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28 November 2018

The Use of Paranormal Elements to Convey Attributes to the Human Condition

Within the post-modern works of authors like Gabriel Márquez, Toni Morrison, John Ajvide Lindqvist and others, paranormal activity is used to highlight social class, history, and politics. These three aspects of the human condition are key contributing factors of one's identity, and these works showcase how these aspects of psychological condition can set the stage for the introduction of paranormal experiences.

A recurring theme that is implemented within paranormal works, is a diminished sense of self attributed to mostly characters of a younger age. More often than not, the audience is introduced to a young female role around twelve or thirteen years old that has some conflict with herself or the world around her. In this case, the stories surrounding Chihiro of *Spirited Away*, Denver of *Beloved*, and Regan MacNeil of *The Exorcist* present the reader or viewer with a young girl who is a typical outcast of society. This attribute is either due to self-isolation, lack of social skills required to make meaningful connections, or trouble within the home and family.

When looking at Chihiro's experience in Hayao Miyazaki's screen production of *Spirited Away*, you follow the story of a young ten-year old girl. The movie begins with her parents moving her to a new home and school while she sulks in the backseat. When taking a short cut, they lose their way and end up at the entrance to an old theme park. As soon as they enter, strange things begin to occur. Her parents are turned into pigs and Chihiro starts to become transparent. She meets a young boy who calls himself Haku and is able to navigate and survive the spirit world with his help.

While she is there, she meets many spirits of varying forms, she takes on two different jobs, and even rescues a few spirits from trouble. She finds a job in the bathhouse under the spirit Yubaba, who steals characters out of her name to rename her Sen. When she realizes that she can no longer remember her former name, Haku warns her never to forget it or she will never be able to return to her world.

One day, she finds Haku in the form of a dragon being attacked, she fights the birds off and allows him to return to his boy form only to find that he is gravely ill. She travels with other spirits to ask for his healing and forgiveness from the spirit she believes to be responsible, but is told that she has already healed him with her love. She rides back to the park on the dragon Haku's back and makes a deal with the spirit Yubaba who stole her name. If she can identify her parents in a crowd of pigs, they all three will be allowed to return home. She gives Yubaba the correct answer, who in turn restores her parents to their human form and returns the characters stolen from her name. Upon leaving, Chihiro tells her parents that she believes she can handle a new home and school after all.

This story focuses on the importance and power of one's name, and the value it holds within an identity. Although we don't learn of Chihiro's background with her parents or how she functioned within her former home, the viewer is able to discern a sense of insecurity and hopelessness that she might feel towards moving, and resentment towards her parents for forcing this change in her life. I believe that collectively, these events spark a need within Chihiro to adapt and find a way to cope. One could argue that her whole experience in the theme park was a figment of her subconscious imagination that was created in order to prepare her for this transition. In the story, her name is changed from Chihiro to Sen, which is the result of characters within her name being stolen from her rather than altered by Chihiro herself. I believe that this is

a reflection of the hopelessness she is feeling throughout the course of the film. Chihiro feels that she has lost all control of her own life and in turn has lost her sense of self. When Haku tells her that she will never be able to return home unless she remembers her name, he is essentially telling her to remain true and not to lose herself in the face of adversity.

The story doesn't hold much substance in the way of revealing Chihiro's history or position in society, but it does shed light on her character and her sense of civic duty confined to this small portion of her own world. Throughout her ordeal, she learns that she is adaptable in the way of change, she is dedicated to working through conflicts, and she fights for those she holds dear. In the end, she holds onto her identity and comes out of the park ready to face the real world having learned the true parameters of her own strength.

<https://youtu.be/dR7kOEe3p6k>

Figure 1

Much like Chihiro, thirteen-year-old Denver from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a young girl with an array of troubles ranging from a damaged family, to a haunting history that contributes to her life as an outcast. The story truly begins when the reader is able to start piecing together Sethe's history through fragmented flashbacks provided by a varying number of characters. Sethe was born in the South to a black mother she never knew, and was later sold to a Mr. and Mrs. Garner's Sweet Home Plantation. During her time at the plantation, she married a fellow slave named Halle to which she bore three children, two boys named Howard and Buglar and a baby girl who we never learn the name of.

