The Devil’s Library Episode 18.5 – “The Great God Pan”

[Intro Music]

Ligeia
Hello and welcome to The Devil's Library. I am Ligeia, and I am here today with my great friend, Leraje.

Leraje
Hail Satan!

Ligeia
Hail Satan! So, today we are going to talk about a tiny book that was my choice. It is a book, uh, it's a novella, uh, The Great God Pan by Arthur Machen. And the reason I chose it, because I just couldn't resist.

Leraje
What, the name?

Ligeia
No, this this book. I couldn't resist. What do you mean? I didn't choose his name.

Leraje
No, no, no, the the the title. The book title.

Ligeia
This is starting very well. What do you mean?

Leraje
At least I remembered the name of it this time.

Ligeia
Oh yeah. Okay. So I chose this novella because I couldn't resist the disturbing Victorian temptations that it offers. It's like a book that combines, you know, the ancient pagan mythology with forbidden knowledge and science and A little bit of scandalised Victorian society.

Leraje
Yes.

Ligeia
Yeah. Ooh. So. Well, let's go. Let's start. Was this your first time reading this?

Leraje
Totally my first time reading it. Um, I'd not even heard of the- that's not true. I had heard the author's name before. This is definitely the first time that I'd kind of like heard it in connection with a particular story and the first story of his that I'd

Ligeia
I will just say that I am extremely happy every time I find something Larage hasn't read. I have a tiny or big celebration because this man, he has read everything. Uh, so-

Leraje
That is not true.

Ligeia

Okay. Okay. Okay. Not everything, but it's really, really challenging to find something you have not read. So. Basically, it's my win already, even if you hated it or whatever. I'm really happy.

Leraje
Well, I did not hate it. I thought it was excellent. I really enjoyed it.

Ligeia
Okay, good. 2 points for me. Ligeia happy. Right. So the book is- this is why I said it's Victorian because it was actually published in 1890. So. I think it's exciting to read something that was at the beginnings of- not complete beginnings, but it was like at the beginning of the horror literature as we know it today.

And it it is something that inspired a lot of modern horror literature or films.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
Many things. And many authors that we know today uh mention this book, mention this author and how This little piece of- that didn't sound well. This little piece of writing. Uh, it's 74 pages. It's tiny.

Leraje
It's very small.

Ligeia
But it has inspired a lot. So I wanted us to read it.

Leraje
I had no idea, but literally so many- Lovecraft praised it.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
Uh, Stephen King said it's I think he said something like it's possibly the-

Ligeia
Yeah, I don't have- yeah.

Leraje
The best story, but it's, um, yeah. I mean, you can see, reading it now, I can see, uh, kind of like looking forward in time from when it was published, you can see its influence on later works. I mean, people like Stephen King himself, Lovecraft, uh, Shirley Jackson, you can see the fingerprints on on their their work.

Ligeia
Yeah. So this is exciting. So I hope our listeners will also get something out of this. And if you haven't read it, it's, as I say, it's very easy to find. It's short. And I think it's very interesting. And specifically, if you look at it with this lens of being this old. So go read it, please.

We will spoil it today.

Leraje
We will spoil it because we don't want to spoil everything.

Ligeia
It's impossible, you know. Right, so would you like to do like a little plot summary or-

Leraje
Yeah, okay, I'll I'll give it a go.

Ligeia
Okay.

Leraje
So, the story starts uh in, I guess, the laboratory uh or or something like that, of Dr. Raymond. Dr. Raymond is, in the best Victorian tradition, a scientist who wants to bridge the science and the supernatural. He wants to bring them together. He wants to use science to access the supernatural. And alongside him in the laboratory that night is a Mr.Clark. And uh Dr. Raymond explains to Mr. Clark that he has found the key to opening the mind to process the supernatural, and it's a very simple uh piece of brain surgery.

Ligeia
Sounds awesome.

Leraje
Which, yeah. The words "simple" and "brain surgery" don't necessarily go together in my head.

Ligeia
Yeah, no, no.

Leraje
There you go. And although Dr. Raymond goes on for some length about how safe and matter-of-fact the operation is, he doesn't undergo it himself. He doesn't volunteer to do it on himself.

Ligeia
No.

Leraje
He wheels in this uh young woman, Mary, and they've got a very odd relationship, the two of them.

Ligeia
Um,

Leraje
and he practi- he does his brain surgery on Mary. Mary apparently can now see the supernatural, and then she falls into like a catatonic state.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
And that that's the end of the first part. Years later, a situation becomes apparent to a Mr. Villiers. Uh, he he comes across an old school friend who tells him he's been ruined, financially ruined, and ruined in the sense that a Victorian gentleman of London could be ruined in those days. And he's he's basically um uh unhoused and living on the streets of London.

It transpires that he met and married a Helen Vaughan. Is it Helen? Yeah, Helen Vaughan.

Ligeia
Helen, yes.

Leraje
And um she is the one who has traduced him and reduced him and encompassed his downfall uh and through the the rest of the novella, It's this slow unfolding of

Helen Vaughan's role in similar things happening to various other London gentlemen.

Ligeia
Like mysterious women and mysterious encounters that are not very much explained what actually is going on.

Leraje
No.

Ligeia
But they never end up very well for the gentlemen.

Leraje
No. Did so did you, I mean, I was gonna say, did you enjoy it? So I'll I'll just ask that first. Did you did you enjoy it?

