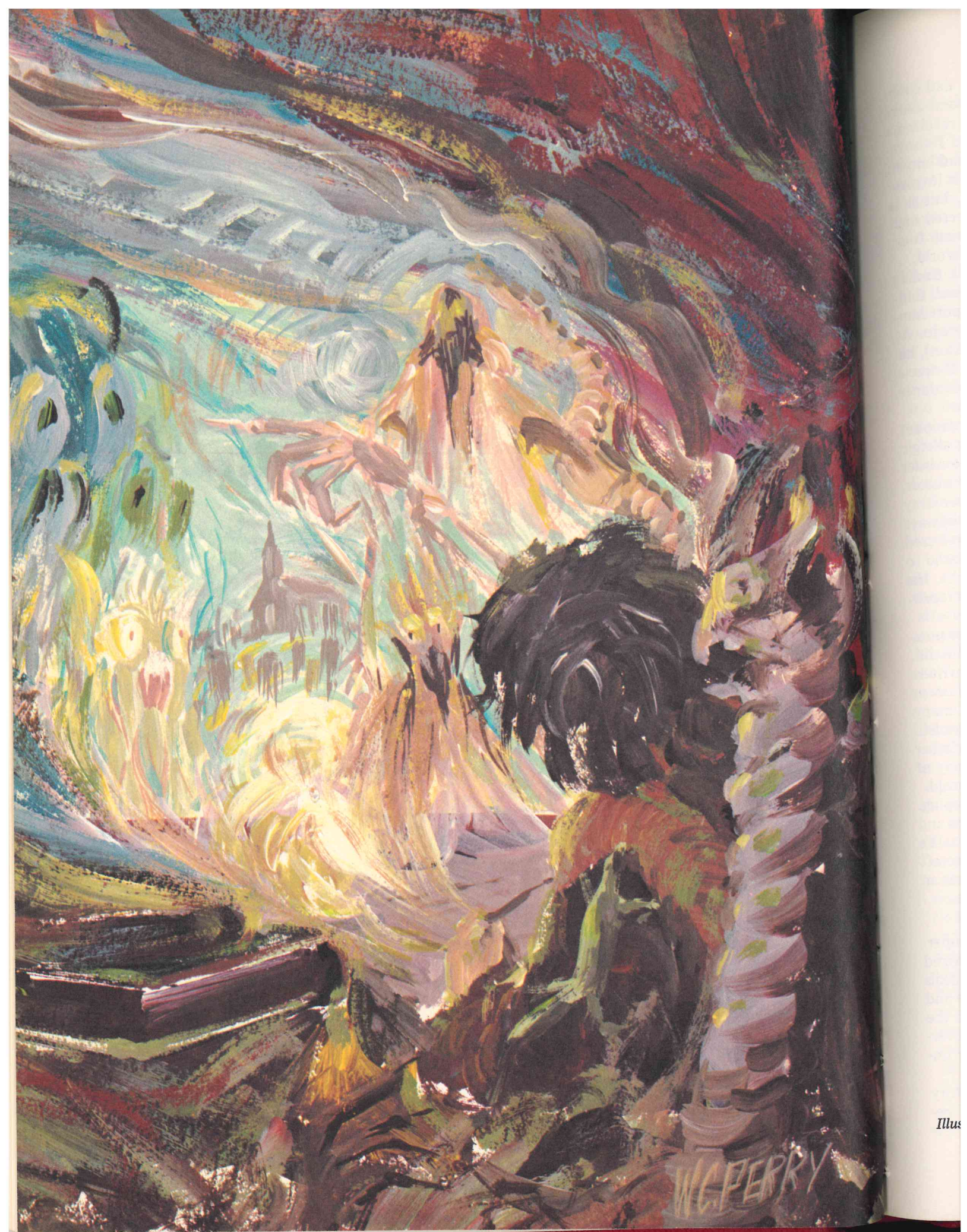


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H.P. Lovecraft the Man Who Cannot Die

by Charlene Szczsponik

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Howard Phillips Lovecraft will never die. Avid lovers of chilling supernatural tales will not let his spirit rest. Lovecraft was born in Providence August 20, 1890, and died here March 15, 1937; but recently several Lovecraft tales were reborn through the medium of television. "Cool Air" and "Pickman's Model" were aired for the first time on the Rod Serling program, *Night Gallery*. Hopefully, television may help the public more fully appreciate the talents of H. P. Lovecraft. The nation, and more especially, his home state of Rhode Island, have overlooked this unique American author for too long. Lovecraft was not financially successful in his lifetime, but the Lovecraft style, and the "Cthulhu Mythos" which he founded have influenced scores of writers in the field of weird fiction.