A short while later, Mr. Garner dies and is replaced by a sadistic and racist character known as Schoolteacher. Under his control Sethe and other slaves endure torture and humiliation so unbearable that they attempt an escape. Two slaves are recaptured, one is brutally murdered

while the other who the reader knows as Paul D, is returned to Sweet Home. Afterwards, Sethe reveals that she still has every intention of running, and has already sent her children ahead to Ohio. Unfortunately, she does not escape before she suffers horrific violation, the robbing of milk that her body has stored for her fourth child, and a severe whipping all at the hands of an emboldened Schoolteacher. She collapses in the forest trying to escape only to be found by a young white girl by the name of Amy Denver, who helps Sethe recuperate and aids her in the delivery of her baby. She decides to name the baby Denver after the woman who saved her.

Sethe enjoys Cincinnati until Schoolteacher arrives to take her back. Instead of submitting her children to the horror she was forced to endure, she takes them out to an old wood shed and begins to murder them, only succeeding with her eldest daughter by slitting her throat. Sethe erects a headstone for the dead child that would read "Beloved". Having escaped himself, Paul D sought out Sethe in Cincinnati and they enjoy some time together until they return home one day to find a young woman asleep on the porch. Most everyone believes that this woman is an embodiment of Sethe's dead daughter, who calls herself Beloved.

Due to the reputation surrounding her family, Denver is an outcast and has lived in solitude at 124 for years. This strange woman becomes one of the few contacts Denver has had outside of the people of 124, and as a result she develops an unhealthy obsession to Beloved, who in turn develops one of equal or greater intensity to Sethe. Beloved becomes abusive and manipulative, and Sethe becomes entranced with satisfying her and justifying her murder. Alarmed now by her presence, Denver ventures out into the community for the first time in twelve years seeking help for her mother. The community comes together and begins to plot the exorcism of Beloved from the house. They arrive at the house to find Sethe with a naked,

pregnant Beloved and amidst the confusion Beloved slips away, never to be seen or heard from again.

One could argue that Morrison's objective was to use a paranormal element to convey the trauma of slavery and the destructive psychological effect that it brands on an individual's identity. She relays her story through historical fiction and tells of ordeals that indefinitely contribute to the annihilation of a slave's sense of self. This story is told through the eyes of people that are held below even the lowest social class, and are accustomed to functioning through every day devoid of their own free will. Their history and position within the human condition sets the tone for how they will operate later on in life and leaves them with a damaged sense of self-worth and purpose. Similar to slaves that one has read about in history books, the characters of this story are conditioned to live and act as one without deviance. In the eyes of the owner, no one slave has an individual identity, value, or importance, but are more so viewed as a smaller working part that fits into a bigger machine.

