Dark Mirrors: An Anthropological Examination of Satanism, Demonology, and the Western Occult Tradition By Zariyah Ortega

Satanism is a term that has elicited fear, fascination, and scholarly inquiry across centuries. Despite its association with devil worship in popular imagination, Satanism is a complex phenomenon shaped by history, myth, social control, religious dissent, and psychological archetypes. Anthropology, as a discipline concerned with cultural meaning-making, offers an important lens through which to examine the origins, symbols, and societal functions of Satanic imagery and practice. This essay explores Satanism from an anthropological perspective, focusing particularly on two cornerstone texts of Western demonology: The Lesser Key of Solomon, attributed to anonymous authors but compiled and edited by figures such as Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and Aleister Crowley, and Daemonologie (1597), written by King James I of England. These texts illustrate the shifting boundaries between religious orthodoxy, political power, and the occult.

To understand Satanism anthropologically, one must first deconstruct the concept of "Satan." The figure of Satan emerges not from a unified religious tradition, but as a product of evolving Judaic, Christian, and folkloric narratives. The Hebrew term "śāṭān" originally referred to an adversary or accuser rather than a cosmic embodiment of evil. Only in the intertestamental period and early Christian writings did Satan become a full-fledged oppositional force to God.

Who is Satan? Satan is a figure that appears across multiple religious traditions, most notably in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also in various philosophical and occult systems. His identity, role, and even his name vary depending on the context, which is why he's known by many different titles, each carrying unique meaning. As religious thought evolved, particularly within Christianity, Satan became a more defined and personified antagonist: a rebellious angel who defied God and was cast out of Heaven. This version, shaped by texts like Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28, and later literature like Paradise Lost by John Milton, helped solidify the image of Satan as the Devil, the ruler of Hell.

During the medieval and early modern periods, the Church increasingly weaponized Satanic imagery to marginalize heretics, pagans, witches, and political enemies. The witch hunts that plagued Europe were less about literal worship of the Devil than they were about consolidating ecclesiastical authority and patriarchal control. Anthropologically, Satanism became a constructed "Other," a negative mirror that reinforced normative Christian identity.

One of the most influential occult texts associated with demonology and ceremonial magic is The Lesser Key of Solomon, also known as Lemegeton Clavicula Salomonis. It is a grimoire, or manual of magic, that was compiled in the 17th century but contains material dating back to earlier centuries. The first and most famous section of the book, Ars Goetia, catalogs 72 demons said to have been summoned and constrained by King Solomon using a magical ring.

The text is attributed pseudonymously to Solomon but was edited and

translated by occult figures such as Mathers and Crowley both key members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. These figures reinterpreted traditional demonology not as Satanic in the modern sense, but as part of a mystical and psychological system.

From an anthropological standpoint, The Lesser Key is a prime example of symbolic ritual behavior. Each demon corresponds with specific attributes, powers, and sigils. These symbols, much like totems or spirit guides in other cultures, form a cosmology that empowers the practitioner by mapping hidden forces. The invocation of demons, then, is less an act of evil than a symbolic encounter with the shadow self, which is a theme explored by psychoanalyst Carl Jung, whose ideas remain influential in symbolic anthropology.

In sharp contrast to the esoteric and mystical approach of The Lesser Key, King James I's Daemonologie is a political treatise masquerading as theological scholarship. Written in 1597, this book aims to justify the persecution of witches and delineates the supposed workings of demonic influence in the world. For King James, witches were not misunderstood spiritual practitioners but active agents of Satanic rebellion against divine order.

Anthropologically, Daemonologie is a text of social control. It reflects the anxieties of early modern Europe, where famine, disease, and gender norms collided with expanding state power. Women, especially widows, midwives, and healers, were disproportionately accused of witchcraft, highlighting how accusations were often less about belief in Satan and more about enforcing patriarchal norms.

James' obsession with demonology can be read as a method of consolidating monarchical and ecclesiastical authority. By positioning himself as a divinely ordained monarch combating Satanic threats, he legitimized his rule and aligned himself with the Church. Here, Satanism becomes a narrative tool and an invented tradition used to construct and enforce ideological boundaries.

