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## **Supernatural and Shakespeare: An Overview**

Shweta Bali

### **Abstract:**

Etymologically, the term Supernatural has its origin in Latin 'supernaturalis' which pertains to all that which lies beyond explanation by science or laws of nature. Ghosts, fairies and witches inhabit this unnatural world which has fascinated humans since times immemorial. Its history can be traced back to the Greek and Latin drama, the Senecan tragedy as also the mystery and the miracle plays which influenced the Elizabethan drama. In fact, the study of Neo-platonic and hermetic ideas on occult and Renaissance magic, and the inclusion of enchantments and paranormal activities in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries has been a topic of great curiosity and much speculation among the critics. A product of the times of fierce religious controversy, Shakespeare exhibits reverential acceptance of the prevailing belief in the existence of the otherworldly beings in this world. Without questioning the prevalent tenets of Christianity, he uses the agents of the spirit world- witches, ghosts, fairies, demons, Goblins, sylphs or even prophecies, divinations, dreams and astrology to enhance the dramatic effect and to augment suspense and thrill in the action of his plays. At times, he even uses it as a functional device to ridicule, question and critique the prevalent social norms. This paper is an attempt to determine the various manifestations of supernatural elements in some of the Shakespearean plays. The study is in no way exhaustive, for the literary oeuvre of Shakespeare is replete with examples from the preternatural world.

**Key words:** Christianity, Elizabethan drama, Supernatural, witchcraft, symbolism, Hamlet, Macbeth,

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Etymologically, the term Supernatural has its origin in Latin ‘supernaturalis’ which pertains to all that which lies beyond explanation by science or laws of nature. Ghosts, fairies, witches inhabit the world of the unexplained which has fascinated humans since times immemorial. The inclusion of preternatural or supernatural in literature especially drama is not an Elizabethan innovation. Its history can be traced back to the Greek and Latin drama, the Senecan tragedy as also the mystery and the miracle plays which influenced the Elizabethan drama. In fact, the study of Neo-platonic and hermetic ideas on occult and Renaissance magic, and the use of enchantments and paranormal activities in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries has been a topic of great curiosity and much speculation among the critics. Nevertheless, the Elizabethan drama owes much to Seneca. To quote Boyer:

To Seneca is usually attributed the introduction of the ghost and the chorus, the division of the play into five acts, as well as the introduction of various themes, such as revenge”. He further adds “[...] even in his appeal to magic and the supernatural – Seneca offered themes both familiar and pleasing to the audience of the Elizabethan theatre. (Boyer 46)

During the Elizabethan age, mythological tradition of other worldly visitations, dreams, nightmares, and curses had a permeating presence in the society. A blind belief in the existence of the supernatural in the physical world which man inhabits was an accepted norm. In fact, it aided the common man to reconcile the natural world with the inexplicable phenomena of life. Elizabethan age was a time when there was a ubiquitous, unchallenged belief in the presence of the power of the unseen. From the nobles and the kings to the down trodden and the vagrants –all believed in the supernatural powers. Consequently, astrology, star gazing, black and white magic, séances, witchcraft and fortune telling were integral to the social fiber. A product of the times of fierce religious controversy, Shakespeare exhibits reverential acceptance of the belief in the existence and interference of the unearthly beings in this world. Without questioning the

prevalent tenets of Christianity, he uses the agents of the spirit world- witches, ghosts, fairies, demons, Goblins, sylphs or even prophecies, divinations, dreams and astrology to enhance the dramatic effect and to augment suspense and add thrill to the action of his plot. At times, he even uses it as a functional device to ridicule, question and critique the prevalent social norms. This paper aims to provide an overview of Shakespeare's use of supernatural elements in his plays.

A chronologist of his times, Shakespeare used supernatural in its myriad forms. Be it the revengeful ghost of King Hamlet in *Hamlet*, the evil stratagems of the witches in *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, the sea-storm in *The Tempest*, the deity of Diana in *Perciles*, the King of fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the ghosts of Posthumus' parents in *Cymbeline*, to name only a few; Shakespeare deftly uses them all to his advantage. Apart from adding eeriness and suspense to the atmosphere, these agencies of the spirit world explicate symbolically his perception of the chasm between the good and the evil forces that govern the mind of the man. The profundity of his art lies in intrinsically weaving the supernatural within the fiber of the plot so that the readers are convinced of their authenticity, their terrifying presence and indispensability to the larger scheme of the play. These paranormal elements appear closely related to the protagonist who often finds a direction for his wayward emotional and psychological state through these forces. These unearthly forces were believed to appear to presage and warn of an impending crisis, to exact justice, avenge a foul deed, add eeriness to the atmosphere or to warn of the unwarranted situation in the personal or social domain.

