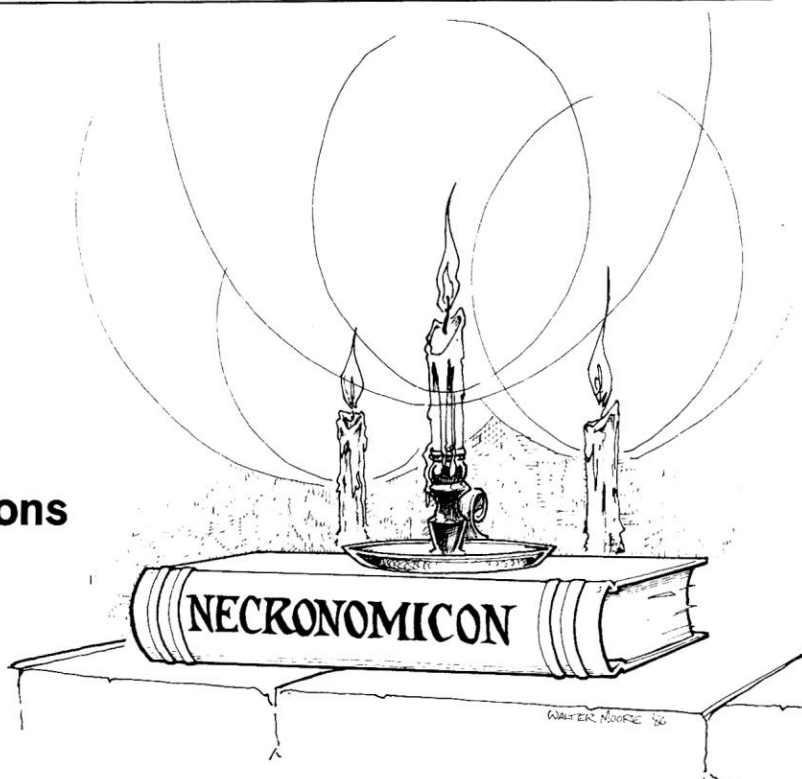


Lovecraft and the *Necronomicon*

Answers to a few questions

By Peter Larsen
Illustrated by Walter Moore



FEW WRITERS in history have produced so many odd speculations and misconceptions as Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937). Largely ignored during his life, Lovecraft and his stories have, in the years since his death, become a focus for a whole body of myths as many and varied as the tales of the Cthulhu Mythos itself. It is only in the last decade or so that a small, but dedicated, group of critics have begun to unravel the twisted paths of speculation that surround Lovecraft, bringing the man and his work into the critical light that they both richly deserve. This project has been greatly aided by the existence of Lovecraft's letters, which, in their tens of thousands, form a record of Lovecraft's thoughts and show clearly the development of both his fiction and his philosophy. The study of these letters makes it possible to answer many questions about Lovecraft that have remained unanswered since his death.

This article is concerned with two of those questions, those asked by Richard Kaczynski in his article "Contemporary Ideas about Lovecraft & the *Necronomicon*," in *Different Worlds* 44. These questions, "Is the *Necronomicon* real? And, if so, does this mean that Lovecraft knew more about the occult than he was letting on?"¹, have been asked again and again, and, as Mr. Kaczynski noted, they have not been answered to the full satisfaction of all readers. This does not mean, however, that answers to these questions do not exist, because, as we shall see, a study of Lovecraft's letters will provide answers, even if these answers do not please everyone. This article will, by presenting information from these letters, answer Mr. Kaczynski's questions and, hopefully, help to dispel a few myths

that surround the life and work of H.P. Lovecraft.

The first question, whether or not the *Necronomicon* exists is a matter of opinion, since there are at least four volumes by that name in existence, and a fifth is being written by Lin Carter even as you read this. So, for what it's worth, there are copies of the *Necronomicon*; whether any of them are the "real" book remains to be seen. Before we look at Lovecraft's comments on the matter, it may be useful to look at each of the volumes in turn, to see if any of them have a true claim on being the shuddersome tome.

The earliest version, the Owlswick Press edition (1973), "discovered" by L. Sprague de Camp² while in Iraq, can be dismissed fairly easily, as the "text" is a series of pages repeated

over and over; the artist who drew it apparently didn't feel like doing more work than necessary. If this was not enough to discredit the Owlswick Press edition, de Camp discusses his part in the hoax in "Preface to *The Necronomicon*" in *Crypt Of Cthulhu* 23³. So much for the first edition. The second and third editions were both released in 1977, the former by H.R. Giger and the latter by Simon. H.R. Giger's edition, published by Sphinx Verlag, is not really in the running for the title of "real" *Necronomicon*, as it does not claim to be Alhazred's book. It is a collection of airbrush paintings by the artist who is best known for his work on the movie *Alien*. Simon's edition, however, is not so easily dismissed. Published first by Shlankkraft, Inc., and, three years later, by Avon, Simon's volume is a collection of formulae, incantations, and the like, designed, or so we are told, to summon the Great Old Ones. In this edition, the Great Old Ones are linked strongly with various Mesopotamian deities, and this serves as our clue to discounting the third volume on our list. All Mesopotamian religion was based on a dualist idea, that a struggle is being fought between two sets of gods, and that the fate of humanity rests on this struggle. Lovecraft, for reasons we shall see below, did not accept this sort of idea, and despite the impressions given by the late August Derleth, the idea of duality cannot be found in Lovecraft's writ-

