

Romance and Horror in Shannon Messenger's *The Sky Fall* Series*

YANG Chun

University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China

In *The Sky Fall* series, romance and horror are the main impetuses that keep the plot developing. How the protagonists, Vane and Audra, bravely face the obstacles and hazards on the way of pursuing true love as well as freedom for people under the tyranny of Raiden becomes the essence of the series. Love helps Vane and Audra overcome various difficulties and threats to their individual development. In the present paper, the author tries to analyze how Shannon Messenger, the author of the book, successfully mingles the fantasy element of paranormal romance with the Gothic elements of horror to foreground the initiation theme in *The Sky Fall* series.

Keywords: *The Sky Fall* series, paranormal romance, Gothic elements, horror, initiation theme

Introduction

Shannon Messenger is the American author of *The Sky Fall* series. She has studied art, screenwriting, and television production, but realized her real passion is writing for kids and teens. *The Sky Fall* series is her debut show in literary world which includes three books named *Let the Sky Fall* (2013), *Let the Storm Break* (2014), and *Let the Wind Rise* (2016). Since the publication, the series have received many praises from both readers and critics. *Let the Sky Fall*, Shannon Messenger's first young adult novel won the ABA (American Booksellers Association) "2013 Best Book for Children". Sarah Wylie (2013), the bestselling author of *All These Lives*, claimed that the book is "thrilling, romantic, and funny. I loved every minute of it" (p. 2). As for *Let the Wind Rise*, *RT Book Reviews* commented that "The conclusion to this very original fantasy trilogy is stronger than the first two installments, with nonstop action and believable teenage sarcasm, which takes the edge off the brutal reality of Audra and Vane's highly emotional romance and quest" (Quealyner, 2013, p. 329).

The Sky Fall series centers on the story of Vane and Audra, two windwalkers known as sylphs. There are four types of winds, namely the northerly, the southerly, the easterly, and the westerly. They speak different languages. Vane is the last westerly and is the only one that can know language of westerly. Audra is Vane's guardian who sacrifices herself to protect Vane and trains Vane to master all four languages in the small time frame before the Stormers arrive. Stormers are the evil forces who murder Vane's parents and Audra's father. The chief of the Stormers is Raiden. In order to defeat Stormers and rebuild peace and freedom, Vane and

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YANG Chun, associate professor, M.A., Foreign Language Department, University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China.

Audra must fight together against Raiden's army. During the fight against the evil, the forbidden romance grows between Vane and Audra. After many turns and twists, with the help of Gale Force, Vane and Audra defeat their enemy and win a happy and peaceful new beginning.

In the series, romance and horror are the main impetuses that keep the plot developing. The forces opposed to love between Vane and Audra and how they bravely face the obstacles and hazards on the way of their pursuit of peace and freedom become the essence of the series. Romance helps Vane and Audra overcome various difficulties and threats to their individual development. In the present paper, the author tries to analyze how the author, Shannon Messenger, successfully mingles the fantasy element of paranormal romance with the Gothic element of horror to foreground the initiation theme with the hope of providing a relatively comprehensive understanding of the moral lesson of the series.

Romance

Romantic love provides everlasting charm for readers. Different from the traditional romantic novel that focuses the romantic relationship of hero and heroine on real human beings, what we see in *The Sky Fall* series is supernatural love of sylph, an air element who can walk, thus the series belong to the genre of paranormal romance. According to *Wikipedia* (2016), the free encyclopedia, paranormal romance is a subgenre of both romantic fiction and speculative fiction. Paranormal romance focuses on romantic love and includes elements beyond the range of scientific explanation, blending together themes from the speculative fiction genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Paranormal romance may range from traditional category romances, such as those published by Harlequin Mills & Boon, with a paranormal setting to stories where the main emphasis is on a science fiction or fantasy-based plot with a romantic subplot included. Common hallmarks are romantic relationships between humans and vampires, shapeshifters, ghosts, and other entities of a fantastic or otherworldly nature. Beyond the more prevalent themes involving vampires, shapeshifters, ghosts, or time travel, paranormal romances can also include books featuring characters with psychic abilities, like telekinesis or telepathy. Paranormal romance has its roots in Gothic fiction. Its most recent revival has been spurred by turn of the 21st century technology, e.g., the Internet and electronic publishing. Paranormal romances are one of the fastest growing trends in the romance genre.

