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Exploring “The Supernatural,” Robert C. Evans. xv

This introductory overview offers brief summaries of the essays that follow, explaining how they are categorized and ordered and suggesting valuable ways to approach the study of the supernatural in literature. This essay will also make it easier for readers to locate topics of interest.

The Supernatural in Literature, Darren Harris-Fain. xxiii

Offering a comprehensive survey of the history and nature of the supernatural, from its mythic and religious beginnings to its prominence as a literary genre, Darren Harris-Fain examines supernatural writings from the ancient, classical, Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Victorian, and Modern periods. Harris-Fain pays particular attention to the Gothic literary genre, and he explains the distinctions between supernatural, science fiction, and fantasy writings. This essay concludes by exploring why supernatural writings have always exercised such a strong hold on the human imagination.

Critical Contexts

The Wonders of the Invisible World: Cotton Mather’s Supernatural Classic, Kevin J. Hayes 3

*Kevin J. Hayes’s essay takes a historical approach to Cotton Mather’s 1692 exploration of the infamous Salem witch trials in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. Hayes examines the book’s background, structure, and contents, describing how it was*

received by Mather's contemporaries and also by later readers and scholars. Hayes contends that the "stories of the Salem witch trials have been told and retold so many times in so many ways that it is a pleasure to return to the originals. Yet the process of reading *The Wonders of the Invisible World*," he suggests, "may give readers a frisson of familiarity. Stories of witchcraft, demonic possession and all their associated supernatural motifs have become a huge part of the popular culture, and some can trace their roots to Cotton Mather. *The Wonders of the Invisible World*," Hayes asserts, "is the blueprint for countless supernatural horror stories in American culture."

"Stay, illusion": Shakespeare's Supernatural Dimension,
Christopher Baker 22

In this essay, Christopher Baker reviews Shakespeare and the Supernatural, a recent book edited by Victoria Bladen and Yan Brailovsk. Baker contends that the "supernatural remains a fertile field for scholarly inquiry, taking its place—at times idiosyncratically, to be sure—alongside the 'turn to religion,' another approach to the supernatural which has marked research on early modern literary culture over the last generation. Students and researchers," he concludes, "will find this volume an essential aid for investigations in this field."

Magic, Mutants, and Men of Steel: Science Fiction and the
Supernatural in Superhero Comics, Darren Harris-Fain 47

Darren Harris-Fain in this essay traces the shift from the supernatural superhero to ones based more on fantasy or science fiction. This change occurred alongside a corresponding drift in the cultural meaning of the supernatural, once considered to be within "the realm of the possible." Harris-Fain explains that, "since the modern scientific era, the supernatural in literature is now widely viewed as part of the fantasy genre." Although there is some overlap, in general fantasy "encompasses characters and events held to be impossible within the material world as we understand it," while "the supernatural almost always involves intrusions of an otherworldly nature into our familiar world, such as gods, demons, fairies, ghosts, beings such as vampires or werewolves, or figures like witches or sorcerers who employ magic."

Supernatural Probability Distributions in Comedy and Tragedy:
 More Lysistratas and Fewer Lears, Edwin Wong 68

In this essay, Edwin Wong discusses the seemingly supernatural dimensions of chance in comedy and tragedy. Wong asks his readers to consider whether “the dramatic arts of comedy and tragedy” function almost as “a supernatural power that, by depicting chance, tames chance. Because luck is either good or bad,” Wong suggests, “two forms of drama arose: comedy to explore good luck, fortune, destiny, and the sunny side of chance and tragedy to explore bad luck, misfortune, fate, and the dark side of chance.” By comparing and contrasting how comedy and tragedy deal with chance, Wong reveals how chance as an aspect of existence can seem, in some ways, supernatural.

Critical Readings

The BBC’s “Supernatural” Recreation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*
 as an Effective Radio Drama, Daniel Brown 99

*In this opening Critical Readings essay, Daniel Brown notes the surprising absence of any recent attempt by filmmakers or animators to bring to life the *Divine Comedy*, either as a motion picture or as an animated film. Dante’s poem, after all, deals with three of the most literally supernatural realms conceivable—Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, all three of which (especially Hell) are populated by supernatural creatures. Looking back at previous attempts to dramatize Dante’s epic, Brown describes how they fall short of conveying Dante’s worlds. He reports, however, that in 2014 the BBC released a three-hour radio drama (now readily available online) that is memorably dramatic and features top-notch actors (such as John Hurt), an intelligent and thorough script, and a full panoply of impressive sound effects. With these aids, listeners can imagine Dante’s supernatural places and beings in a way that perhaps no visual treatment would equal.*

“That Faustus may be a spirit in form and substance”: Body, Spirit,
 and the Supernatural in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*,
 Matthew M. Thiele 114

In this essay, Matthew M. Thiele suggests that “[p]erhaps no work of English literature shows how attempts to represent the supernatural are limited by our understanding of the natural world better than The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus by

Christopher Marlowe. By learning magic, summoning demons, and making a pact with Lucifer, Faustus gains seemingly unlimited power to do whatever he wants. An important aspect of his pact that critics often overlook is that Faustus becomes a spirit. Faustus does not seem capable of understanding what it means to be a spirit, however, and he continues to live his life as if he has a body, with all of a body's concomitant limitations. Among Faustus's many failures, his failure to take full advantage of his power and imagine a new way of living in the world unencumbered by embodiment is striking.