Ligeia
I did enjoy this. Yes, very much. It brought me back to like really like this old uh writing style. And it's almost exactly like um Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. It brought me back to those stories and the I was imagining London of that time, you know, all that like how much the world was changing already.

And of course I was not alive yet, but I've seen movies and I was like imagining the streets of London and how how dark and interesting it it must have been to walk those streets at night and also dangerous, but maybe maybe it's less Maybe it was less dangerous than nowadays, and especially for a man.

So, so it was it was all sorts of very interesting for me.

Leraje
Very Gothic story.

Ligeia
Very Gothic. Very Gothic. And it's not um as much of like a descriptions like Poe or Ligotti.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
Which I would like to get to a little like authors that I I see similarities with uh later. But it was not that descriptive, I don't think, but still, I could absolutely- I was I was immersed in in this story.

Leraje
I think you're right. I mean, both Poe and Ligotti write very kind of descriptive, emotive prose. This is- it's emotive, but in a different way. It's very- it's it's filled with action. There's things happening all the way through it. Um, you know, there's there's actual events unfolding, whereas with both Poe and Ligotti, things do happen, but it's that's not really the point of their stories.

Ligeia
Yes. Even though I have to say things happen in this book, we know about this experiment and like the whole science obsession and how that well how how that went. Um, and we know things are happening. But the whole storytelling is so fragmented and so ambiguous around what actually are the things that are happening.

Leraje
Well, we never actually meet Helen Vaughan.

Ligeia

No. This is one of the points where I also wonder- but but but you know, also what these gentlemen saw, there are a few of them that that they saw something which was so terrifying that that they were suffering with this horrible shock of the whole organism, you know, and they died. And we never get to even see any glimpse into that, like, what was that?

Or what, what was this thing about Helen?

Leraje
Do you think that's a good thing that we never saw it, or a failing?

Ligeia
That's a good question. I was going to ask you.

Leraje
Okay.

Ligeia
Because I think there are two ways. I Sort of liked it because I think what my own or anybody and any reader can use their own imagination and usually that works very well because because you don't know you you have these fragments so the story takes you somewhere which is frightening dreadful uh the horror is there but you don't get the details so you need to somehow create them for yourself.

And usually your own mind creates something that is terrifying to you.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
So that that is perfect. On the other hand, I, at some points, a little criticism, I don't

Leraje
know.

Ligeia
I I was feeling like the story felt a little bit like these Victorian gentlemen were just sitting around and gossiping about the woman they never understood. And they didn't do much to actually understand her. There was like this, this gentleman's club of men who were, for me, interchangeable in a way. Like uh like they had different names, but I didn't care about any of them.

Leraje
No.

Ligeia
You know, even their voices and the way they they spoke was the same.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
And maybe that was on purpose. I don't know. It's hard to tell, but there was like this gossiping group of men talking about a female character that we never got to hear. She never had a voice in the story. We only got what the male part of the story had to say about the whole thing.

Leraje
I think that's true. I think that's very true. Um, so I think this is a novella that has got lots of interesting things to say about Gender and women's role in Victorian society.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
And also class.

Ligeia
Oh yeah.

Leraje
And social mobility within London. As from the reading I've done on Arthur Machen, he was actually quite um aware and critical of the way that women were uh kind of pigeonholed. around that time. I

Ligeia
had this feeling that maybe this was done on purpose to show-

Leraje
Oh yeah, I think it was, definitely.

Ligeia
Yeah, so I really enjoy that aspect.

Leraje
The positioning, the using of a female character as the kind of like designated bad baddie, you know, that that's kind of like evil character that that that it's kind of like Victorian society at that time, it it perceived women or pigeonholed them as biologically predisposed to be emotional, overly emotional, and, you know, uh, and irrational.

But uh Macken was quite frustrated by that and considered it a sexist uh interpretation. And he I think he actually described it in one of some of his diaries as an incomprehensible opinion of women.

Ligeia
Oh.

Leraje
Uh and called it humbug. And he said that women were entirely worldly, and practical, uh and controlled by what they're conventionally supposed to do rather than what they actually do do. So-

Ligeia
Really? I like this guy.

Leraje
Yeah. So I think the-

Ligeia
Oh.

Leraje
Because I saw very, very strong parallels between Helen- the Helen Vaughan Mrs. Beaumont character and um Lilith, you know, this kind of like female rage. —or feminine rage. I know you're not. That's a phrase I I use carefully in your presence.

Ligeia
Good.

Leraje
Not wanting to provoke it. Um, but you've you've spoken before that about this this idea that um feminine rage is used too loosely uh in connection with Lilith as a character.

Ligeia
And

Leraje
maybe this isn't feminine rage, but I think it could be. And I think maybe Macken might have wanted to intend that.

Ligeia
Yes. He probably would be surprised with the the phrase, like, "feminine rage." But I think this is exactly how I understood the story. Helen as a symbol, almost a metaphor, a symbol of something that was absolutely misunderstood. by the society she she was in, and especially because the society was usually run by men at that point.

And she was not- we don't know much about her, but we know she was at the same uh time very beautiful, with no description of what that means, but she was very beautiful. But also people struggled to describe her. And when they looked at her, they felt a little bit more like like uh disgusted almost, and they couldn't tell why.

Leraje
You're right. There was no real description of what they considered to be beautiful about her. You know, they didn't describe the beauty of her uh eyes.

