

Supernatural elements in shakespeare



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No one questions the fact that William Shakespeare is a pure genius when it comes to creating immortal characters whose characteristics transcend those of the normal supernatural beings, but most students of literature agree that his uses of the supernatural are merely figments of his creative imagination. Every man, woman, and child is influenced by the age into which they are born and Shakespeare was no exception. Not only does his use of supernatural elements within his works reveal the Elizabethans' obsession with mythical beliefs, but it also reveals his attitude toward these beliefs at different points of his writing career. Because of the profound understanding of the beliefs of his time, Shakespeare was able to create masterpieces that critics and readers have respected all over the world.

In Shakespeare's time, the belief in the presence and power of the supernatural touched life at every point. Customs were formed by it and behavior was dictated by it. Not only did the poor believe in it, but all classes of people were under its spell from nobles to the poor. It governed people's lives down to the smallest details. They carried charms and mascots, found horror in spilling salt and walking under ladders, and dreaded the thirteenth of Friday (May 35-38). They believed that all supernatural elements were at work.

The Elizabethans had always been susceptible to belief in the supernatural. As May notes, these people more than other people questioned matters beyond their vision (39). Shakespeare was clearly influenced by his race. He had an inquiring mind that refused bondage by the limitations of matter (Mish 28). Listing the numberless superstitions that Shakespeare gathered from his environment would be impossible. May believes that it is because

his own observations of the habits of animals and plants were explained by stories that were more myth than truth. Elizabethans also gave superstitious explanations for changing weather and season, phase of life, and sickness and death (59-63). As a youth, Shakespeare was susceptible to all kinds of influences around him.

Due to the widespread obsession with the supernatural, Shakespeare was compelled as a writer to adopt the views of the majority. The people who crowded the theaters and paid the money demanded fairies, ghosts, and witches, and all the commonly held beliefs regarding them. So Shakespeare packed his works with popular beliefs about the supernatural.

Magic and supernatural beings occur in one-fourth of Shakespeare's comedies, 60% of his plays, and 60% of his tragedies (Hoffman 67). Witches appear in Macbeth, a ghost appears in Hamlet, and fairies appear in A Mid-Summer Nights Dream. In addition, magic cures are given in All's Well, evil curses are chanted in Richard III, and prophecies are told in Julius Caesar. Most of Shakespeare's works contain some form of the supernatural.

Shakespeare, however, was too great of a writer to lower the quality of his work to satisfy the taste of the Elizabethans. Although the court sometimes pressured him into including some form of the supernatural in his plays that had nothing to do with his themes, he rarely allowed Elizabethans' demands to affect his own conception of how the supernatural should be used.

To understand how far Shakespeare exceeded other writers, a comparison of their supernatural characters is necessary. In other pieces of literature the ghosts, witches, and devils are merely monsters whose purpose is to scare.

However, the characters are real in Shakespearean literature, and while they are evil and terrifying, and embody most of the current superstitions, they never fail to be impressive and dramatic. Another point that sets Shakespeare apart from other writers is his refusal to use the supernatural for its own sake and not for the purpose of his plot. The demands of the people convinced lesser writers to introduce a supernatural element that had no connection with the theme. A further point to be noticed in Shakespeares skillful handling of the supernatural is the absence of unnecessary appearances. Hoffman observes that Shakespeare never allows it to appear to much and weaken its effect on the audience (99-101). Over all, Shakespeare still handled and portrayed old beliefs but always in the interest of his plot. Because of this, he sets himself above all other writers.

Shakespeare was always ready to accept the beliefs of the Elizabethans. His ready acceptance was also typical of the young Shakespeares attitude toward life overall. In his years of optimism, he wrote his early plays. However, Shakespeares happy enthusiasm didnt last. Schiller believes that when he left Stratford and moved to London, He entered a new environment filled with scholars (49). As he developed as a thinker and a philosopher, he lost his cheerfulness and joy of being alive which are so apparent in his early works. The passage of years replaced it with seriousness and later with pessimism. Shakespeare, however, didnt end his days in mental gloom. When he retired again to the peace and quietness of Stratford when he had become rich and famous, he then returned to the enthusiasm and hopefulness of his youth (Schiller 49).