Fairies, Witches, Spirits, and Elves: The Supernatural at the Crossroads in *Jane Eyre*, Melissa Anderson 131

*In an essay dealing with a major nineteenth-century novel and novelist, Melissa Anderson discusses the widespread Victorian interest in supernatural beings, with particular focus on fairies—the supernatural creatures most often mentioned in Charlotte Brontë's famous book. Anderson tracks the many times supernatural beings are invoked in *Jane Eyre*, both as cultural touchpoints (in art and stories) and also as figures capable of exerting power in surprising ways. As she traces these uses of the supernatural in the text, a pattern emerges: Jane repeatedly finds herself in challenging situations due to her low social and economic position, and each time, supernatural intervention grants her special knowledge, insight, courage, or agency to prevail. In a sense, the supernatural forces allow Jane to exert her own will even in the face of powerful opposition.*

Functions of the Supernatural in Dickens's Short Fiction, Laurence W. Mazzeno 149

In an essay dealing with the author of perhaps the most popular "ghost" story of all time (A Christmas Carol) Laurence W. Mazzeno surveys a large number of Charles Dickens's short stories featuring various aspects of the supernatural. He contends that "[w]hether Dickens believed in the reality of supernatural beings . . . is not really important to his use of them in his fiction. Throughout his career," Mazzeno observes, Dickens "was participating in, and taking advantage of, the popularity of the genre that emerged from the gothic tradition which arose in the previous century. . . . Like others among his contemporaries," according to Mazzeno, "Dickens was bothered by the changes he saw taking place all around him; in the real world individuals were

being devalued and society moving toward the worship of science and statistics at the expense of human relationships and traditional moral rectitude.” Therefore the “ghost story provided Dickens a way to examine real-world problems by introducing the unfamiliar into the everyday.”

Educating Miles: Thinking the Evil in *The Turn of the Screw*,
Hazel Hutchison 174

Henry James’s novella, explored in this essay by Hazel Hutchison, has fascinated readers and critics since it first appeared in 1898. A perplexing blend of Gothic and modern sensibilities, The Turn of the Screw is open to both supernatural and realistic interpretation. It has also been regularly reprinted, translated into many languages, and adapted numerous times for stage, film, television, and opera. James skillfully weaves a tale in which the country house at Bly and its inhabitants may or not be haunted by the ghosts of two dead servants. Told through the viewpoint of the unnamed Governess, the story makes us wonder if the supernatural elements are only a figment of her imagination. Hutchison explains that “as James himself noted in the preface, . . . the horror of the tale would be much more intense if the reader could supply it from his own imagination: ‘Make him think the evil, make him think it for himself.’”

Eight Ways of Viewing Oscar Wilde’s *Supernatural Picture of Dorian Gray*, Jamil M. Mustafa 193

This essay by Jamil M. Mustafa places Wilde’s classic of Gothic literature in its biographical and historical contexts, and also explores the novel’s symbolism and motifs, social circumstances, religious ideas, and Victorian science and technology. Mustafa notes, for instance, that paintings with the supernatural ability to affect the lives of their subjects were not unknown in Gothic literature. But in Wilde’s tale this influence is reversed, as Dorian Gray’s life affects the appearance of his portrait. Dorian’s hedonistic pursuit of every pleasure and vice also becomes a vehicle for Wilde to explore the changing relationship between England’s classes as well as his society’s treatment of homosexuality. When Wilde was brought up on charges of gross indecency, his prosecutors found plenty of material in this story to use against him. Mustafa’s essay also touches on the novel’s treatment of religion in an era of scientific and technological advancements.

Daphne du Maurier's Fiction of the Gothic and Supernatural,
Thomas Whissen 213

Thomas Whissen in this essay discusses the life and works of the “first lady” of Gothic romance fiction, Daphne du Maurier. Although du Maurier wasn't fond of this label, and also wrote history, biography, and stage plays, she is most remembered for her bestselling novel Rebecca, which has never gone out of print and has been adapted for stage and screen, most famously by Alfred Hitchcock in 1940 and most recently by Ben Wheatley in 2020 for Netflix. Whissen explores the connection between du Maurier's love of the rugged and windswept Cornwall coast, where she spent as much time as she could, and her writing, which often featured a strong sense of place much like the Cornwall of du Maurier's time. Du Maurier based Rebecca's Manderley on a decrepit mansion on the coast named Menabilly, which she leased in 1943. This essay also explores du Maurier's life and other works, such as her menacing short story “The Birds” (also filmed by Hitchcock), and Whissen devotes time to the storytelling techniques that made her such a success.

Techniques, Symbols, and Varied Contexts in Shirley Jackson's
The Haunting of Hill House, Jamil M. Mustafa 227

In a second essay by Jamil M. Mustafa, Shirley Jackson's famous novel is explored in relation to its author's life, its literary motifs and symbolism, and its place in the canon of American haunted house novels. Evocative and dreamlike, Hill House has an outsize presence in Jackson's story, existing on the border of sentience. Recently filmed as a miniseries for Netflix, The Haunting of Hill House, like much of Jackson's work, explores the struggles of a main character who is an outcast.

Stephen King, S. T. Joshi, and the Supernatural Style of King's
The Shining, Robert C. Evans 242

Evans's essay discusses the attacks on Stephen King's supernatural books and literary style by S. T. Joshi, one of the most prominent students of “weird” literature. Joshi has asserted that “King's writing, considered abstractly, is a mixture of cheap sentiment, naive moral polarizations between valiant heroes and wooden villains, and hackneyed, implausible supernatural phenomena.” Joshi also objects to King's “bland, easy-to-read style, which contains just the right number of scatological and sexual

profanities to titillate his middle-class audience.” Evans’s essay examines King’s famous novel The Shining in relation to these criticisms, noting specific examples of the flaws Joshi alleges while also commenting on the book’s various strengths as a work of literature.

Resources

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