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Supernatural Elements in Jane Eyre

Wandering through the world of *Jane Eyre*, confronted at every turn with living symbols, windswept images, scratching similes, monstrous metaphors and more, the perceptive reader can take hardly a single step nor turn a single turn without confronting the omnipresence of the Supernatural. Natural elements with more than natural propensities abound, forcing the reader either to abandon realism, as a child might abandon an overplayed game, or else forego the pleasures of extralimital discovery.

The Gothic Convention

Jane Eyre is by no means a true gothic novel, though it does embrace numerous features of what we might coin the Gothic Convention. For the purposes of this analysis, we take note only of those relevant to the supernatural theme; but even with this qualification, we find nevertheless a plethora of instances: distortions of human form, demonic animals and ghosts and vampires, witches and propitious storms and various grotesque paraphernalia. Needless to say, *Jane Eyre* transcends the bounds of the Gothic Convention. The gothic heroine, that insipid creature who possesses as little of the natural as of the supernatural, whose propensity for untimely ankle twisting is matched only by her inability to notice the bad guy wears black, has been well and truly exorcised. Neither do we encounter the supernatural used as a device simply to provoke fear.

Characterisation

Charlotte Brontë, in an effort to undermine the chauvinistic tendency to judge a book by its cover, depicts Jane Eyre as the quintessential “Plain Jane.” But Jane is, if nothing else, self possessed—by which I mean not self controlled, but self aware—and if we can only peek inside that dull chest¹ and glimpse those self possessions, we will certainly find jewels a plenty. According to the time tested maxim: “Show don’t tell,” Charlotte Brontë makes careful use of the supernatural in order to externalise the internal workings of character. One of the first instances of this is the nightmare of the “red-room.” (45) Not only does the “red-room” scene demonstrate an affinity between Jane and the preternatural, but we find also an aspect of conflict: “Superstition was with me at that moment: but it was not yet her hour for complete victory.” (46) Bearing in mind that we are dealing here with the darker side of the supernatural, this conflict between superstition and rationality—where the former demonstrates the absence of control and the latter the presence of control—is actually a representation of the deeper and more thematic conflict between Jane’s fiery temper and the socially prescribed as well as self acknowledged need for self-discipline. In words Jane Eyre herself uses, we refer to the balance of feeling and judgement:

Feeling without Judgement is a washy draught indeed; but judgement untempered by feeling is too bitter and husky a morsel for human deglutition. (265)

As Jane’s character develops, she comes to realise that a balance must be made, for just as rationality without superstition would render her a slave to

¹Pun intended

reason, similarly, self-discipline with no spark of passion would render her a slave to convention.

“Perhaps I had too rashly overleaped conventionalities,” (460) demonstrates this balance, for though Jane refuses to be subjugated by convention, the word “rashly” suggests that convention does have its value, and that careful unhurried consideration might judge convention to be, at least on occasion, in the right.

. . . nor did I refuse to let him, when seated, place me on his knee. Why should I, when both he and I were happier near than apart? (464)

Here again we find Jane inclined to thwart convention, though she is a rebel only within the boundaries of “politeness,” and so this too is balanced by her desire not to be Rochester’s mistress, but his wife.

To reiterate: the belief in the preternatural need not be supplanted by rationality, but rather tempered by it. Indeed, the supernatural exists in *Jane Eyre* not simply for its utilitarian capacities; but the acceptance of its actual existence is itself an essential part of Jane’s character.

The “red-room” also stimulates reflection, and we see John depicted not so much as a preternatural monster as a anti-natural monster, who:

. . . twisted the necks of the pigeons, killed the little peachicks, set the dogs at the sheep, stripped the hothouse vines of their fruit, and broke the buds off the choicest in the conservatory. . . . (47)

In this reflection we see the revelation not only of John’s character, whose hands drip with the red blood of barbarity, superimposed over the character of the malevolent and metaphorically bloody “red-room”; but also an indication of Jane’s attitude to the male sex and the beast that can lurk

within his heart. If this latter analysis seems perhaps contentious, we should bear in mind the preceding descriptions of Eliza and Georgiana, for there we find a drastic contrast. Eliza was “headstrong and selfish.” (46) Georgiana had a “spoiled temper.” (46) What we see then is the female in possession *of* a bad character, though the male, at least in Jane’s view, is rather possessed *by* a bad character. Indeed, a bad character that is not something of a monster, but everything of a monster. It is not surprising then, if we step once and for all from the “red-room,” to find Jane say to Rochester: “It is time someone undertook to rehumanize you.” (461)

Symbols

In accordance with the Gothic Convention, *Jane Eyre* often presents symbols not so much as treasure, hidden in depths of obscurity, as we find in more conventional and certainly more contemporary novels, but as gifts from above, flashing lightning, jumping from the page, making their presence known.

