress—in the cases described here being Brown’s leadership appointment and Faust’s salvation. Tales of good versus evil tend to borrow from religious iconography and narratology^[23]. These themes are present in the leadership realm of American religiosity today, specifically with the creative historical imagination of Abraham Lincoln being portrayed as a God-ordained vampire hunter^[3] and recent claims that Donald Trump, as a seeming religious-vested politician, is literally fighting demons^[9]. These leadership tasks are accompanied with the longstanding and time-transcendent narrative of demons interrupting godly experiences. The weight of demonic hauntings does not cease, continuing in popular religious voices^[20]. At an individual level, these narratives continue further in the self-help tradition of American theology and the necessity of individuals responding to the presence of demons as the heart of the American experience^[5].

The Latter-day Saint spiritual tradition is a ripe manifestation of the “American religious experience” that automatically intertwines the macabre presence of evil that permanently accompanies the report of religious transcendence. The origins of Latter-day Saint faith began in 1820 when Joseph Smith prayed and faced the devil. Twelve years before that reported historic moment for the faith was the precursory narrative of the intertwined dialectic as Goethe’s *Faust* was published. *Faust*’s themes sit as a backdrop for our developing understanding of this permanent polarity in the American religious narrative. Brown’s Faustian deliverance from demons paralleled Smith’s haunting experience and the Latter-day Saint scriptural version of Moses’s confrontation with the devil. Victory comes only with the gothic experience being shown as vivid, necessary, and—at least for a time within religious narrative—just as present and as real as the heavenly deliverance experience.

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