

The Bye Bye Man Study Guide

The Bye Bye Man by Robert Damon Schneck

(c)2017 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Bye Bye Man Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Section 1: 'Ouija' through 'The Bridge to Body Island'.....	4
Section 2: 'Eye on the Bye Bye Man' to the Imaginary Ghost.....	8
Section 3: The Imaginary Ghost to the End.....	11
Characters.....	14
Symbols and Symbolism.....	16
Settings.....	18
Themes and Motifs.....	19
Styles.....	21
Quotes.....	22



Plot Summary

Robert's Damon Schneck's investigative short story takes an in-depth look at how efforts have been made to communicate with the spiritual world. It begins with an examination of the origins and history of the Ouija board. The nineteenth Century saw a rise in mysticism focused on communicating with the astral plane, which gave rise to tools or methods used to communicate with the dead, including the Ouija board. After describing the history and creation of the Ouija board, Schneck begins to focus on instances where malevolent spirits have communicated through Ouija boards. This starts with a description of the notorious case of Mattie Turley, which involved a teenager shooting and killing her father, and then delves more deeply into a story into a story that Schneck's personal friend Eli told him involving events dealing with a Ouija board and the mysterious figure, the "Bye Bye Man."

This events started in the summer of 1990 and involved three friends who began to have séances. They began to grow bored with the friendly spirits who spoke to them through the board, and after a "strike," they persuaded those spirits to connect them with the Bye Bye Man. The exact nature of the Bye Bye Man is never made clear - whether he was a spirit, a demon, or living human, but after a few eerie encounters, the séances end. Schneck admits the conclusion is not "a very satisfying conclusion" (145), but it serves as a springboard for Schneck himself to undertake an investigation of the origins of the Bye Bye Man, starting in Algiers, a part of New Orleans.

Schneck was unable to find any evidence that the Bye Bye Man actually existed in Algiers, or that he committed the railway murders that were rumored to be the start of his carnage. This leads Schneck to suggest that maybe the events in Wisconsin were, in fact, an attempted demonic possession. Schneck goes on to describe the nature of demonic possession and the events that lead to a person becoming possessed, including a discussion of how any of the three friends, who "were living lives that traditional moralists would describe as sinful" (153), would make ideal targets for demonic possession.

Schneck concludes the chapter by examining the Bye Bye Man as either an urban legend or as product of the subconsciousnesses of the sitters. This includes a description of his striking features, namely the Albinism, blindness, and the Bye Bye Man's companion, the Gloomslinger. To illustrate how such an entity could be created collectively, Schneck compares the features of the Bye Bye Man with a spirit created in controlled settings at the University of Toronto named "Philip." Following this comparison, Schneck concludes that "there is no evidence to suggest the Bye Bye Man actually exists" (174).



Section 1: 'Ouija' through 'The Bridge to Body Island'

Summary

Ouija boards have existed since the late nineteenth century and have straddled the boundary between "harmless, slightly spooky" (127) entertainment and full-fledged "disturbing experiences" (127). The board is constituted of two pieces - a board with the alphabet, numbers 0-9, as well as "Yes" and "No," and a pointer or 'planchette' that slides across the board to select numbers of letters in response to questions posed by the participants. While attempts have been made to link the Ouija board to ancient forms of divination, the Ouija board falls more in line with the Victorian era sensibilities, when orators would create full-length books or lectures that were reportedly dictated by spirits. The Ouija board itself was first patented in 1891, but it was not until 1901, when William Fuld began to work on the marketing for the board, that it became household word. Fuld claimed that the name was fusion of 'oui' (French for yes) and 'ja' (German for yes), though other theories claim that it was "the Egyptian word for good luck" (130) or "the name came from the fabled Moroccan city Oujda" (130). To add to the mystique of the board, Fuld died a tragic death in a Ouija board factory.

