Reading for Pleasure

Attraction of the supernatural

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I have always been an avid reader of stories with a supernatural element. I do not expect to believe them, but I do expect the author to have given some thought to the implications of such happenings. I find little satisfaction in stories where the supernatural is used merely to alarm, or to round off the narrative.

Successful in my terms are fantasies like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Richard Adams's *Watership Down*. Here the authors have created worlds that are totally different from our own and yet completely credible. These are worlds where there is a place for magic rings, resurrected wizards, or visionary rabbits within the whole imaginary landscape. As with science fiction, the criterion is whether it is consistent within itself, rather than in terms of our normal experience.

Successful, too, can be the reworking of the old myths, although there has been a regrettable tendency to "de-mythologise" them. These stories, which belong to that shadowy area between history and religion, are lost without gods and omens and enchanted swords, but, when treated sympathetically, they can be powerful. One of the finest of these is *The Bull from the Sea*, in which Mary Renault tells the story of Theseus. She puts into the novel much historical detail and reconstructs the Greek religion along the lines of Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Her rituals are far from meaningless. Although her gods may not be quite as I imagined them (from Homer or Kingsley), there is no mistaking their reality for Theseus.

Unusual enemies and attributes

Unfortunately, the scene is different when it comes to novels with a modern setting. Again and again they fall into the pitfalls that I have mentioned. Horror stories are ever popular, weaving their webs of fear out of our nightmares and superstitions, but, beyond the cold chill of the dead hand and the red eyes of the vampire, there is only theatrical effect. The writer is not seriously portraying a universe where such malevolence can exist. They are just adventure stories with an unusual enemy.

Other stories just bring the supernatural in to tie up the loose ends—a ghost who leads the hero to the lost documents, for example. In these cases the ghost could be replaced with a mouse or any kind of coincidence because the element is not integral to the story. In other cases the whole issue is ducked, and the supernatural is reduced to the actions of a deranged mind or the paranormal. This last, especially, is a favourite ploy. No longer do we have elves or gods or ghosts, we have psychic impressions left on the environment. Extrasensory

perception is portrayed as a normal, if unusual, human attribute.

Perhaps I should not be surprised at this. The popular assumption, the myth of our society, is that science has all the answers. We have only to frame the correct hypothesis, set up our controlled experiments, and all knowledge will fall into our laps. In this atmosphere there are few who can resist the temptation to treat the subject in a pseudoscientific manner. For the rest, with religious beliefs discredited, they have only the suppressed terrors of an alien reality to exploit.

Science and theology

C S Lewis is a writer who is successful in this category. An Oxford scholar of philosophy and literature, he scandalised many of his colleagues by broadcasting, and then publishing, works of Christian theology for the "common man." He then went further beyond the pale by publishing some science-fiction novels and children's fantasies. And, to confound his critics, he then produced some of his finest literary criticism.

In the first of his science-fiction trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, Ransome is kidnapped by Weston and Devine and taken to Mars. This is set long before the days of Apollo missions and Mariner space probes. Weston and Devine have privately perfected a means of space travel, and they have been mining gold on Mars. Now, however, the natives are insisting that one of the earthmen is taken to meet the Oyarsa; Ransome is to be that man. Like his captors, Ransome fears that he is to be a human sacrifice, and he flees across the planet. This gives Lewis the opportunity for some fascinating descriptions. It is a strangely beautiful world with its paint-box colours and tree-like vegetation, with strangely shaped hummocks and waves "... too narrow, too pointed at the top and too small at the base..." Lewis delights in describing the people too, with their languages and customs: the furry "hrossa," great speakers and singers, the dignified "sorns," and the inventive "pfiftriggi." This is a world where there is no sign of the evils that have befallen Earth. Death is not feared, its date can even be calculated, and "you leave the world, as you entered it, with the 'men of your own year'." The Oyarsa is not a fearsome pagan idol but the angelic guardian of the planet and at last Ransome meets him. For his fellow humans the encounter is less happy. The Oyarsa cannot be seen, only heard, and there is no room for such a being in Weston's dogmatism. He is convinced that it must be the ventriloquism of a witchdoctor who has pretended to go into a trance. He looks around the company and finds an elderly Martian who has fallen asleep in the heat (there may be no sin on Mars, but there is still frailty). To Ransome's intense embarrassment Weston then addresses all his belligerent remarks to this sleeping figure. At last his "witchdoctor" awakes and, overcome with confusion, leaves. The Oyarsa, of course, remains.

Lewis discusses the theological issues raised throughout the novel in a lighthanded and perceptive manner. Perhaps because

of this his novels are not to everybody's taste, but it does bear out my argument that the encounter with the supernatural can be convincing when the author has thought out the implications.

The darker side

Another writer about the supernatural was Charles Williams. He was a friend of C S Lewis, and Lewis's published letters led me to Williams's unusual stories. Images and ideas tumble into his novels from all over the place: from literature (he was an expert on Dante); from philosophy (he published the first English edition of Kierkegaard); religion; history; the occult. His novels have more vigour, if less clarity, than Lewis's, and if his ideas are mainly Christian they are certainly not orthodox Christianity. One of his friends once described his work as "clotted glory," and this beautifully describes their richness.

