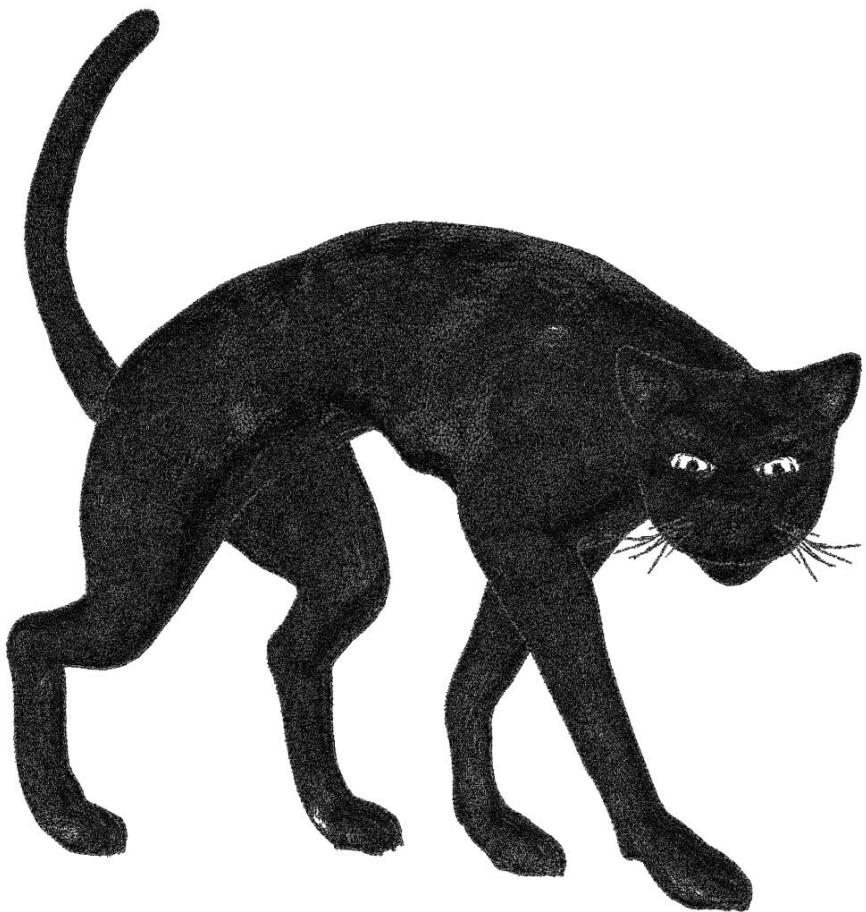


The Cats of Ulthar

by H. P. Lovecraft

Fully annotated



Produced by David Haden for the 129th birthday of H.P. Lovecraft, 20th August 2019.

Introduction

This is my online and annotated edition H.P. Lovecraft's well-loved short tale of cats and revenge. The story had its written genesis in a poem of January 1920 and in a dream. The dream was recalled by Lovecraft in a letter of 21st May 1920. Lovecraft also briefly noted a fragment of this same dream, to serve as item No. 28 in his *Commonplace Book* of potential story-ideas.

The story was written out in full on 15th June 1920, and as written it also seems to incorporate his earlier *Commonplace Book* idea No. 11. The completed story was first typeset and published in the amateur publication *The Tryout* for November 1920.

A variant version was re-written from memory in summer 1931, for performance at Henry S. Whitehead's regular boys' club in Florida. This version was delivered orally to the boys by Lovecraft himself, who was then visiting for an extended stay with Whitehead at his home. This 1931 version, possibly handwritten, has not survived.

Thematically related material written by Lovecraft in 1920:

- “The Street” (late 1919) (story — strange new arrivals; uncouth villains lurk and plot in mouldering houses; supernatural forces take revenge on them).
- “The Terrible Old Man” (January 1920) (story — old house, later ‘cottage’; uncouth villains approach the house; revenge and their deaths when inside).
- “Tryout’s Lament for the Vanished Spider” (January 1920) (poem — a beloved creature has vanished and is lamented; the creature is hailed as one of an ancient race that remembers Egypt and Babylon; it is missing but will return to its accustomed place in due course).
- “The Tree” (first half of 1920) (story — mysterious death; revenge)
- “Cats and Dogs” (June 1920) (essay — cats venerated in ancient civilisations; maligning and persecution of cats by the ignorant).

It is said that in Ulthar,¹ which lies beyond the river Skai,² no man may kill a cat;³ and this I can verily believe as I gaze upon him who sitteth purring before the fire.⁴ For the cat is cryptic, and close to strange things which men cannot see.⁵ He is the soul of

¹ *Ulthar* — This story is the first to introduce Ulthar, a place later to be developed and woven into a number of Lovecraft's stories. He also connected it with his own earlier tales. For instance, *Dream-Quest* has it that the original Pnakotic manuscripts were sent into the Dreamlands from the archives of Olathoë, a city in "distant and frozen Lomar" which was originally in the high Arctic. The manuscripts were carried into the Dreamlands by unknown hands (or paws?) for safekeeping, circa 24,000 B.C., when the city was over-run by uncouth invaders at the onset of the last great Ice Age. In the Dreamlands a last full copy of these Pnakotic texts was then kept at Ulthar. Lovecraft's later writing thus connects Ulthar with the setting of his earlier story "Polaris" (written 1918), even though Ulthar was not mentioned in that story.

Lovecraft himself is later named as a visitor to Ulthar. As his lightly veiled pseudonym 'Ward Phillips' he makes an appearance as a character in "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" (written 1932-33)... "Phillips, the Providence mystic, was lean, grey, long-nosed, clean shaven, and stoop-shouldered." Phillips is deemed to have visited the Dreamlands and... "heard many strange and significant things in Ulthar", and therefore would have encountered the cats there.