There are two common hypotheses as to how the Ouija board works. One is that the board is driven by automatism, meaning the answers are created by the sitter's or sitters' minds. Historically, "...psychologists encouraged their patients to produce automatic writing as a way of gaining access to the subconscious" (131), however, spirits are most famously credited with creating the messages. One of the most well-known examples is a housewife from St. Louis named Pearl Curran, who received a message from a spirit who claimed to be a poor English woman who had emigrated to the United States before being killed in an Indian massacre. The collaboration between Curran and the spirit was prolific, and led to the creation of "historical novels, plays, poems, short stories, and a monthly magazine" (131). Admittedly, it is up to the spirits to identify themselves, and "they can claim to be anyone from Imhotep to the sitter's Aunt Emily" (132). Predictably, the Ouija board became known as a dangerous toy, linked with potential demonic possession and "astral mischief" (133). An infamous scandal happened in 1933 when Mattley Turley, just a teenager, shot and killed her father and then claimed that she had been instructed to do so by a Ouija board. It was later revealed that she was acting under her mother's instruction and that it was her mother who had been using the board.

Unexplained paranormal experiences have been reported by sitters, including the event told to Schneck by his friend "Eli" (a pseudonym) which constitutes the event that makes up the story of the Bye Bye Man. Three friends, two of them a romantic couple, began to have séances with a Ouija board in a small town in Wisconsin called Sun Prairie. The narrator of the story, Eli, was working as a caretaker for three adults with Prader-Willi Syndrome, a genetic disorder in which the manifestation is "stunted growth, limited brain



development, high-pitched voices, but the most dramatic symptom is their insatiable appetites" (135). The three friends used a Ouija board for their séances, and communicated primarily through the "Spirit of the Board," who connected the sitters with various spirits. Eventually, the sitters became bored with the spirits they were communicating with, and the Spirit of the Board mentions an entity that was more than a spirit; in fact, it was an actual living human. This entity is the Bye Bye Man, and the Spirit of the Board refused to connect the sitters with him because he was dangerous, to the relief of Katherine, Eli's girlfriend and one of the sitters. Eli and John, the third friend, however wanted to communicate with the entity, so they staged a strike.

The strike was successful, and through it, the sitters learned the story of the Bye Bye Man. He suffered from albinism, and grew up in an orphanage in Algiers, a part of New Orleans. As a child, he was violent, and eventually, according to the board, he attacked the head nurse, which led to him fleeing the orphanage. His eyesight, always poor, failed him, but it did not stop him from traveling around the country by railways and "carrying out random killings," aided by his created companion, the Groomsinger. The Groomsinger was a macabre creature of tongues and eyes sewn together that "acted like a hunting dog" (139) and assisted the Bye Bye Man in his murderous ways. The Bye Bye Man developed a sort of telepathy that allowed him to sense when people were talking or thinking about him, which led him to track those people down.

The séances began to have an effect on the participants: Katherine began to have panic attacks, always around 3 a.m., "the soul's midnight" (140), when the soul is at its lowest ebb. John also reported having a sense of unease. The uneasiness felt by all three culminates when Katherine and Eli had a terrifying encounter on the bridge to Body Island, an island infamous for dead bodies washing ashore. Katherine heard what sounded like a train whistle, and was overwhelmed by a tide of fear. Subsequently, she suffered from panic attacks for the rest of the day. On the same night, John had a terrifying encounter in his apartment: he felt uneasy and could not concentrate. He could not fall asleep in his bed, so he decided to try sleeping on his floor. He was awoken by a knock at the door and Katherine's voice telling him "let's go out to breakfast!" He noticed that it was still very dark outside, and was "overcome by a sense of fear so intense that he felt limp and lay back down on the floor" (140).

Eli tells John it could not have been Katherine when asked, and John is left to wonder what would have happened if he had opened the door.

Analysis

Schneck immediately establishes that while the Ouija board is a game for most, it has been rumored to have more sinister paranormal effects on others. Like so many paranormal occurrences, these happenings are unverifiable, unsubstantiated, but passed by word of mouth. After establishing both the mundane origins and creation of the Ouija board, Schneck begins to build towards "The Bridge to Body Island," which is an example of just such a story: it was told to Schneck by a personal friend, and while it is not an example of the board performing clichéd activities such as planchette attacking



the sitters or spelling out the names of demons, "the horrors are gruesome- almost lunative- they're never seen" (135). That the horrors are repeated through a chain of storytellers underscores their unsubstantiated nature.

