

The Real Mystery of the Beetle

A study of the symbolism in Richard Marsh's novel

The evolution of a human to a monster bug can be described as literal fantasy. But more than a scientific interpretation, the book calls for cultural and ethical appreciation. To understand the inner layers of meaning in Richard Marsh's novel, "The Beetle: A Mystery", we need a clear perspective on the life and times in the late Victorian London. The city was in the grips of a revolutionary social change which was forcing individuals to redefine the accepted concepts of race and gender.

Robert Holt, the unfortunate clerk represents the lower strata of an unequal social order. The rich were getting richer while a huge chunk of the population was plagued by unemployment and starvation. The Beetle's residence is symbolic of the squalor in which the people of the slums lived. "...an uncomfortable odor greeted our nostrils, which was suggestive of some evil-smelling animal." The Beetle symbolizes the degradation of society, when human beings were reduced to the lives of savages, forced into a life of crime and immorality. As we move through the streets of the nocturnal city, we are brought face to face with the Gothic horror of poverty at its worst.

London was also aggravated by the emergence of two sexual issues. Homosexuality was viewed as a something that was unnatural and therefore inhuman. The uncertainty of the gender of the Beetle is reflective of the confusion felt by the common man in this regard. The other issue was the growth of the new woman. In the novel, Marjorie Lindon is every inch the modern face of womankind, strong, passionate, yearning for equality. While her father is a personification of orthodoxy, who views "a speechifying woman as a thing of horror".

Marjorie passively admits that she doesn't find anything wrong about shocking her father with unacceptable behavior. Under the influence of the Beetle she throws away her female

attire and wears a man's clothes which was considered equivalent to profanity. Marjorie is torn between her need to be recognized as an intelligent individual and the ties that bind her to her father. She stands as a threat to authority and displays liberal thinking. But like most people she abhors beetles with "a rooted, and, apparently, illogical dislike."

This unfounded aversion to things that are foreign was a hallmark of upper class British who considered themselves superior to every other being on Earth. Consequently, other races and nationalities were relegated to a lower level of existence. Their inability to comprehend the nuances of the occult led them to reject the whole idea as trash. When Marjorie Lindon puts off the light to escape from her tormentor, she realizes that she had made "a grievous error. I had exchanged bad for worse. The darkness lent added terrors." Richard Marsh makes it clear that ignorance -depicted here as darkness- only made matters more complicated.

The protagonist, Paul Lessingham is indicative of the political turmoil and the general hysteria associated with reform. Being stalked by the Beetle he cannot move away from his past. Neither can he enjoy the present or look forward into the future. This is the hypnotic impact that the Beetle had on people. Unable to acclimatize with the shifting horizons of race, class and gender, they found themselves enveloped in the pangs of delirious anxiety. The Beetle is simultaneously fascinating and disturbing. Even the practical, scientifically inclined Sidney Atherton, fails to understand its implication. Here Richard Marsh openly criticizes the characterless nature of modern technology which was supposed to make things easier for the public but created bewilderment instead.

The romantic melodrama and the detective plot placed the novel in the popular fiction category, but *The Beetle* stands testimony to the collapse of social norms that existed in the 19th century and the materialization of a more open minded, unbiased and tolerant new generation.

References

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