

# A STUDY ON THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS PRESENT IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET AND MACBETH*

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## ABSTRACT

Hamlet and Macbeth stand unique from all other great tragedies of Shakespeare. In both the plays, supernatural elements play a key role for the progress of the plays. This study on the supernatural elements present in Shakespeare's Hamlet and Macbeth explores in three sections; the presence of the supernatural elements, the appearance of the supernatural elements and the purpose of appearance of the supernatural elements. Both plays are psychological dramas. The central theme takes place in the minds of the leading characters Hamlet and Macbeth. The play Hamlet happens in Denmark and Macbeth in Scotland. In Macbeth, the weird Witches are projected as evil beings, their dialogues and prophecies lead to the evil actions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth exploiting and killing many lives. But in Hamlet, the Ghost of the King is portrayed as genuine and good being. The Ghost appears before Hamlet only to avenge the murder of the King and not to harm anyone unnecessarily.

**Keywords:** *Supernatural, Ghosts, Witches, Evil, Paranormal.*

## INTRODUCTION

Supernatural elements are imaginary, which are not real. Supernatural elements are the exhibits of human inner fear about netherworld and spiritual beings. Usually these supernatural figures are portrayed as either evil or good in the works of the writers.

The supernatural is also defined as events or things that cannot be explained by nature or science. The supernatural element in literary work is used to create a paranormal effect and a mystical experience for the reader.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the supernatural "includes all those phenomena, which cannot be explained by the accepted laws of the natural science or by physical laws".

In 17<sup>th</sup> century England, religion held a dominant position in people's daily life. Despite the development of the economy, the peasants lead a miserable life. They had no place to live in and many people starved to death because of famine. In such severe circumstances, people had to rely on mysterious power for relief. They believed in after life. In consequent to this the learned and the cultured also started to believe in the presence of the supernatural.

During the Elizabethan age, people were obsessed with mythical beliefs and Shakespeare was no exception. Most of Shakespeare's works contain some form of supernatural element. The use of supernaturalism has deep moral and psychological significance.

There are various unique features of the supernatural; it is always placed in the closest relation with the character. It contributes to the action and influences the course of the action.

The critic Baily quotes, "the tragedy of Macbeth is the greatest murder in Shakespeare, done in the most supernatural atmosphere, and by Shakespeare's greatest poet."

C. Clark believes the Ghost in *Hamlet* is not a meaningless spirit, it "starts the contradictory thoughts in Hamlet's brain which makes the whole play." The supernatural is essential for the progress of the plot.

The supernatural is a recurring feature in many of Shakespeare's plays. The supernatural is an essential component of the structure of the plot in the plays *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Shakespeare used supernatural elements for a dramatic effect and to enhance the plot. He did not want to stop with the delivery of dialogues in

the stage, he also wanted to bring in visual effect for better enjoyment for the audience. Examples of supernatural elements used in Shakespeare's plays

- *Richard III* – The appearance of 11 ghosts.
- *Julius Caesar* – The ghost of Caesar appears.
- *Macbeth* – The appearance of the witches and the ghost of Banquo.
- *Hamlet* – The ghost of Hamlet's father appears.
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*- Usage of magic.

Shakespeare portrays the supernatural in his tragedies with great artistic purposes – to set up an atmosphere of mystery, awestruck incidents and horror. And also for emphasizing the extremity of tragic effect.

The study analyses the presence of supernatural elements in the plays *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. The appearance of supernatural elements is different from the appearance of human beings. Hence, it is discussed elaborately in the study.

The supernatural elements are presented for various purposes like bringing horror, mystery, visual and dramatic effect on the stage. The language used by such supernatural elements give an eerie feeling in the minds of audience. The study ventures to analyse and discuss these facts.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- To elaborate on the presence of the supernatural elements in the plays *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.
- To state the appearance of the supernatural elements in different incidents and situations in the plays.
- To explain the purpose of the appearances of the supernatural elements in the plays.

### **PRESENCE OF SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN THE PLAY *MACBETH***

Three Witches are introduced in the First Scene of Act One and also the introduction of the spirits which look like animals, they are a cat and a toad.

Again the Witches appear in the Third Scene of Act One. Here, they also speak about a gory incident of killing pigs. The First Witch says it could control the winds and regulate ship. The First Witch shows the thumb of a pilot who was drowned. All these bring an eerie effect on the stage.

In Act One, Scene Three, Macbeth and Banquo meet the Witches, where they give a prophecy of Macbeth becoming Thane of Glamis and Thane of Cawdor.

Harrison believes: "The words of the witches are fatal to the hero only because there is in him something, which leaps into light at the sound of them. But, they are at the same time the witness of forces, which never cease to work in the world around him, and, in the instant of his surrender to them, entangle him in ineradicably in the web of fate."

The appearance of dagger floating in the air confuses the mind of Macbeth. He has a hallucination of the witches which offer sacrifices to their goddess Hecate.