Eli begins his story of the events surrounding the Bye Bye Man with a description of the setting, which includes "dying family farms and scattered hamlets like Pumpkin Hollow and Killdeer Creek" (135), details that already begin to create an eerie picture of death and decay. He next mentions that he spent that summer working with Prader-Willi (PWS) syndrome patients. These patients suffer from a genetic deficiency like the Bye Bye Man (albinism is caused by a genetic mutation which leads to a lack of pigmentation in the skin), however they are a point of contrast to the Bye Bye Man because while they have an insatiable appetite for food, they do not rove around the country murdering hobos. This contrasts highlights both the importance of societal prejudice against obvious differences and deficiencies, but also the difference between the time period that the Bye Bye Man was rumored to have been born - prior to the Depression, and the PWS patients who Eli cared for in the late twentieth century. Based on the telling of the story and his participation in the séances, it is clear that Eli believes in the possibility of the Bye Bye Man's existence. His dedication to divination through the Ouija board indicates that he believes that the sitters were communicating with spirits, and it was not the arguably more rational hypothesis of automatism.

Aside from the basic facts detailing the history and creation of the board, many of the events described in this first section are subject to audience's personal interpretation of the events. This includes the events in 'The Bridge to Body Island', but also the events in Mattie Turley's case and the stories of Pearl Curran. One of the themes of the story is the evasiveness of truth, and either of these stories could well be the subject of their own investigation as whether or not spirits were involved or whether it was solely the creation of the living person credited with the material.

Discussion Question 1

What is the connection between nineteenth Century Spiritualism and the Ouija board?

Discussion Question 2

How does Schneck connect divination with a tradition of story telling?

Discussion Question 3

How do the spirits that the trio (Eli, Katherine, and John) first communicate with through the Ouija board function as gatekeepers?



Vocabulary

phenomena, planchette, voluminous, disassociation, prolific, divination, occult, automatism, insatiable



Section 2: 'Eye on the Bye Bye Man' to the Imaginary Ghost

Summary

Admittedly, the story of the Bye Bye Man "does not have a satisfying resolution" (145). Schneck admits that part of why the story spooked him might have to do with hearing it on Halloween, as well as that Eli, the original narrator, sacrificed accuracy for the sake of a compelling narrative. To investigate the possibility of the Bye Bye Man's existence, Schneck decides to try to pursue information about either the orphanage that the Bye Bye Man grew up in or the murders he later committed. Schneck travels to New Orleans and ventures to Algiers, the supposed location of the orphanage. According to the Algiers Historical Society, the orphanage did not exist. Schneck then decides that perhaps the Bye Bye Man had actually been raised in a home for disabled children, however, Schneck finds none that are the right age. Next, he turns to records of mass killers, which leads him to the "The Cleveland Torso killer" - however, this is also fruitless, as of the 16 accepted "torso" murders, head heads were recovered, and no showed signs of the mutilation the Bye Bye man would undertake. Without any evidence, Schneck concludes that the Bye Bye Man was an invention. At a dead end, Schneck then begins to explore other possibilities, including demonic possession.

Possession is presented as a universal, paranormal occurrence with historical precedents, including "Christian worship that actively seek possession by the Holy Spirit" (149). The spirits involved in Wisconsin were not benign. Medieval and Renaissance authorities believed possession was a causal event, most likely caused by the sinfulness of the victim. The sitters, based on their lifestyles and "aspects of their lives do suggest a vulnerability or openness to diabolical forces" (152). All three had unconventional opinions and were leading lives that some might consider amoral, and the addition of the Ouija board might have been enough to lead to a demonic possession. Schneck does not argue that the possession happened, just that it was attempted.

Schneck next turns to a more thorough look of the characteristics of the Bye Bye Man. He suggests that the name 'Bye Bye Man' is reminiscent of the names of many urban legends, including the "Hookman" would haunted lover's lanes. Whatever the origin, because even thinking his name is enough to draw him to a victim, it remains, according to Schneck, "the single most important part of the story" (155). Another significant aspect of the Bye Bye Man's characterization is his albinism, something which marks the Bye Bye Man as an anomaly and social outcast. The Bye Bye Man was also blind, which Schneck says "can be interpreted symbolically as separation from light, truth, and goodness" (158). The Gloomslinger is even further shrouded mystery, though it has parallels to both Frankenstein and creatures from H.P. Lovecraft's works. Whatever its origins, it plays a critical role in the Bye Bye Man's story and his gruesome acts. The motivations of the Bye Bye Man are as mysterious and indiscernible as his origins,



however, Schneck draws parallels to both mutilations practices in Voodoo (or Vodou) and traditional West African practices.

