

Adventuring in the Worlds of H.P. Lovecraft Part 2



DREAMWORLD

By Keith Herber

During his rather short career (1917-37) as a writer of horror stories, H.P. Lovecraft brought to fiction a number of unique places and things, many of which today still serve as inspirational starting points for writers of the macabre. The most famous of these concepts is that of the 'Cthulhu Mythos,' a term first used by August Derleth to describe the mythology and pantheon of beings created by HPL and later added to by many others. Prior to these Mythos tales, however, Lovecraft wrote a number of stories dealing with other themes.

The Lord Dunsany, Irish dramatist and a writer of dream-like fantasies, was an early influence upon Lovecraft and many of HPL's first stories were attempts to capture the feelings and experience of his own dreams. Most of these stories were fragmentary and sketch-like, and it was not until sometime early in the 1920s that he finally wrote of a complete "Dreamworld" which could be visited by those who knew how to dream 'deeply enough.' This world of dreams was populated by many different peoples and beings who inhabited the cities and villages of this strange realm. Some of them were quiet and peaceful, reminiscent of the 18th century New England that HPL professed such a love for; others, however, were built about mysterious temples or dark citadels better left undisturbed. Dreamers who would attempt to travel out of these populated regions to the barren wastelands and towering mountains beyond would discover dark horrors slithering through clefts in the rock or padding softly behind them when passing through the nighted valleys. Beyond even these places lay worse—the nightmare land of the Underworld, populated by ghouls, monstrous Dholes, and others.

It was during this period that Lovecraft also wrote a number of more traditional 'horror stories,' many Poe-

esque in style, and self-admitted attempts to emulate the earlier author—a favorite of HPL's since childhood. One of the first and best of these tales is "Arthur Jermyn" (1920), the story of a man who, through the exploration of his family tree, discovers a not-too-distant ancestor that is decidedly non-human. A later story, "The Picture in the House" deals with backwoods degeneracy and cannibalism. In 1926 he wrote "Pickman's Model," a particularly gruesome story often reprinted in horror anthologies, that very effectively combines both these themes. Some time after "Pickman" Lovecraft wrote the story "Cool Air" and the novel-length "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," both dealing with the idea of life extended beyond the normal limits and the price ultimately paid by those who would attempt it.

The major portion of these stories were set in and around a sometimes real and sometimes mythical, contemporary New England. "Witch-haunted Arkham" corresponds to Salem, Mass., and it was here that Lovecraft located the Miskatonic University—a setting employed by the author in many of his tales—whose library housed one of the five known copies of the dread *Necronomicon*. This volume was kept, by order of the University officials, under lock and key and public access to it was forbidden. Other stories took place in the darkest slums of Boston or

the ghettos of New York City where winding streets led to dark doorways through which passed strangely huddled figures.

Lovecraft was a member of the 'Protestant aristocracy' of New England—a descendant of one of the many once-influential but then decaying and vanishing families of Providence. Impoverished, he watched in growing fear as immigrants settled in the New England area in increasing numbers, bringing with them their own ways and beliefs and altering the culture in which he had been born and raised. He was likewise concerned about the physical changes wrought by the influx of people and at least once wrote an impassioned letter to the editor of the local newspaper deploring a proposed plan to replace, with family housing, a series of old waterfront warehouses he felt of significant historical value. Many of his stories took place in such ancient and 'deserted' areas, located in parts of the cities that he now considered turned "foreign" and mysterious.

Lovecraft was also an amateur student of his own family tree and many of his early tales are concerned with the protagonist stumbling upon some frightful secret regarding his own ancestry—either a recent 'taint' in the bloodline as described in both "Arthur Jermyn" and "Pickman's Model," or some deeper, more ancient 'urge' of genetic origin and pre-dating human existence, as written of in "The Festival." Here the protagonist suddenly finds himself driven to visit a crumbling New England town where, along with the town's inhabitants, he eventually descends to the vaults located beneath an old church.

"The Call Of Cthulhu," written in 1926, is considered to be one of the 'key' Mythos tales, and, it may be added, the only one in which Cthulhu makes an actual appearance. However, it was in 1927, with "The Colour Out of Space," that Lovecraft himself felt that he had entered a new 'era.' Although over the remaining ten years of his life he produced only eleven stories (two of them collaborations with other writers) among them are many of his finest ever. Most of them longer than the average short story, he found difficulty in selling them and several did not see print until well after his death. He nevertheless persevered and continued to ignore the demands of 'commercialism' while attempting to write solely for the purpose of aesthetic expression. Nearly destitute, he made a game of seeing how cheaply he could live while still managing to save money for travel in the South to visit the historic cities of

Charleston, St. Augustine, and New Orleans.