² *Skai* — An obvious poetic variant of 'sky'. As a boy Lovecraft had been a keen meteorologist, and well into his young manhood he was practicing astronomer until around late summer 1918 when both his eyesight and his mathematics failed him. This fascination fed into his very first expression of weird cosmicism, the long poem "The Poe-et's Nightmare" (1916), in which the Lovecraft-a-like poet of the narrative is a described as a "student of the skies". As an astronomer, and in the 1930s sometimes a "fisher" (via radio-set) for distant and exotic stations in other nations, he would probably have been pleased to learn of the huge modern radio telescope named SKAI (the Square Kilometer Array Interferometer).

³ *kill a cat* — Lovecraft was an staunch Anglophile and there had indeed been such laws in England and Wales, such as in the ninth century when there were heavy fines for those who injured or killed a cat. But in the story Lovecraft strongly evokes and encapsulates the real historicity of a much later period across the English Channel. Namely, that dark period of religious anti-cat mania to be found in late medieval and early modern northern continental Europe — whose culture Ulthar is evidently partly patterned on. Later people became more enlightened, and by Lovecraft's beloved 18th century the cat was once again back in favour as pet and mouser — especially so in what was by then Great Britain. In that century it was not uncommon for a British poet to pen verses on the death of his learned friend's pet cat (Thomas Grey mourning the death of Walpole's cat, for instance) and Lovecraft continued this poetic tradition for his own friends and their cats. If he actually *revived* the tradition, rather than simply continued it, must remain something for the historians of poetic form to discover.

⁴ *I gaze* — The story was partly inspired by just such a situation...

"I had a visitor the other night, who gave me an idea for a good story. He was a furry, four-footed young visitor, with a black coat, white gloves & boots,

antique Aegyptus,⁶ and bearer of tales⁷ from forgotten cities in Meroë⁸ and Ophir.⁹ He is the kin of the jungle's¹⁰ lords,¹¹ and heir to the

& white around the tip of his nose & the tip of his tail. He sat in a chair near me, purring most inspiringly, when I permitted my fancy to consider his ancient race & heritage. ..." — letter of 21st May 1920, in *Letters to Rheinhart Kleiner*, pages 190-191.

The story was however pre-figured by six months in the form of Lovecraft's poem "Tryout's Lament for the Vanished Spider" (January 1920). In this a beloved creature has vanished and is lamented, the creature is hailed as one of an ancient race that remembers Egypt and Babylon. It is sure to return to its accustomed place, in time. The creature is of course a spider, not a cat — but the elements are the same.

⁵ *cannot see* — Unseen forces are of course a common feature of Lovecraft's work, and there are also the unseen rats of "The Rats in the Walls" to consider within the range of such phenomena. Vanishing is also a repeated element of the "Ulthar" story. Cats vanish — the slayings and the dark cottage are out of sight of the villagers — the kitten vanishes — the cats vanish — the wanderers vanish — the coppers vanish — and then finally a law... appears. This process of slowly-gearred transference of disappearance from the cats to the coppers seems apt, if the story is understood as Lovecraft working through his emotional pain at the loss of his beloved pet cat in 1904.

⁶ *Aegyptus* — Ancient Roman name for the coast and deltas of Egypt, the name being said to be from the Greek name for the vital temple of Ptah located at the centre of the Egyptian city of Memphis. The concluding paragraph of Lovecraft's contemporaneous essay "Cats and Dogs" (June 1920) seems to place the origin of the cat even further back, being ultimately... "Babylonian". Possibly he was thinking of the only mention of cats in the Bible, where the author notes with distain that cats are allowed to sit on the idols of Babylonia (Baruch 6:22) — from the context, these were domesticated temple cats. But to have introduced that fact into the story would be seen to confuse the common reader who casually equated the veneration of the cat with Egypt.

⁷ *bearer of tales* — Likely a wicked pun on 'tails'. But just possibly also a very obscure allusion to Herodotus's most ancient name for cats, the *ailurri*, or 'tail-wavers', that being his description used on his visit to Egypt.

If understood in terms of its import for the story-world, then 'bearer of tales' implies that cats can tell stories and thus talk. Talk the cats of Ulthar indeed do, albeit in their own language, although that occurs only in the later *Dream Quest*... "Carter now spoke with the leaders [of the cats] in the soft language of cats..." (*Dream Quest*). In his letters Lovecraft talks about so 'conversing' with street-cats he encountered in real-life.

⁸ *Meroë* — There is a tangential cat connection, as Meroë is the destination of the travellers in Henty's travel adventure novel *The Cat of Bubastes, A Tale of Ancient Egypt* (1889). Meroë was a very large island kingdom in what is now the Sudan, "bounded on three sides by the Nile from Atbara to Khartum, the Atbara, and the Blue Nile" (1911 *Britannica*), and it was known to the Graeco-Roman world by that name. It was deemed by ancient commentators to be a land... "remarkable for its numerous pyramids", and in modern times still "marked by over two hundred pyramids" to be seen as mounded ruins in the desert (1911 *Britannica*). It had few fortified sites and thus appears to have been held together and defended only by intense religious belief. It appears to have ended as an independent kingdom in 350 A.D., with natural semi-desertification of the region and shifting Roman trade routes slowly weakening it — until finally invading

secrets of hoary and sinister Africa.¹² The Sphinx is his cousin, and he speaks her language; but he is more ancient than the Sphinx, and

tribes could pick it off the map. For fictional purposes, this terminal date might mark the beginning of the ‘dark wanderers’ — perhaps priestly groups who might be supposed to have fled from the falling Meroë and have thus begun their wandering, taking their intense lion-god religion and perhaps their sacred cats with them.