Ligeia
Hair. Or or hair.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
Her or or anything. Her movement. Like, was she graceful? Was she, I don't know. blonde? Was she- did she have dark hair, red hair, whatever?

Leraje
But I think that ties back to a thing you said a few minutes ago about not explicitly describing the horror.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
Um, so there's a school of thought within horror that, as I understand it anyway, from from writers who who've talked about this, Some writers think that you should definitely describe the horror in minute detail. I mean, The Ha that we did not that long ago is a good example of that.

Ligeia
And

Leraje
then some writers feel that you should never describe the horror and let the reader's imagination do the work. And the reason for that is that when you see a horror movie and the and the the the evil character, whatever, is finally revealed, that the true horror- okay, it might be horrific, it might be gross, it might be whatever, but your mind can cope with it, and then within 5 minutes it's dealt with it.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje

So maybe it's better not to show it, because then your mind can go work overtime on thinking, what the fuck is this?

Ligeia
That's usually me.

Leraje
Yeah,

Ligeia
I I don't like when they like show the monster or what is happening. I don't like to be- or maybe I will say I do like when the authors leave space to my intellect, to my, you know, imagination, and let me deal with it, even though sometimes I need to think about it a little bit longer, but that actually stays with me.

Leraje
So I read um Stephen King's "Dance Macabre" a very long time ago. It came out in the '80s, I think. And it's a non-fiction book he wrote about why why he is a horror writer and the books that influenced him. And he talks about this and he says these these three schools of thought: um do you throw the door wide open and reveal the horror?

Do you never open the door? Um and he said what he tries to do in his work is let the door bulge a little bit but never but never fully open it.

Ligeia
Like that.

Leraje
Yeah. Yeah. Which I think is perfect.

Ligeia
It is perfect. And this story is really a good example of how to think about how to create the atmosphere and the horror. When we talk about Helen also, first of all, she only exists through the testimony of the men.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
Which is, as we agreed, done on purpose.

Leraje
I think so.

Ligeia
And she she is um I have I have a few notes, but uh what I wanted to say now, because you said something that inspired a little thought. Uh maybe the description of her was never there, because so what about maybe each of these men, these these gentlemen who saw her, saw something that is beautiful to them.

Leraje
To them. Yeah.

Ligeia
So she was just exactly the symbol of that. So that's why it was more about the fear of the female strength, autonomy, her sexuality, probably.

Leraje
All of those things. Yeah.

Ligeia

And these gentlemen, men, not being able to deal with that thought even. So that was maybe so terrifying to them. I'm not saying they died because of that, but I I I have a feeling the description was absolutely not necessary because they all saw something else, I think.

Leraje
Yeah. And the end of the story, or towards the end of the story, kind of backs that up because when Helen Vaughan, Mrs. Beaumont, whatever, dies, she kind of like phases between these different states, different genders, different creatures, different animals.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
There's a really good book by uh an author called Peter Straub called Ghost Story, and this short story, I am sure Peter Straub must have read this before he wrote Ghost Story. In that story, there's a female character and there's a group of men, um, and this female character has the ability to change shape, so she can change from one woman to another woman to something else to something else, etc.

Ligeia
Good fun.

Leraje
Yeah, and I think what you're saying is absolutely spot on. That just like the horror is never fully um discussed, Helen Vaughan's beauty also does not never need to be discussed because it will be different for each of her-

Ligeia
Victims.

Leraje
Victims, yeah.

Ligeia
Mhm. And also the confusion with her name. Even though, I mean, these people were like They recognised her face in the drawings.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
But even that was so ambiguous that it was just maybe the resemblance of Mary.

Leraje
Right.

Ligeia
Or something. It was changing. It was like, oh-

Leraje
There was there was a point when they had one of them, was it Villiers? No, Smith, had to go back and recheck.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
Because-

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
And I think that's that backs up your point.

Ligeia
I think so. I think it's possible. I think it can be seen in this way. Yeah.

Leraje
But I think straight from, I mean, we're talking about um this kind of the misogyny of of Victorian England in those in those days. I mean, the story starts with a very misogynistic scene.

Ligeia
Oh God, yeah. I actually had to talk to you about that.

Leraje
Yeah. So, so when the when Dr. Raymond performs this operation on Mary, kind of like, it's very patriarchal.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
Um, he starts off acting like a father figure to her, and then he kisses her and becomes her patriarchal husband.

Ligeia
And she's 17.

Leraje
Yeah. And then later, he uh in that same scene, he becomes like, Her controlling master. So this is kind of like right from the get-go, there's this this this the patriarchy is right there, right in your face. The misogyny of this culture is right there. And I do think that Macken did that deliberately.

I think it's a deliberate

Ligeia
commentary.

Leraje
Absolutely.

Ligeia
Because of the way how it was written, I could feel he he did it on purpose. And as we learn at the end of to the end to of the story, Mary was either pregnant already or after that, which is- I don't know which is worse.

Leraje
I think it was after because I think-

Ligeia
Which is even worse, I think.

Leraje
She was the mother, but Pan is the father.

Ligeia
Yes. Yes. Yeah.

Leraje
Maybe?

Ligeia

Yeah, it is. It is true. But also, yeah.

Leraje
Oh, but I'm sure, you know, Dr. Raymond was um

Ligeia
Yeah, that was that was difficult for me. Yeah, no, she was a child and these old fuckers. No. But yes, it was there for a reason.

Leraje
It was there to establish Dr. Aymond as a fucking prick, basically.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
And also as a commentary on the state of um how women were viewed in Victorian England at the time.