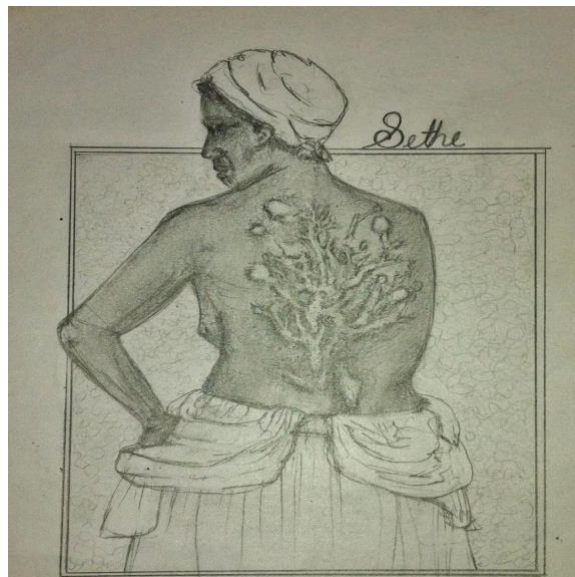


Figure 2

Even though Sethe escapes from the plantation, she will never be rid of the emotional scars her circumstance has dealt her. I believe that Sethe carried this damage with her to Cincinnati, and as a result, transferred the uncertainty she attributes to her own character down to her children and more specifically to Denver. Even though Denver was brought into a world sheltered from the burden of captivity, she was only afforded a short time of peace before her sister was murdered at the hands of her mother. Sethe was not able to suppress the lingering terror her former life plagued her with and in turn imposed upon Denver years of uncertainty, anxiety, and a lack of individual importance. Throughout her existence Denver is robbed of human connection, opportunity to lay claim to her place in society, and a chance to make a difference. Because of this, she lived as an outcast, removed from society and shunned from her community. When *Beloved* first appeared she latched onto her, I believe viewing her as a separate entity from her own life, and using her as an escape from her world and a connection to another.

When considering all the complex factors contributing to Chihiro's and Denver's psychological condition, the key factors that determine Regan MacNeil's of *The Exorcist* are relatively straight forward. Regan is a young girl living with her divorced mother, Chris MacNeil, an actress that has just relocated her and Regan to Washington DC for an extended shooting of a movie. With an absent father, a preoccupied mother, and an array of predominantly temporary places to call home, Regan mostly keeps to herself but is otherwise a well-behaved child. After moving into their rental in Georgetown, Chris continually hears strange noises originating in the attic which she believes to be a minor rat infestation. When Regan begins exhibiting signs of irrational behavior such as overexcitement, swearing and lying, and a general lack of focus, Chris takes her to several doctors all of which diagnose her with Hyperkinesia and

attributes her symptoms to an accumulation of stress due to separation from a permanent home. When her condition worsens, Chris begins to suspect something more sinister is at play. Regan begins exhibiting signs of inhumane strength, violence, and strange occurrences impossible to generate on her own. Chris employs the help of Father Damien Karras and Father Lankester Merrin. Together, they exorcise the demon from Regan that has presented itself in the form of Captain Howdy, an entity that had manipulated Regan with a play on her emotions, claiming he needed help escaping from the spirit world.



Figure 3

It is easy to discern what factors contributed to Regan's vulnerability and possession, being that she has no solid ground on which to call home, no present father, no friends, and a busy mother who makes time when she can. Regan has no stability in any aspect of her life that would keep her grounded or rational, and when a seemingly friendly face appears to her in any form she is naturally more receptive. Even though her mother is a relatively well-off actor and has a fairly high class social circle, Regan is not afforded these same privileges. She has never been able to develop a definitive sense of individual purpose because she is unable to form meaningful connections outside of her mother that would allow her to do so. I believe that her

circumstance makes her desperate for a companion, and in turn leaves her more susceptible to manipulation. Essentially, one could argue that it is easier for a demonic entity to assume control of someone who has no solid sense of self-worth and identity, and in turn leave that person more malleable in terms of who they will become within the possession.

Works like Gabriel Márquez's *Chronicles of a Death Foretold* and John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Let the Old Dreams Die*, employ two utterly different versions of the paranormal. One might argue that these works and collections focus on the dark aspect of human negligence and the spiraling effect it can take on society's identity and morale as a whole.

Chronicles of a Death Foretold sets around a small Columbian community that is preparing for the Bishop's arrival, who is on his way to bless the marriage of Bayardo San Roman and young Angela Vicario. As San Roman takes his bride off to their new home, Santiago Nasar, the narrator, and the Vicario brothers bury themselves deep in wedding revelry until early that next morning. When Bayardo returns Angela back to her home after discovering that she is not a virgin, her brothers Pedro and Pablo demand to know who deflowered their sister. She blindly names Santiago Nasar, a well-off Arabic ranch owner. The brothers set out to murder him, making their intentions known to many people throughout the day including the butcher, a police officer, and the colonel, all of which shrugged them off under the assumption that they were bluffing. Clothilde Armenta, the milk shop owner, warned the priest of the brothers' plan when they came to hide out in her shop, intending to catch Nasar on his way to or from the docks. The priest quickly forgot her warning, completely wrapped up in the excitement surrounding the Bishop's arrival. The crowd gathered for the Bishop, but would stick around long after due to the rumors surrounding the murder of Nasar. Clothilde Armenta yelled for him

to run, but he made it no further than his front door when the brothers caught up with him, stabbing him several times until he was dead.

