

H. P. LOVECRAFT, AN EVALUATION

by

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Since the publication of my "H. P. Lovecraft: A Bibliography" (Biblio Press, 1952), I have been repeatedly urged to write out my opinion of Lovecraft's work. I have been kept from doing so by the pressure of a full-time library job, plus my own creative work in the diverse fields of the horror story, the western story, and poetry, as well as the semi-annual publication of ESSENCE and other time-consuming activities such as an unending struggle against censorship groups which are violating Constitutional rights on both a local and national level.

The following brief essay is an admittedly hurried and incomplete attempt to meet demands for a Lovecraft critique. An entire book, requiring many months of uninterrupted work, could be devoted to the project and I sincerely regret that circumstances do not permit me to undertake such a task. But I hope that my comments, in spite of their brevity, will be of some interest.

Nearly twenty years have passed since Lovecraft's death, but, unfortunately, a final evaluation of the man and of his work is still not possible. His collected poems, though due to appear shortly, have not yet been published. His letters, either selected or collected, have not appeared. Probably some of the pieces which he contributed under pseudonyms to "little" magazines have never been reprinted. And of course no complete and carefully written biography of the man has ever been published.

With the important exception of the poems and letters however, all of Lovecraft's work of any significance has been in print for some years. It seems doubtful, therefore, that an evaluation of his work, at this time, will be seriously qualified by future publi-

cation.

In his essay on Lovecraft, "Tales of the Marvellous and the Ridiculous", which originally appeared in "The New Yorker" and was later reprinted in his book, "Classics and Commercials", Edmund Wilson states flatly: "Lovecraft was not a good writer." (Before Lovecraft admirers reach for their shotguns, I might point out that Edmund Wilson also refers to no less a literary figure than Somerset Maugham as "second-rate" and "a half-trashy novelist.") Even though his criticism is far too severe--too much of a generalization--Wilson does call attention to two Lovecraft faults which I must reluctantly acknowledge: his frequent prolixity and his tendency to lean on shopworn adjectives such as "terrible", "horrible", "hellish", etc. to achieve eerie effects. In a good horror story, adjectives such as this are best omitted or at least introduced very sparingly. Beyond these criticisms, Wilson emphasizes the essential weakness and lack of verisimilitude of the "Cthulhu Mythos" episodes. With this, too, I must grudgingly agree. And at this point I would like to call attention to the fact that the two specific faults mentioned immediately above--prolixity and adjectivitus--are more frequently encountered in the "Mythos" stories than in any others.

The "Cthulhu Mythos" has raised a great commotion. Over a period of years, enthusiastic collaborators, imitators, friends and admirers have elevated the Cthulhu myth to a pedestal of importance which it scarcely deserves. The "Mythos" did indeed become the frame for Lovecraft's later tales, but they were not his best tales. Lovecraft also amused himself by employing Cthulhu terminology in some of his huge correspondence, but it now seems doubtful that he at-

tached as much importance to the "Mythos" as do some of his disciples!

Many of the Cthulhu stories, such as "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Whisperer in Darkness", are actually tedious. They are too long; our interest is apt to flag; our "willing suspension of disbelief" may not hold to the final page. All too often we read on without compulsion, without belief, without very much actual enthusiasm.

Lovecraft often seems so intent on introducing and exploiting the "Mythos", he loses sight of some of the basic elements which are essential in a good short story: economy of wordage, verisimilitude, mounting suspense sweeping to a single climax followed quickly by the final denouement.

Referring to the "Mythos", Edmund Wilson concluded: "It is all more amusing in his letters than it is in the stories themselves." Of course it was not intended to be amusing in the stories, but I think Wilson's meaning is clear.

When it still possessed the freshness of novelty, the Cthulhu Mythology afforded a vast amount of entertainment. But with the passage of time the novelty has evaporated and the myth has become threadbare. Lovecraft used it in story after story and his disciples have exploited it since his death and it now seems wrung nearly dry of interesting effects.

It remains, of course, an integral part of the bulk of Lovecraft's work. To attempt to dismiss it as incidental or unimportant would be to close our eyes to the facts.

In my opinion however, Lovecraft's future reputation as a writer of fine horror stories will rest on a very few of his early tales in which the Cthulhu Mythos is either entirely absent or at most still in its formative stages in Lovecraft's own mind. These early stories which I mean to mention were published prior to the appearance of the first generally accepted "Mythos" story: "The Call of Cthulhu" (WEIRD TALES, February, 1928)

These stories are: "The Hound" (WEIRD TALES, February, 1924); "The Rats in the Walls" (WEIRD TALES, March, 1924); "The Music of Erich Zann" (WEIRD TALES, May, 1925); "The Outsider" (WEIRD TALES, April, 1926); "Pickman's Model" (WEIRD TALES, October, 1927)

Of these I think the best of all is "The Music of Erich Zann." This piece, which might have been written by Poe, has everything which many of the "Mythos" tales lack: compression, sustained and rising suspense culminating in a powerfully effective climax followed almost immediately by the end of the story. Stylistically and structurally, I think Lovecraft never surpassed it. I think it probable that the old German mute will go on sawing his accursed viol in that ghoulish-infested garret long after great Cthulhu has lapsed into silence! This story, like Poe's masterpiece, "The Cask of Amontillado", seems literally above criticism. There are no wasted words. The brief story unfolds with a remorseless inevitability. Nothing could be omitted, nothing added, nothing changed which would improve its quality. In its particular genre it remains a pure masterpiece.