In archaeological terms the ruins of its central city were first discovered by James Bruce in 1772. Some hasty Italian attempts at treasure-looting for gold occurred in 1834, but only succeeded in damaging a few pyramids. With the city location uncertain, some of the likely pyramids were properly excavated for the first time by Budge of the British Museum in 1902-05. The city was not found, yet a clear link was established with the mainstream of Egyptian culture (e.g. chapters of the *Book of the Dead* presented as wall reliefs, now in the British Museum). Finally the main city mounds were identified by Sayce of Oxford (who also excitedly thought he had discovered evidence for African iron-working — later totally disproved) and the city mounds were properly excavated by the University of Liverpool in 1909-10. Thus Meroë was an active site of exciting and ongoing discoveries in H. P. Lovecraft’s youth. A lifelong student and armchair explorer of Ancient Egypt, he would also have read many popular reports on it and seen maps circa 1911-12 — when he was about age 21 — due to the publication of the final excavation report book *Meroë, the City of the Ethiopians*, 1911, complete with many photographs. Some further final pyramid excavations were ongoing when Lovecraft wrote “The Cats of Ulthar”, after which the site was abandoned until the 1960s — when the Canadians laboriously uncovered the mundane outlines of the town area.

Meroë would also have been of interest to Lovecraft ‘the Roman’, because it was on the southern edge of Roman influence. Initially hostile to the Empire, skirmishes and raids quickly gave way to trade, aided by the strong arm and reach of the Roman army. From the 1st century B.C. such trade and cultural influence led to the city’s heyday. Had Lovecraft lived to reside down in the hot south of America, and thus translate this warm lush environment into some Solomon Kane-like tales of an ancient Roman map-maker (perhaps a closet vampire, werewolf or similar?) encountering fiends and horrors in the ancient cities of the African interior, then Meroë could well have played a part in such stories — offering a suitably liminal terrain in which Lovecraft’s great interests of Egypt and Rome had met and mingled. For support for this speculation on Africa see my essay “H.P. Lovecraft and Great Zimbabwe”, in my fifth *Historical Context* book.

⁹ *Opbir* — mentioned in the Bible, but now of unknown location. Reputed to be the place from which the fine gold of Solomon was shipped into his kingdom, though possibly not the ultimate source of that gold. I can find no connections with cats.

¹⁰ *jungle’s lords* — Lovecraft implies here various forest-cats which live in wild tropical places, and he accentuates their aristocratic glamour to chime with his own sensibilities. Had he been able to see the final excavation report book *Meroë, the City of the Ethiopians*, 1911, he would have seen details Meroë’s central Lion Temple, and full page photographs of the lion-gods on the walls.

¹¹ *lords* — In Lovecraft’s “Cats and Dogs” essay he shows that cats to be natural aristocrats.

¹² *hoary* — A rough white or pale grey, with age. When paired with *sinister* it implies ancient ruins deep in the African interior, ruins which still hold some lurking threat despite their great age and abandonment. Lovecraft, along with members of the

remembers that which she hath forgotten.¹³ In Ulthar, before ever the burgesses¹⁴ forbade the killing of cats, there dwelt an old cotter¹⁵ and his wife who delighted to trap and slay the cats of their neighbours. Why they did this I know not; save that many hate the voice of the cat in the night, and take it ill that cats should run stealthily about yards and gardens at twilight.¹⁶ But whatever the reason, this old man and

Lovecraft Circle such as Robert E. Howard (*Solomon Kane*) would later explore this idea in fiction. See my long essay on “H.P. Lovecraft and Great Zimbabwe”, on this use and where Lovecraft might have taken it in fiction had he lived.

¹³ *Sphinx* — In 1905 the sand was completely cleared away from the Sphinx, and the great monument was seen its entirety for the first time since classical antiquity. As an eager amateur Egyptophile, the 15 year old Lovecraft would surely have thrilled to this and the many other ongoing discoveries from the Near East. Lovecraft specifically refers to the Sphinx several times in his works. In “The Cats of Ulthar” his line “remembers that which she hath forgotten” might be a reference to the way that the current face of the Sphinx is a later and cruder addition. Is Lovecraft suggesting that the original face was more cat-like? I believe that a lion-with-mane has been suggested by informed theorists of this matter — allowing enough stone for the current head-dress to be cut out by later stone-carvers. Was this a current theory known to Lovecraft in 1920? In his later story “Under The Pyramids”, Lovecraft transfers Houdini’s choice of story location to the Temple of the Sphinx (a real place, the gate-chapel leading to the Second Pyramid), leading him to speculate again on the nature of the original face of the Sphinx...

“Near the edge of the plateau and due east of the Second Pyramid, with a face probably altered to form a colossal portrait of Khephren, its royal restorer, stands the monstrous Sphinx — mute, sardonic, and wise beyond mankind and memory. [...] There are unpleasant tales of the Sphinx before Khephren — but whatever its elder features were, the monarch replaced them with his own that men might look at the colossus without fear.”

¹⁴ *burgesses* — Despite the word’s feminine sound, it does not indicate such. It is an antiquated British term for the administrator of a local borough or district, and the word is now forgotten by all except for a few historians.

¹⁵ *cotter* — Archaic, a tenant of a rural cottage, often paying rent in the form of labour. Although elsewhere in his work and letters Lovecraft uses it to refer to any rural cottage dweller.

¹⁶ *at twilight* — These lines seem to echo Lovecraft’s mother’s notion of that at dusk some strange ‘creatures’ were likely to rush on her from around corners ...

“I remember Mrs. Lovecraft spoke to me about weird and fantastic creatures that rushed out from behind buildings and from corners at dark, and that she shivered and looked about apprehensively...” — Memories of Clara L. Hess, given in de Camp, *Lovecraft: A Biography*.

