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Lord Cutler Beckett, the merciless chairman of the infamous East India Trading Company that managed British interests in global commerce in the 17th and 18th centuries, is a cunning and ruthless man. Grim, precise, Napoleonic—he commands the worldwide seafaring resources at his disposal with cold-blooded elegance.

Lord Beckett—and, for that matter, the East India Trading Company—are fictitious components that fulfill an especially prominent role in the third of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film trilogy: *At World's End*.

Lord Beckett's power extends even beyond the natural world to include, also, the realm of the supernatural. Because he has locked away the beating heart of Davy Jones in a small sea chest, Lord Beckett thinks he is impervious to death itself. In one scene Davy Jones, the sailors' nickname for lost soul who is the holder of the keys of hell, asserts complete command over his ship,

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the *Flying Dutchman*, a legendary ghost ship cursed to sail the seas without ever returning to a home port.

To which Beckett responds with icy arrogance: "This is no longer your world, Jones. The immaterial has become—*immaterial*."

There are at least two meanings to Beckett's bold proclamation. On the level of the plot of the film, he is implying that because he can at any time put a knife through Jones's heart and end his existence, he controls even the spiritual world through its leader. On another level, he is expressing the modernist declaration of independence from all the ignorance and superstition of the Dark Ages. He believes that the new world order that he represents has spelled the end of the supernatural. For the modernist, the immaterial had become, truly, immaterial.

Toward the conclusion of the film, however, Beckett meets his untimely and violent end in a furious sea battle. His ship, the *Endeavor*, is broadsided simultaneously by the

Black Pearl on one side, manned by living human beings in the flesh, and on the other side by the *Flying Dutchman*, crewed by spirits who have fallen for various reasons under its curse.

In short, the worldview of reason had lost to the combined efforts—the fusion, if you will—of the material *and* the immaterial.

In point of fact, popular culture is increasingly rife with stories and images of the supernatural. It seems that consumers of literature, television, video, film, gaming, the Internet cannot get enough. Elves, griffins, wizards, dragons, unicorns, basilisks, hobbits, minotaurs, orcs, fairies, mermaids, shapeshifters—the list goes into *infinitum* mode. Entire encyclopedias have been devoted to full descriptions of such creatures. Book stores now have whole sections—shelf upon shelf—for selections in science fiction, horror, and fantasy. Most cable TV companies offer the Sci Fi Channel.[®]

There was a time not so long ago that such fare was considered to be for children only. But it's increasingly clear that artistic depictions of imaginary worlds cannot be dismissed in an effort merely to "put away childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11, NKJV). The themes and issues that appear in these various media have become every bit as profound—and as everyday practical—as those of theology or philosophy.

One of the essential keys to this realization is the idea that stories are potentially more than what happens first followed by what happens next. They consist of far more than a linear series of events. Jesus surely recognized this—as did His disciples. At the conclusion of any one of His imaginative parables, they surely didn't merely respond with, "Great yarn, Jesus!" Instead, His parables often left them scratching their heads, and this wasn't the result of lice or psoriasis. It was because they were searching for the *meaning* of the parable.

In addition to the linear elements of a plot, stories seek to express and explore themes and ideas. When a sinister character like Lord Cutler Beckett makes a comment about the supposed end of all things supernatural, something more is going on than clever dialogue between a living human being and a legendary ghost.

In point of fact Jesus Himself put His own kind of spin on a ghost story in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Here is a fictional story, told in Scripture in red letters, with all that that connotes, in which Jesus shifts into "once upon a time." And He does so apparently to illuminate a principle that He has elsewhere expressed as "'He who is first shall be last.'"

But for some of today's readers, this parable seems to imply a theological concept that is contrary to

that of the rest of Scripture. Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus describes death as a conscious state. Yet careful study of Scripture contradicts this concept.

What could Jesus have been thinking?

"In this parable," Ellen White writes, "Christ was meeting the people on their own ground. The doctrine of a conscious state of existence between death and the resurrection was held by many of those who were listening to Christ's words. The Saviour knew of their ideas, and He framed His parable so as to inculcate important truths through these preconceived opinions."¹

In couching so much of His teaching in the form of parables, Jesus clearly understood the impact of the narrative mode. He also surely knew that He could count on the conventions of interpretation that the storyteller should expect from hearers or readers. In the instance of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus was attempting to communicate only one particular point: a person's eternal destiny is determined by the way in which he or she lives in the here and now.

"It is not wise to use the details of a parable to teach doctrine. Only the fundamental teaching of a parable as

clearly set forth in its context and confirmed by the general tenor of Scripture, together with details explained in the context itself, may legitimately be considered a basis for doctrine."²

These are the guidelines for the interpretation of a fictional parable as it was utilized in the culture of Jesus' time on this earth. Since that time imaginative writing has expanded to include such genres as the short story, the novel, film scripts, and others. Writers of these forms usually invest meaning in many seemingly inconsequential details. All the subtleties of setting, character, plot, and dialogue can contribute to the ideas that the writer is trying to communicate.

The assertion of the supernatural in the film *At World's End* (a telling title, by the way) appears to be only a small expression of the resurgence in our culture's interest in such things. On at least one level, today's Christian should resonate with this vigorous response to modernism's crusade against the spiritual. God Himself is both material *and* immaterial.

REFERENCES

¹ *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 263.

² *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 830.

