

**The Supernatural Realm and Physical Realm: Shakespeare's
juxtaposition of Opposites in *Julius Caesar***

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's literary corpus is globally acclaimed to occupy a pride of place in the humanities. In some of his plays, the supernatural realm galvanizes the physical realm to animate the plot. Owing to this, many critics conclude that actions in some of his plays derive their verve from the supernatural realm. This perception poses a problem because it disregards the physical realm which is the cornerstone of humanity. This has created a debate as to the more potent realm in Shakespeare's dramatic engagements. This study argues that Shakespeare depicts the inevitable unity of both supernatural and physical realms. Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as a guide, it establishes that the human mind can unconsciously relapse into the supernatural realm and create life in the physical realm. Therefore, both realms align through a structure of complementarities. The primary data for this study is *Julius Caesar* while the secondary data are journals and critical materials on Shakespeare's dramaturgy. The playwright recreates both realms to form an inseparable whole where the existence of one is upheld by the other. Humanity lubricates the supernatural realm through propitiations and sacrifices while the physical realm depends on the supernatural realm for insight. It must be understood that this relationship is rooted in the unity of opposites.

Key Words: Relationship, Prophecy, Unity, Dramaturgy, Humanity

Structured Practitioner Notes

1. It is widely known that Shakespeare copiously makes use of the supernatural realm in his plays.
2. Through a critical analysis of *Julius Caesar*, my research demonstrates that both supernatural and physical realms of existence share an inevitable unity and a reciprocal relationship.
3. Given the narrow interstice between the supernatural realm and the physical realm in *Julius Caesar* as outlined and explained in the study, the reader should appreciate the supernatural realm as an important aspect of human existence irrespective of how that realm manifests or is accessed.

Introduction

William Shakespeare's literary corpus bulks large in the humanistic disciplines. Arguably, his works dominate global literary scene more than any writer of the Elizabethan era. Such intimidating image is similar to his description of the dominance of Caesar in his eponymous play *Julius Caesar*. Speaking through Cassius about the overwhelming presence of Caesar, Shakespeare remarks thus "Why, man, he doth bstride the narrow world like a colossus" (19). Indeed, it appears that when Shakespeare wrote the play, he was instinctively prophetic about the excellence of his literary creativity and output which "like a colossus", straddles the miniature world. The reasons are varied and resonate with humanity's existential impulses. Thematically, it is impossible to identify any topical issue in human existence that is not subsumed in Shakespeare's oeuvre. From love to revenge, disguise to deception, poverty and riches, perseverance and surrender, illusion and reality, etc, every human actuality is boldly captured in Shakespeare's corpus. Liwei Zhu opines that:

Shakespeare's plays are considered to be the greatest plays in the world literary history, not only because of the beautiful language, the complex

plot construction and the modern implications of their universal themes, but also because of the breathtaking literary skills applied and the mysterious elements in these plays. (391)

The above lines indicate that there are many factors that set Shakespeare's dramaturgy apart as an accomplished compendium of creative ingenuity. Due to these factors, many years after his death, Shakespearean corpus continues to provide a potent prognosis for the critical analysis of society and the human condition. In some cultures, it is seen and appreciated as a creed while in other cultures it provides the immediate yardstick for interpreting reality. James Shapiro summarizes the distinctive significance of Shakespearean works in the lives of Americans by observing that "read by almost everyone at school, staged in theatres across the land, and long valued by conservatives as highly by liberals, Shakespeare's plays remain a common ground, one of the few places where Americans can meet and air their disparate views". (i)

Beyond America, the immediate implication of the foregoing establishes Shakespeare's works as providing a critical mirror for the direct appraisal of human indulgences, relationships, and behaviour across the world. In his hands, history becomes elastic and transmutes to reflect extemporaneous issues in society. Some of his plays dwell on real historical figures that held sway at the height of their glory, a redefinition of tragedy in classical understanding. For example, the historical substratum of *Julius Caesar* derives from the enthralling life of Julius Caesar, the former Roman General and dictator whose political manoeuvres led to the collapse of the Roman Republic and the birth of the Roman Empire. As An Elizabethan writer, Shakespeare conveyed the era's consciousness by demonstrating how great men suffered tragedy as a result of their weaknesses. Indeed, no Elizabethan writer illustrates the classical notion of tragedy like William Shakespeare. His tragedies were a combination of grace to grass tales and excessive

pride that became an inevitable error in human character, a celebration of hubris. His comedies also dwell on poverty and riches, mistaken identity, illusion and reality.