Ligeia
Yeah. It also is like this, you know, all that active part of the story is only men. And the the the female character or characters, they are always just-

Leraje
Controlling.

Ligeia
She's sitting there. She's being used as a tool for the bigger good of science and forbidden knowledge or whatever, gaining knowledge. So, and he knew. He knew uh something can go wrong, but it was still worth it. It was like, okay, a little sacrifice for the better and bigger.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
Which he is going to share with other men. So what is this life of this little child? And also he said she she was an orphan.

Leraje
So he owns her.

Ligeia
Yeah. She actually owes him. I can do whatever I want with her life.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
He actually says this. I was like, I'm gonna burn this book, but I have to continue because it was like- First page and I was already fuming. What do you mean, you-

Leraje
But that that kind of um uh that arrogance, not just in his treatment of uh Mary by Dr. Raymond, that I think that that kind of arrogance of- you're talking about a society that was just coming off the back of the Enlightenment and was you know was making all these great leaps, these great scientific leaps.

And I think the arrogance of men, male scientists at that point, was they can't they can't fuck up. They couldn't make a mistake in their own minds. Um. And I think Machen was commenting on that as well. You know.

Ligeia

Yes.

Leraje
The the folly. And that's a theme that you know is picked up by later authors like Lovecraft. Yes. And Mary Shelley before him. before them both. You know, this kind of like hubris of thinking that they are all-knowing and uh cannot- the pursuit of science can never be wrong, no matter what it is you're trying to do and who you hurt in the process.

Ligeia
Yeah, and also using people who are maybe, you know, in a need for help, like an orphan or a homeless person or whatever that was. It was like, um, who is going to criticise me? Excuse me, uh, who is going to criticise? This is a lesser person. It was still there.

Leraje
Yeah, I mean, it was quite interesting to me that all of Helen Vaughan's- Mrs. Beaumont- all of her victims, for want of a better word, were all very kind of like upper middle or upper class gentlemen of Victorian society. She never went after anyone who was kind of of a lower station in life.

It was always them. And part of her treatment of them was always taking, stripping away of their class, uh you know, of their of their social standing.

Ligeia
We talked about the the ending, and I wanted to just maybe go a little bit back to that, how that was like one of the first, maybe first examples of real body horror. That I know of, which was really well done. And I think it has inspired so many authors after that, like Clive Barker.

Leraje
No doubt.

Ligeia
Cronenberg, even. I don't know. Would you agree?

Leraje
Oh yeah.

Ligeia
I think it was really well done for how old this book is. Obviously, we have already seen and read so many other books, but Just if you imagine that it was 1890, I think it must have been really something else for people who read that book at that time.

Leraje
Oh, it attracted a lot of criticism after

Ligeia
it

Leraje
was published. Yeah.

Ligeia
And the ending must have been terrifying for people.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
I really like that. It wasn't gross or anything, but it it like he went there. It was good.

Leraje
It was the most explicit thing in the whole story, that little section at the end.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
And I think it was good that we had it. And I think again, it was good that whilst it was explicitly described, it wasn't- it wasn't like it's usual, it wasn't gross, it wasn't kind of like gross-out explicit. It was- it was presented as something, um, so there's this strain in in Victorian society, there was this kind of like Atavism, this this this kind of atavistic fear of- as as science became a thing, the idea that ran underneath that was that there was this world of esotericism and power and supernaturalism that still was there and was waiting for when science failed.

Yeah, and uh this story and that scene in particular, I think, played into that that that fear.

Ligeia
Mm-hmm. Absolutely. Yes, I think it worked very well. Were you satisfied, satisfied with the ending? Or did you want more? Or-

Leraje
No, I thought it was perfect. I think if he'd gone there even more, like really gone for the gross out, then it would have been almost a betrayal of the rest of the story.

Ligeia
Yeah, because he was not explicit in anything. Even with the the experiment at the beginning, we didn't get to read uh anything about it. It just happened in two Like sentences. So I would be surprised what at the end that would be the case. It was written with like, I would say, grace.

Leraje
Oh, it's beautiful. The whole story was beautifully, beautifully written.

Ligeia
Yeah, beautiful.

Leraje
You sent me a quote when we were reading it.

Ligeia
Yeah. Do you have it?

Leraje
So this is the quote that you you sent to me. "In every grain of wheat, there lies hidden the soul of a star."

Ligeia
Isn't that beautiful?

Leraje
It is beautiful. It's true as well.

Ligeia
Yeah. But like it's written with-

Leraje
What spoke to you? Why did you send me that quote in particular? What spoke to you about that?

Ligeia
I could see it in my in like immediately as I read it, I could see the fields and the wheat and and the blue skies and and the golden wheat and the connection that We are just a planet. We are just another rock in this whole universe of other things and stars and planets and rocks, whatever that is.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
And we are all connected. And I just felt the beauty of that.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
The beginning-

Leraje
It's a beautifully written phrase as well.

Ligeia
Yeah. And and uh maybe I was grateful for how it works that we get the sun and the stars and the the stuff that we need to eat grows.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
Until we actually fuck it up completely. But I mean, it was it was just really nicely written, beautifully written, simple, short sentence, nothing huge. And I love that when people are able to say in simple sentence a huge Beautiful, powerful thing.

Leraje
Yeah, I mean, McGonagall does that, and I think Susanna Clarke does that as well.