Paranormal romance does not take place in the real human world, and it takes place in imaginary lands. Its mysterious color and fantastic beauty become the lure of *The Sky Fall* series to teenagers who harbor all kinds of dreams about romantic love. In the series, we can see Audra occupies Vane's heart in a mysterious way:

She's aged in my dreams. Grown up with me. Which is the most confusing part. What kind of dream does that? And what kind of dream girl walks into Yard House?

The dreams are insanely vivid, too. Every night it's like she's in my room, leaning over me, watching me with eyes so dark blue, they're almost black. Her long, dark hair tickling my skin. Her lips whispering sounds I can't understand as they float through my mind. But when I wake up, I'm alone. Nothing but silence, and a faint breeze swirling through the air even though my window's locked tight.

It all sounds so crazy.

But I'm not crazy.

I don't know how to explain it—but one of these days I'll figure it out. (Messenger, 2013, p. 14)

The mysterious color abounds in the whole series and hooks both the readers and Vane to figure out the identity of Vane's dream girl:

And I've heard whispers on the wind outside my dreams. But they've never been words I could understand or a voice I could recognize—and they've never used my name.

Not to mention I've never had the wind attack me before. Sudden breezes flaring up at odd times—sure. Winds that seem drawn to me—occasionally. But those never freaked me out. I know it sounds weird, but the wind doesn't scare me. Even after what happened to my parents. Even after what happened tonight. The wind calms me somehow. I've never understood why. (Messenger, 2013, p. 26)

Besides the supernatural color, there are also many vivid narratives of Audra's true feelings towards Vane:

My life never held much joy or warmth or richness—not with out my father. But Vane filled my empty world with the thrill of his touch. The soothing peace of his forgiveness. I should've kissed him when I had the chance. I should've taken one moment of pure, unadulterated happiness. Pressed my lips against his and let the intoxicating heat erupt between us. Tasted his sweetness. Then pulled him closer till there was nothing separating us but fire and skin". (Messenger, 2013, p. 356)

The test of life and death is one of the most dramatic parts in the series. The description of Audra's fear of losing Vane is the most touching part which drives the development of their romantic love to its climax:

This isn't happening. There's no way this can possibly be happening again. My whole body trembles as I fumble to get a better hold on Vane's limp body.

I shake his shoulders, trying to jar him wake.

Useless.

His chest rises and falls, but they're slow, shallow breaths.

Why isn't he waking up?

I squeeze his hands. Whisper pleas in his ear. Hold him as tightly as I can. All the tings that brought him back before.

No response. (Messenger, 2013, p. 135)

After they overcame many barriers and finally defeated Stormers, Vane and Audra united; they experience the sweetest moment of their lives and their romantic love has a happy ending:

All the times I imagined this moment, I never got it right.

Her lips were sweeter and softer, and they fit against mine like we were formed that way. Everything about us matches. Our breathing. Our movements. And the heat. The delicious fire that ripples through my body before it rushes back to hers.

She clings to me as hard as I cling to her, her hands sliding down my back as I grab her waist and press her against me, so there's no space between us. I'll never let anything separate us again. Now I know why they call it "bonding".

As we burn and connect, parts of her meld to me. Her strength. Her determination. Her honor. They flow to the cracks in my heart and fill them. Heal the places the violence crushed and shattered. Make me whole. I know I'm doing the same for her.

We were two broken, incomplete people.