While “weird and fantastic” might not have been *precisely* the sort of words to be used by an elderly lady from that era, the sentiment was probably more or less correctly

woman took pleasure in trapping and slaying every cat which came near to their hovel; and from some of the sounds heard after dark, many villagers fancied that the manner of slaying was exceedingly peculiar.¹⁷ But the villagers did not discuss such things with the old man and his wife; because of the habitual expression on the withered faces of the two, and because their cottage was so small and so darkly hidden under spreading oaks at the back of a neglected yard.¹⁸ In truth, much as the owners of cats hated these odd folk, they feared them more; and instead of berating them as brutal assassins, merely took care that no cherished pet or mouser¹⁹ should stray toward the remote hovel under the dark trees. When through some unavoidable oversight a cat was missed, and sounds heard after dark, the loser would lament impotently; or console himself by thanking Fate that it

recorded. Lovecraft was, at spring 1920, just beyond the first anniversary of the loss of his mother to the insane asylum, although he visited her there regularly and may have continued to hear such ‘dark creature’ fears from her — as they walked and talked together in the shadowy wooded asylum grounds. One might later see such fears reflected in Malone’s fear of rigidly angular brick buildings in the story “Red Hook”, the corners and angles of “Witch House”, and the bizarrely-angled risen city of “Cthulhu”.

¹⁷ *strange pleasure .. exceedingly peculiar* — this is one such example in Lovecraft’s work; others include the murderous necrophilia that forms the central concern of “The Loved Dead”, written a few years later in 1923 — reputedly the story that caused *Weird Tales* magazine to be ‘banned in Indiana’.

¹⁸ *neglected yard* — Poe had a similar setting for the hanging of the cat in his macabre revenge tale of a cat-killer, “The Black Cat”... “One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it [the cat] to the limb of a tree”, this dreadful deed being done in the shabby yard of “the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit”. Thus, although “The Cats of Ulthar” is often said to be Dunsanian, is can equally be called Poe-esque in term of its setting and cat-death.

As for the ominous dark trees which cover this yard, note that Lovecraft explored the related idea of a weird sentient tree actually talking the killing revenge, in his story “The Tree” which was also written in “the first half of 1920” (*Lovecraft Encyclopedia*).

¹⁹ *mouser* — a once-common term for a domestic or farm cat kept because it caught and despatched many mice each night. Less common today, but still understood.

was not one of his children who had thus vanished.²⁰ For the people of Ulthar were simple, and knew not whence it is²¹ all cats first came.²²

One day a caravan²³ of strange wanderers from the South²⁴ entered the narrow cobbled streets of Ulthar. Dark wanderers²⁵ they were, and unlike the other roving folk²⁶ who passed through the village twice

²⁰ *vanished* — In a later Lovecraft story, “The Horror at Red Hook”, it is the young children of Norwegian sailors who vanish and are horribly sacrificed by the newly-arrived cult in the slum of Red Hook. Young children are also snatched by cults, for sacrifice, in a number of his other stories.

²¹ *is* — Lovecraft uses “is”, not was. Thus he implies that the place still exists.

²² *knew not* — This is rather gnomic. Possible Lovecraft means to imply that the cats of the Dreamlands come from some outer place or dimension, and thus cannot be truly killed in such a way. With the implication that therefore there is no need to lament their apparent death, while also offering a reason why they have such immensely long memories. If so then this may also obliquely reference to the traditional folk idea that cats have ‘nine lives’, extending this to a form of implied semi-immortality perhaps in a state akin to vampires. Rather more simply, Lovecraft may have meant to imply only that the people of Ulthar do not know the ancient language and invocation needed to bestir all the local cats to wrathful revenge, as young Menes does later in the story.

²³ *caravan* — This indicates not a single wheeled structure, but rather a long strung-out line of wooden wagons, carts and pack-animals, and a nomadic travelling group.

²⁴ *South* — The wanderers must therefore have been coming from the port of Dylath-leen, and would have recently travelled over the sea to reach that port.

²⁵ *Dark wanderers* — Historically, in the 5th Century Herodotus visited Egypt and used ‘the burnt faced ones’ to refer to the northern Ethiopians from Meroë in the far south of Egypt. To forestall future confabulation on this point, I should add that the final excavation report on the city of Meroe notes... “The Meroites were not negroes. The ruling class is represented with high foreheads, straight noses, and thin lips, while the complexion was fair. The skin is painted red like that of the Egyptians or the people of Punt.” (from *Meroë, the City of the Ethiopians*, 1911, page 55).

In fiction, S.T. Joshi notes the resemblance to the Wanderers (capital W) in Dunsany’s famous dreamland-story “Idle Days on the Yann”. Lovecraft first encountered Dunsany in the Autumn/Fall of 1919, and the resulting ‘Dunsany phase’ would last two years. Thus “Cats” was written while Lovecraft was in the full grip of his first great impetus toward emulating Dunsany.

²⁶ *roving folk* — evidently a nomadic people, akin in appearance, practices and wagon-decoration to the gypsies of Earth. When gypsies first appeared in England in the 16th century they were surmised to have come from Egypt, and thus named ‘gypsies’. By Lovecraft’s time their ancestral origins was instead known, by the linguistics, to be in northern India — and this was much later confirmed by genetic science. Yet Lovecraft’s fictional wanderers are not earthly gypsies, and thus he is free to imply that this particular band arises from Egyptian culture. Indeed, the opening lines of his story hint that they might be travellers who found their way into the Dreamlands from lost parts of upper Egypt far to the south, such as Meroë, when that civilised and fertile place of

every year. In the market-place they told fortunes for silver, and bought gay beads from the merchants. What was the land of these wanderers none could tell; but it was seen that they were given to strange prayers, and that they had painted on the sides of their wagons strange figures with human bodies and the heads of cats, hawks, rams, and lions.²⁷ And the leader of the caravan wore a head-dress with two horns and a curious disc betwixt the horns.²⁸

There was in this singular caravan a little boy with no father or mother,²⁹ but only a tiny black kitten to cherish. The plague had not

“numerous pyramids” was destroyed by a combination of shifting Roman trade routes, natural desertification and invading tribes. If this band is meant to be an implied branch of Dunsany’s Wanderers, then they would arrive every seven years in Ulthar, coming from some unknown and fantastic desert land beyond the “high” mountain range of “Mloon”. Lovecraft’s later linkage of the cats of Ulthar with the Moon, in his epic *Dream Quest*, does suggest that the alert intertextual reader is meant to feel that *perhaps* the Moon itself is the strange unvisited “strange far desert” that lies high beyond the mountains of Mloon. Here also we see Lovecraft starting to perceive how a loosely coherent mythos could be very lightly developed among different authors, without any central co-ordination or ‘rule-book’. And how he could himself then add intertextual interweavings to his later own works which would subtly enhance his earlier works, and even enhance those of other writers.

