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Source: *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Science Fiction and the Non-Print Media (Nov., 1980), pp. 350-352

Published by: [SF-TH Inc](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239371>

Accessed: 19/06/2014 21:35

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On the Fascination of Horror-Stories, Including Lovecraft's

"What do they see in H.P. Lovecraft?" you [DS] asked me several months ago, and as I once drove Damon Knight almost to tears by announcing that I had not only read *At the Mountains of Madness* straight through but also enjoyed it (this was years ago) I feel it incumbent upon me to answer.

I think I now know.

At an SF fan gathering last week there was much reminiscing about horror stories. Not only did everyone have a favorite (if one can use that word about fiction which in fact scared the bejeezus out of people between ages 6 and 16) but people talked of their remembered "favorite" as an expression of something real about the world, a description of life the reader truly believed in, or at least suspected was true. Thus:

'There was this story about a man who got caught between Tuesday and Wednesday and everyone had the Wednesday script except him so he kept making mistakes. For years I really thought everyone knew this big secret about life except me and I had missed it.'

'Vampires? I married one.'

'Of course the house is haunted by an evil presence. I can feel it the moment I walk in the door. But it's not the house; it's _____. I keep telling my other roommates we have to get rid of him.'

'When I was little, I thought the whole world was made of fungus. I used to go through the woods, shuddering and looking for something not made of fungus. I used to wonder if I was made of fungus.'

There's nothing new in interpreting horror stories and horror films as crude descriptive psychology, but I believe that most work in this area has been done from an intrapersonal, Freudian point of view, and so concentrates on issues of sexuality and guilt, which is fine for some work (especially 19th-century fiction, e.g. Arthur Machen's *Black Crusade*) but which leaves out issues like the relation of self to other or the ontological status of the self, in short the characteristic issues of much modern horror fiction.

The party-goers, sophisticated people, were saying as much: I thought everyone had the secret of living but me; I thought the world was made of "bad stuff" (Laing's phrase in *The Divided Self*), vampires are metaphors for emotional parasitism, and so on. They didn't go on to say (but I will) that these images of basic human concerns are, as one would expect, very concrete, very bodily, very "extreme," and although grotesque and frightening, in some sense also reassuring. They validate perceptions that need validating, especially in adolescence — i.e., under the bland, forced optimism of American life terrible forces are at work, things are not what they seem, and if you feel lonely, persecuted, a misfit, and in terror, you aren't crazy. You're right.

Horror fiction is a *fiction of extreme states* (Adrienne Rich uses the phrase "poetry of extreme states" to describe some of Emily Dickinson's work) and the message is (as Rich notes): *Someone has been here before. You're not alone.* That is a comforting and important message to receive in a culture which is bent on denying the destructive, the irrevocable, the terrifying, and the demonic. When I was 15, Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space," with its malevolent, parasitic, alien life inhabiting everything around the characters, scared me (for months I was afraid to look up at tree branches at night; I expected to see them moving by themselves) but I kept reading the story. It was infinitely preferable to the repressions of the 1950s and the suburban future I was supposedly headed for. Looking back, I suspect it was *the 1950s and that imaginary future, in fictional form.*

Such social criticism as is contained in even the best horror fiction is usually implicit. Even in such a fine novel as Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (a modern Gothic with the values reversed and a criticism of patriarchy; Jackson has other fiction of this sort) the movement is toward individual tragedy, not politics.* Stories like "The Yellow Wallpaper" are rare, though nothing in the genre precludes them.

About Lovecraft and his fans:

Schizophrenia as diseased ontology. Laing's patient (in *The Divided Self*) convinced that his body was stinking and rotting, though no one else could smell or see this. Lovecraft's imagery of the rotting, walking corpse, once (in the tragic "The Outsider") the victim-teller of the tale, or the shapeless, horrid, usually fetid monster, sometimes a threat from the outside ("The Haunter of the Dark"), sometimes one's own blood kin (there's one story, the name of which I forget, in which the unclean spirit is a sort of collective family ghost which is vanquished by the narrator's uncle), sometimes one's blood kin and oneself ("The Weird Shadow Over Innsmouth"). I don't mean, of course, to say that Lovecraft was schizophrenic, but that he was able to fashion artistic images which express certain basic issues in human experience, issues which matter to all of us though they trouble some of us more and others of us less.

To mention other writers' work: "The Yellow Wallpaper" deals with issues of autonomy, separation, and individuation by creating a powerful horror-story image (the other self coming out from behind the wallpaper). The story is political protest. It is also a horror story and has been anthologized as "pure" horror. I read it at 15 and it scared me; when I re-read it at 35 I was amazed that I had so completely missed the feminist message. I then gave it to my women's studies class and it scared *them*.

Another example: what is the monster under the ancestral moat, who demands human sacrifices once a year but is generally harmless to all not of the family line? I believe it to be a metaphor for the kind of unspoken family command or "script" of which modern psychology so often speaks, injunctions like Be a failure, Never have enough, Live without love, and so on.