It was during this period he wrote some of what were to become his most famous tales including "The Dunwich Horror," "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," and "At the Mountains of Madness." These and others form the core of Lovecraft's 'Mythos tales' and with them he explored more deeply some of the themes he had begun in his earlier stories. "Dunwich" and "Dreams in the Witch-House" look into the possibilities of transcending time and space, but "Innsmouth" once again takes up the idea of 'tainted genes' that may lie quietly hidden in anyone. In "At the Mountains of Madness" the protagonist discovers that all earthly life may have evolved from some basic protoplasm brought into existence artificially by beings who came to Earth from somewhere deep in space.

According to the pre-history of the world described in various Lovecraft stories, the planet Earth may have been devoid of all life until two billion years ago when those known as the 'Old Ones' arrived and began to build great cities of stone beneath the warm seas. Later they migrated to the continents that had risen above the surface of the water and here built further great cities of towering stone. The Old Ones apparently created the first 'earthly' life out of a need for slave-beasts to help build their great cities and it is this basic life-form that, through the process of evolution, eventually gave rise to the human species. It was several hundred million years later that Cthulhu and his spawn "seeped" down from the star Xoth and, after inhabiting a huge continent in what is now the Pacific Ocean, began a war upon the Old Ones that lasted off and on for hundreds of thousands of years. A truce was finally reached and peace reigned on the planet for several millenia before a tremendous cataclysm sank the black continent of R'lyeh beneath the waves with Great Cthulhu trapped within his 'tomb.'

Several hundred millions of years then passed relatively quietly while the Old Ones spread their great cities across most of the land surface of the globe. It was some time later that a strange race of 'flying polyps' arrived on the planet to build great windowless cities on basalt and feed upon the cone-shaped beings that they found roaming the plains in a land that would someday be Australia. These cone-shaped bodies were later inhabited by the Great Race of Yith who were able to send their minds across space and time so that they could

dwell in the place of their choosing. The Yithians, in the form of the cone-shaped animals, suddenly and savagely turned upon the unsuspecting polyps, destroying most of them and locking the remainder away in great crypts that lie far below the surface of the ground.

About 275 million years ago, as the planet entered what later became known as the age of reptiles, or dinosaurs; a race of Serpent People came to power in and around Europe and Asia. Their civilization later fell, along with the dinosaurs themselves, but remnants of their cities may still be discovered along with pockets of surviving Serpent People. Powerful sorcerers, these beings were probably most often described by fellow writer and correspondent, Clark Ashton Smith. It was several million years later when the Shoggoths, the powerful but nearly non-intelligent slave-beasts of the Old Ones, evolved a sudden consciousness and revolted against their masters. The Old Ones survived—exterminating most of the beasts in the process—but soon after, deprived of their work-animals, their civilization began to go into a slow decline.

Sometime in the middle of the Jurassic period, the Mi-Go, in search of the rare minerals on which they feed, arrived upon the surface of the planet somewhere in what would one day be eastern North America and immediately began a long-lasting war with the Old Ones, further hastening their decline. As the land masses of the planet slowly moved apart, the two combatants became more and more separated, leading to an eventual cessation of the hostilities between them. In the meantime this same continental movement formed a land bridge between Australia and the Antarctic leading to even greater wars between the Old Ones and the now-dominant Yithians with their high-level technologies. It was not until 50 million years ago that the minds of the Great Race of Yith, sensing impending disaster for the planet, abandoned the cone-shaped bodies and fled into the future to inhabit another life-form, one that would dominate the planet sometime after the extinction of the human race. Prehistoric Earth was once again left mainly in the possession of the Old Ones.

Their last two land-cities, one on the tip of South America, the other located on the Antarctic continent, remained inhabited until approximately five million years ago when the increasingly cooler climate of the planet forced the few remaining Old Ones—somehow now having lost the ability to traverse outer space—to

retreat beneath the sea where they would build their final great city somewhere beneath the Antarctic continent. From this time on the planet was populated and controlled mainly by species that had evolved locally from the protoplasm first created by the Old Ones. Perhaps first among these were the furry pre-humans that settled and civilized the land later to become known as Hyperborea, Lomar, Mu, Atlantis, and other early human civilizations also figured into the Lovecraft prehistory of the planet but these topics were most often dealt with by other writers such as, again, Clark Ashton Smith.