ings⁴. With this in mind, it is hard to imagine that Lovecraft would have based his work on a source so far removed from his own philosophy. So we can also rule out this edition, although, of all the pretenders to the title, Simon's is, by far, the hardest to eliminate. Lastly, we turn our attention to the Neville Spearman, Ltd., (1978) and Corgi (1980) edition, edited by George Hay. This edition looks promising until one notices that one of the "experts" on the project, David Langford, is a science-fiction writer with a highly developed sense of humor. Then one reads Colin Wilson's "The *Necronomicon*—The Origin of a Spoof" in *Crypt Of Cthulhu* 23⁵, where he quite straightforwardly reveals the preparations involved in this spoof. In the same article, Wilson admits that he invented the idea that Winfield Lovecraft, Howard's father, was a Freemason, which ruins the idea that Lovecraft learned "occult secrets" from contact with his father or his father's library. Having discarded this edition, we are at the end of our list: there is no volume on the market that is the fabled *Necronomicon*.

This, of course, does not remove the possibility that the *Necronomicon* does exist somewhere. Lovecraft could have read a book that was the *Necronomicon*, and based his fictional work on it. He could have, but he did not. In his own words:

Regarding the *Necronomicon*—I must confess that this monstrous & abhorred volume is merely a figment of my own imagination!⁶

Later, Lovecraft expanded this statement to include his Great Old Ones as well as the *Necronomicon*.

... Regarding the dreaded *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred—I must confess that both the evil volume & the accursed author are fictive creatures of my own—as are the malign entities of Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, Nyarlathotep, Shub-Niggurath, &c.⁷

The meaning of these statements is quite obvious: Lovecraft created the forbidden *Necronomicon* for use in his stories, and it has no existence outside of those stories. That so many people believe in the *Necronomicon*'s true reality, in the existence of the books and creatures of the Mythos, is a great tribute to the power of Lovecraft's writing and his ability to mix the real and the fantastic until it is difficult to see where one ends and the other begins. Lovecraft rarely mentioned the *Necronomicon* alone, instead he would include it in a list of books that really

did exist, such as Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. This caused the *Necronomicon* to become real by association, picking up reality by its connection to books that we know are real. The strength of this practice can be seen in its opposite: Lovecraft imitators, not understanding his techniques, often ruin the impact of their eldritch tomes by surrounding them with books we know are imaginary; the effect of each book is less, and we soon become unwilling to be fooled. This is one reason why other fictional tomes have not achieved the "reality" that surrounds the *Necronomicon*. Reality by association, however, was not the only trick used by Lovecraft. He would often use the ideas of other horror writers in his stories; they, in turn, would fill their tales with objects and creatures of Lovecraft's creation. There were two reasons for this practice: first, it was fun, an amusing in-joke for these authors and their fans; secondly, it added to the reality of all these creations by giving the impression that each author was drawing on a single, well-known body of lore, which they were, but not in the fashion that people imagined. Lovecraft states both these points in this next passage, discussing just such a borrowing by Frank Belknap Long.

Long has alluded to the *Necronomicon* in some things of his—in fact, I think it is rather good fun to have this artificial mythology given an air of verisimilitude by wide citation.⁸

In another letter, Lovecraft elaborates on these comments and discusses the intentions of the group concerning their work.

It rather amuses the different writers to use one another's synthetic demons and imaginary books in their stories—so that Clark Ashton Smith often speaks of my *Necronomicon* while I refer to his *Book Of Eibon* ... & so on. This pooling of resources tends to build up quite a pseudo-convincing background of dark mythology, legendry, & bibliography—though of course none of us has the least wish actually to mislead readers.⁹

While Lovecraft wanted to create a believable background of legend and mythology that he and others could use in their stories, he did not wish to participate in a spoof or hoax. If his readers were willing to suspend disbelief for his stories, that was fine, but if anyone wrote Lovecraft and asked him about the reality of his creations, he was very quick, as we have seen, to set them clear on this matter: there was no *Necronomicon*, nor had there ever

been. Lovecraft's feelings on the matter of hoaxes and spoofs is stated very clearly in the following:

... I am opposed to serious hoaxes, since they really confuse and retard the sincere student of folklore. I feel quite guilty every time I hear of someone's having spent valuable time looking up the *Necronomicon* at public libraries.¹⁰