²⁷ *strange figures .. cats, hawks, rams, and lions* — The invocation of the visual appearance of part of the Ancient Egyptian pantheon is obvious. Also, in Ancient Egypt it was punishable by death to kill either the cat or the hawk — thus the pairing and the first-placement here may be an indication that Lovecraft knew of such matters.

²⁸ *curious disc .. horns* — Ancient Egyptian religion is again evoked. While the head-dress suits various deities we probably have here a priest of the Moon god Thoth (Thut), wise scribal writer for the gods and father of astronomy. Both aspects would have fitted with Lovecraft’s interests, and also with the “Mloon” of Dunsany’s Wanderers. There is a further reason for choosing Thoth. Lovecraft may also have believed, with the Greeks, that cats were understood in Ancient Egypt to be “children of the moon” — later events in *Dream Quest* would seem to partly confirm this.

²⁹ *no father or mother* — At this time Lovecraft’s father had died in the madhouse and his mad mother was in the asylum and had only about a year to live. There was, however, at that time no reason to suppose she would physically die soon, and it appears that Lovecraft was not aware of the exact nature of his father’s death. Yet Lovecraft had, in effect, lost both his mother and father in terms of their nurturing and guiding roles. He had also relatively recently lost his uncle, grandfather and even his cherished younger cousin.

been kind to him,³⁰ yet had left him this small furry thing to mitigate his sorrow; and when one is very young, one can find great relief in the lively antics of a black kitten.³¹ So the boy whom the dark people called Menes³² smiled more often than he wept as he sate playing with his graceful kitten³³ on the steps of an oddly painted wagon.

³⁰ *plague* — Lovecraft was writing just 18 months after the last of a series of killer influenza epidemics, which had killed at least 50 million people around the world. In the worst phase during October 1918, in the nearby city of Boston deaths ran at 200 a day — mostly young adults in the prime of health. Thus the word “plague” would have had a strong resonance with many of his readers in 1920. At a personal level, he was also writing on the ten year anniversary of his successful convalescence after a near-killer bout of measles, which he appears to have suffered in early 1910.

³¹ *black kitten* — Lovecraft was, of course, a lifelong cat-lover — yet he only ever owned one cat and preferred instead to ‘borrow’ them (rather like his library-books). His only ‘owned cat’ had been lost traumatically in the fall/autumn of 1904, when Lovecraft had just turned 14 years old, he had to leave his beloved childhood and family home. During the house move his pet black cat ran away and was never seen again. This cat features again and is named in “The Rats in the Walls” (written August–September 1923), where it is stated to be “seven years old” and Lovecraft notes rather poignantly that it had “come with me from my home”.

Correlating these dates, a real pet cat that was seven years old in 1904 was thus likely to have been a new kitten — and thus given its name — when Lovecraft was aged about 7. That seems about the right time of life for a bright child to be given such a pet to care for, and it might be plausibly suggested that a real black kitten was likely given to distract the boy Lovecraft from thoughts of the death of his father (July 1898). We know from a letter that the cat had indeed been had from a kitten, as Lovecraft states in a letter... “I watched him grow from a tiny black handful” and the same cat had then been had for many years.

The naming of this cat — today often used by Lovecraft’s anti-fans as a political stick with which to idly beat and deride him as being “as reptilian as some of his cosmic horrors” etc — is thus rather open for debate. In terms of asking whether a seven year-old, or some adult relative or servant in the household, would have given this cat its then-common and unremarkable name.

³² *Menes* — Menes, founder of Memphis and deemed to have been the first mortal who ever reigned in Egypt, probably c. 2750 B.C (at a best-guess by scholars). Memphis being the Greek name for an Ancient Egyptian city sited strategically near the wide and fertile reaches of the Nile river delta (which, incidentally, were then believed to have a sort of Dreamlands equivalent superimposed upon them). This most ancient city was the centre of the god-cult of Ptah, and linguists state that the Greeks derived the name ‘Aegyptos’ from the name of Ptah’s temple in the centre of the city — this name later became Aegyptus under the Romans and thus our own name ‘Egypt’. Lovecraft, being an intense Egyptophile from an early age, would have been aware of such matters.

Interestingly, in relation to Lovecraft’s own mythology, Ptah is the deification of the archaic ‘primordial mound’ god of ‘risen land’, i.e. the god of submerged land that has

On the third morning of the wanderers' stay in Ulthar, Menes could not find his kitten; and as he sobbed aloud in the market-place certain villagers told him of the old man and his wife, and of sounds heard in the night. And when he heard these things his sobbing gave place to meditation, and finally to prayer. He stretched out his arms toward the sun and prayed in a tongue no villager could understand;³⁴ though indeed the villagers did not try very hard to understand, since their attention was mostly taken up by the sky and the odd shapes the clouds were assuming.³⁵ It was very peculiar, but as the little boy uttered his petition there seemed to form overhead the shadowy, nebulous figures of exotic things; of hybrid creatures crowned with horn-flanked discs.³⁶ Nature is full of such illusions to impress the imaginative.³⁷

spontaneously risen from the sea or the Nile delta — this might remind one of the setting in Lovecraft's "Dagon" and also of R'lyeh in "The Call of Cthulhu".