Modern Satanism, especially as defined by Anton LaVey's Church of Satan (founded in 1966), distances itself from the literal worship of Satan. Rather, it reclaims Satan as a symbol of rebellion, individualism, and rational self-interest. LaVeyan Satanism is performative, theatrical, and anti-authoritarian. Rituals are often parodies of Christian practices, designed to provoke thought and defy normative religiosity. He authored The Satanic Bible (1969), The Satanic Rituals, and several other works that outlined his belief system what he called "rational Satanism." This was not devil worship, but a symbolic, theatrical philosophy that rejected guilt-based religion, instead embracing individualism, hedonism, and personal responsibility.

LaVey conducted public rituals, weddings, and funerals in the name of Satan, often attracting media attention with his gothic style and provocative statements. He surrounded himself with artists, rebels, and outcasts, turning the Black House in San Francisco into a hub of countercultural occultism. Through his writings and persona, LaVey helped shape modern Satanism into a movement that challenged moral conformity, religious dogma, and societal repression

From an anthropological lens, this modern Satanism represents a form of what Victor Turner might call communitas a liminal space where individuals

form bonds through shared transgression. It is also an example of symbolic inversion, where dominant cultural symbols (e.g., the cross, the church, God) are flipped to expose underlying contradictions.

Satanism here functions not as a belief in evil but as an intentional identity against cultural hegemony. It shares structural similarities with other resistance movements, including punk subcultures, queer theory, and anarchism. The use of Satanic imagery becomes a form of ritualized dissent: a protest against conformity, often misunderstood by the broader public.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz emphasized that culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms. Satanism, particularly in its literary and ritual traditions, is rich with such symbolic forms, sigils, infernal names, inverted crosses, black masses. These are not simply “evil” symbols, but contested signifiers that carry historical, political, and personal meanings.

Mythologically, Satan mirrors the archetype of the trickster, a figure found across cultures, from Loki in Norse myth to Eshu in Yoruba tradition. The trickster disrupts, mocks, and reshapes reality. In this light, Satanic figures become mythic disruptors of moral absolutism. For those marginalized by mainstream religion, these figures offer a way to reimagine spirituality on one’s own terms.

Anthropologically, Satanism should not be dismissed as mere rebellion or shock value. It is a site of cultural negotiation where people grapple with identity, morality, and power.

In my own interpretation, demons are not external forces waiting to possess us in a theatrical sense, as portrayed in Hollywood cinema. Rather, I believe demons are symbolic manifestations of our deepest shadow workings repressed trauma, desires, fears, and unresolved inner conflicts. They represent the aspects of ourselves that we are often too afraid to confront.

From this perspective, we do not become 'possessed' by demons in a supernatural way, but we can certainly become possessed, or more accurately obsessed, by these internal forces to a detrimental degree. These obsessions can take the form of harmful patterns, addictions, self-destructive behaviors, or toxic relationships. It is only by facing these 'demons' head-on, acknowledging their presence, and integrating their lessons that we can achieve personal growth and spiritual transformation. Scientifically speaking, CAN we create our own physical images/entities? I do believe given we are made up of energy, and energy cannot be created nor destroyed, but can only be transformed from one form to another, we do have those abilities to manifest. But I digress…

This interpretation aligns with both anthropological symbolism and psychological theory, merging ancient traditions of demonology with modern understandings of the self. In this way, demons serve not as adversaries to be exorcised, but as invitations to greater self-awareness.

Satanism, as understood through the texts of The Lesser Key of Solomon, Daemonologie, and contemporary practice, is far more than devil worship. It is a cultural construction, shaped by historical fears, power struggles, and evolving identities. Anthropology allows us to see Satanism not as a monolithic evil, but as a multifaceted response to the human condition, one

that challenges authority, reclaims agency, and constructs meaning through inversion and ritual.

Rather than asking whether Satanism is "real" or "dangerous," anthropologists ask what functions it serves: What anxieties does it express? What structures does it resist? And what truths might it reveal about the societies that fear it? Satan is more than just a horned villain or fiery ruler of Hell. Across cultures and time, he has been prosecutor, rebel, tempter, and liberator. His many names reflect the diverse ways societies understand opposition, morality, and the nature of choice. Whether feared, hated, pitied, or even admired, Satan remains a potent symbol of challenge. Forcing humanity to confront its limits, flaws, and freedoms.

Satanism, in this context, becomes a dark mirror, one that reflects not only our terrors but our truths.