In order to completely understand the point Márquez is trying to convey the reader must look at this work through a Marxist lens. The people of this community are presented to the reader as desensitized blind subjects, and the town a form of corrupt and complacent government that is completely entranced with the teachings of the church. He creates a villain in the Bishop and illustrates the unjust, capitalistic ideals of the church in respect to the townspeople. Márquez goes even further to condemn the church when he makes a point of showing that, instead of the people splitting the goods amongst themselves, they exert an extensive amount of energy into preparing it all for the Bishop, an unappreciative foreigner that represents the economic success of the few over the destitute earnings of the majority. Even with his criticism of the church, he still leaves room to highlight the shortcomings of the townspeople, presenting a situation that could have been avoided, but wasn't due to the oblivion of the town and the frenzy that surrounded the Bishop's arrival. It could be argued that a mere ritualistic display of self-importance by the church caused such a distraction that it destroyed the compassion that the people of the town should have held for one another. I believe that Márquez attempted to expose the Catholic Church as an evil or 'paranormal' entity geared towards self-interest, by portraying it as an institution that causes its followers to lose the sense of identity, civic duty, and compassion that characterizes a united community.

Within John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Let the Old Dreams Die*, the first short story entitled *The Border* is the best example of skewed identity and societal exclusivity that is emphasized by the implementation of a non-human paranormal element. It follows the one-track existence of Tina, a horribly disfigured Swedish border patrol agent that has an impressive knack for detecting

smugglers. Her differences make her appear almost sub-human, and as a result she is feared by many of the people around her. Her father has progressive dementia and her boyfriend is more worried about his dogs than he is about her. Because of this, she invests all her time and energy into her work life, which is disrupted when she makes a wrong assumption about a strange man travelling through customs. With this man known as Vore, Tina finds someone who completes her in all the right ways. As the pair grows closer, we learn more about Tina's past and by the end of the story, the reader realizes that all is not what it seems with this pair.



Figure 4

Due to her outward appearance, Tina has struggled with developing a connection with the world around her. Her only relationship was with her father, who's dementia has only gotten worse. She is denied the basic human need of intimacy and in turn feels like an outcast, alone in the world in every way that could matter. I believe that Tina loses her sense of self-worth due to her physical appearance and as a result feels like she has no control over her identity within her community. She has little confidence despite her success as an agent, the readers see this when she chooses to stay at her current post rather than taking a job somewhere better, or when she chooses to settle for her less than compassionate boyfriend rather than living on her own. She

remains where she is comfortable and one could argue that this is the reason for vulnerability around Vore. Instead of considering herself an equal when she discovers someone like her, she morphs into a version of herself that can fit into him, viewing him as the piece that completes her rather than a companion that strengthens her. I would argue that Tina's low social class, meager quality of living, and a disintegrating relationship holds her in a state of uncertainty that hinders her ability to become the best possible version of herself, and makes her desperate for anything that will satisfy even the basic needs of the human condition.

Collectively, these stories attempt to educate the audience on the intricate and inner workings of the humanities and human condition. They achieve this by emphasizing or exaggerating a situation by presenting the consequence of events in the form of an intense and other-worldly being devoid of compassionate insight. I believe these authors present their works in such a way that highlights the toxicity of insecurity and uncertainty within any aspect of the human condition and introduces the reader to a consequential entity that is meant to incite fear and a desire for change. Through the implementation of a paranormal element presented in any form, the authors successfully educate their readers and viewers alike about the importance of identity and self-worth, regardless of a physical label.