Shakespeares First important use of the supernatural occurred when he was in his twenties. He was still a young man so he was happy to enjoy the realities of life rather than ask about its meanings (Schiller 200). The form of supernatural used by Shakespeare in *Mid-Summer Nights Dream* is the harmless fairies. He doesnt attach any particular meaning or significance to them, nor does he give them any special powers or control over humans. The fairies mix freely with men and women of the court and, through childish pranks, do nothing more than annoy them. With the desire to entertain in mind, Shakespeare doesnt use anything heavy (Hoffman 135).

At least six or seven years pass before he writes *Hamlet*. A profound change has come over his attitude toward the supernatural. No longer does he handle it with the cheerfulness shown in his earlier works. *Hamlet* reveals that his mind is darkened by doubts and questions. The form of the supernatural he uses is the terrifying ghost. He had used it in *Richard III* but not until *Hamlet* did he develop it fully and demonstrated dramatic use of it (Dameron 87).

The ghost fulfills all the demands of Elizabethan beliefs. In the first place, it comes at night when it is cold and lonely, it cant speak unless spoken to, and it comes for a purpose to revenge his murder. Second, Shakespeare gives the ghost more power over humans than just the fairies ability to annoy. It, however, is limited. The ghost has no power to float into the castle at Elsinor and slay Claudius with his own hands. It must choose the living to help. Even then, it couldnt insist on his carrying out the task. The ghost could only spur him in the hope that it would be done.

The Ghost in Hamlet is an excellent example of the skill with which Shakespeare had in forming his supernatural characters with Elizabethan beliefs. However, it is more than that. Dameron describes it as a revelation of the changing and darkening attitude toward the supernatural and a heavy tragedy that foreshadow the gloom of Macbeth (97).

Macbeth is the Shakespearean play in which the supernatural is most largely used. Witches control events and exert an irresistible influence over the characters. They possess most of the powers that Elizabethans believed they possessed including the ability to raise storms and command the winds (Dayan 309). But that's not all. In Macbeth the supernatural beings exercise greater powers than ever, and they succeed in their purpose to ruin the great and noble Macbeth.

Macbeth also reveals the darkest and most pessimistic phase of Shakespeare's life. He now seems to believe that terrible influences and temptations surround human beings. At this time, according to Hoffman, Shakespeare was almost overwhelmed by his contemplation of all the sin, pain, and cruelty which seemed to rule human existence. His use of the supernatural is no longer physical; it is moral. It is the ability of evil to destroy the soul (215). Shakespeare reveals his mental state in the lines of Macbeth when the character is approaching defeat:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty place from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

Lives but a walking shadow, a poor player,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing (Shakespeare v. 2. 19-28).

Macbeth was a work of Shakespeares darkest years, when his own attitude toward the supernatural was one of gloominess.

The last of the plays dealing with the supernatural was The Tempest, which reveals Shakespeares final attitude, not only toward the supernatural, but also toward life overall. Six years passed since Macbeth and Shakespeare was approaching fifty. He retired from the busy world of London to the peace of his home town, Stratford. He once more returns to the use of fairies, but he uses them to express a new themereconciliation with a forgiveness of sins or mistakes (Hoffman 278). Prospero forgives his brother, Antonio for the terrible wrong he has don and no traces of anger or resentment linger. In this final play the supernatural is entirely beneath the control of man. All authority is taken form the spirits in The Tempest and the power to harm is gone. Shakespeares state of mind is best expressed at this point when Prospero reveals how man has at last attained dominion over the forces of evil (Schiller 378).

William Shakespeare was a genius. Not only was he able to use the supernatural in his works to the fullest extent of Elizabethan belief, but he was skillful at molding the supernatural into remarkable assets to his plot. However, Elizabethan beliefs werent the only influences that shoved their

way into the meanings of his plays. His whole outlook on life also played a major part in the way that he shaped the supernatural. Not only does his use of supernatural elements within his works reveal the Elizabethans obsession with mythical beliefs, but it also reveals his attitude toward these beliefs at different points of his career. His remarkable handling of the supernatural is one reason why William Shakespeare is generally regarded as the greatest writer of English literature.