Of all the subsisting thematic pre-occupation in the Shakespearean corpus, none commands an overwhelming presence like his depiction of the Supernatural and Physical realms of existence. During the Elizabethan era when Shakespeare's literary creativity blossomed, many people believed in superstition and were convinced of the existence of such supernatural elements like witches, ghosts, apparitions, and prophesy. Also, physical elements like storms, rough weathers and unusual appearance of wild animals were used to alert humanity of imminent disaster or tragedy. Witchcraft was severely punished since it was generally believed to alter human fortunes and circumstances negatively. Therefore, the general believe that supernatural elements dominated spaces between and among humans subsisted. According to Kristen Poole, "in Western thought, conceptions about the nature of the supernatural have long been connected to the ideas about the structure of space." (6) This means that the physical realm, dominated by man, was not far from the supernatural realm. No doubt, the Elizabethan consciousness affected the young Shakespeare and influenced his artistic imagination. In plays like *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, there is a consistent depiction of the inevitable interaction between the supernatural and the physical realms of existence. In this juxtaposition, Shakespeare demonstrates that both realms of existence are intricately intertwined and share a reciprocal relationship, therefore, cannot do without each other. The alignment of the two realms of existence is such that they provide aesthetic catalyst which propels dramatic actions in the plays and because drama is the playwright's primary medium, the supernatural world and the physical world are more portrayed in the plays mentioned above.

The Physical and Supernatural world in unity

This study focuses on the relationship between the supernatural realm and the physical realms of existence in *Julius Caesar* and how both realms affect each other. The play imbricates elements and channels of the supernatural such as ghosts, prognostic divination, soothsaying, and dreams which are revealed through psychoanalytical interpretation to affect the characters' mentality. Psychoanalysis harps on repressed emotions which ultimately manifest as dreams when the individual is unconscious. Calpurna, Caesar's wife dream of his murder, but she may have had premonitions about the event which is activated during her sleep. The ghost of Caesar that appeared to Brutus is a condition of his mind, an accumulation of guilty emotions after the death of Caesar. In addition the play outlines an important aspect of human inclination – a recourse or dependant on the supernatural realm for revelation and insight. It shows that there is certainly no line, whether thin or bold, that separates the two realms of existence. This is because human existence is incomplete without constant recourse to the supernatural realm. However, in Shakespeare's hands, this relationship is structured in a way to reveal how both realms serve a complementary function for the opposite realm.

In *Julius Caesar*, the supernatural constantly intersects with the physical. It acts as a medium of prophecy, a haruspication providing a peep into the future. However, Shakespeare proves that witchcraft, as a channel through which the supernatural is accessed, can be compromised and deceptive. In *Macbeth*, the supernatural, in form of the three witches play a subversive role by deceiving Macbeth, giving him a false sense of security. In this way, the supernatural realm plays

a vital role, negative or positive, in the physical realm even in the contemporary world. In the 21st century, a world confronted by a myriad of problems, is inevitably challenged to seek help in the supernatural realm. However, the supernatural realm is partly responsible for some of the problems and challenges that confront humanity.

The human practice of consulting the supernatural realm for insight and advancement is basically established in the complementary relationship that exists between the two realms. Humanity conceives the supernatural as possessing the power to alter human existence for good or for bad. This power or energy that exists in the supernatural realm can be appropriated by humanity to achieve diverse objectives. In order to ensure the regeneration of the supernatural realm, humanity lubricates that continuum through propitiation and sacrifices. These practices are redolent in religious and cultural practices around the world. In turn, the supernatural realm depends on constant sacrifices and propitiation to maintain power and contact with humanity. While the Western religious spectre of the supernatural and physical realms of existence is globally acclaimed in Christianity and Islam, the African cultural spectre of that same relationship is termed barbaric and fetish. Christians in their worship of God engage in diverse spiritual practices which many times require them to bring gifts to a specified altar or give cash donations to a church. When they pray and fast, they subscribe to the supernatural realm and many times, at the end of their prayers, they lubricate the spiritual thoroughfare with sundry gift items as may be prescribed by a designated spiritual leader. This is a globally accepted practice among the Christendom. But culturally, when the African man engages in practices to access the supernatural realm, it is termed fetish. This research is committed to demonstrate how the supernatural realm and the physical realm share a reciprocal relationship and their alignment is basically complementary as demonstrated by Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*. It is this basic

submission that humanity must accept to maximize all the positive potential that abounds in the relationship between the two realms.