Ligeia
Yes, yes.

Leraje
They're both very, very good at that.

Ligeia
Yeah, so, and it was at the beginning, and I was like, oh, I think I'm gonna love this book because this is awesome. I love that.

Leraje
So the the the quote that I highlighted is a bit longer, but I stood here and saw before me the unutterable, the unthinkable gulf that yawns profound between two worlds. "The world of matter and the world of spirit. I saw the great empty deep stretched dim before me, and in that instant a bridge of light leapt from the earth to the unknown shore, and the abyss was spanned." Chills when I read that.

Ligeia
I have them now. Yes, it's what- I should just not say anything after this.

Leraje
It is a great little paragraph, that.

Ligeia
Gorgeous.

Leraje
I love that quote.

Ligeia
Yeah. Yeah, I should really not say anything anymore.

Leraje
No, you definitely should, otherwise it's gonna be a very boring episode.

Ligeia
Oh yeah. Yeah, I mean, I still wanted to maybe pay attention to how well was done the the topic of Victorian science or obsession with science.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
And the absence of ethics.

Leraje
Mhm.

Ligeia
You know, the consequences of even this experiment, Dr. Raymond, it was all justified in in his head and everybody else's heads. It was okay.

Leraje
Yeah. No, it's like I said earlier, the the the Victorians of that period just thought if it was in the pursuit of science, then it was okay.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
Which it isn't, obviously.

Ligeia
Obviously it isn't. And I would like to see if Okay, we have options. If the experiment would have worked in a different way, what if she would have died in a horrible way immediately right there? Would it have changed anything? Probably not.

Leraje
For him, no, I don't think it would.

Ligeia
Nobody would have criticised anything. What if they would have used a man? So yeah, I just wanted to say how how well he Like, pointed at the the gender disbalance. Like, these two men or all the men that were doing this uh were controlling the actual stuff that was happening at this this instant.

It was it was the experiment and the science.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
And the girl or the the female characters, they were used and they not Not only used, but they had to bear the consequences of that. Which is exactly what's happening with the grape culture. You know, like an abortion and stuff like that. Like, oh, let's have fun.

Leraje

Yeah.

Ligeia
And who bears the consequences is the females. And now they can't get rid of unwanted pregnancies because that's fun.

Leraje
Or or they can, but they have to do it in such a way it's fucking lethal to themselves. Yes.

Ligeia
That's an experiment in itself. So, lobotomy or whatever, uh what is next? Um, so, I think this was very timeless, what he did.

Leraje
Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I think he also had things to say about uh imperialism. Uh, I mean, Machen himself was Welsh. Mhm. Um, and parts of this story were set in Wales. Yes. Um, and the more kind of like esoteric parts, the more spiritual and supernatural parts happened in Wales.

Ligeia
Um. Hmm. I haven't noticed that.

Leraje
Yeah, so you know, the the kind of like where Helen uh grew up and was raised and and and that kind of thing. And I think Macum was deliberately saying- he was having his English characters almost say, "Oh, you know, the the the light of English science needs to shine on these, you know, these kind of like lesser —" Mm-hmm.

This imperial attitude that Savages need to be tamed. Savages need to be controlled. You know, the the natives, the Welsh in this case, or historically just about every fucking country on the face of the planet that Victorian society-

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
—decimated.

Ligeia
Decimated. Yes, that's a good one.

Leraje
I I think there was there was a lot in this story. The the the the the the the commentary on class, the commentary on gender, the commentary on the patriarchy, And the commentary, I think, a little bit on imperialism and the empire as well. Oh, yeah.

Ligeia
Yeah, I saw it. And so, what do you think about the choice of the mythology? Why why god Pan?

Leraje
Again, I think it was it's quite clever because it it it it evokes uh a deity that has kind of like Roman-ish origins, you know, or-

Ligeia
Greek.

Leraje
Pan is Greek, yeah, but it was kind of like I think it was kind of like usurped by the Romans who were in Britain. Sorry, yes, I phrased that badly. I don't

mean to suggest that Pan was a Roman deity. More that it was kind of like brought over to Britain by the Romans uh when they were-

Ligeia
Oh, okay. So originally it was a Greek deity or mythology. Yes, that's right. And then you mean like

Leraje
The Romans

Ligeia
brought it over to Britain. This culture was brought by the Romans.

Leraje
Yes, that's right.

Ligeia
Yeah, okay, yes.

Leraje
And that kind of like the leaning on what would have been Celtic and Gaelic history and and tying that in with a deity like Pan, so you had this kind of like culmination of- it was it was making it ancient, basically, predating Christianity. Which is also kind of like an imperialistic tool of empire as the as the English used it in Victorian times.

Ligeia
Yeah, I see that.

Leraje
And I think that the the kind of doing that sort of like tying together all these kind of Gaelic, Celtic, Roman, and obviously originally Greek, these very ancient things that predate Christianity and predate um the formation of England as a country even, um, was was a good choice.

Ligeia
And I think maybe there was also this aspect of Pan being like a deity or god of the wild, the nature, anything that can't be controlled by by humans, by people. So I think that was also a great choice for the imperialism and also the industrialization. And how certain things can't be controlled even.

Yeah. So so maybe to see this deity meant to be savage, be wild, be one in with nature, and to see and to learn the knowledge that has been here, the ancient, the forbidden, the the primordial something. That was here before everything else.

Leraje
Exactly. Do you think then that it was it was a way of saying, "Hey, you men of science, you think you control."