The Life of Lovecraft

Howard Lovecraft, the son of Winfield S. and Sarah Phillips Lovecraft, lived most of his life in Providence as a self-styled recluse. He was raised in the home of his grandfather, Whipple V. Phillips, at 454 Angell Street. This house, situated at the edge of a rolling field which stretched out toward the Seekonk River, seemed to young Lovecraft to possess an ancient and mysterious atmosphere.

Able to read at the age of three, Lovecraft showed an early interest in the history of his family. Both the Lovecraft and the Phillips families originated in England. The Phillips family were among the early settlers of Rhode Island, owning lands in Foster and Coventry, and later moving to Providence. Howard Lovecraft was an Anglophile, who often stated that the American Revolution was a mistake. He chose to conjecture that he might have descended from an ancient Celtic warrior. As a lonely, delicate youth, much protected and pampered by his mother and doting aunts, such grand dreams were important to him.

Because of his ill health, Lovecraft was never required to attend school (Except for a short time at Hope High School). He received most of his education from tutors and from the books he found in his grandfather's extensive library. Many hours were spent there, reading whichever of the ancient volumes struck his fancy. He became well-versed in the classics and mythology. He excelled in astronomy (Lovecraft wrote an astronomy column for a Providence newspaper at the age of sixteen). The modern sciences and modern literature did not interest him. Such unsupervised self-education led to an amazing proficiency in his favorite areas and an unfortunate lack of knowledge in other subjects.

In 1904, after the death of his grandfather, the family fortune gave out. Lovecraft and his mother were forced to move to more economical quarters, still on Angell Street. The death of Mrs. Lovecraft in the early 1920's seemed to have a profound effect on his life style and upon his writing. It is fortunate that one of his aunts came to live with him and take care of his everyday needs. Lovecraft was absent-minded about the mundane activities of life. When he was writing, he often forgot to eat or to change his clothes.

During this time, Lovecraft received a little money for his writing, but most of his income came from the revisionary work he did for other writers. It has been said that the finished work often contained more of Lovecraft than it did of the original author. It was at this period of his life that Lovecraft undertook a long and complicated revision of the memoirs of Harry Houdini. In 1924, Lovecraft made a trip to New York to deliver the finished manuscript (He

lost the manuscript during the trip, and had to re-write the whole thing in New York). Several weeks later, his astonished Rhode Island friends received a note announcing the marriage of Howard P. Lovecraft and Mrs. Sonia Greene. Lovecraft had known Mrs. Greene for some time, through their involvement in the National Amateur Society, but it is clear that none of their friends had suspected such a serious relationship. At the age of thirty-four, Howard Lovecraft attempted to enter the world.

Unfortunately, Lovecraft had little luck finding a market for his work in New York, or indeed, finding work of any kind. His inability to support himself began to eat at his never-very-healthy ego. At the same time (or perhaps for the same reason), his marriage was also proving to be a mistake. Before a year had passed, Lovecraft was back in Providence and his accustomed habits.

Most stories about Lovecraft include an account of his unusual mode of living. Supposedly allergic to cold, he stayed inside during most of the winter months. In warmer weather, he was a great walker, and was often seen (muffled against whatever stray breeze might find him) walking along the byways of Providence and neighboring towns. He preferred to walk at night, when fewer people were around to distract him from the atmosphere he sought. His friends in Providence became accustomed to receiving Mr. Lovecraft at midnight or later.

Possibly because of his habits and hours, or possibly by choice, Lovecraft had few friends. He did, however, enjoy corresponding with fellow writers all over the country. His association with amateur writing clubs brought him in contact with many young writers, whom he encouraged and consoled. His letters reveal that he considered himself a father figure to them. He proved a good teacher. Many of his proteges went on to fame in the literary world.

Lovecraft's days were spent reading and sleeping. In the evenings, he walked, and wrote letters and stories. The only outstanding facet of Lovecraft's life was its extraordinary dullness. H. P. Lovecraft never really lived, but he will never die. He was an observer and chronicler of the mysteries of life.