Polemical licence: Shakespeare and the supernatural world

Scholars and critics across the world (Zhu Liwei, 2019; Deva Jasheway, 2009; Amal Frag, 2009; Kenneth Usongo, 2021; Helen Stewart, 2010.) have, at one time or another beamed their critical searchlight on Shakespeare's use of supernatural elements in his plays. These critical voices in various ways try to either justify the use of supernatural elements in Shakespeare's plays or provide insight to the roles they play. Unfortunately, the focus has predominantly been on the supernatural realm without recognition of the physical realm. Of all the critical voices in Shakespeare's use of the supernatural, none as far as this study is concerned, has endeavoured to establish the relationship between the two realms of existence or recognize the playwright's commitment to their complementarities. Liwei Zhu remarks that "Shakespeare's perspective and religious belief affects the usage of some supernatural elements in his plays. Take his religious belief for instance, as a child, Shakespeare received education on religion" (392). Liwei sees Shakespeare's background as the primary reason why he uses supernatural elements in his plays. Apparently, Liwei is more concerned with the reasons which account for the use of the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays more than anything else. Such reasons may not be immediately substantiated since other critics may also give contrary views for the rich use of the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays. Since it will be difficult to arrive at a consensus as to why Shakespeare so profusely used these elements in his plays, it follows that other aspects of such use should be interrogated and examined.

For Deva Jasheway, the supernatural elements in Shakespeare's plays serve a more artistic purpose because they help to galvanize dramatic action. According to him, "whether the supernatural aspect is in the appearance of ghost or the description of an ancient god, it often bears a connection to a larger scheme of the play". (1) Deva does not juxtapose the supernatural with its counterpart existential realm, the physical or how they affect each other. His concern is how the supernatural contributes to the aesthetic quality of the play and its effect on the plot. These views leave the understanding of the supernatural stranded in a delicate cognitive level without deep appreciation of its occurrence in the plays.

In further exposition of the supernatural in varying hues, Amal Frag is of the opinion that 'as a popular dramatist, Shakespeare had to furnish the public taste even if he may or may not have believed in the world of spirit...However his use of supernaturalism has added a deep moral and psychological significance'. (25) Obviously, Frag's thoughts gravitate more towards the moral and psychological significant effect of Shakespeare's use of the supernatural in his plays. For example, in *Hamlet*, following the death of his father, the young Prince Hamlet is psychologically disturbed after the ghost appeared as his late father urging him to avenge his death. Prince Hamlet's impaired psychology drives him to melancholy as he struggles with the morality of committing murder on the mere prodding of an apparition. In *Julius Caesar*, Caesar's ghost appears to Brutus and warns him that they will meet at Philippi. After the encounter with the ghost of Caesar, Brutus suffers psychological breakdown, he becomes nervous and consequently depressed. It is to these kinds of effects of the supernatural that Frag is concerned with in her submission.

Kenneth Usongo's comparative study of the supernatural in Shakespeare and Achebe concentrates more on the effect of the supernatural on the protagonists in the two works.

According to him, “an analysis of the works of Shakespeare and Achebe from a supernatural perspective might determine cross-cultural symbolic habits regarding human nature” (17) While we may isolate Usongo’s views on Achebe because it is beyond the purview of this study, his views on Shakespeare capture our critical fancy. According to Usongo, Shakespeare’s deployment of the supernatural is primarily to demonstrate how different cultures and races react to supernatural elements. For Usongo therefore, it seems that Shakespeare’s juxtaposition of the two realms of existence will better be understood as a form of paradigm to elicit cross-cultural responses. Yet again, the relationship between the two opposite realms and their consequences on each other is left unharnessed.

Helen H. Stewart argues that the supernatural in Shakespeare’s plays are mere constructions of the imagination but that the playwright presents them in such a way to create a picture of reality about them. According to her “in Shakespeare’s plays, he introduces us to the awful abode of ghosts, the exquisite world of fairies, the unseen but active sphere of nymphs and sprites, and the weird conclave of witches with a realism that makes us forget to regard them as mere creatures of the imagination” (44). From the foregoing, it is apparent that Stewart conceives of supernatural elements in Shakespeare’s plays as existing only in the imagination of the physical characters, therefore they are not real. This kind of perception renders the whole supernatural world inconsequential. Although many critics and other people who subscribe to religious syncretism align with this line of thought, but there are abundant evidence even in the Bible, Christianity’s moral manuscript that the supernatural world do exist. Since Stewart’s line of thought denies the existence of the supernatural in Shakespeare’s plays, it destabilizes further attempt to establish a relationship between the two opposed realms of existence. From the analysis below, it is proved that the supernatural realm and the physical realm do not just exist,

they share an inevitable, reciprocal relationship which combines to determine the fate of men. Their existence is real. They are not just an abstract embodiment of the continual warring impulses of humanity.