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
"But nature will always find a way to fuck with you if it chooses to." Yes.

Ligeia
And if you saw it, you your mind will go crazy because it's so small and so narrow-minded, actually. so obsessed with just certain little aspects of what works for you and brings you money and fame. And, you know, it was- I'm not saying all science of that era was wrong, but sometimes they used ways that were really questionable.

Leraje

No, I think I completely agree. I think-

Ligeia
You know what I'm saying?

Leraje
The end result. Oh yeah. I mean, The end result they got was often sort of like scientifically valid, but the methods they used to get it were not great.

Ligeia
And the price they, you know, other people had to pay.

Leraje
Exactly.

Ligeia
It was all just justified. So yes, I think and I think it was also time when people started to really try to not be so connected to nature because that was the the point of the the higher society to be living in luxurious houses, have their standards, have their comfort, to go as far as possible from the previous life, you know, be connected with the nature, living in small houses, working outside in fields, in forests, having animals and had to take care of them every day.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
So I think that was their way of like, no, no, no, we are better than that. So not even looking that way.

Leraje
I mean, that kind of what you've just said there, it kind of reminds me of something that Heather Parry was getting trying to get across in Carrie and Craig.

Ligeia
Yeah, that's a good point.

Leraje
You know, the uh, I'm not gonna try and say her name. I can't remember it even now. Heather, please, I'm so sorry. Celeste, yeah. So her uh her her parents were this kind of like, they used to be this kind of like working class or very poor family who became industrialists. And I think what you're saying there is probably very true.

Oh God. Oh no. Can't believe. I got it right after you told me.

Ligeia
It's all good. You didn't say Amanda or Miranda. Or Cecile. All good.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
Esmeralda.

Leraje
Esmeralda. Miranda, Amanda, Esmeralda.

Ligeia
Yeah. So, I don't know. Do you have anything else that you would like to add to this?

Leraje
Only that I I think that this is a kind of I don't want to be so arrogant as to assume that, you know, people aren't familiar with it, but it was not familiar to me, and it was a revelation, both in terms of I can clearly see how it must have influenced a lot of writers.

Ligeia
Would you like to talk about some of them? Because I was-

Leraje
I think we've mentioned quite a few already, but sure. I mean, I can see the fingerprints of the fingerprints of this story in the work, the later work of people like Lovecraft, uh Richard Matheson, Harlan Ellison, uh Stephen King, even Peter Straub, uh Shirley Jackson, Ray Bradbury, the sort of the the American writers who came after Machen, uh horror and fantasy writers who came after Machen.

Sorry, not Machen.

Ligeia
Machen, yeah.

Leraje
I

Ligeia
was like, is this another name?

Leraje
Yeah, sorry.

Ligeia
Celeste.

Leraje
Uh Celestia. So it it was a revelation to me about how Clearly influential, this particular story of his was. Yeah,

Ligeia
I'm very happy we read it together.

Leraje
And you saw some influence too?

Ligeia
Yeah, I I just wanted to say, of course, I also saw uh influence uh in Lovecraft and uh his idea that the universe contains truth, truth capable of shattering human sanity. So I think this is absolutely clearly there. Then I saw Edgar Allan Poe, of course. Yeah. And I see how these two both are interested in consciousness, confronting experience that can't be- like it it cannot safely be contained.

I love that. That's my Poe right there. Then with Ligotti, I saw that And also, let me know if you agree with this, because I I have made a note here, like uh Ligeti, ordinary reality conceals something that is horror, is a nightmare, is absurd. A hope. Yeah, it's the terrifying thing, you know?

With Mäkinen, his nightmare is the world we perceive may be merely a comforting surface Over something incomprehensible.

Leraje
Hmm. Unknowable.

Ligeia

Do you agree?

Leraje
Yeah, no, I think that's absolutely- I think um you're you're absolutely right in in that and also the comparison to Ligotti. And I think Ligotti must have read Machen. I think it would be impossible not to. Um, but that that idea, and I think they do have similarities because I think Ligotti also believes that He comes at it from a different perspective, but the idea that the the what the reality that each individual perceives is not necessarily the reality.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
The underlying reality.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
Um, and I think both writers sort of like dabble with that idea quite a lot in different ways.

Ligeia
In different ways. It is not, as I'm saying, it's not like a copy-paste.

Leraje
No,

Ligeia
no. I see a big influence, which by Ligeti it has been taken to like the genius high stuff.

Leraje
Yes. I mean, Ligeti married it with a kind of like nihilistic, highly pessimistic view of humanity.

Ligeia
Yeah. Yeah. I said highs, maybe it's the depth actually. The pit. And I also wanted to mention I saw a little bit of Oscar Wilde and his Dorian Grey.

Leraje
Yeah, Dorian Grey. Yeah. Yeah.

Ligeia
A little bit.

Leraje
Well, the commentary on Victorian society.

Ligeia
The commentary and the exploration of the corruption and the dangerous, you know, the the pleasures.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
And how even the like the body horror at the end was, I don't know, I saw it there. So I wanted to mention that. I don't know.

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
Maybe I'm making it up, but why not?

Leraje
No, I don't think so. I don't think so.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
I mean, you're talking about a bunch of writers who were either Gothic or post-Gothic, really. And I think, you know, in the way that that particular story is, The Great God Pan is structured in a very modern Gothic sensibility. If you updated the style of writing, that could easily be a very That could have been published last year.