Thus, when the ghost meets Hamlet, it reveals that it has come to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" while to Macbeth, the witches become the mouthpiece of his hidden desires and reckless ambition. The appearance of the ghost and the witches in the very first scene in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* respectively, creates an uncanny atmosphere and prepares the audience to anticipate the unexpected. The rather eager introduction of the supernatural also underscores the abnormality and the unnaturalness of the setting. Hamlet's assertion "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I, iv, 67) reiterates this fact. To prove that these apparitions are not merely hallucinations of an agitated mind, Shakespeare makes them appear before a number of people. For instance Hamlet's Ghost is first seen by the guards Marcellus and Barnardo, who call Horatio, Hamlet's school friend, to confirm the appearance. Although later it appears only to

Hamlet in Queen Gertrude's chamber in Act III, yet, by that time the Ghost had become an integral component of the plot.

Similarly in the opening scene of *Macbeth*, the witches appear on the stage in front of the audience much before they make their presence felt to any character. Setting the course of action of the play, they are quick to foretell the future of both – Macbeth and Banquo. They greet Macbeth as “Thane of Glamis”, “Thane of Cawdor” and the “king” respectively and hail Banquo as great and as the “Father of Kings”. As harbingers of evil, they are quick to establish a rapport with the ill-intentioned Macbeth. His assertion “so fair and foul a day I have not seen,” (i.iii.40) seems a resonance of the weird sisters' assertion earlier “Fair is foul and foul is fair” (I.i.12). Macbeth garrulously accepts their forecast as the unwritten decree of God and succumbs to temptation lurking within, while Banquo, unaffected by the Prophecy, and skeptical of the intentions of the witches maintains his poise and calmness. The chaotic course of Macbeth's life is set during his first meeting with the witches. Unscrupulously, he treads on the path of evil, bloodshed and murder, although they nowhere suggest him the means to achieve his ambition. It is Macbeth's own villainy and relentless ambition which prompts him to murder Duncan and then Banquo in quick succession. His second meeting with the witches makes him all the more resolute and ruthless. He has no qualms about murdering Duncan and Banquo or in slaughtering the defenseless Lady Macduff and her children.

Master of delineation of characters, Shakespeare lends uniqueness to the witches as well. He makes the “weird sisters” androgynous, for they intend to be without sex, passion and life; thereby, arousing fear, curiosity and suspense amongst the audience. Even Lady Macbeth exhibits features similar to the witches. Apart from being a shrewd manipulator, she shares their grotesquery. She too behaves androgynously, craving for manly strength and ruthlessness and wishes to be “unsexed” to help Macbeth succeed in his murderous intentions. The dazzling future, these witches envision for Macbeth, enthrall the couple no end and they gladly become their allies. Unable to resist the all persuasive yet so subtle influence of the witches, Macbeth needs neither goading from them nor the temptation of unlimited pleasure by bartering his soul as Doctor Faustus did to deviate from the ethical path. Thus, the witches serve a dramatic

function of aggravating the tension and anxiety, the horror and the consequent distress in the tragedy. In fact they foreshadow the gloom and the doom of Macbeth.

Shakespearean plays are replete with examples wherein ghosts appear at unearthly hours, before the day break. Puck points this out to Oberon in *A Mid Summer Night's Dream*:

Yonder shines Aurora's harbinger  
At whose approach, ghosts  
Wandering here and there  
Troop home to Church yards. (III.ii. 380-382)

Moreover, these ghosts make their earthly visitation often in the same state and garb in which they had been murdered. Thus Hamlet's father appears in "the very armour he had on when he the ambitious Norway combated"(I.i.59-60); his face pale from the poison that killed him and his beard, as Horatio describes "was as I have seen it in his life. A Stable silvered"(I.ii. 240). Similarly, Banquo's ghost, stabbed to death, appears at the Banquet with a "bloody countenance" and still oozing wounds, much to the discomfort of Hamlet while Caesar's ghost appears to haunt Brutus. More often than not, the ghosts are driven by a purpose or a mission - to seek revenge and retribution, to ask for a decent burial or show direction. Moreover, they represent the social and political mayhem and disarray in the State and predict disaster not merely for the protagonist but for the commoners as well. Hence, in *Hamlet*, it provokes Hamlet to avenge his father's death. In *Julius Caesar*, the ghost of Caesar predicts the death of Brutus while the ghosts of Richard confront his murderers. In *Macbeth*, the ghost objectifies the internal turmoil and guilt of Macbeth. These inhabitants of the spirit world act as the catalysts, unleashing his latent evil intentions.

