John Green

EN ID7

Mr. Smith

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**The Dramatic Significance (or Purpose) of the Supernatural in Julius Caesar**

Note: ‘dramatic or narrative purpose’ refers to how every element within either (that is every conversation, aside, soliloquy, action, and piece of narration, etc.) with either a play or novel has a definite purpose within the story. For greater clarification read the handout ‘Dramatic Significance’.

“Beware the Ides of March” (I. iv. 52). This familiar line by the Soothsayer in Julius Caesar reflects the presence of omens and ghosts in the play. What exactly is the significance of these supernatural references? The supernatural establishes mood, develops character, and foreshadows the plot.

 First, the supernatural creates mood in the play. The most important mood is impending doom which gradually increases until the scene of Caesar’s assassination. This mood is first introduced with the scene of a terrible storm on the night before Caesar’s murder. Many supernatural things happen during this storm, including men on fire and lions walking on the streets of Rome. Tension is further created as Casca describes his unearthly visions. The feeling of doom continues as Calphurnia’s dream is revealed when Caesar says, “She dreamt tonight she saw my statue, / Which, like a fountain with a hundred spouts / Did run pure blood, and many lusty Romans / Came smiling and did bathe their hands in it” (II.ii.1.76-79). The audience feels that something is about to happen and that the dream is an omen that foreshadows Caesar’s demise. Tension builds once again as Caesar is warned repeatedly by the soothsayers to beware the ides of March. The supernatural events which occur in the play clearly help to create the mood which keeps the audience’s interest throughout the rest of the play.

A second purpose of the supernatural is to reveal characters. Julius Caesar is a self-confident, conceited man when he ignores the warning of the Soothsayer in his statement, “He is a dreamer, let us leave him. Pass!” (I.ii.1.22-24). His words show that either Caesar does not believe in omens, or he is trying not to appear superstitious in front of the crowd to keep up his public image. Caesar is not the only character in the play who can be assessed by the way he reacts to the supernatural. Some of Brutus’ characteristics are also revealed when he comes into contact with unusual forces of nature. For instance, Brutus is unmoved when the storm is raging outside. However, when Caesar’s ghost appears in front of him, he is shown as a superstitious but noble man, who accepts his destiny. Brutus says, “The ghost of Caesar hath appeared to me / Two several times by night, at Sardis once / And last night here in Philippi fields. / I know my hour is come” (V.v.1.16-19). Brutus believes that everything is predetermined and that there is no way of changing his fate; therefore, he does not try to battle with it and accepts his punishment readily. Clearly, Shakespeare reveals characters through their reaction to the supernatural.

The final dramatic purpose served by the supernatural is to foreshadow the plot. The storm before Caesar’s assassination is a perfect example. Casca, who is deeply influenced by the storm, describes the unusual sights, “A common slave – you know him well by sight - / Held up his left hand, which did flame and burn / Like twenty torches joined, and yet his hand, / Not sensible of fire, remained unscorched…” (I.iii.l.15-32). These terrible phenomena prophesy violent times for Rome and the death of the emperor. Also, Calphurnia’s dream and the soothsayer's warnings convince the audience that the murder of Caesar is inevitable. Another superstitious event that foreshadows the action, occurs in the first scene of the last act, when Cassius says:

 And in their steads do ravens, crows and kites

Fly o’er our heads and downward look on us

As we were sickly pray; their shadows seem

A canopy most fatal, under which

Our army lies, ready to give up the ghost. (V.i.l.84-87)

The ravens and crows are a bad omen and the audience expects the defeat of Brutus and Cassius’ troops. However, the spectators may not be sure and may, therefore, anticipate the ending with interest. Clearly, plot is developed by the supernatural.

In conclusion, supernatural events create the moods of tension, suspense or impending doom; they reveal some strengths and weaknesses of the characters; and they also foreshadow the action which helps to keep the audience’s interest. The characters are warned by the forces of the supernatural about their gloomy future; everything seems to be predetermined. The spectators are left with the feeling that the destiny of humans is preordained and they cannot change their fate.

**Works Cited**

Shakespeare, William. Julius Caesar. London: Oxford Press, 1979.

*Exercise*

*Underline or label the following elements in the essay:*

1. *hook*
2. *question*
3. *thesis statement*
4. *topic sentences*
5. *linking words (transitions)*
6. *specific examples*
7. *quotes “woven” into writer’s sentence*
8. *parenthetical (bracketed) citation of quotes*
9. *indented format for quotes of more than 4 lines*
10. *concluding sentences*
11. *thought-provoking conclusion*
12. *MLA format*
* *12 point*
* *Times New Roman*
* *1.5 spacing*
* *½ inch indentation of paragraphs*
* *surname and page number at top right (½inch from top)*
* *1 inch margins*
* *key information at top left of page 1*
* *title of essay bolded*
* *title of text underlined or italicized*
1. *Works Cited*
* *correct information*
* *correct punctuation*