Ligeia
Absolutely. It's amazing.

Leraje
Just in terms of the story, the structure of the story.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
Um, and you can see Poe reading that and thinking, "Wow." The idea that the the the traditional Gothic return, you know, the event happens, time passes, the echoes of the event reverberate in the present.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
Which is an idea that Poe explored quite a lot in a lot of his stuff. Like you said earlier about Lovecraft, the idea that there's this unknowable thing that could shatter people's sanity.

Ligeia
That is so huge that it doesn't even care about it. We are so irrelevant.

Leraje
And yeah, in the way that- sorry, in the way that Lovecraft used otherworldly, other-dimensional beings, Macken just uses the idea simply that nature is ungovernable and unknowable uh in that same way. So, well, I think all of these authors have taken something from him.

Ligeia
Could be, right?

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
I have questions for you.

Leraje
You have questions for me?

Ligeia
Okay. I have questions. We can cut this out if you want.

Leraje
No, no, I'm interested.

Ligeia
So, our first question for you today: if seeing the true nature of existence can drive people Crazy, insane, mad, whatever word you want to use. How can we be certain that madness or insanity isn't actually a form of enlightenment? What would you think about this?

Leraje
I mean, it's an idea that's been explored through a lot of um literature, not just horror literature. Uh, but it is quite a common thing in horror literature to to to say that once you strip away the kind of like the politeness of so-called civilization or modern society, what we're left with is this, um, random-seeming, uncontrollable- Ligotti called it the madness of things.

Ligeia
Yes, yes.

Leraje
And I think there's a- there's a strong argument for the idea that you've just put forward, that it's kind of like, how can we be sure How can we know? If the if the world is truly a veneer that each person interprets in a different way, based on their own lives, their own ideas, their own preconceptions, their own- then how can we ever say that that is is a thing that is knowable?

Yeah. As a kind of fact, as a as a kind of like objective fact. And therefore, maybe madness is an enlightening way. in some cases to look at. I mean, there's this- have you ever read uh The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams? Okay. So it's science fiction and it's comedy.

Ligeia
See, see everybody listening, another book that he has read.

Leraje
Everybody, I mean, it's a very well-known book.

Ligeia
Of course, yeah.

Leraje
So there's there's um There's, I think there's 5, but it's very funny. Um, there's 5 books and the tagline to it is, uh, to the 5th book, I think, is, uh, Douglas Adams wrote, "This is the 5th book in the increasingly misnamed Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy trilogy." And uh, there's a character in that book called Wonko the Sane.

And uh Wonko lives in an inside-out house. Uh the the inside, in air quotes, of the house is where the doors and the windows all look out into. And the outside of the house, or the outside of the house is actually the inside, is where he puts his sofa and his bed and his kitchen and all that.

And one of the characters said to him, why Have you done this? And he said, "The world is insane. This is an asylum I've built for it."

Ligeia
Oh, I love that. Exactly. Oh my God. I need to read that. I mean, yeah.

Leraje
So I think that's a very valid interpretation.

Ligeia
Okay. Okay. Thank you. So that was a good question.

Leraje
It was a good question.

Ligeia
I have another one.

Leraje
Go on.

Ligeia
Interrogation. So, is Helen a supernatural femme fatale or a symbol of male fear of female sexual autonomy? Autonomy, not anatomy. Autonomy.

Leraje
Well, maybe both are true, you know, based on that final scene. I think um definitely the latter, as written by Machen.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
I mean, we spoke earlier that he was a man who thought the idea that women were the kind of like air quotes again, "weaker" or more emotional or, you know, uh contrary or something. He thought that was bollocks, basically. So I think he deliberately made Helen this this kind of like symbol of atavism, uh of kind of the ungovernable natural force.

This who happened because she was a woman to also represent a lot of Victorian society's fears about Uh, the power of women, and that's why I mentioned Lilith earlier.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
Yeah, it's there's a tie-in to that, that that kind of fear that patriarchal men have of female emancipation and female power.

Ligeia
Who, women who refuse to be obedient. Right. Yeah, lesser. And One more question.

Leraje
Okay.

Ligeia
I need to squeeze all the knowledge out of you because you know things.

Leraje
Um, okay.

Ligeia
Okay. So if the story was written from Helen's point of view or perspective, who do you think would be the monster?

Leraje
Oh, Victorian society. Male-dominated Victorian society.

Ligeia
And we can finish it with this thought. Thank you.

Leraje
Do you agree?

Ligeia
I do. I do. That's why I asked, because this is what I thought.

Leraje
Yeah. The patriarchy is the enemy in this. There's no question about it.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
Well, to me anyway. I mean, obviously there's-

Ligeia
Absolutely. It's not science that is wrong. It's how it used to be approached and maybe, probably still is by many.

Leraje
I think any culture, any society that considers itself the dominant society as as England did during the Victorian years, and possibly America—the USA, sorry—does now, has a a a massively arrogant, egotistical belief in its own righteousness and its own power and its own right to do what it wants in the name of exercising that power.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
So yeah, I think Macan has a lot to say about um the patriarchy, a lot to say about the class, uh the society, London Victorian society or English Victorian society. Uh and he was obviously not a fan of any of these things.

Ligeia
Yeah, I agree.