Macbeth sees the Ghost of Banquo and panics. He also falls sick. Lady Macbeth comforts him saying that that was just a hallucination.

Three Witches also appear in the next two Acts. Horror struck scenes appear in Act Four Scene One.

Lady Macbeth is affected by her guilt and sees the vision of blood stain on her hands. And goes berserk at the sight of such hallucination.

### **PRESENCE OF SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN THE PLAY *HAMLET***

The apparition of the dead King, father of Hamlet appears at the strike one o'clock at night before Barnardo, Marcellus and Horatio. They express it was looking terrifying and it wanted them to talk to it.

Dower Wilson states, "the ghost scenes in Hamlet cannot rightly be understood without some study of Elizabethan spiritualism which was very difficult thing from modern spiritualism."

Again in Act One Scene Four, the same Ghost appears before Horatio and Hamlet. Hamlet is much dismayed and questions whether it was a good spirit or a cursed demon. The Ghost calls Hamlet to go with it.

In Act One Scene Five, Hamlet and Ghost have a conversation.

In Act Three Scene Four, the Ghost urges Hamlet to take revenge against the murderer Claudius, the brother of dead King.

### **APPEARANCE OF THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN *MACBETH***

The Three Witches in Macbeth are siblings. All the Three are crazily dressed. They look withered and they neither look like a man nor a woman. This kind of appearance brings disgust and horror in the minds of the audience.

Along with the Witches, also appear the spirits of a cat and a toad.

The Three Witches go around the cauldron preparing poison. In order to bring disgust and shock in the minds of audience, the Witches list about the ingredients they will drop in the cauldron; a newt's eye, a frog's tongue, fur from a bat, a dog's tongue, the forked tongue of an adder, the stinger of a burrowing worm, a lizard's leg and an owl's wing.

Another Witch also adds some more ingredients like the scale of a dragon, a wolf's tooth, a witch's mummified flesh, the gullet and stomach of a ravenous shark, a root of hemlock that was dug up in the dark, a Jew's liver, a goat's bile, some twigs of yew that were broken off during lunar eclipse, a Turk's nose, a Tartar's lips, the finger of a baby that was strangled as a prostitute gave birth to it in a ditch. This preparation of the hemlock poison is horrible and it is supernatural to be performed on the stage.

Such performance during the time of Elizabethan period was welcomed by the audience and they believed it too.

### **APPEARANCE OF THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN *HAMLET***

The Ghost of the senior Hamlet, the dead King appears in the attire of King before Marcellus, Barnardo, Horatio and Hamlet. He ventures to talk when the rooster crows. It shows an eagerness to talk to Hamlet. It even beckons Hamlet to follow it. It appears four times in the play.

In Hamlet, the supernatural makes only a fewer appearance as the Ghost of the dead King Hamlet. Out of the play's total of 22 scenes, the Ghost appears in just four (1.1), (1.4), (1.5) and (3.4). And in two of them (1.4) and (1.5), the Ghost does not speak even.

In the opening scene of the play, the castle of Elsinore at midnight, the Ghost appears to Barnardo, Marcellus and Horatio. Barnardo and Marcellus urge Horatio to speak to it.

The three men agree on the Ghost's exact resemblance to the dead King, senior Hamlet.

When the Ghost reappears, Horatio asks whether the country is in any danger. The rooster crows, the Ghost vanishes without answering.

When Hamlet was beckoned by the Ghost, he follows it courageously.

The description of the Purgatory is explained in the following words,

“Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away.”

### **PURPOSE OF APPEARANCE OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN *MACBETH***

Majority of Elizabethans from all walks of life did believe in the actual existence of the Witches. There were some who did not, and the skeptics tendered to come from the educated classes. “The word Witch had a double meaning”. (Willard Farnham, Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier)

Witches were essentially tragic beings who had sold themselves to the devil. They had demonic powers, they had power to command nature, to see into the future, to harm people or livestock by the use of magical charms (Curry). Farnham states, Witches were supernatural from the hell, who were able to take on human form in order to deceive and harm their victims. During those period, Witches were projected as females.

The supernatural appears from the very beginning of the action of the play Macbeth. The Three weird sisters are by far the most prominent. There is also a dagger floating in the air that appears to Macbeth just before he enters King Duncan's bed chamber to murder him (Act Two Scene One). Macbeth hears a voice which cries, "sleep no more/ Macbeth does murder sleep" and there is the ghost of the murdered Banquo which appears to Macbeth at the banquet.

The Witches speak 63 lines out of total 2000 lines in the play.

They are the first characters on stage in the play. Even before they start to speak, audience knew they were bad Witches as there was thunder and lightning on the stage. And when they speak, they speak of the spirits of cat and toad. The Witches appear suddenly and vanish without notice on the stage. The First Witch gruesomely takes out a pilot's thumb to show to the others, and the three of them chant a spell that turns on the magical number Three.

The Witches shout,

"Fair is foul and foul is fair:  
Hover through the fog and filthy air."