Analysis

In this section, Schneck begins to more specifically develop the themes of social rejection and deviation, particularly with regard to the Bye Bye man himself, and the challenge of finding truth. Even during the initial telling of the events, Eli embellishes the narrative, "sacrificing accuracy for effect" (145), which is likely a common problem for urban legends. The need to play up specific elements for dramatic effect, even without changing the fundamental storyline can warp a story. The conclusion that the Bye Bye Man is an invention is unsatisfying, but as Schneck notes, it is central to the theme that in spiritual matters there are two possible interpretations: either it is spirits trying to interact with the living, or it is the product of the sitters' subconscious. Each of the urban legends that Schneck discusses had an origin story as to how they either earned their name or unique physical characteristics, and while any evidence of the Bye Bye Man's existence is lacking, Schneck's theories as to his origin and name are abundant. That even is thinking his name is enough to draw the Bye Bye Man to a victim suggests that his name is meant to be secret. Schneck connects this to folklore figures such as Rumpelstiltskin: "To know the Bye Bye Man's name and think about it, however is to steal away some important part of him, something that he is compelled to retrieve through murder and mutilation" (155).

Algiers, the hometown of the Bye Bye man, as Schneck describes it, is appropriately "a part of New Orleans that most visitors never see" (146), and features "...dangerous looking bars, dilapidated houses, and vacant industrial lots...home to some of America's worst urban poverty and crime" (146). Even today, the town exists on the periphery or outskirts of proper society. Similarly, the 'Mad Butcher' or 'Cleveland Torso Killer,' also exists on the outskirts, and while from the evidence Schneck was able to uncover he was not the Bye Bye Man, he did prey on similar victims, namely hobos and transients living by rail lines. Being born with albinism marked the Bye Bye Man for a life of living as a subject of potential persecution and suspicion. "...the albino was not white, black, or mixed, and was likely to be rejected by all three" (156). It was especially problematic for individuals of African descent. As Schneck quotes from the National Organization for Albinism and Hypo-pigmentation: "A basic theme in many variation in that God is delivering judgement on a family with albinism and that the individual with albinism is cursed or the embodiment of sin... Another belief that the person with albinism is the result of incest or inbreeding" (156). The Bye Bye Man is further separated from society by his blindness.

The possibility that the sitters may have been influenced by popular culture is also introduced in this section, with Schneck connecting attributes of the Bye Bye Man's character to historic horror writers Mary Shelley and H.P. Lovecraft, as well as the more recent film "Angel Heart," which came out in the late 1980's and featured Algiers as a setting.



Discussion Question 1

Schneck begins Section 2 by admitting that his source, Eli, sacrificed accuracy for effect when telling story. Does this influence your willingness to believe the story of the events surrounding the Bye Bye Man?

Discussion Question 2

Based on the lack of physical evidence, Schneck concludes that the story seems to be an invention. He proposes two potential creators: either spirits or the sitter's subconscious. Which party seems most likely?

Discussion Question 3

How does the Bye Bye Man's physical characteristic mark him as being different from others?

Vocabulary

resolution, lapses, benign, sadistic, reputed, transients, charismatic, malevolent, transgressions, astigmatism, telepathy



Section 3: The Imaginary Ghost to the End

Summary

The "Philip Effect" is one plausible explanation for the events surrounding the Bye-Bye Man, however many elements of that story contrast with the story of the Bye Bye Man. Philip as a ghost created by a research team in Toronto to investigate whether séance phenomena could be created "in full light" (163). Philip fell in love with a gypsy while out riding, and the resulting affair caused her to be accused of witchcraft and burnt at the stake. Philip himself committed suicide out of a sense of remorse and agony. Notably, the story was mix of fact and fiction, and in séances, the ghost could only answer questions based on the material that had been created and agreed upon by the research team. He was the product of a deliberate approach that was intended to be consistent and repeatable, which differs vastly from the events in Wisconsin. The creation of the Bye Bye Man was not deliberate, and it was marked by a strong emotions that likely impacted how events unfolded.