One of Williams's strengths is his depiction of evil and the occult. He was once a member of the Society of the Golden Dawn which practised magic rites—and not all of its members contented themselves with white magic. He brings this knowledge of the occult into his novels and also his understanding of the darker side of human nature. Indeed, he is often criticised for appearing to sympathise too much with his "evil" characters, and the novels do not always satisfy those who want a straightforward condemnation of these people. The black magic passages in *War in Heaven* reek with an authenticity that most similar novels lack, and the inner destruction of Wentworth in *Descent into Hell* is one of the most horrifying passages that I have ever read.

One of my favourites is *The Greater Trumps*. This follows the typical Williams pattern of taking an idea or symbol from written work on the occult and placing it, pulsating with power, in an everyday setting. In this case the power resides in a

pack of tarot cards which has come into the hands of Coningsby, a bluff and unimaginative country gentleman. His daughter's fiancé Henry recognises this as the prototype pack which Henry's family have been seeking for centuries. On their own these cards can tell fortunes and influence the elemental powers of nature. Even more power can be wielded if they are used in conjunction with the "dance of life." This dance of life is a set of mysterious figures, similar in size to chess pieces, that correspond to the characters on the cards. By some unknown power, and in a strange golden glow, they move over a large board. "Gently and continuously they went . . . as if to some complicated measure." Henry and his uncle are determined to possess the cards and to unlock the secrets of the dance. If Coningsby persists in his stubborn, ignorant refusal to sell, they are prepared to unleash the strange powers of the cards and destroy him.

The figures of the dance and the cards dominate the novel, especially those of the greater trumps. Their images keep recurring as normal reality is gradually overwhelmed: the emperor; the hanging man; the tower which is continually rising and falling, and rising again. Among them all is the figure of the fool. This character is reputed to hold the secret of the dance, but he is the only figure which does not move. Only one person sees the fool in movement, "always arranging itself in some place which was empty for it."

Williams's imagery works almost at a subliminal level, and this makes it ideal for portraying a reality as undergirding, and occasionally invading, normal life. Moreover, although the tarot pack need not be taken literally, the ideas and insights concerned are those that the author takes seriously and that he develops in his other writings.

For me then, the supernatural must be treated seriously if it is to play a convincing part in a novel—not devalued, cheapened, or trivialised. The writer must set it in a convincing context and understand the implications beyond the mechanics of the plot.

Two middle-aged patients had attacks of urinary calculi one week after returning from a fortnight's holiday in a warm climate and attacks have recurred. Might the holiday have been the cause? If so, Why? and Could the attacks be prevented?

All potential stone-forming substances in the urine will approach their saturation limit if the excretion of the compound remains constant and the urine volume falls. Though we are not told what type of calculi the patients passed, the two principal candidates are calcium oxalate and uric acid. Most normal urines are, in terms of strict solubility products, supersaturated with calcium oxalate and stone formation is prevented by several unidentified substances which inhibit crystallisation in the urine.¹ In hot climates relative dehydration and oliguria is common, and in the Middle East, where water may also be in short supply, stones are frequent. An increased incidence of stones, mostly uric acid, also occurs in patients with ileostomies, who are generally somewhat dehydrated from the passage of large volumes of ileostomy contents. This dehydration in the warm climate visited by these patients is probably the main cause.¹ This would also apply to uric acid stones. The solubility of the uric acid: sodium urate system in urine is proportional to the square of the urine volume, so that if the urine volume decreased from (say) 2.5 1/24 h to 1.25 1/24 h the amount of uric acid that could be maintained in solution would fall to one-quarter. In addition high urinary concentrations of uric acid in the urine make the formation of calcium oxalate stones more likely.

On holiday an increased output of uric acid from an increased intake of high-purine foods such as fish roes, smoked fish, oysters and shellfish, liver and other viscera, beer, or meat extracts is much more likely than an increased intake of oxalate (chocolate, tea, coffee, beetroot, spinach) or calcium (milk and milk products, beans and lentils, chocolate and its products) containing foods. Stones formed during the period of relative dehydration may still not all have passed and may explain the "recurrence" of the stones. The attacks could have been prevented by ensuring an adequate fluid intake for

the temperature and activity—four to five litres a day may be needed to ensure a urinary output of at least two litres, and this can be used as an end point; by avoiding the heat of the day by taking a siesta in the shade; and by avoiding high-purine foods.

¹ Nordin, B E C, et al, in *Nephrology*, ed J Hamburger, J Crosnier, and J Grunfeld, p 1091. New York, Wiley, 1979.

What are the hazards of ultraviolet "sun tan" lights?

Such is the great variation in "suntan light" and "sunbeds" now freely available—that is, at a price—to the public that it is quite impossible to talk of safety and hazard in general. Until recently suntan was achieved using UVB, which has a wave length of 290 nm to 320 nm. This is the main ultraviolet band responsible for tanning and burning, aging, and carcinogenic effect of natural sunlight. UVA with a wave length from 320 nm to 400 nm has been introduced recently as apparently pigmentation may be achieved with less burning than with UVB. Although UVA was at first thought to be without risk, there is some evidence of cataract, rather dubious evidence of dermal changes that might accelerate the appearance of aging, and some evidence, likewise still vague, of cancer of the skin. It should be emphasised, moreover, that much of the work on UVA has been done in association with psoralen, with which it is used for treating psoriasis, and this combination does induce skin cancer and cataracts in animals. A further difficulty in assessing risks is that the ultraviolet emission of the various lamps varies enormously in respect of UVB output. For these reasons protective goggles should be worn even during allegedly pure UVA exposure. I also believe that claims by commercial "solaria" that exposure on a sunbed will not induce skin cancer, aging, or eye changes are premature and should not be allowed.