When we turn to gaze upon Bertha, however, it seems there is great opportunity for confusion. Indeed, the proposition that Jane recognises and is even fixated upon the monster within the male—as well as her compunction to tame that monster—might be countermanded, at least by the confused reader, by the monster aspect of Bertha. Of course, the monster that Bertha represents is of quite a different pedigree.

In actual fact, Bertha fulfils a multiple of needs, amongst them providing a token representation of the gothic distorted human form. It seems clear though that her most important role is that of a symbolic representation of unrestrained freedom. Remembering that a key development in *Jane Eyre* is Jane’s learning to bring a balance to her fiery character with the controlling influence of sobriety, what we see in Bertha is a beast unrestrained. She is,

simply stated, the demon of unbound passion, who, ironically, must therefore be entirely caged. Certainly there is much the natural in her, but it is the otherworldly quality she displays that excites our interest and leads us down into the dark depths of who she is, and there to understand what she truly represents.

We should also take note of the space Bertha occupies in the physical world. The attic prison is, after all, *above* Jane's *bedroom*. The menace she irradiates, juxtaposed with her dominant position, both seen in relation to the madness she incorporates, must, all together, point out the inherent dangers of uncontrolled passion.

There is in Bertha, as in many supernatural manifestations, a quality of the prophetic. She is a monstrous, distorted exaggeration of what Jane herself could become. The closeness of Jane and Bertha, the fact that Jane is a *potential* Bertha, is clearly demonstrated by Jane's rescue of Rochester from his fiery bed:

“In the name of all the elves in Christendom, is that Jane Eyre?” he demanded. “What have you done with me, witch, sorceress?” (180)

Not only is Jane represented here as having something of the supernatural in her self, but also, and more to the point, she is described in terms that could quite easily belong to Bertha.

In conclusion, it is certainly an over simplification—born, however, of eclectic necessity—to reduce a living woman, even a living demon, to the status of symbol. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Bertha is *primarily* a symbol, and if we have not done her justice, it is in reference to other facets of what she represents *as* a symbol, rather than what she might be beyond that symbolic self.

We have already mention the often prophetic nature of the supernatural, and this feature is perhaps more clearly demonstrated in the horse-chestnut scene.

. . . Adele came running in to tell me that the great horse-chestnut at the bottom of the orchard had been struck by lightning in the night, and half of it split away. (285)

As with many of the symbols, and according to the Gothic Convention, this seems dreadfully heavy-handed. Thankfully, the supernatural storm that caused this clumsy symbol at least bequeathed to it the saving grace of magical origin.

The horse chestnut, so called for its coarseness contrasted with the edible chestnut², is meant, obviously, to represent Jane and Rochester. It presents them as a unity which is prophesied not only to split in two, as if that image lacked clarity, but for one half to “split *away*.” And this is indeed precisely what happens.

God

At times, it seems almost impossible to differentiate between a supernatural act and an act of God. When, for example, Rochester recounts his telepathic communication with Jane, he makes the precursory comment: “You will think me superstitious.” (472) Jane, however, decides to keep her part in the experience secret, believing:

If I told anything, my tale would be such as must necessarily make a profound impression on the mind of the hearer: and that mind, yet from its sufferings too prone to gloom, needed not the deeper shade of the supernatural. (472)

²No prizes for guessing which is which.

Rochester finally concludes his story with: "I thank God." (472)

It does often seem that the supernatural of *Jane Eyre* is not so much a hodge-podge of particular and diverse forces, like a gang of Greek gods playing games with their mortal toys, but a single power of manifold aspects, acting towards certain prescribed goals. But if this is God, this is indeed a strange God.

Presentiments are strange things! and so are sympathies; and so are signs . . . I have never laughed at presentiments in my life, because I have had strange ones of my own. Sympathies, I believe, exist . . . And signs, for aught we know, may be but the sympathies of Nature with man. (249)

Notice: "sympathies of Nature with man." This is simply and clearly pagan belief. What we see in *Jane Eyre* is a Christian God who still displays facets of his pagan childhood.

Atmosphere

It would be tedious to examine many more instances of the supernatural, and indeed we need not. Although there are other important examples, the preponderate remainder: ghosts and vampires, witches and demons, often are used to create atmosphere in which the reader naturally and almost unconsciously sets aside his discriminations, and thus absorbs thematic truths without objecting to the shapes in which they appear.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be stressed that Charlotte Brontë's incorporation of supernatural phenomenon served more than the utilitarian purposes discussed in this paper. Of at least equal importance was the desire to depict a world rich in belief. Nowhere in *Jane Eyre* does a landscape exist

simply to provide a place for feet to walk, eyes to wander, or people to live; but rather Charlotte Brontë paints a landscape which is possessed by the supernatural, and able therefore to convey an impression of what lies beyond the physical, what is *true* rather than what is real.

Just as we discovered the supernatural of *Jane Eyre* to be a Christian god displaying facets of his pagan childhood, likewise we have discovered *Jane Eyre* to be romanticism displaying facets of her gothic childhood.

Works Cited

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