

Evil ways: A Morality Play

by [William Hamilton](#) in the [June 3, 1998](#) issue

The faces of Monica Lewinsky, Ken Starr and Bill Clinton are like red figures against a blue background, dancing in a Matisse-like circle, arms outstretched, hands touching, each one mysteriously (even fatally) related to the other two. Two are intelligent lawyers from small southern towns. Two (at least) have vigorous sexual appetites. Two think of themselves as invulnerable. Two come from dysfunctional families. One is pious and wishes the other(s) ill; one may bring the other down without wishing to.

I propose to turn their stories into a moral tale, a lesson. I claim that each one is doing evil. It is not enough to say that she is ditzy, that he suffers from satyriasis, that he is a pious right-wing thug. Is there a common language by which we can call them evil today? Evil, Reinhold Niebuhr has written, is always “the assertion of some self-interest without regard to the whole.” But that is only a beginning.

In trying to find a way to talk about evil I will be assuming as fact matters that we do not know to be fact. Thus, what I am doing is as much fiction as it is an essay.

I wish to set myself against medicalizing or psychologizing the behaviors under scrutiny. And I wish to set myself against the current dualistic wisdom (coming from both secular America and European antimoralists) that says such things as: “Americans are too moralistic, too Puritan. It is both cool and necessary to distinguish the private from the public; the first has nothing to do with the second.” Or, as the saying goes, what goes on in the bedroom has nothing to do with what goes on in the Oval Office. Perhaps that should be amended to say: what goes on in the Oval Office has nothing to do with what goes on in the Oval Office.

This dualism, like most dualisms, is a sign of careless thinking. Let’s take the issue of adultery, which may be relevant. Let’s define it as when a married person has sex with someone other than the spouse, without the spouse’s knowledge or permission. Adultery requires, I am arguing, a sophisticated system of lying to make it work: lying to the spouse, lying to the mistress, lying even to the self. If lying is a distinctive part of one’s private life, will the liar be able to keep it from spilling over

into the public realm? Can one be half a liar? (Of course, someone might argue that since politics requires persistent lying to both self and public, what better training for politics could there be than adultery?)

With a background in Christian theology, I do not consider the body as evil or sex as having a special relation to sin. The flaw of that first couple in that first garden was pride, not concupiscence, and Jesus was especially forgiving of sins of the flesh as compared to his reported excoriation of sins of the spirit. A Christian perspective also means that when I am examining the evil others do, I may never exonerate myself or consider myself uniquely wise because I see so clearly the sins of others.

The relation between evil and responsibility is not a simple one. There is much in the letters of Paul of Tarsus that does not leap comfortably into our late 20th century. But the poignant cry of Romans 7 suggests how tricky it is both to take evil seriously and to insist that those who do evil are responsible for it. Note Paul's touching attempt to distinguish "sin" from his "I." "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." For Paul, evil is inevitable but not necessary. Inevitability reminds us of those structures of evil for which we are not responsible. "Not necessary" reminds us of our freedom from those constraining structures.

Monica, Ken and Bill are neither sick nor victims. They are engaged in (albeit modest) evil and must be held responsible for it (even though none of them has given the faintest hint of any sense of responsibility). Each might have done otherwise; they have chosen not to.

Starr is an able lawyer, devout, a committed member of the Christian right's hate-Clinton club. Friend of publisher Alfred Regnery and broadcaster Pat Robertson, he decided to stay on as a million-dollar-a-year partner at his law firm after being appointed special prosecutor in August 1994. He failed to mention, at the time of his appointment, that his law firm was being investigated by the Resolution Trust Corporation for negligence, and thus he was in the position of investigating the very people who were suing his firm. There is a further serious question about the legitimacy of considering the Lewinsky tapes.

Starr is making brilliant and tendentious use of two legal systems that have no built-in checks: the vaguely drafted special prosecutor's law and the grand jury system over which his control is complete. He presents a fascinating example of how law

can be (even legitimately) used to advance a political agenda. His ruthless politicizing, his thin-skinned inability to take criticism, his apparent unfamiliarity with both ethics and the Bill of Rights, all suggest how evil can exist even within the law.

Lewinsky may be the hardest of all to define as evil. Can we describe her without recourse to the phrase "Beverly Hills"? All we have is guesses: highly sexed and given to sexual fantasies, so that it may be difficult for us (and even for her) to distinguish the real from the hoped-for conquests. Too chubby to be "in" at high school, not overgifted with much in the way of skills or talent or intelligence, sexual prowess became her only means of achieving identity.

Contemporary feminist theory has spoken of the strange emergence of a new kind of outlaw heroine, both aggressive and confused, demanding radical freedom, rebelling against adversaries. Sounds familiar. We cannot tell where Monica is headed: it may be to jail, it may be to the photo studio at *Penthouse*. Hers is almost a picture of evil unaware of itself. Sad, driven--innocent, unintended evil can be very dangerous indeed.

It's not that Clinton is priapic, or that he had oral sex in the Oval Office (or even that he had oval sex in the Oral Office). He doesn't rape, and he probably doesn't even harass. But it is the case that he (and plenty of those around him) have decided to duck and weave, to play pained and earnest, to dissemble, to make lawyerly distinctions (there was no sexual relationship--because oral sex is not a sexual relationship?).

The true center of his evil is not sex, nor any of the legalisms chatted about by law professors. The center is disloyalty. He has let down his family, his colleagues, his party and supporters; finally, his nation. Bill, we are quite capable of forgiveness (we've all needed it ourselves, many times). All it takes is something faintly resembling repentance. We are not dumb enough to buy your smarmy evasiveness.

We should have seen it coming. He was never able fully to admit his opposition to the Vietnam war. He bought the Religious Right's program of "welfare reform" as an attack on promiscuous women for having too many children. He backed away from his original decency on the rights of gays in the military. He cruelly turned his back on an old friend, Lani Guinier, when he saw that supporting her would mean standing up for a controversial principle.

Our remaining questions may never get answers. Why did you do it, if you did, in the office? Are you dumb, addicted or overwhelmed by a sense of invulnerability? Do you and Hillary really believe in those silly boxes that hold and isolate the separate chunks of your life? Can't you see that we are more distressed about your screwing us with your evasiveness and mistrust than with any other screwing? Disloyalty may be an old-fashioned, even ancient, evil, but time has not diminished its evil.

More distilling needs to be done than I am capable of, but I can think of two virtues that our three faces of evil have suggested:

1) Look carefully around you at those you have come to count on and who have come to count on you. Family, friends, colleagues, patients, clients, and the rest. *You are not to let them down.* Your loyalty to them must be as nearly absolute as you can make it. This is the message sent by the examples of Clinton and Starr.

2) *You are not to lie at all.* This is the message of the Lewinsky case. This goes radically against conventional wisdom. Lawyers don't call it lying, they call it providing the best possible defense. Doctors don't lie, they prolong life by never giving up hope. All our white lies are justified because they lubricate the grinding wheels of our social lives. We should consider the abolition of the white lie. This needn't entail the death of politeness, but perhaps we should allow ourselves to lie only when human life is seriously at stake.

To look at these faces of evil, without any sense of self-righteous superiority, may help us to become their opposites.