The Lovecraft Style

Howard Lovecraft dealt primarily with the supernatural. His tales cannot be successfully categorized as either fantasy or science fiction. Fantasy deals with beings outside man's empirical knowledge and science fiction employs known facts carried to the furthest extent of the imagination. Lovecraft overlapped both fields in the development of his unusual style.

An amazing knowledge of New England history and legend make Lovecraft's stories hellishly believable. His most effective tales are based in New

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England. The use of familiar settings and local historical characters gives credence to the most impossible occurrences. For example, "The Shunned House," about which Lovecraft wrote, still exists on Benefit Street in Providence. An observant reader might recognize the house from Lovecraft's description, but the yard, full of bloated, repellent growths which added such an aura of desolation and decay to the story, does not exist.

In "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," one of Lovecraft's best stories, an ancient evil possessed the body of Charles Ward in an attempt to perpetuate the powers of its demonic followers. Lovecraft combined history and fantasy to describe a heritage of fear. Familiar, but not famous, names from local records are used in minor roles. These gentlemen from the seventeenth and eighteenth century appear and behave in exactly the proper manner for men of their station and period of time. The action takes place on Benefit Street and Prospect Street in Providence, in old Salem and in an old farmhouse on the Pawtuxet River. Familiar names and places coupled with ancient, mysterious formulae and hints of loathesome, lurking forces combine in a typical Lovecraft atmosphere.

Atmosphere and mood are the important points of all Lovecraft stories. The slightly stilted eighteenth century writing style, which he so often affected, served as contrast to his foul, ungodly creatures. Lovecraft was a master of adjectives. His unusual use of colors, unnatural cold, "indescribable" sounds, and unbearable stench, created the mood he sought. "The Haunter in the Dark" is a good example of the effectiveness of his technique. Many Rhode Islanders have scanned the Providence skyline for that dark church tower and tapering steeple which Lovecraft told us loomed blackly against the flaming sky at sunset on Federal Hill. It isn't there; but one feels it should be.

Lovecraft's knowledge of history is astounding. Since his death, theories have been formed that he may have had a first-hand knowledge of the so-called New England Megaliths. These Mycenaean-like stone structures have been found in North Salem, New Hampshire, around Shutesbury, Massachusetts and in parts of Vermont. It is thought that the megaliths may be of Celtic or Northwest European origin. It is also theorized that the structures may have been used as hidden retreats for alchemists, who obtained complex sulphides from the New England rocks. These sulphides were converted, by techniques not known to the modern world, into alloys, which they passed off as silver and gold. When the lean ore of the area was exhausted, practical alchemy lapsed into occultism. For generations thereafter, the Puritan mind of that era associated

the megaliths with dark beliefs of witchcraft and devil worship.

How Lovecraft obtained his knowledge of the megaliths is uncertain. Excavation of the Massachusetts and Vermont sites did not begin until after his death. There was no written or published material from which he could have derived his knowledge of those sites. Lovecraft must have seen the stone structures. There is no other way to explain the accurate description of the megaliths in his stories and the way he utilized the dark legends surrounding them. "The Dunwich Horror," "The Colour Out of Space" and "The Thing on the Doorstep" contain references to stone structures, altars and staircases which could serve as adequate descriptions of megalith sites now known to exist. We will never know if Lovecraft visited the megaliths. That secret will remain hidden forever.

The Cthulhu Mythos

The Cthulhu Mythos, initiated by Lovecraft, consists of two opposing groups of deities.

The "Elder Gods" were benevolent beings, none of whom Lovecraft ever named. They existed in the constellation *Orion*, and occasionally aided the forces of good against the powers of destruction. They seldom played an important role in Lovecraft stories. Human characters were usually unaided in their battle against evil.

"The Ancient Ones," also known as the "Great Old Ones," were malefic gods who inhabited the earth many eons ago. Through their practice of black magic, they lost most of their powers and were exiled. They continue to lurk "outside," waiting for their followers to "open the door" and enable them to take possession of the world again. Occasionally, a blundering student of necromancy causes an "opening" which allows them to work their evil will on living things.

Most important among the "Ancient Ones" are "Azathoth" and "Yog-Sothoth." Azathoth is an "amorphous blight of nether-most confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the center of all infinity." Equal to Azathoth, and sharing his rule, is Yog-Sothoth, the "all-in-one and one-in-all," who is not subject to the laws of time and space.