Fun was fun, but Lovecraft was too much of a gentleman to take pleasure in the confusion and wasted time of another. Whether Lovecraft would have enjoyed the "spoof" volumes of the *Necronomicon* that have appeared since his death is a good question. He had considered writing such a volume, but had rejected the project as being far too difficult, partly due to the amount of time it would take and partly because

... one can never produce anything even a tenth as terrible and impressive as one can awesomely hint about.¹¹

Despite these reservations, I think that Lovecraft would have enjoyed these "other *Necronomicons*," admiring the huge amount of work that their authors have put into them, but perhaps a little worried that they might not be seen as spoofs, instead being taken for the true volume of horrors whose real existence was limited to the minds of Lovecraft and his readers.

With the question of the reality of the *Necronomicon* settled, one hopes, to the acceptance, if not the pleasure, of all readers, we will now turn to Mr. Kaczynski's second question, which concerned Lovecraft's knowledge of the supernatural. Now this question is really two questions; did Lovecraft know about the occult, and did he believe that knowledge? Mr. Kaczynski argues yes to the first point, suggesting that Lovecraft must have had a great deal of occult knowledge, since "Lovecraft would have been a fool to write about something he did not know."¹² This is not necessarily true. If a writer had to experience everything that he or she wrote about, how could anyone write fantasy or science fiction? Jules Verne never saw a modern submarine, and yet he describes one quite convincingly in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. In a similar vein, J.R.R. Tolkien never met a hobbit or dwarf, but he is still able to show us their cultures in fascinating detail in *The Lord of the Rings*. There is a great gulf between what can be imagined and what has been experienced. Lovecraft could have easily drawn all of his occult

knowledge from a few popular novels, embroidering on their simple, cliché occult themes with his fertile imagination. There is no need for Lovecraft to have immersed himself in forbidden lore.

This argument, of course, does not prove anything. It is fully possible for Lovecraft to have read books on the occult. It is even likely, because, as Mr. Kaczynski pointed out, the early part of this century was a very fertile period for occult societies of all kinds, and books of occult lore received wide audiences. This climate of occult credulity makes it even likely for Lovecraft to have come across one or more books of occult information, which may have formed the basis for some of his stories. The fact of the matter is that Lovecraft did indeed read a certain number of this kind of book, as he records below.

Yes, indeed—voodoo, black magic, the history of the witch cult, & everything of that sort is surely of the keenest interest to me. I continually borrow the standard classics on this subject from the ample library of the generous H.C. Koenig . . . right now I have his copy of the famous old *Malleus Maleficarum*.¹³

This, then, explains where Lovecraft gained any real occult information that appears in his fiction. There is no need to rely on Kenneth Grant's claim that Lovecraft learned his supernatural lore in dreams, since he read it in books. He used these occult books in his stories as background, as noted above, to give his own fictitious grimoires a degree of reality by association, and he may also have used them for information, basing his own myth-cycle on existing occult patterns, in the same way that Tolkien based his fiction on medieval legends and poetry. All of this is quite possible and even likely, as far as it goes. Going beyond that point, mistaking Lovecraft's interest in the occult for belief, is where you get into trouble.

The problem with theories based on Lovecraft's occult beliefs is that no such beliefs existed. Lovecraft saw himself as a wholly rational man, untouched by even the slightest degree of superstition. A quick look at a couple of his letters illustrates this.

. . . I must say that I myself do not believe in any form of the supernatural.¹⁴

I am an absolute sceptic and materialist, and regard the universe as a wholly purposeless and essentially temporary incident in the ceaseless and boundless rearrangements of electrons, atoms, and molecules which constitute the blind but regular mechanical pat-

terns of cosmic activity.¹⁵

These are hardly the words of an occultist; Lovecraft had no personal belief in the supernatural, no matter what strange elements he used in his stories. Looking at the information above, the conclusion is inescapable: Lovecraft's interest in the occult was purely academic, a study of quaint folklore and, perhaps, some research to make his stories more authentic, nothing more.

To underline this fact, it is worthwhile to take a brief look at Lovecraft's ideas on occultists and occult books. In an early letter, he discusses his irritation with a columnist from a local newspaper.

Recently a quack named Hartmann, a devotee of the pseudo-science of Astrology, commenced to disseminate the usual pernicious fallacies of that occult art through the columns of *The News*, so that in the interest of true Astronomy I was forced into a campaign of invective and satire.¹⁶

This does not point to a man with much respect for occultists, much less to one who was a serious student of the occult. While Kenneth Grant's claim that Lovecraft had heard of Aleister Crowley¹⁷ is probably true, it is doubtful that Lovecraft would have regarded him with anything more than the contempt which he showed toward Hartmann. There is certainly no reason to believe that he adopted any of Crowley's ideas for his stories, much less placed any faith in them.