³³ *playing with* — Lovecraft wrote a variety of observations and poems on the beauty and grace of kittens and cats, and is also known to have carried some catnip with him (some say in the form of a 'catnip mouse') on his walks — in order to attract the attentions of suitable felines. His various writings on the *felidae* and *felis* (as he sometimes also called them) are now to be found in *The H.P. Lovecraft Cat Book* (2019).

³⁴ *prayed in a tongue* — The boy Lovecraft had fashioned makeshift turf and bowered shrines to nature deities in the fields near his home and later by the banks of the Seekonk near his home. "I have in literal truth built altars to Pan, Apollo, Diana, and Athena" (from "A Confession of Unfaith"). His early facility with languages was such that he probably invoked such deities in Latin or Greek.

³⁵ *odd shapes .. clouds* — Also written in 1920, Lovecraft's story "The Street" has a sky-vision, and also in a tale of local revenge — involving a tree-shaded sentient street...

"The poet says that all through the hours before dawn he beheld sordid ruins but indistinctly in the glare of the arc-lights; that there loomed above the wreckage another picture wherein he could descry moonlight and fair houses and elms and oaks and maples of dignity."

There may in both instances be some slight influence here from the press reports of the famous visions of the 'Angels of Mons', an event during the First World War?

³⁶ *horn-flanked discs* — Again, the reference is likely to be to the Moon god Thoth.

³⁷ *Nature is full of such illusions* — As a boy meteorologist, complete with a daily-tended weather station, Lovecraft would have spent much time observing clouds. Given his

That night the wanderers left Ulthar, and were never seen again.

And the householders were troubled when they noticed that in all the village there was not a cat to be found. From each hearth the familiar cat had vanished; cats large and small, black, grey, striped, yellow, and white.³⁸ Old Kranon,³⁹ the burgomaster,⁴⁰ swore that the dark folk

taste for vivid imaginings we might assume he often ‘saw’ faces and animals in the clouds. We certainly know he glimpsed earthy faces in the glades and pools along the Seekonk shoreline... “which my infant imagination peopled with fauns & satyrs & dryads” (letter of 8th July 1929, referring to the wooded bluff above York Pond).

“When about seven or eight I was a genuine pagan, so intoxicated with the beauty of Greece that I acquired a half-sincere belief in the old gods and Nature-spirits. I have in literal truth built altars to Pan, Apollo, Diana, and Athena, and have watched for dryads and satyrs in the woods and fields at dusk. Once I firmly thought I beheld some of these sylvan creatures dancing under autumnal oaks...” (“A Confession of Unfaith”).

³⁸ *each hearth* — The wide variety of cat breeds might here suggest that Ulthar is home to many stray cats, lost and abandoned in the real world, who then find their way into the Dreamlands and thus to comfortable hearths in a town seemingly without any dogs. That the cats of Ulthar are able to make “the great leap through space back to the housetops of our earth and its dreamland” from the Moon’s dark side, in *Dream Quest*, suggests they may have many ways of travel that are only guessed at by humans, those...

“cryptical realms which are known only to cats and which villagers say are on the moon’s dark side, whither the cats leap from tall housetops” (from *Dream Quest*).

In 1929 Lovecraft used the existence of ‘cat-ladders’ at Mrs Beebe’s rural house near Wilbraham to suggests a similar magical inter-dimensional transportation to his fellow writer H. Warner Munn. Munn was unaware that secret cat passages had been built into in the walls of Beebe’s old home. To Munn’s eyes, it thus appeared that some of Mrs Beebe’s cats would magically spirit themselves out of locked and sealed rooms. This partly inspired Munn’s short story “The Cat Organ” (*Weird Tales*, November 1930, headed there “Tales of the Werewolf Clan, 1: The Cat Organ”). Mrs Beebe’s cat-ladders also appear in the Lovecraft poem “[To a Cat]” (circa late 1920s), which can be found in *The Ancient Track*.

³⁹ *Kranon* — the Ancient Greek *kranion* meant ‘the tough and encased upper part of the skull’, and this may be an obvious source for a name for a hard-headed leader called Kranon. Yet in Ancient Greek, *Krannon* or *Kranon* (spellings are indifferent) was also a city name meaning ‘a rocky cairn’ with the implication of a high ‘head-horn’ of rock at the head of a crooked hill, and thus the name also implies a certain loftiness and difficulty in approach. This city’s storm-foretelling pair of black ravens, often mentioned in books of strange animal lore, may have first brought the city’s name to Lovecraft’s attention. One might then plausibly suppose that such high and inaccessible rocky places were long the lairs of wild-cats in semi-arid areas, and thus one would have a useful connection between the word and the origins of tamed cats.

had taken the cats away in revenge for the killing of Menes' kitten;⁴¹ and cursed the caravan and the little boy. But Nith, the lean notary,⁴² declared that the old cotter and his wife were more likely persons to suspect; for their hatred of cats was notorious and increasingly bold. Still, no one durst⁴³ complain to the sinister couple; even when little Atal, the innkeeper's son, vowed that he had at twilight seen all the cats of Ulthar in that accursed yard under the trees, pacing very slowly and solemnly in a circle around the cottage, two abreast, as if in performance of some unheard-of rite of beasts.⁴⁴ The villagers did not know how much to believe from so small a boy; and though they feared that the evil pair had charmed the cats⁴⁵ to their death, they

A variant of *krannon* was perhaps also used by the Greeks to describe the ‘hard head-like’ quality of certain very tough pips, such as acorns and cherry pips, although this appears to be the plausible surmise of a few modern linguistic scholars and was unlikely to have been known to Lovecraft. Similarly Lovecraft probably didn’t see any connection from *kranion* to the Latin form *calvaria* (‘skull’) to the place called Calvary (‘hill of skulls’), the famous high barren rock outcrop and place of Christ’s crucifixion.

⁴⁰ *Burgomaster* — name for a head of a town or district in continental northern Europe. Equivalent of a town mayor. Of continental European origin and thus perhaps another small nod toward the Grimm fairy-tale tradition.