The Cthulhu Mythos is not of primary importance in Lovecraft tales. The use of the Christian concept of Satan as an object of fear would have worked almost as well; however, the introduction of unfamiliar evil powers into the already uneasy mind of the reader adds a final breath of terror to a Lovecraft story. Lovecraft unsettles the reader's mind with his credible descriptions of pending evil and then deals the final blow with the introduction of a strange and ancient god.

The Mythos Lovecraft created has given rise to dozens of stories by other authors. Lovecraft, himself, urged many writers to expand on his creation. Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, Robert Bloch, and August Derleth have each used (or added to) the Mythos in his own way and to his own ends. The Cthulhu Mythos has proved flexible enough to serve as a foundation for many stories in many different areas of weird fiction.

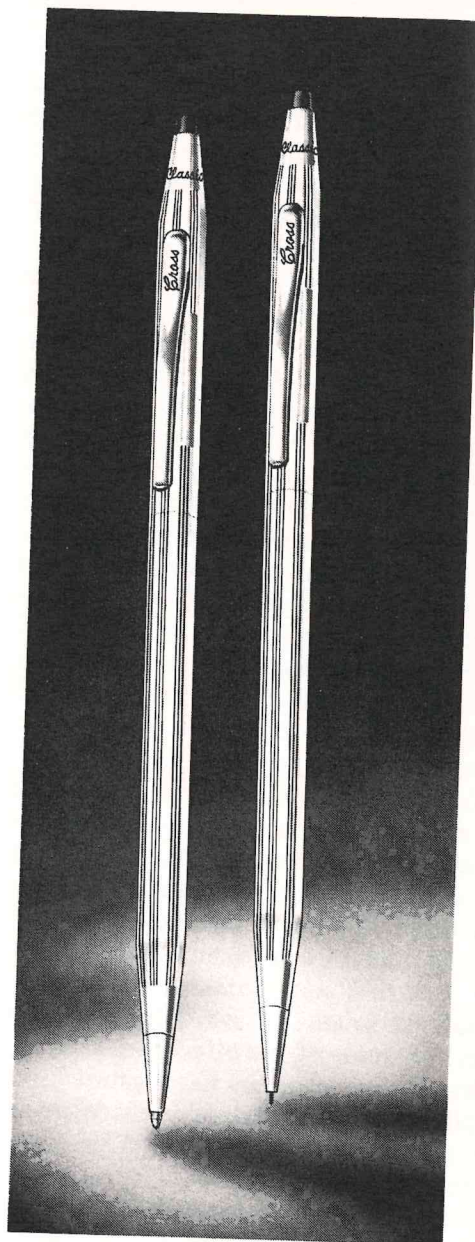
Lovecraft Today

H. P. Lovecraft has left his mark in the literary world. The Cthulhu Mythos will live on in new stories, by other authors; but the television and motion-picture industries will have a more difficult time trying to carry on the Lovecraft tradition. Lovecraft used understatement. He refused to completely and fully describe his hideous monsters. His technique was to use familiar settings and introduce hints of unwholesome, alien beings. These hints were gradually built into an "unspeakable horror." The problem is how to make these hints and unspeakable horrors visible.

The television producers of "Pickman's Model" used modern technology to re-create that half-human thing that Lovecraft said lurked beneath the streets of Boston. Those viewers who had not read the original Lovecraft description were properly horrified; but any true Lovecraft fan must have been disappointed. No human creation could ever equal the hideous demon that Lovecraft spawned in our imaginations.

The recent movie version of "The Dunwich Horror" fared better in its attempt to depict one of H. P. L.'s bestial creatures. The use of weird color combinations, shadows, the sound of flapping wings, fearful outcries, hints at form and quick glimpses of claws or beak, was more in keeping with the Lovecraft style. In the movie version, as in the original, the imagination was allowed to develop its own form of terror. Lovecraft may survive in television if each viewer is allowed to "see" in his imagination those fearsome monsters that were bequeathed to us.

Since the death of the "Gentleman from College Street," a cult has been formed around the Lovecraft Mythos, and indeed, around the man, himself. Periodically, over the years, Lovecraft fans arise, like a coven of long-hidden witches, to give new birth to the master's stories. Because of the never-ending labors of these toilers for greatness in the macabre, H. P. Lovecraft may go on forever.



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