Now we're one. (Messenger, 2016, pp. 372-373)

The romantic love between Vane and Audra threads narrative conflicts between loyalty and betrayal, life and death, freedom and tyranny, good and evil in *The Sky Fall* series and pushes forward the development of the plot. It also exhibits an important part of adolescents' growth, the development of emotional cognition. "As the eternal theme of human society, love is not only important in the growth and development process of a person, but also a required course of youth life" (ZHOU, 2011). In our life, love can be a kind of incentive, encouraging us to overcome difficulties and keep on pursuit. In this way, love helps our development of emotional cognition as well as the maturity of our inner world. With the love from Audra, Vane grows up from a carefree innocent boy into a guardian for people in the desert who suffered the pains under the tyranny of Raiden.

Os wanted to come too, but someone needs to stay here and figure out what to do about all the destruction in the valley. The people in the desert deserve our help and protection. We can't make up for what they're lost, but we can make sure it never happens again. (Messenger, 2014, p. 380)

From simply immersing in love with Audra to taking responsibly to free people, Vane achieves his maturity on his path to grow up.

Horror

To define the core of "horror", it is important to take a look at the word and its history. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "horror" begins its career in English as a roughness or ruggedness; there is something uneven about it. It also means a roughness or nauseousness of taste, such as to cause a shudder or thrill. The fullest and most lasting sense of the word is in place by the late 14th century which means a painful emotion compounded of loathing and fear; a shuddering with terror and repugnance; strong aversion mingled with dread; the feeling excited by something shocking or frightful. Beginning in the late 15th century, it is also used to signify a feeling of awe or reverent fear, a thrill of awe, or of imaginative fear, a usage that touches on the heights to which fear can lead the imagination, and an important aesthetic consideration. Thus "horror" is equivalent to something that is rough, nauseating, dreadful, frightening, repulsive, unspeakable, nameless, loathsome—an odd foundation on which to build an art, which depends on the successful evocation and manipulation of fascination, revulsion and fear and may present to people scenes and realms of fantastic, dangerous, and uncanny beauty (Kawin, 2012, pp. 4-5).

When Audra is captured by the Stormers, she is caged in Raiden's dungeon. The dark and suffocated atmosphere in the dungeon as well as the pain and torture suffered by Audra presents a scene of horror to the readers:

I try to count my steps and memorize the turns as Raiden leads me to his dungeon, but his fortress is a labyrinth of narrow paths and twisting stairways that take us up and down and every possible direction. By the time we reach the dim, windowless room lined with dark-barred cells, I'm so turned around, I can't tell if I'm deep underground or high in a different tower.

Raiden shoves me into a cell in the center of the row and locks the barred door behind me. I crawl to a corner, curling my legs into my chest and wrapping my arms around them, trying to preserve what little heat I can.

The cold is different here.

Dump and heavy. (Messenger, 2016, p. 38)

The mysterious suicide draft invented by the evil forces is like dark clouds around everyone. Audra, Vane, and their friends are facing the threats of death every minute. The death of Gus, one of the best friends of Audra, reinforces the horror atmosphere:

Gus coughs again and Aston's eyes widen and he shouts a dozen curses as he grabs my mother's needled blade and swipes it toward Gus's throat.

"What are you doing?" I scream.

"Trying to save him."

He slashes barely Gus's neck before I can pull away.

The blow barely grazes Gus's skin, and there's so much shouting and squealing and flailing, I can't figure out what anyone is saying, until my brain catches two words:

Suicide draft.

"No!" I scream. "GET RID OF IT!"

Aston slashes again.

But the windslicer does nothing.

Neither do any of the commands Aston and Solana shout.

And Gus keeps choking harder and harder, right up until the moment his neck snaps and his body goes limp and cold. (Messenger, 2016, p. 236)

Through creating mysterious and horrible atmosphere, Shannon Messenger successfully foreshadows the dangers and twists of the path of growth of Vane and Audra and conveys the message to young readers that the path of growth is hard and on the path of growth, you should never stop taking on difficult challenges.

Conclusion

In *The Sky Fall* series, paranormal romance unfolds in the setting of Gothic horror, which builds up suspense and drives the development of the plot. By interweaving Vane and Audra's romantic love with the development of their emotional cognition as well as their social cognition, Shannon Messenger artistically foregrounds the initiation theme of the novel, thereby broadening the educational significance of the series for the young readers.

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