Lastly, we turn to Lovecraft's interest in occult books like the *Malleus Maleficarum*. We have already looked at Lovecraft's study of these tomes, and the likelihood that he used information from them in his stories, but what was his opinion of the books themselves, beyond their value as objects of folklore? The answer is that he didn't think much of them. Again, we turn to his letters:

As for seriously-written books on dark, occult, and supernatural themes—in all truth they don't amount to much. That is why it's more fun to invent mythical works like the *Necronomicon* and *Book Of Eibon*. The magical lore which superstitious people really believed, and which trickled down to the Middle Ages from antiquity, was really nothing more than a lot of childish invocations and formulae for raising daemons etc., plus systems of speculation as dry as the orthodox philosophies. . . What the mediaeval and renaissance philosophers and "magicians" wrote is mostly namby-pamby stuff of their own devising—plus the popular folklore of their day.¹⁸

Lovecraft pretty brusquely dismisses most of occult tradition in this pas-

sage, showing his low regard for what he felt were unscientific and irrational minds. He is no more kind to modern occultists, since later in the same letter he dismisses them as well, saying

. . . you will undoubtedly find all this stuff very disappointing. It is flat, childish, pompous, and unconvincing—merely a record of human childishness and gullibility in past ages. Any good fiction-writer can think up "records of primal horror" which surpass in imaginative force any occult production which has sprung from genuine credulousness.¹⁹

There we have it; Lovecraft's contempt for true belief in the occult is simply too strong to assume that his interest in occult matters was anything more than academic interest in folklore or authorial research. One might, I suppose, still claim that Lovecraft, while no believer, was a conduit for blasphemous occult lore from alien dimensions, but how can one argue with an idea like this?

So, through the study of Lovecraft's own letters, we are able to answer the questions posed by Mr. Kaczynski's article. These answers are: no, the *Necronomicon* is not real, nor is it based directly on some occult text, and yes, Lovecraft did have a fair amount of occult knowledge, gained from various books, although he placed no faith in that knowledge. Lovecraft, far from being a serious student of the occult, was a sceptical materialist who put what faith he had in science. With this information, it is possible to read Lovecraft's work in a new light, understanding it better, and coming closer to the idea of horror that Lovecraft worked so hard to present. As we strip away the myths that have grown up around the man and his work, we are better able to appreciate Lovecraft for what he is: one of the greatest horror writers in history.

NOTES

[1] Richard Kaczynski "Contemporary Ideas about Lovecraft and the *Necronomicon*," *Different Worlds* 44 (1986) p. 14. Referred to, from now on, as Kaczynski.

[2] Not Lin Carter, as stated in Kaczynski.

[3] L. Sprague de Camp "Preface to *The Necronomicon*," *Crypt Of Cthulhu* 23 (1984) p. 17. *Crypt Of Cthulhu* is an excellent magazine devoted to Lovecraft criticism and the publishing of rare and/or unprinted material by Lovecraft, his friends, and his colleagues. If you can't find it in your area, you might try: Cryptic Publications; Robert M. Price, Editor; 107 E James St; Mt Olive NC 28365 for information on subscriptions and back issues.

[4] August Derleth added the idea of the benevolent "Elder Gods" to Lovecraft's far

more hostile mythos and, in general, filled his own Cthulhu stories with a strong sense of dualism. For more information, see: Richard L. Tierney "The Derleth Mythos," *Crypt Of Cthulhu* 24 (1984) pp. 52-53, or Robert Bloch "Heritage Of Horror" from *The Dunwich Horror and Others* (the new Arkham House edition).

[5] Colin Wilson "The Necronomicon—The Origin of a Spoof," *Crypt Of Cthulhu* 23 (1984) pp.14-16.

[6] H.P. Lovecraft *Selected Letters IV*, p. 346. Referred to, from now on, as *Selected Letters*. Volume is indicated by the Roman numeral.

[7] *Selected Letters V*, p. 16. The letter as a whole expands on these themes.

[8] *Selected Letters III*, p. 166.

[9] *Selected Letters IV*, p. 346.

[10] H.P. Lovecraft *H.P. Lovecraft: Uncollected Letters*, p. 38.

[11] *Ibid*, p. 37.

[12] Kaczynski, p. 14.

[13] *Selected Letters V*, p. 89-90.

[14] *Selected Letters V*, p. 116. This whole letter is a good guide to Lovecraft's philosophy.

[15] *Selected Letters II*, p. 41.

[16] *Selected Letters I*, p. 4.

[17] Kaczynski, p. 14.

[18] *Selected Letters*, p. 286.

[19] *Ibid*, p. 287.

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NOTE: The edition of *H.R. Giger's Necronomicon* listed above is the English translation. The original was published in 1977 in Basel by Sphinx Verlag. □

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