In part, this may be due to the fact that the sitters involved in the séances with the Bye Bye Man were "in a state of transition" (167). John, who had the most intense experience with the Bye Bye Man, was particularly "adrift in the 'gap between old and new'" (167). The in-between spaces are "frequently associated with strange phenomena" (170). Additionally, it is possible that the changing nature of the relationships between participants impacted the characteristics of the Bye Bye Man. Not long after the events, Eli and Katherine separated, and shortly afterwards she began to see John. Schneck suggests that it is possible that an attraction between John and Katherine led to certain elements of the Bye Bye Man's characterization, particularly anything related to sex and guilt.

Schneck's final proposal for the nature of the Bye Bye Man is that he was a 'thought-form', or "... a non-physical entity created by thought" (169). Madame Alexandra David-Neel was a French scholar and Buddhist who spent many years in Tibet studying mysticism. In particular, she experimented with 'tulpa,' or thought-form creation. She managed to create her own innocuous thought-form. While David-Neel's tulpa was initially created, they can also appear spontaneously, especially to travelers and Western mountain-climbers. Schneck speculates that perhaps if the séances had continued in Wisconsin, something more dangerous could have been created. An additional possible explanation for the Bye Bye Man is that he was an 'artificial element'- artificial elements do not obey commands and are "fixed by the emotions" (171) that lead to their creation. Of the three sitters in Wisconsin, John is identified as the most likely participant to have created an artificial element. The night of his experience with the Bye Bye Man, he was potentially lonely or bored, and missing his friends. He was awoken by a knock at the door and the voice of his infatuation. That John did not invite the artificial element possibly short-circuited any other potential harm to the participants.



The story does not have a conclusive ending. While the evidence to suggest that the Bye Bye Man exists is scant, Schneck makes a quick reference to more recent events in Montana which, while they occurred close to rail tracks, do not match the profile of the Bye Bye Man's murders. Schneck makes his own trip across the bridge to Body Island but gains no additional insights.

Analysis

Philip's story is a deliberate contrast to the Bye Bye Man's. While the the Bye Bye Man grew up as impoverished orphan, Philip is an estate-holding aristocrat. Philip is motivated by remorse and agony over suffering he has caused, but the Bye-Bye Man perpetuates suffering by committing gruesome murders. Philip is created in a controlled environment by researchers intentionally kept calm and collected, but the Bye Bye Man was created in an emotionally charged environment characterized by fear and potentially lust coupled with guilt. In Wisconsin, the situation was "an impromptu arrangement that produced unforeseen results" (166). The sitters did not intend to create the Bye Bye Man, and his appearance brought the séances to an abrupt end. As Schneck notes: "In contrast with the powerful but artificial emotions used in Philip, the Bye Bye Man was created against a backdrop of genuine fear, dislocation, and sexual tension" (167). The impact this has on the course of events is critical.

This last section dives most deeply into self-generated spirits or beings, and with Schneck proposing that "these scraps of Bye Bye Man might have coalesced into something more formidable and the results might have been fatal" (171). Of all the proposed theories surrounding the Bye Bye Man, Schneck makes the strongest case that he might have been the product of "emotions that caused it to appear in the first place" (171), and even goes so far as to suggest that John, caught in state of transition and developing strong feelings for Katherine, might have been the possible creator of the Bye Bye Man. "Perhaps the castration symbols in the Bye Bye Man's story express guilt over contemplated sexual misconduct" (173). Because of the disorganized nature of sitter's approach in Wisconsin, it results in "an undefined, loosely constructed being that tried to fulfill its creators' expectations by killing anyone thinking about Gloomsinger or the Bye-Bye Man" (173).

Discussion Question 1

How do the circumstances that lead to Philip's creation differ from that of the circumstances surrounding the Bye Bye Man?

Discussion Question 2

How would you compare the Bye Bye Man to the tulpas that are described?



Discussion Question 3

What symbolism does Schneck crossing the bridge at the very end of Section 3 have?

Vocabulary

aristocratic, apparition, manifestation, benign, poltergeist, pubescent, potent, patricide, peregrinations



Characters

Narrator

The narrator is a friend to the three participants who encounter the Bye-Bye Man in Wisconsin, as well as the reader's guide through other related anecdotes and background information about Ouija boards and other communications with spirits.

The Bye Bye Man

It is unclear what exactly the Bye-Bye Man is - a spirit? A demon? Something in-between? His story is very similar to an urban legend in that much of it is murky and varies depending on who is telling the story, however he is most commonly described as being blind and is thought to suffer from Albinism. He originates from Algiers, a part of New Orleans.