The Elizabethan belief in witchcraft was also profound and accepted by law. The witches were officially recognized as having the power to harm and hurt others. It was seen as an attempt by women to challenge the patriarchal norms and establish their own supremacy. The Elizabethan society, ruled by a female monarch could barely tolerate subjugation at the hands of much powerful 'witches'. Consequently, strict laws against the practice of Witchcraft were implemented. In fact, in 1563, the Act against 'Conjuracions, Inchantments and witchcraftes' was passed"(Lee, Religion). It prescribed imprisonment and other severe punishments for

witches. King James, in 1603, replaced the Act with a much harsher law which proposed death penalty for witches. The law was so arbitrary that anyone suspected of practicing witchcraft was put behind bars.

*Othello* is a befitting example of Shakespearean play wherein Desdemona is wrongly accused, rebuked and punished on the basis of superstitious belief in the magical powers and Witchery. Convinced that Othello “hast enchanted Desdemona”, Brabantio rants out at Othello:

O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?

Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!

For I'll refer me to all things of sense,

If she in chains of magic were not bound (I.i.64-68)

He further argues that his daughter has been

abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted

By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.

or nature so prepost'rously to err,

Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,

Sans witchcraft could not. (I.iii.64-67)

No denials by Othello convince Brabantio. Concomitantly, Othello himself believes in spells, superstitions and enchantments. Explaining the history and the significance of the handkerchief which Desdemona has misplaced, he claims that it has the power to read the minds of the people. He also recollects what the Egyptian Charmer had told his mother about the mysterious powers of the handkerchief:

While she kept it

'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father

Entirely to her love, but if she lost it

Or made gift of it, my father's eye

Should hold her loathèd and his spirits should hunt  
After new fancies. (III, iv,49-55)

Othello's firm belief in the supernatural power of his mother's handkerchief and his subsequent misjudgment of the intent and character of his virtuous wife Desdemona embodies the dilemma of the Elizabethan age. Torn between "Scientific truth and superstitious belief... ignorance shades into superstition, credulity and these, in turn, shade into faith and knowledge" (Mortimer, *Superstition and Witchcraft*.) In fact, in delineating the character of a jealous husband in Othello, Shakespeare seems to be ridiculing the system which laid more faith in the unexplainable superstitions rather than imposing trust in the assertions of a righteous woman.

Similarly, Apparitions, too, form an integral part of the paranormal mechanization used by Shakespeare. There is Caesar's apparition which visits Brutus predicting the latter's death. Even Macbeth is witness to three apparitions which the weird sisters conjure. The first one is an armored head supposedly of Macbeth, warning him against Macduff. The second apparition is of a bloody child which conveys to Macbeth that no man born of a woman can do him harm. The third apparition is of a crowned child, holding a tree declares:

Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be  
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill  
Shall come against him (IV. i. 87-90).

The last two apparitions fill Macbeth with false sense of security and confidence. He interprets these prophesies as epitomizing his invincibility, for he knows that all men are born of women and that forests do not move.

Thus defying logic, the agents of supernatural realm become the perpetrators of chaos, confusion and the impending doom. They influence the action of the play through their visionary powers. According to Fallon "they are clearly agents of a darker power, in league with Hecate, the goddess of the underworld, and their purpose is to ferment toil and trouble for Mankind". (Fallon, 165)

Indubitably, Shakespeare's theory of supernaturalism evolved with time. While in the earlier plays, it is used as a device to arouse wonder, fear and anxiety or as a catalyst of change

or disaster; by the time he wrote *The Tempest*, his perception of preternatural had undergone an evolutionary transformation. From a rather secretive, magical, demonic, unearthly power which played on the psyche of the characters, capable of unnerving, troubling and overpowering them; in his deft hands, it became a compliant instrument, subservient to the whims and fancies of man. Consequently, Shakespeare portrays Prospero as a master magician- perhaps the grandest magician in literature. He controls the spirits of the four elements, can rake up storms, invoke the elves of the brooks, and make the sylphs sing ditties or render Ferdinand helpless with a stroke of his potent wand. He may bamboozle others and the audience through the use black and white magic and other paranormal activities but he remains the master of the unnatural forces. He commands over the otherwise fearsome, mysterious power of the supernatural and when the time comes to return to the normal life, he abjures them voluntarily and consciously. In delineating his character, Shakespeare seems to assert the capability and ability of man to gain supremacy over the hitherto feared, aberrant entities, supernatural events and elements which remain inexplicable and beyond the realm of the natural physical world.

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