

# SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS

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## Abstract

The supernatural plays a significant role in the dramatic world of William Shakespeare. Ghosts, witches, prophecies, omens, and magical events appear frequently in his plays, contributing to themes of fate, morality, power, and psychological conflict. Shakespeare used supernatural elements not only to entertain audiences but also to explore deeper philosophical questions about human nature, destiny, and the limits of human understanding. This paper examines the role of supernatural elements in several major Shakespearean plays, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Tempest*. The study analyzes how these elements influence character development, plot progression, and thematic depth. The research concludes that the supernatural in Shakespeare's works serves as both a dramatic device and a symbolic representation of internal human struggles and societal beliefs of the Elizabethan era.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Supernatural, Ghosts, Witches, Magic, Elizabethan drama

## 1. Introduction

William Shakespeare, widely regarded as one of the greatest playwrights in English literature, frequently incorporated supernatural elements into his plays. During the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, belief in supernatural forces such as ghosts, witches, and omens was common. These beliefs shaped the cultural imagination of the audience and provided fertile ground for dramatic storytelling.

Shakespeare skillfully used supernatural elements to intensify dramatic tension and to reflect the fears, beliefs, and moral concerns of his society. These elements often appear at critical moments in the narrative, influencing characters' decisions and shaping the outcome of events.

In many of Shakespeare's tragedies and romances, supernatural forces serve as catalysts for action. They may reveal hidden truths, foreshadow future events, or manipulate human behavior. Thus, the supernatural functions both as a plot device and as a symbolic representation of the unknown forces governing human life.

## 2. Supernatural Beliefs in the Elizabethan Era

To understand Shakespeare's use of the supernatural, it is important to consider the historical context of the Elizabethan era. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, many people believed strongly in supernatural powers.

Several factors contributed to this belief:

- Limited scientific knowledge
- Strong religious influence

- Folklore and mythological traditions
- Fear of unexplained natural phenomena

Witchcraft, in particular, was widely feared and condemned. King James I, who ruled during Shakespeare's later years, was especially interested in witchcraft and even wrote a book titled *Daemonologie*. This cultural environment encouraged playwrights to incorporate supernatural themes into their works.

Shakespeare used these beliefs to create dramatic impact and connect with his audience.

### 3. Ghosts in Shakespearean Plays

Ghosts are among the most prominent supernatural figures in Shakespeare's plays. They often symbolize guilt, revenge, or unresolved conflicts.

#### 3.1 The Ghost in *Hamlet*

One of the most famous ghosts in literature appears in *Hamlet*. The ghost of King Hamlet reveals to Prince Hamlet that he was murdered by his brother Claudius.

The ghost serves several important functions:

- It initiates the central conflict of the play.
- It motivates Hamlet's quest for revenge.
- It introduces the theme of moral uncertainty.

However, Hamlet questions whether the ghost is truly his father's spirit or a deceptive demon. This uncertainty adds psychological depth to the play and reflects Renaissance debates about the nature of spirits.

#### 3.2 Ghosts in *Julius Caesar*

In *Julius Caesar*, the ghost of Caesar appears to Brutus before the Battle of Philippi. The ghost symbolizes Brutus's guilt and foreshadows his defeat and death.

Unlike the ghost in *Hamlet*, Caesar's ghost does not speak extensively but functions as a reminder of the consequences of political betrayal.

### 4. Witches and Prophecy in *Macbeth*

Perhaps the most famous supernatural figures in Shakespeare's plays are the three witches in *Macbeth*. They introduce the play with a mysterious prophecy that Macbeth will become king.

The witches represent dark supernatural forces that manipulate human ambition.

Their prophecies influence Macbeth in several ways:

- They awaken his ambition for power.
- They create uncertainty about fate and free will.

- They lead Macbeth toward moral corruption.

The witches do not directly force Macbeth to act, but their predictions encourage him to pursue power through violence. This ambiguity raises an important question: Is Macbeth controlled by fate, or does he choose his own destiny?

The witches therefore symbolize temptation and the dangerous allure of power.

### **5. Magic and Illusion in *The Tempest***

Unlike the darker supernatural elements in tragedies, *The Tempest* presents magic in a more creative and transformative way.

Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan, possesses magical powers that allow him to control the island and its inhabitants. Through his magic, he commands spirits such as Ariel and creates illusions that influence other characters.

Prospero's magic serves several purposes:

- It helps restore justice.
- It symbolizes knowledge and intellectual power.
- It represents artistic creation.

Many scholars interpret Prospero as a representation of Shakespeare himself, controlling the theatrical world like a magician controlling his stage.

### **6. Supernatural Omens and Signs**

Shakespeare also uses supernatural signs and omens to foreshadow major events.

For example:

#### **In *Julius Caesar*:**

- Strange storms occur.
- Animals behave unnaturally.
- A soothsayer warns Caesar to "Beware the Ides of March."

These omens suggest that nature itself reacts to political disorder.

#### **In *Macbeth*:**

- Darkness appears during the day.
- Horses eat each other.
- Unnatural events follow King Duncan's murder.

These signs symbolize the disruption of the natural order caused by Macbeth's crime.

## 7. Psychological Interpretation of the Supernatural

Modern critics often interpret Shakespeare's supernatural elements as psychological manifestations rather than literal supernatural events.

For example:

- The ghost in *Hamlet* may represent Hamlet's inner desire for revenge.
- Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth* may symbolize Macbeth's guilt.
- The witches may represent Macbeth's subconscious ambitions.

From this perspective, the supernatural becomes a dramatic representation of human psychology.

## 8. Dramatic Function of the Supernatural

The supernatural plays several key roles in Shakespeare's dramatic structure:

### 1. Creating Suspense

Supernatural appearances generate mystery and tension, capturing the audience's attention.

### 2. Driving the Plot

Many important events in Shakespeare's plays are triggered by supernatural encounters.

### 3. Exploring Moral Questions

The supernatural often raises questions about destiny, justice, and human responsibility.

### 4. Reflecting Cultural Beliefs

Shakespeare's use of supernatural elements reflects the beliefs and fears of the Elizabethan audience.

## 9. Conclusion

Supernatural elements are an essential feature of Shakespeare's dramatic world. Through ghosts, witches, magical powers, and ominous signs, Shakespeare explores complex themes such as ambition, guilt, fate, and justice.

Rather than presenting the supernatural merely as fantasy, Shakespeare uses it as a powerful dramatic and symbolic tool. These elements deepen the psychological complexity of characters and intensify the emotional impact of the narrative.

Ultimately, the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays reflects both the cultural beliefs of his time and the timeless human fascination with the mysterious forces that shape our lives.

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