⁴¹ *taken the cats away* — There is a faint echo here of the famous northern European folk-story which generally goes by the name of the “Pied Piper of Hamelin”, in which all the children of a river-port are one day charmed my music into a walking line and led away into the mountain-side. Extermination of creatures and bitter revenge are similarly involved in the “Pied Piper”, and the cats of Ulthar likewise go off to pace two-by-two and vanish into a dark place. The general river-port setting is also somewhat similar.

⁴² *notary* — An official entrusted to conduct non-contentious and routine legal matters, especially the witnessing of signatures, marks and seals placed on important documents.

⁴³ *durst* — archaic English, here meaning ‘dared to’.

⁴⁴ *performance* — Early in Lovecraft’s *Commonplace Book*, item #11 he noted the story-idea... “Odd nocturnal ritual. Beasts dance and march to musick.”

⁴⁵ *charmed the cats* — Lovecraft was an expert ‘cat charmer’, and he kept catnip on his person for attracting suitable cats he encountered on his walks. Thus he presumably sometimes feared that others might use similar ‘cat charming’ methods for more nefarious purposes, especially in slum areas. In 1917 one can find calls in American newspapers for the introduction of the role of “official cat-catcher”, to match that of the traditional town dog-catcher.

preferred not to chide the old cotter till they met him outside his dark and repellent yard.

So Ulthar went to sleep in vain anger; and when the people awaked at dawn—behold! Every cat was back at his accustomed hearth! Large and small, black, grey, striped, yellow, and white, none was missing. Very sleek and fat did the cats appear, and sonorous⁴⁶ with purring content. The citizens talked with one another of the affair, and marvelled not a little. Old Kranon again insisted that it was the dark folk who had taken them, since cats did not return alive from the cottage of the ancient man and his wife. But all agreed on one thing: that the refusal of all the cats to eat their portions of meat or drink their saucers of milk was exceedingly curious. And for two whole days the sleek, lazy cats of Ulthar would touch no food, but only doze by the fire or in the sun.⁴⁷



It was fully a week before the villagers noticed that no lights were appearing at dusk in the windows of the cottage under the trees.

⁴⁶ *sonorous* — A pleasantly deep loud sound, here the loud purring sound of the type typically made by contented cats.

⁴⁷ *two whole days* — In late summer 1918 Lovecraft's mother, in his words, "breaks down". Lovecraft states that he had a likewise breakdown due to this and thus did "nothing" for "two months" — *Lord of a Visible World*, page 68. This memory is supported by the dating of his poems, in the production of which there is a long gap at that time. There is thus a small 'fit' here between the story and Lovecraft's own biography.

Then the lean Nith⁴⁸ remarked that no one had seen the old man or his wife since the night the cats were away. In another week the burgomaster decided to overcome his fears and call at the strangely silent dwelling as a matter of duty, though in so doing he was careful to take with him Shang⁴⁹ the blacksmith and Thul⁵⁰ the cutter of stone as witnesses. And when they had broken down the frail door they found only this: two cleanly picked human skeletons on the earthen floor,⁵¹ and a number of singular beetles crawling in the shadowy corners.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Nith* — a city alluded to once in Dunsany, who has... “the green eyes of the mountain men who had looked at him strangely in the city of Nith when he had entered it by the desert door.” (“The Coronation of Mr. Thomas Shap”, 1912). Possibly this was Dunsany’s nod to the *Nith* from... “the stream called *Nith Neambnach*, which turned the first water-mill erected in Ireland by King Cormac for his wife and bondsmaid” (Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1894). *Nith* thus appears to once have indicated a fast tight river, which might explain why a visitor rarely entered the city of Nith by the ‘desert door’, there presumably also being a preferred ‘river door’.

Nith is also the name of a lovely and fast Scottish river known by poets. The famous Scots poet Robert Burns has in his “A Vision”... “Hasting to join the sweeping Nith”. Poe, in an essay on the poems of Fitz-Greene Halleck, noted Halleck’s verses on “Burns” which posit that... “by the Doon’s low trees, And pastoral Nith and wooded Ayr” are the best sites at which to remember the poet Burns. From the early Victorian period one can also find a local tale of how a lost “ghost” cat once swam the Scottish Nith to return living to its owner (John McDiarmid, *Sketches from nature*, 1830) — but it seems unlikely that Lovecraft knew of this local fireside tale.

⁴⁹ *Shang* — Chinese name, associated with the ancient ruling dynasty famous for their power and their strong development of metalworking. Thus a name suited to a blacksmith.

⁵⁰ *Thul* — An old name in India for an empty place, roughly indicating a ‘little desert of sand-ridges’, and thus suited to be the name of a stone carver. Also occurs in Dunsany as a place name... “sometimes my dreams took me as far as Pungar Vees, the red walled city where the fountains are, which trades with the Isles and Thul.” (*Idle Days On The Yann*).

⁵¹ *cleanly picked* — A similar fate awaits... “the hungry zoogs who looked evilly at a small black kitten” in Lovecraft’s later *Dream Quest* tale. Thus the *modus operandi* of the Cats of Ulthar is somewhat akin to the famous piranha.

⁵² *singular beetles* — although the species is unspecified here, the scarab beetle had a key role for the Ancient Egypt pantheon. Scarab beetles are closely associated with the lion-god in the carvings at Meroë — see *Meroë, the City of the Ethiopians*, 1911, page 64.

There was subsequently much talk among the burgesses of Ulthar. Zath,⁵³ the coroner,⁵⁴ disputed at length with Nith, the lean notary; and Kranon and Shang and Thul were overwhelmed with questions. Even little Atal, the innkeeper's son,⁵⁵ was closely questioned and given a sweetmeat⁵⁶ as reward. They talked of the old cotter and his wife, of the caravan of dark wanderers, of small Menes and his black kitten, of the prayer of Menes and of the sky during that prayer, of the doings of the cats on the night the caravan left, and of what was later found in the cottage under the dark trees in the repellent yard.