Julius Caesar: Existence beyond the physical

The dramatic progress of *Julius Caesar* is predicated on a constant straddle between the physical realm and the supernatural realm. According to Horst Zander, “the play contains a rich layer of supernatural agencies and events: there are the Soothsayer, the prodigious thunderstorm at night, with its various portent, the augurers, Caesar’s ghost and several other elements of this kind.”

(13) The first instance is during the Feast of Lupercal when a race was run as part of events to celebrate the occasion. Mark Anthony is one of the characters involved in running this race. From Caesar, we learn that Calpurnia, his wife is barren. Caesar instinctively instructs Mark Anthony to touch Calpurnia as he runs his race since it is believed that any barren women touched during the race will shake off her sterile curse.

Caesar: Forget not, in your speed, Antonius,
To touch Calpurnia; for our elders say
The barren, touched in this holy chase,
Shake off their sterile curse. (Act.1 Scene 2.)

By the above instruction, the ‘almighty’ Caesar admits that the challenge of barrenness on his wife is beyond his or human abilities. The instruction to Anthony to remember to touch Calpurnia confers greater, more powerful supernatural abilities to the unseen forces which is a reality for many. Perhaps, when humans, with all their sophistication and discoveries fail, they inevitably resort to the supernatural realm for solutions to their problems. The feast of Lupercal in Rome was a religious celebration and a fertility rite in honour of the goddess Pan. It involved

nudity by the men who ran the race and animal sacrifice where blood was shed profusely. According to the beliefs of the people, the god Pan, after the feast of Lupercal visited barren women and caused them to become fertile. In this way, the supernatural played an important part in the circumstances of men and Caesar's belief in their existence buttresses this point. However, there is no evidence in the text that Calpurnia or any other woman got pregnant after the feast. Therefore, no one knows whether the god Pan existed or had powers to cause barren women to be pregnant. While it is easy to believe that the supernatural represented by the gods were lubricated through the feast of Lupercal, one can also argue that it was a figment of psychological state of the mind.

Although it is not explicitly stated in the play that Caesar possessed any special supernatural powers, but he demonstrated an uncanny ability at the beginning of the play in his assessment of Cassius. During the encounter, Caesar without any spiritual or supernatural aid, accurately summarizes the personality of Cassius. His perceptive abilities in this instance borders on superhuman abilities which is what supernatural mediums like prognostic divinations are noted for all the time. In addressing Mark Anthony, Caesar states thus:

Caesar: Let me have men about me that are fat;
Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep O' nights.
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
He thinks too much: Such men are dangerous (Act 1. Scene 2)

The abiding textual evidence in the play leading to the murder of Caesar proves the above character assessment of Cassius to be accurate and direct. Caesar's premonition about the invidious role to be played in his murder by Cassius does not emanate from any supernatural medium but rather from his deep sense of human observation. According to Harold Bloom, "although he can be very blind, his estimate of Cassius shows him to be the best analyst of

another human being in all of Shakespeare.” (5) It is this kind of psychological directness that the theory of Psychoanalysis negotiates in this study.

In another instance, while Caesar was in procession during the feast of Lupercal, a soothsayer accosts him, warning him to beware of the Ides of March. A soothsayer is someone who, through some magical means, is able to look into the future and accurately predict or forecast what it portends. Soothsayers are generally believed to consult powers in the supernatural realm to inform humans of impending event. Many times, humanity depends or consults soothsayers to know the minds of the gods, the consequences of human actions and their outcome. As channels of prophesy, soothsayers provide an effective prognosis for interpreting and appreciating the future. Most times, their peep into the future reveals tragic consequences and humans are forewarned to avert the misfortune or disaster. The soothsayer’s warning to Caesar and its eventual accuracy provides the most validation of the existence and positive energy of the supernatural. The Ides of March in Roman calendar was the 74th day of the year which corresponds to the 15th of March in the modern Christian calendar. The date was significant in Rome because it ushered in the New Year with various religious activities and ceremonial rites. On the date also, many remarkable events happen in Rome which symbolizes peace, forgiveness and cancelling of debts. It was for this reason that Caesar was asked to forgive and recall Publius Cimber, Metallus Cimber’s brother who was banished by Caesar. The accuracy of the Soothsayer’s warning that Caesar should be wary of the Ides of March upholds the supremacy of the supernatural in the affairs of men who occupy the physical realm. After the soothsayer’s warning, Caesar ignores it and just as predicted, he was murdered on the same day. Caesar’s eventual death despite all the warnings and signs proves that man’s helplessness in the hands of

the supernatural elements “aims to reflect through physical and symbolic means the archetypal struggle of the mortal being against exterior forces.” (Soyinka 43)