The monster which assures the family's prosperity at the cost of lives *outside* the family line is another matter; like deals with the devil (if seriously treated) this is a poetic, personal, felt version of Brecht's "What keeps a man alive? He lives off others."

I think we tend to be aware of veiled sexuality and aggression in horror fiction (e.g., *Dracula*) or guilt (much of LeFanu's work), but I don't think much has been done with ego psychology.

At its best horror fiction does attempt to give the subjective, undiluted, raw, absolute, global experience-in-itself of these basic human issues. Hence the primitiveness, the crudity, the coarseness of texture of even the best of such stories, like Poe's, although such coarseness is not a defect. It is a consequence of the material, which is a common psychology of experience, not an individual psychology of particular characters. In treating phenomena and not people, horror fiction very much resembles SF; perhaps this resemblance is one reason for the overlap of readers and authors. The resemblance may also illuminate the silly-simple metaphysics readers seem to find irresistible in SF. (Are we really aliens and not humans? How can we tell?) Such supposedly epistemological and ontological questions may function like the images in horror stories, as metaphors for other, much more basic, issues.

Perhaps the very nature of fiction militates against the use of horror-story material as narrative fiction. Although the horror-story image feels true (at least at the time one feels like that), it's not the whole truth of anybody's situation and so a moment's reflection will qualify the impact of the image. To my mind, even the best examples of pure horror story (like Poe's) are badly weakened by the necessity of keeping the reader from that moment of reflection. Avoiding thought is not a good recipe for art. I suspect that the most aesthetically successful examples of the genre move towards tragedy or social protest or something besides horror-story *per se*. Probably the ideal place for the raw, undiluted experience-treated-as-the-whole-truth is in lyric poetry, which is not under an obligation to add to the question *What does it feel like?* the further question *Yes, but what is it, really?* Sylvia Plath's "The Muses" is a piece of this sort. And Shirley Jackson's best work (*The Haunting of Hill House*, "The Lovely House," etc.) is, for me, rescued by the implicit social dimension. In fact a good case can be made for Jackson as a proto-feminist writer.*

You might be interested to know that at the party one very bright young woman described her adolescent reading of SF as a genuinely subversive force in her life, a real alternative to the fundamentalist community into which she had been born. This alternative had nothing to do with the cardboard heroes and heroines or the imperial

American/engineering values, which she had skipped right over. What got to her were the alien landscapes and the alien creatures. We scholars perhaps tend to forget how much subversive potential both SF and fantasy have, even at their crudest. Orwell to the contrary, there really is a certain subversive force to statements like *Big Brother is ungood*. Of course if people stay at this level, without analysis and without remedies, nothing happens except a constant desire for repetition of the original, elementary validation. That is, you have addiction, a phenomenon well exemplified by the Lovecraft fans, who seem to constitute a perpetual audience for more HPL, more posthumous collaborations with HPL, more biographies of HPL, more imitation HPL, and so on.

Does any of this illuminate Lovecraft's popularity?

*I am indebted for this view of Jackson's work to a student of mine at the State University of New York at Binghamton, Barbara Nichols.

— Joanna Russ

SF Studies in France

1980 saw the inauguration of an SF workshop at the annual congress of the Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieure (S.A.E.S.), held at Poitiers on 9-11 May. The convenor, Jean Raynaud of the Université de Bretagne Occidentale at Brest, has recently become one of the first two scholars to gain the higher French Doctorate (Doctorat d'Etat) for a thesis on SF; the other is Mme Denise Fauconnier of Nice. To an observer, it was clear that the academic study of Anglo-American SF is in its flourishing infancy, and in return one would hope to see more attention paid in the English-speaking world to French SF and its milieu. There is a spirited recent introduction to the latter by John Dean of Université Paris-Nord in the *Stanford French Review* (Winter 1979: 405-14).

— Patrick Parrinder

Errata in SFS No. 21

Thanks to an oversight on our part, a serious misprint at the bottom of p. 211 of Darko Suvin's bibliography escaped our notice. The *second* entry for [William] Gordon Stables should have read: "*Wild Adventures Around the Pole; or, The Cruise of the 'Snowbird' Crew in the 'Arandoon.'* 1883. Bleiler. Adventures in ship and balloon. Neither SF nor fantasy." Georges Slusser (p. 223) should, of course, be George, and Boris Eyzikman (pp. 226-27) Eizykman (as in the present issue).

For the most glaring error we bear no responsibility. Linda Leith's name somehow migrated from where it belonged (and was at the time of our last check of the page layout, before the issue went to the printer) — at the very bottom of p. 234 — to the middle of Jörg Hienger's essay (p. 170). The name evidently fell off in the process of pasting up the pages prior to photographing them; and whoever was doing the paste-up, without contacting us for instructions, decided to stick it at the end of what was the opposite page on the printer's "boards." We made up an erratum slip noting its absence before we discovered its erroneous "reappearance." — **The Editors**