Katherine

Katherine is one of the three friends who encounters the Bye Bye Man. During the course of the events surrounding the Bye Bye Man, she is romantically involved with Eli.

John

John is also involved with events surrounding the Bye Bye Man. It is John who has an unnerving experience late one night where someone (or something) comes to his door and imitates the sound of his friends' voice in an attempt to lure him out of his room.

Eli

Eli is the third friend involved, and is the person responsible for narrating the events to the overall narrator in the section titled "The Bridge to Body Island." Similar to John, he is interested in horror and the paranormal.

Mattie Turley

Mattie Turley is a teenager who shot and killed her father because of communication with her mother's Ouija board.



The Gloomslinger

The Gloomslinger is the Bye-Bye Man's companion on his travels. He thought to be macabre creation sutured together from pieces of corpses, that functions as a "hunting dog" (158) for the Bye Bye Man.

Philip

Philip is an aristocratic ghost created by researchers at the Society for Physical Research as part of a study on the origin and reproducibility of séance phenomena.

Dr. A.R.G. Owens

Dr. Owens is the director of the study at the Society for Physical Research.

Madame Alexandra David-Neel

Madame Alexandra David-Neel was a French scholar, traveler, writer, and Buddhist who spent her life studying mysticism and spirituality.

William Fund

William Fund is the man who made the Ouija board a household name through clever marketing at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Spirit of the Board

During the séances in Wisconsin, the Spirit of the board functions as a sort of gatekeeper for the sitters. It keeps the malevolent spirits at bay. However when Katherine, Eli, and John become bored with those spirits and stage a strike, the Spirit of the Board reluctantly begins to introduce them to aspects of the Bye Bye Man's story.



Symbols and Symbolism

Philip, the "Imaginary Ghost"

Philip serves as a foil to the Bye Bye Man. He is created under controlled settings in Toronto, and even the details of his past life are the opposite of the Bye Bye Man's. He is "an aristocratic Englishman" (163), unlike the Bye Bye Man, who grew up in an orphanage. Philip is not marked by the savagery and the goriness of the Bye Bye Man.

The Bridge

The bridge to Body Island represents transitions. In the case of Katherine and John, it represents the transition from what they are able to handle psychically to what they can not. In the case of the narrator, Schneck himself, it represents the transition from his investigation to his final conclusion that the truth of the events surrounding the Bye Bye Man is unknowable.

The Bye Bye Man's albinism

In the case of the Bye Bye Man, his extreme whiteness marks him as unnatural and abhorrent. The Bye Bye Man's albinism marks him as "unsettling" (156). An Albino has "no substantive deformity - and yet this mere aspect of all-pervading whiteness make him more strangely hideous than the ugliest abortion" (156).

Ouija board

The Ouija board represents a seemingly trivial object that has deeper and darker roots than are apparent on the surface. Schneck contrasts the Ouija board with Parcheesi and Monopoly, other board games, to highlight the appeal of the Ouija board's "mystery and danger" (127). Despite this, the board is very much marketed as entertainment "...sample questions printed on the box: Will I star in my own music video?' 'Does Taylor like me?'" (127). These questions are vastly different from the experiences of John, Katherine, and Eli.

The Bye Bye Man

The Bye Bye Man himself represents the ultimate enigma - something (or in this case someone) which had rippling effects, but is essentially unknowable and unverifiable. This connects with larger questions of faith and spirituality, and indeed, even what could be argued to be real, tangible, and true.

The Prader-Willi syndrome patients

Like the Bye Bye Man, the Prader-Willi syndrome (PWS) patients suffer from a genetic deficiency that gives them an unsettling characteristic, namely, their insatiable hunger. In some ways, this is similar to the Bye Bye Man's insatiable hunger for violence, however because the PWS patients are not characterized by harmful behaviors, they are a foil to the Bye Bye Man and his blood lust and gore.

Settings

Algiers

Algiers is the part of New Orleans that the Bye Bye Man originates from. It is described as being on the west bank of the Mississippi and east of the French Quarter.

Arizona

Arizona is where Mattie Turley shoots and kills her father.

Sun Prairie, Wisconsin

Sun Prairie is where the three friends (John, Eli and Katherine) make first contact with the spirits in the Ouija board.