And in the end the burgesses passed that remarkable law which is told of by traders in Hatheg⁵⁷ and discussed by travellers in Nir;⁵⁸ namely, that in Ulthar no man may kill a cat.⁵⁹

⁵³ *Zath* — Arabic form of the name for an ancient nomadic Indian tribe known in Sindh in India, a tribe theorised in Victorian times as one of the three roots of the modern nomadic gypsy people. It may indicate that Lovecraft did a little research in encyclopaedias and at the public library, to find such choice details for his story.

⁵⁴ *coroner* — A person formally entrusted with the authority to enquire into the cause of a death and to establish the identity of the deceased.

⁵⁵ *Atal* — this appears to be a Sikh name most common in the Punjab of India. There may be some connection here with the famous 'Baba Atal'. This Atal brought his best friend back to life after a sudden death and — for thus breaking the laws of nature — he went into a trance and died at the age of nine. Among Sikhs this 'boy of light' is greatly revered and has the title 'Baba', a title given usually only to a 'grand old man'. Had Lovecraft encountered this while researching gypsy origins for the story, he might have seen in this account a poignant reflection of his friendship with Phillips Gamwell, Lovecraft's beloved young cousin, who had died young on 31st December 1916. Also perhaps a reflection of with his own chosen stance in life as a boyish 'old gent'.

As a character from "The Cats of Ulthar", Atal later also appears in the Lovecraft story "The Other Gods" where he is apprentice to Barzai the Wise. Later he appears in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* as a three-hundred year-old bearded sage at the Temple of the Elder Ones in Ulthar.

⁵⁶ *Sweetmeat* — Not actually meat, but rather a sweet crystalline product such as dried fruits preserved in a sweet glaze, or lozenges made with ingredients such as honey and clarified butter.

⁵⁷ *Hatheg* — a settlement of traders somewhat near to Ulthar, and presumably located on the edge of the desert, most likely at some point higher than Uthar (which is down

on the river below). Hatheg is said to be within occasional sight of the distant desert peak of Hatheg-Kla... “Hatheg-Kla is far in the stony desert beyond Hatheg” (from “The Other Gods”).

What of the name Hatheg? The *Hatheg-el-Habesch* is mentioned in Ludolfi’s *Historia Aethiopica* (1681), in discussing the names various local peoples have for the highest rulers of what we know as the large country of Habesh or Al-Habash (Abyssinia, later northern Ethiopia). This nebulously bordered and largely mountainous country is indeed very high, much being some “10,000 feet above the level of the sea” and such a terrain meant that it once had many groups and local rulers within it. In that context *Hatheg* or *Hatzege* (Arabic) translated to ‘king of kings’, or the ‘Emperor over all’ the many lesser kings in Habesh (Jeronimo Lobo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, 1735, pages 253–254). Lovecraft’s choice of the name Hatheg for his lofty mountain is thus quite apt — it surveys all and dominates the wide land around it.

What then of -kla? In this same high region a *takla* was the name for a ‘holy plant of faith’, and generally poetically indicated a ‘springing up of renewed Christian faith (ascending holiness)’ when found as the personal name *Takla* (e.g.: among saints, “the exhumed body of Takla Haymanot was found undecayed 57 years after its burial”, Budge, 1906). Thus, Lovecraft is again broadly correct in appending *-kla* to Hatheg-kla, though both religious scholars and linguists will no doubt splutter at his joining the two together in such a cavalier way.

Thus, in Lovecraft’s mind Hatheg-Kla could have indicated to the people of the Dreamlands something akin to the ‘emperor-mountain of the ascending spirits’.

⁵⁸ *Nir* — a settlement quite near Ulthar, but on the other side of the river Skai.

⁵⁹ *cat* — The cats of Ulthar return in force in Lovecraft’s long dream-adventure *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (written autumn/fall 1926–January 1927).



The Lion-god in his temple at the city of Meroë, as seen in the frontispiece of the final excavation report book *Meroë, the City of the Ethiopians*, 1911.

“... of human form, lion-headed, and wearing a remarkable head-dress, consisting of three bundles, flanked by feathers and crowned uraei, and supported on a pair of horizontal ram’s horns. This head-dress is often seen in the Egyptian temples on the heads of the Ptolemies and Roman emperors, and is also associated with Thoth [the moon-god], who was worshipped at Dakka, and Mandulis of Kalabsha. [In contrast, elsewhere] The Egyptian lion-god Mihôs, Miysis, ‘fierce-eyed lion,’ ordinarily wears a simpler form of the same...” and has a different name.



Charles W. "Tryout" Smith (1852-1948) by Daniel Pond. With thanks to Kenneth W. Faig Jr.

Here Smith is seen in his shed among his friendly spiders and old-time curios, in the process of picking out the metal type (individual letters) which would enable him to set up a page of another issue of his amateur magazine *The Tryout* for hand-printing. Smith was a long-time 'amateur journalist' and elderly friend of the young H.P. Lovecraft, with whom he appears to have come into contact by letters in 1917. Smith lived about sixty miles north of Lovecraft, and they first met in 1921. His home was Haverhill, about ten miles inland along the Merrimack River from the New England coastal town of Newburyport (Lovecraft's model for Innsmouth). A lively and boyish old man, Smith kept alive the old-time amateur ideal of the independent 'boy printer' by typesetting, printing and mailing his amateur journal *The Tryout* from 1914 until 1946. It was in the November 1920 issue that "The Cats of Ulthar" first appeared, and he also published other stories and poems by Lovecraft. The character 'Preserved' Smith in Lovecraft's "The Shunned House" (1924), an elderly servant who has the sense to quit the evil house, is probably a nod to Smith.



Cover illustration: David Haden.

Back cover: my Photoshop adaptation and HPL-morphing of an old public domain book illustration.