After "The Music of Erich Zann", I would cite "The Rats in the Walls." Actually, I very nearly voted it first place because it achieves a pitch of sheer grisly horror which exceeds the taut terror of "The Music of Erich Zann." On the other hand, it does not possess quite the same degree of purity and compression. But it is a masterpiece of its type, and again I can think of no Lovecraft story after "The Music of Erich Zann" which equals it. As a matter of fact, one almost feels that Lovecraft has gone too far in this particular story. Something inside one rebels as the ghastly eldritch grottos reveal their loathsome secrets. Perhaps it is simply that one instinctively refuses to believe that homo sapiens could ever descend to such a hellish sub-level. But this is a philosophical comment, not a criticism of the story.

"The Rats in the Walls" begins in the somewhat leisurely manner which has come to be associated with rather old-fashioned gothic ghost stories, and for some little time nothing really hair-raising happens. But once the full horror comes to light, it simply overwhelms us. We see at once that the leisurely start was intended to lull us a little. Certainly it kept us interested enough to continue, and we did perhaps expect some pretty formidable horrors--but nothing like what we finally encounter! For sheer inhuman horror those twilit grottos under the evil foundations of Exham Priory have yet to be surpassed.

In his introduction to "Best Supernatural Stories of H. P. Lovecraft", August Derleth states: "It has been said of "The Outsider" that if the manuscript had been put forward as an unpublished tale by Edgar Allan Poe, none would have challenged it." Perhaps this is not literally true, but I agree with the spirit of it. "The

"Outsider" is one of Lovecraft's finest stories. It possesses the merit of compression; with rising intensity it achieves its single shuddery effect--and ends. Some aspects of this story call to mind Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death"; both stories achieve their effects with a minimum of wordage, both linger in the mind.

"Pickman's Model" is one of Lovecraft's strongest stories. It has unity of effect, suspense, a highly original plot idea, and a climax which neatly and forcefully ends the story. It is not quite as tightly knit as "The Music of Erich Zann" or "The Outsider", but it is still Lovecraft writing at his top-level best. The "nameless blasphemy with glaring red eyes" gnawing at a human head would probably feel at home in one of those unspeakable grottos under the infamous walls of Exham Priory!

I have mentioned Lovecraft's "The Hound" because it has remained in my mind after I first read it many years ago. Its structure is somewhat slight and it does not have the power of Lovecraft's very best tales, but it has splendid atmosphere and, again, brevity and unity of effect. It might have been written by the early Poe. But I cite it primarily because it has lingered long in my mind.

The limitations of this little critique do not permit me to touch on many other good Lovecraft stories. I have mentioned only five which I think are the best. I am merely expressing a personal opinion--a personal taste--and I am more than willing to admit of other opinions--no matter how they may differ from my own. Time alone will decide who is right!

I have not yet seen all of Lovecraft's poetry, but I think I have seen enough to comment briefly. Much of the poetry falls into two main categories: deliberately archaic work imitative of eighteenth-century verse, and a group of weird sonnets known as "Fungi from Yuggoth." The imitative verse is interesting and often competent, but I think the "Fungi" sonnets are far more arresting and effective. A few of the very best of them may survive.

Any criticism of Lovecraft's work, no matter how brief, would be incomplete if it omitted mention of his famous essay, "Supernatural Horror in Literature." Even Edmund Wilson concedes that the essay is "a really able piece of work." In my pamphlet, "H. P. Lovecraft: A Bibliography", I commented: "The background and evolution of the horror tale--a 'must' for anyone seriously interested in the genre." The comment still holds. Apart from the letters, I think it is probably the finest piece of non-fiction which Lovecraft ever wrote.

Judging from the few letters and extracts from letters which are in print, Lovecraft's "Selected Letters" (or "Collected") will definitely enhance his reputation. It is probable that their publication will revive and intensify interest in both the man and his work. Lovecraft's erudition, humor and style is such that it is even possible they will eventually tend to eclipse his other work! At this point we can only wait and see.

Lovecraft's final place in American literature has not yet been determined. It is too early for that. But it seems certain that the very best of his work will endure, that it will remain important in the par-

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ticular field which he chose. If he did not reach the summits attained by Poe, or Bierce, at his best he scaled some dizzy heights.

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