Barker Stewart or "Body Island"

Barker Stewart is an island near Wassau, Wisconsin where bodies frequently wash ashore. Katherine and Eli have a frightening, unexplained encounter there during the time that they are communicating with the spirits through the Ouija board.

The University of Toronto

The University of Toronto is the location of the study undertaken to understand séances.



Themes and Motifs

Self-Generation of Paranormal Phenomena In Contrast With Spiritualism

Automatism or some other form of internal generation is offered as explanation for how the Ouija board works as an alternative to actually divining with spirits. This dichotomy is presented throughout, starting with Pearl Curran, who had a prolific collaboration with a spirit that resulted in numerous written texts. In this first example, Schneck admits that "...it remains unclear how much of it came from the author's subconsciousness" (131). Pearl Curran herself denied that her material came from a Ouija board, but her readers "maintained that Pearl had buckled under the pressures and criticisms from outsiders" (132).

Schneck determines through his investigation that the Bye Bye Man is a creation, but how, why, and by whom remained mysteries. The final possible explanations that Schneck propose are both self-generated, however the line between automatism and spiritualism begins to become blurry as both forms (namely tulpas and artificial elementals) are spirits, and as Schneck describes, possibly difficult to control once they have been created. This suggests that it is up to either the readers or the participants to decide what they believe, as the definitive truth in these circumstances is hard to pin down.

Social Deviation and Rejection

Many of the characters are outsiders from mainstream American society, either through their habits or their physical appearance, which may have played a part in why or how they were able to see the various spirits or tulpas. Katherine, John, and Eli "held unconventional social, spiritual, and political opinions" (153), and the Bye Bye Man is physically marked as unsettling and disorienting, possibly for racial reasons. "...when fair skin confers superior rank, a black person who is whiter than a white person is disorienting for everyone" (156). Additionally, "A basic theme...is that God is delivering judgment on a family with albinism, and that the individual with albinism is cursed, or is the embodiment of sin" (156). The Bye Bye Man's appearance causes him to be socially ostracized, and coupled with his behavior, he becomes rejected by society, first in the orphanage, and then as a railroad drifter/murdering menace.

Other characters exist outside the normal confines of society, including the Bye Bye Man's victims, which are mostly hobos and transients living near railroad lines, the gypsy 'Margo' who Philip the ghost falls in love with, and Madame Alexander David-Neel, who "spent fourteen years in Tibet...studying with swamis, hermits, and lamas [all groups who avoid regular society]" (170). She also spent considerable time in social isolation to create tulpa of her own. Whether this creation would have been possible

from within society is not discussed, but it seems isolation was a critical aspect of the process.

The Elusive Nature of Truth

In the epilogue, Schneck describes his approach to research as "... a combination of Christmas morning, piecing together a dinosaur skeleton, and playing Battleship ("Hey! You sunk my unsubstantiated conclusion!")" (182), and this quest for truth, an "elusive quarry" (176), shapes the structure of the narrative. As Schneck investigates the truth, it takes the shape of proposing explanations, and then refuting them based on evidence. For each proposed explanation, Schneck outlines his thoughts, the research he undertakes, and then his subsequent conclusion as to why that particular line of inquiry is not the most accurate explanation for the Bye Bye Man.

Throughout, Schneck discusses when he feels the information is less than truthful. "Eli will admit to sacrificing accuracy for effect when telling the story for Halloween," and considering that the Bridge to Body Island story is told over a decade after the events transpired, few aspects of the story can be conclusively proved or even investigated. As Schneck investigates, he admits that "the ultimate source of the Bye Bye Man will remain unknown" (154), but by breaking down the "anatomy" (154) of the Bye Bye Man's story, perhaps some insight can be gained. By tying the Bye Bye Man's story to urban legends, including "the fiends that are said to haunt lovers' lanes, summer camps, and dark stretches of woods" (155), Schneck suggests there is perhaps a seed of truth in the Bye Bye Man's story - however, it is buried deep.

Styles

Point of View

With the exception of the section labeled "The Bridge to Body Island," the story is told from the point of view of the narrator, Schneck. The Bridge from Body Island is told as a first person narrator by Eli, who is the originator of the Bye Bye Man's story and a participant in the séances that lead to his discovery.