All of Lovecraft's stories are intertwined and therefore not easily classified. It should be noted that his very first story, "Dagon," written in 1917, could be considered a Cthulhu Mythos tale though written long before either the name or the phrase was coined. Lovecraft himself once wrote:

"All my stories, unconnected as they may be, are based on the fundamental lore or legend that this world was inhabited at one time by another race who, in practicing black magic, lost their foothold and were expelled, yet live outside ever ready to take possession of the earth again."

This statement has been understood by some (probably most influentially, August Derleth) to mean that the Great Old Ones were evil and banished from the planet by an alternate pantheon of "good" gods that for some reason oppose the "evil" of Azathoth and the rest of the Other Gods. This interpretation is sometimes explained by those who prefer it as necessary to satisfy basic mythological concepts regarding the struggle between good and evil. Others disagree and it would seem just as easy to draw a correlation between the expulsion of the Great Old Ones from Earth and another well-known banishment, that of Adam and Eve, who were expelled from the Garden of Eden for partaking of forbidden knowledge. Although they may have "sinned" and therefore lost an exalted status, they were hardly branded as evil and it should be noted that most religions promise an eventual return to some 'state of grace.' This interpretation of the Mythos would also seem to satisfy some 'mythological imperatives.'

H.P. Lovecraft was an intellectual who preferred, above all others, the controversial philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche whose viewpoints included a belief in an existence beyond 'good and evil.' HPL created the initial kernel of the Mythos—the first writings to describe it—and it is difficult to believe

that his own viewpoint of "beyond good and evil" does not underlie this now widely-read and referred to literary creation.

A chronological reading of the tales of H.P. Lovecraft reflect a man of continued personal growth. His early stories are filled with sinister, sometimes scarcely-human foreigners who lurk about the crumbling buildings of past ages indulging in horrifying rites to unknown gods; protagonists suffer sudden discoveries about their heritage and experience strange, unspeakable longings; the dream tales are filled with longings to escape into 'another world.' An arch-conservative in his twenties and thirties, by the time Lovecraft died at the age of forty-six, his view of the world around him had changed considerably. Living a simple, almost monkish existence, he still believed that an individual's heritage and background were important—without them, a person could hardly be considered an individual—but he also expressed the belief that no single culture was objectively superior to another, they just simply were.

His last major story, "The Shadow Out of Time," demonstrates much of this change in point of view. The creatures—the Great Race of Yith—for the

first time were not bent upon destruction of the human race and in fact barely touched upon us. Obviously superior to humans in many ways, the Yithians governed themselves by a natural system of sharing and upon their rare contact with humans, treated these individuals with the most respect possible. All in all they lack the 'horrible' qualities inherent to nearly all the earlier alien beings created by Lovecraft. Perhaps most importantly, the Yithians demonstrated an ability to transcend time and space—a life-long desire of HPL—simply by casting their minds out of their bodies and fleeing to another point in the universe, escaping death and thereby achieving a kind of immortality, a deep-seated wish most likely shared by every human being.

In one of his last letters (to Harry O. Fischer) HPL wrote:

"... what makes me feel cordial & at ease toward anyone is not so much an identity of tastes & beliefs & perspectives, as an assurance that my own tastes & beliefs & perspectives are not regarded as insane, incomprehensible, or non-existent..."

*Yrs. by still sunken R'lyeh
Granpa Cthulhu*

—The End—

Touch the Future



Nobody offers a larger selection of fantasy/adventure games, war games, miniatures and accessories. Write for our free catalog today.

**THE
SOMPLEAT
STRATEGIST**
Adventure Game Headquarters
Fantasy and Wargame Headquarters

ORDER
TOLL FREE **800 225-4344** Amex/MC/Visa
\$10 Minimum
Visit the fantasy and war game headquarters near you:
NY: 11 East 33 Street, New York City, NY 10016 (212) 685-3880
320 West 57 Street, New York City, NY 10019 (212) 582-1272
MA: 201 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, MA 02115 (617) 267-2451
VA: 103 East Broad St., Falls Church, VA 22046 (703) 532-2477
NJ: 215 Glenridge Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07042 (201) 744-6622
FL: 5406-8 Stirling Road, Davie, FL 33314 (305) 961-5660
PA: 254 W. DeKalb Pike, King of Prussia, PA 19406 (215) 265-8562
2011 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103 (215) 563-2960
MD: 231 Park Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21201 (301) 752-1493

In the bloody days of Richard Lionheart...

HOLY WARRIORS



A Module Of Faith, Intrigue and Death During The Crusades For:

Time & Time Again

The Time Travel Role Playing Game

TIMELINE LTD