On the eve of the Ides of March, there were ferocious thunder and lightning around the Capitol and a lion also roared within the vicinity. During the night also, Calpurnia, Caesar’s wife, shouted in her dream to the effect that Caesar was murdered.

Caesar: Nor heaven, nor earth, have been at peace tonight:
Thrice had Calpurnia in her sleep cried out,
Help, ho! They murder Caesar! – Who’s within? (Act 2 scene 2)

In response to the strange happenings of the previous night, Caesar sent a servant to consult the supernatural through the augurer to know the mind of the gods. Upon return, the servant informs Caesar that the augurer warns that he should not step out of the house the same day. According to the servant, after killing a beast meant for sacrifice to the gods, the priest did not find the heart of the beast and therefore warns that it portends evil for Caesar’s movement the same day. For the second time in the play, we see Julius Caesar recognize the existence of supernatural powers. By asking his servant to consult the oracle, Caesar admits that the gods can see into the future and advise accordingly. Evidently, the gods warn Caesar not to step out of his house the same day but he characteristically ignores the warning. Eventually, the warning is vindicated because Caesar was murdered the same day. Also, Calpurnia dreams that Caesar was murdered and many people came to wash their hands in his blood. This revelation from the supernatural realm is one of the most potent forces in the entire play. Her warning becomes an accurate prophecy which precisely describes the events of the future.

Finally, the ghost of Caesar appears to Brutus at Sardis while he was preparing for battle and warns him that they both will meet at Philippi. The appearance of Caesar’s ghost can be described as the most visible occurrence of the supernatural in the play. Many people doubt the

existence of ghosts but in this case, Caesar's ghost appears to Brutus and converses with him. The first primary function of the ghost as an element of the supernatural is to inflict guilt on Brutus' psychology and state of mind. This is because, after the ghost vanishes, Brutus suffers guilt for the first time after murdering Caesar. He also goes through spells of depression and melancholy. Generally, whenever the supernatural intervenes in the lives of men, it is either to play prophetic roles by providing information about the future or to reveal the cause of an event and provide remedy in the physical realm. In this case, Caesar's ghost provides information about Brutus' defeat in the battle at Philippi. At the appearance of the ghost, Brutus demands to know its mission and the ghost gives a cryptic answer:

Brutus: Why com'st thou?

Ghost: To tell thee thou shall see me at Philippi. (Act. 4 scene 3)

The warning of the ghost was prophetic and accurate. At Philippi during the second and final battle between Brutus and Cassius and Mark Anthony and Octavius Caesar's forces, Caesar's ghost again appears to Brutus. This time, Brutus accepts his fate and commits suicide instead of being captured alive. It is believed that Caesar's ghost was responsible for Brutus' defeat.

Conclusion

Although Shakespeare demonstrates the inevitable interaction and relationship between the supernatural realm and the physical realm in most of his plays, it is also pronounced in *Julius Caesar*. The relationship sustains the plot development in a good degree because it creates suspense since the audience is eager to know what happens as events unfold. The linkage between the activities of men in the physical and the interruption by elements of the supernatural realm proves that humanity can hardly do without the supernatural. The Four dimensions of supernatural occurrence in the play, through soothsayer, through dreams, through oracular

consultation and through the appearance of a ghost are indicative of the various dimensions through which both realms can come together and influence each other. While the oracular consultation of the supernatural requires a sacrifice to activate the spiritual thoroughfare, no propitiation is required at the other times for the supernatural to manifest. This proves that the supernatural can manifest itself without prompting through dreams or the appearance of a ghost or they can manifest with sacrificial prompting through oracular consultations. As the appearance of the ghost of Caesar shows, a ghost can be a psychological state when man is burdened by dominant thoughts which create an image in the subconscious mind. Conversely, the subconscious mind can be regarded as belonging to the supernatural realm since its existence is suppressed by the conscious mind which becomes active during dreams or when the conscious mind is inactive. Indeed, from the events in *Julius Caesar*, the supernatural realm and the physical realm share an inevitable unity and must be appreciated as such.

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