Macbeth's first words in the play echo the Witches' Scene One, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen". Banquo's first words are in the form of questions. There appear the Witches. Macbeth commands, "Speak if you can and what are you?". All the Three Witches hail him. The Third Witch hails Macbeth and says, "That shall be King hereafter". This is the prophecy that triggers Macbeth to start his evil actions.

When the Witches meet him the second time, Macbeth has two murders on his conscience, Duncan's and Banquo's. Banquo's son Fleance fled. This was to make the prophecy of the Witches to come true. "Thou shalt get Kings, though thou be none".

The movement of the great Birnam Wood happens on the stage to approve of the prophecy of the Witches. It is stated in the play that,

"Macbeth shall never vanquished be until  
Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill  
Shall come against him."

A C Bradley in Shakespearean Tragedy calls the Witches the most potent agency in Macbeth for exciting, "the vague fear of hidden forces operating on minds, unconscious of their influence". He grants that the Witches' "contribution to the atmosphere of Macbeth can hardly be exaggerated", but he thinks that they are generally given far too much credit for influencing the action of the play, especially, of course, of Macbeth. He also sees the contradiction between the credit the Witches are given for influencing the action and the often-made claim that they are not real beings but merely a symbolic representation of the unconscious or a half-conscious guilt in Macbeth.

### **PURPOSE OF APPEARANCE OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN HAMLET**

According to Wilson, during Shakespeare's time, there were three schools of thought...on the question of ghosts. English Catholics believed that ghost actually existed and were the spirits of the dead. They also believed that spirits came from Purgatory, it is a vaguely located place between heaven and hell, where the souls of those who are evil do not go to heaven and also were not bad enough to go to hell. It is also stated such spirits return for some special purpose on the earth.

Hamlet is evoked of bitterness and resentment towards his uncle Claudius, his step-father and the King. Hamlet anxiously requests the Ghost to tell why it has appeared, "what should we do?". The Ghost beckons him to follow, Horatio and Marcellus also follow Hamlet. Both the sentinels express something must be rotten in the

state of Denmark. The Ghost demands Hamlet to avenge his dead father's murder. It continues and says, how Claudius seduced Gertrude, Queen, the mother of Hamlet and then poisoned his brother, the King of Denmark.

Hamlet agrees to fulfil the Ghost commandment of avenging Claudius for both adultery and murder. Hamlet confirms the Ghost was a genuine spirit and not a devil. The Scene and Act One ends with Hamlet swearing Horatio and Marcellus, not to reveal when he pretends to be mad. A great many things happen between this scene and the appearance of the Ghost. This is the last appearance of the Ghost.

Shakespeare's audience would have fully understood Hamlet's doubts about the Ghost's nature and they also would have been satisfied with the statement, "An honest Ghost". Not only the audience of Elizabethan period was satisfied with the Ghost and strange beliefs but also the present audience is satisfied.

At this time of the entrance of the Ghost, it is not dressed in battle armour but in his night gown. The Ghost says,

"Do not forget. This visitation  
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose."

Hamlet postpones his revenge as he wanted to get convinced of the Ghost story.

Gertrude is bewildered about Hamlet's speaking to vacuum. The Ghost asks Hamlet to comfort his mother for the bafflement. This is the last appearance and the last words of the Ghost.

John Dover Wilson emphasizes the power impression that Hamlet's first meeting with the Ghost would have made on the members of Shakespeare's audience, all of whom as believing Christians of their time lived on much more familiar terms with the supernatural than most of us do. Of course the Ghost makes a strong impression on Prince Hamlet too. Though Wilson does not seem to think it, worth pointing out that Hamlet's hysterical explanations as soon as the Ghost leaves the stage in Act One Scene Three.

Robert H West thinks that King Hamlet Ghost is an ambiguous Ghost. He argues that, according to Elizabethan ghost belief and to what Shakespeare actually wrote, there is equally good evidence for claiming that the ghost is a catholic ghost, a paganesque ghost or a devil. West says, Shakespeare intended the ghost nature to be ambiguous. "Shakespeare knowingly mixed the evidence and did it for the sake of dramatic impact".

## CONCLUSION

This study is done in three parts highlighting the presence of the supernatural elements, the appearance of the supernatural elements and the purpose of appearance of the supernatural elements in the plays *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

In the first part, the study elaborately describes the use of supernatural elements, Witches in the *Macbeth* and the Ghost of Hamlet's father in *Hamlet*.

In the appearance of the supernatural elements, the form, the attire and the places of appearance are discussed.

In the third part, the purpose of appearance has been explained based on Elizabethan period's thoughts on witches, ghosts and supernatural beliefs.

The mind of Shakespeare about ghosts and witches has been critically analysed in the study. Shakespeare had well read about the minds of the then audience and brought in visual effect sumptuously on the stage.

If the weird Sisters of *Macbeth* and the Ghost of *Hamlet* have been deleted, the story has no constructive completion. Henceforth such supernatural elements are vital for the works of Shakespeare to be perfect on the stage.

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