Leraje
So yeah, I think so. And you agree, do you? You think-

Ligeia
I do agree, yes. Uh this is how I saw it and I was interested into like to see if it's just me because I'm I'm a woman and it might be a little bit you know this is how I see things because this is my experience of life in a society still nowadays I can't imagine being like in the 1920s like yeah 19th century I can't really imagine but I can tell It is still here and it's sad and it doesn't make sense.

Leraje
No.

Ligeia
And I personally, well, I personally, yeah, that's a good one. Uh, I think uh, even using a word like "feministic" or "feminist," "I am a feminist," I do not really like that because We should just all be okay and normal and equal and not need to use these words. Everything else, everything that is either one side or the other extreme is not normal, is is not good.

Leraje
I know what you mean. Yeah.

Ligeia
You know.

Leraje
I think it's necessary. That word is necessary. Feminism.

Ligeia
I know. I know.

Leraje
But it's it's just so confusing and nasty.

Ligeia
We should have never been in a war. Like the gender war is absolutely like, my brain is not able to comprehend why, you know, we are people and we shouldn't need to be using these words, but we do because it has been so one-sided and one, just a majority of everything that is being decided and has been for at least 2,000 years in this territory where we live.

I have to use that word, even though I am not one of those that is like against men and I hate men. No, I love men. I love people. I love people who are good and have good values and value life and want to do good things and just just be kind. Uh,

Leraje
yeah.

Ligeia
But we have to use these words because this is where we are.

Leraje
Yeah. And you know, at the end of the day, the people who started this were Men.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
It was men who said that, oh yeah, women are the, air quotes again, weaker sex. Women are the emotional-

Ligeia
Yeah. It doesn't matter that we give life and we can carry another whole person. We can actually create a person. We are the weaker. Okay. Yeah.

Leraje
Wow. You ever see the idea that women can't do things because they're overly emotional? Go to any fucking football ground. around quarter to 5, 5 o'clock on a Saturday and watch a bunch of grown men crying because their football team has just lost a game.

Ligeia
Yeah, I mean, you know,

Leraje
I

Ligeia
mean, but also like every single freaking human came from a woman.

Leraje
Well, yeah,

Ligeia
you can't go around this. You were born out of a woman who created you in your body- in her body, not in your body, in her body. Do we need to say anything? It should be celebrated. It should be valued. I don't understand the the war. I don't. I hate it. I don't like it.

And you know, people should all have the same opportunities and and value and and the same salaries according to their knowledge, their skills. Who cares? You know, it shouldn't be about the gender at all.

Leraje
No, it shouldn't.

Ligeia
So,

Leraje
you know, there's a whole bunch of things it shouldn't be about. It shouldn't be about gender, it shouldn't be about race, it shouldn't be about sexuality, it shouldn't be about class, it shouldn't be about um poverty or or need, but somehow it is still.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
So. You know, things like feminism, um,

Ligeia
yeah,

Leraje
uh, LGBTQIA+ rights. The people who started this were the people who had the power at the time, which was rich, old, white dudes. So it was quite nice in a way to see Helen wreaking her-

Ligeia
In her little female, not little, but in her female rage. Let's get back to that.

Leraje
But I mean, to- Female rage, yes, but also class rage. Oh yeah. Her mum was a working-class orphan, you know, and she was raised in the countryside.

Ligeia
Yeah.

Leraje
So this wasn't someone from Victorian upper-class gentleman society. So this was a woman uh from a working-class background um who was wreaking havoc on the upper echelons of uh Victorian London society.

Ligeia
Good, good girl.

Leraje
It was it was hard to hate her.

Ligeia
No, I I loved her. I loved the how she was used as as this symbol. I really liked it because we didn't need to connect with her as a person. We didn't need that. It was well done.

Leraje
Yeah. And again, another reason for keeping her off stage.

Ligeia
Yes.

Leraje
For a lot for me, just about all the story. Yeah.

Ligeia
Yeah. So, yeah. Very good. And I'm happy you liked it.

Leraje
Yeah. And I'm happy you suggested I read it.

Ligeia
We can also continue with, there are like a few short stories still in the book. Maybe we can, we can do those. Yeah. You never know, people. What is our next?

Leraje
We don't

Ligeia
know. It might be continuation of this book. Or Ligotti or-

Leraje
Yeah.

Ligeia
Who knows?

Leraje
Kyle Parker. Yeah. Somebody else that occurs to us.

Ligeia
We also, yeah, we have some newer stuff. We keep coming back to, what's her name? Mariana.

Leraje
Mariana.

Ligeia
Yeah. The Argentinian. The Dangers of Smoking in Bed.

Leraje
Oh, The Dangers of Smoking in Bed.

Ligeia
Oh gosh, I can't remember her name.

Leraje
Is it Vas- it's not Vasquez, is it?

Ligeia
Something like that. I'm so sorry. We keep coming back to that. Yeah. So who knows? We have-

Leraje
I haven't read that one story by her.

Ligeia
Of course, because it's about smoking.

Leraje
I did used to smoke, but that doesn't mean I sought out stories in which people-

Ligeia
Well, I bought the book because of the name, so.

Leraje
Right.

Ligeia

And I don't smoke, but I was like, hmm, interesting. I want to know. Good, yeah. So, yes. Right, so that was it for this episode. Uh, we hope you liked it. We hope you are inspired to read this novella.

Leraje
Yes, definitely read it. It's really, really good.

Ligeia
Yeah. And we will see you next time. Uh, I was Laigeia, Hail Satan!

Leraje
Anamdoraj, hail Satan.

[Outro music]