Language and Meaning

The story is written in the style of investigative journalism, in which the narrator focuses less on the events that constitute the story and more on the history and cultural factors that influenced the events and the participants. The language is straightforward and without embellishments or figurative elements.

Structure

The story is structured into three parts. In the first, the background of of the Ouija board is explained, as well as theories as to how it works and how it compares to other forms of communicating with spirits. This part also includes the actual events surrounding the Bye Bye Man, which serve as launchpoint for Schneck's investigation on the veracity of the story and potential explanations for the events that took place. In the second part, Schneck begins to not only define whether the Bye-Bye Man existed, but also takes a closer look at some of the characteristics of the Bye Bye Man. The second part also begins to explore some of the possible explanations for what happened in Wisconsin. This exploration continues into the final part, which uses an intentionally fabricated ghost as a foil to the story of the Bye-Bye Man. The contrast between Philip the ghost and the Bye Bye Man allows Schneck to highlight aspects of the Bye Bye Man's story that makes it unique,



Quotes

You can play all the Parcheesi you want without having to worry about demonic possession, and if you throw Monopoly into a fire, it won't scream the way Ouija supposedly does.

-- Narrator/Schneck (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote begins to introduce the sometimes-tiny division between spiritual matters and entertainment, as well as that rumors (i.e. the Ouija board screaming if it's thrown into a fire) and urban legends occupy a unique place in the public's imagination. So many of these rumors come from a trusted friend, and are spread informally. While they are unsubstantiated, they are often inferred to have an element of truth.

The resulting material may be so alien to the participants' notion of themselves, however, that an external source seems to be responsible.

-- Narrator/Schneck (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This discussion of self-generated messages or 'automatism' introduces the motif that many of the demons and monsters we create often come from ourselves, even if we are unable to recognize them as such. This will be developed further with the later discussion of tulpas, or spirits that a person generates often for a specific purpose.

Demonic possession is presented as the natural outcome of consulting the board, though the most famous example is a work of fiction.

-- Narrator/Schneck (chapter 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote highlights how Schneck is foreshadowing the events that make up the story of the Bye Bye Man as experienced by John, Eli, and Katherine. One of the potential explanations Schneck suggests is that it was an attempted possession.

Medieval and Renaissance authorities believed possession could result from witchcraft or illness, but the likeliest cause was the victim's own sinfulness.

-- Narrator/Schneck (chapter 2 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote highlights another way in which an individual could precipitate or create their own problems in the spiritual world, similar how the messages from the Ouija board and the tulpas were self-generated. Similar to the tulpas, these possessions have a specific cause; in this case, the victim was sinful so they drew malignant spirits to them.

The Bye Bye Man was probably regarded as cursed from birth. Like the Wandering Jew and Cain, he seems to be a perpetual traveler with special powers, an extended lifespan, and something like two of the three marks of Cain... He is also a permanent inhabitant of the gray area between races and places where the paranormal flourishes.

-- Narrator/Schneck (chapter 2 paragraph 3)



Importance: By mentioning parallels the Bye Bye Man has with biblical characters and pointing out that he is ideally positioned to exist as a paranormal figure, Schneck ties his appearance to spiritualism, as well as the Bye Bye Man's exclusion from society.

This was not a laboratory experiment, so sitters talked about the messages they were getting, speculated freely, and may have been engaged in a 'process of joint imaginative creation' that was expressed through the board.

-- Narrator/Schneck (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: One of the proposed mechanisms for how the Ouija board works is that the messages come from the sitters' own minds, and this quote highlights the possibility that the possibility that the Bye Bye Man was created as a collective creation can not be ruled out.

Even if the group believed the story came from their subconscious, there may be a corner of our brains, some convolution inherited from millions of years of bug-eating, tree-dwelling ancestors, that regards all threats as real.

-- Narrator/Schneck (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: Even with the high likelihood of the Bye Bye Man being pure fabrication, the threat that he possess was very real for John, Katherine, and Eli. As this quote suggests, there is likely a part of the human psyche left over from our primitive ancestors, that perceives even imagined threats as real.

The Truth, Mr. Angel, is an elusive quarry.

-- Narrator, quoting Louis Cyphre from Falling Angel (chapter 3 paragraph 4)

Importance: Appropriately, the story concludes with this quote highlighting that truth is hard to track down. It is also heavily implied that the reader should make up their own mine as to what the truth of the Bye Bye Man is.