

- Introduction -

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psychologists will dispute, and their admitted truth must establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form. Against it are discharged all the shafts of materialistic sophistication, which clings to frequently felt emotions and external events, and the naively insipid idealism which deprecates the aesthetic motive and calls for a didactic literature to "uplift" the reader toward a suitable degree of smirking optimism. But in spite of all this opposition the weird tale has survived, developed, and attained remarkable heights of perfection; founded as it is on a profound and elementary principle whose appeal, if not always universal, must necessarily be poignant and permanent to minds of the requisite sensitiveness.

The appeal of the spectrally macabre is generally narrow because it demands from the reader a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from every-day life. Relatively few are free enough from the spell of the daily routine to respond to rappings from outside, and tales of ordinary feelings and events, or of common sentimental distortions of such feelings and events, will always take first place in the taste of the majority; rightly, perhaps, since of course these ordinary matters make up the greater part of human experience. But the sensitive are always with us, and sometimes a curious streak of fancy invades an obscure corner of the very hardest head; so that no amount of rationalization, reform, or Freudian analysis can quite annul the thrill of the chimney-corner whisper or the lonely wood. There is here involved a psychological pattern or tradition as real and as deeply grounded in mental experience as any other pattern or tradition of mankind; coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of it, and too much a part of our inmost biological heritage to lose keen potency over a very important, though not numerically great, minority of our species.

Man's first instincts and emotions formed his response to the environment in which he found himself. Definite feelings based on pleasure and pain grew up around the phenomena whose causes and effects he understood, whilst around those which he

did not understand -- and the universe teemed with them in the early days -- were naturally woven such personifications, marvelous interpretations, and sensations of awe and fear as would be hit upon by a race having few and simple ideas and limited experience. The unknown, being likewise the unpredictable, became for our primitive forefathers a terrible and omnipotent source of boons and calamities visited upon mankind for cryptic and wholly extraterrestrial reasons, and thus clearly belonging to spheres of existence whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part. The phenomenon of dreaming likewise helped to build up the notion of an unreal or spiritual world; and in general, all the conditions of savage dawn-life so strongly conduced toward a feeling of the supernatural, that we need not wonder at the thoroughness with which man's very hereditary essence has become saturated with religion and superstition. That saturation must, as matter of plain scientific fact, be regarded as virtually permanent so far as the subconscious mind and inner instincts are concerned; for though the area of the unknown has been steadily contracting for thousands of years, an infinite reservoir of mystery still engulfs most of the outer cosmos, whilst a vast residuum of powerful inherited associations clings round all the objects and processes that were once mysterious, however well they may now be explained. And more than this, there is an actual physiological fixation of the old instincts in our nervous tissue, which would make them obscurely operative even were the conscious mind to be purged of all sources of wonder.

Because we remember pain and the menace of death more vividly than pleasure, and because our feelings toward the beneficent aspects of the unknown have from the first been captured and formalized by conventional religious rituals, it has fallen to the lot of the darker and more maleficent side of cosmic mystery to figure chiefly in our popular supernatural folklore. This tendency, too, is naturally enhanced by the fact that uncertainty and danger are always closely allied; thus, making any kind of an unknown world a world of peril and evil possibilities. When to this sense of fear and evil the inevitable fascination of wonder and curiosity is super-added, there is born a composite body of keen emotion and imaginative provocation whose vitality must of necessity endure as long as the human race itself. Children will always be afraid of the dark, and men with minds sensitive to hereditary impulse will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own

globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse.

105 With this foundation, no one need wonder at the existence of a literature of cosmic fear. It has always existed, and always will exist; and no better evidence of its tenacious vigor can be cited than the impulse which now and then drives writers of totally opposite leanings to try their hands at it in isolated tales, as if to discharge from their minds certain phantasmal shapes which would otherwise haunt them. Thus Dickens wrote several eerie narratives; Browning, the hideous poem "'Childe Roland"; Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*; Dr. Holmes, the subtle novel *Elsie Venner*; F. Marion Crawford, "The Upper Berth" and a number of other examples; Mrs. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, social worker, "The Yellow Wall Paper"; whilst the humourist W. W. Jacobs produced that able melodramatic bit called "The Monkey's Paw".

120 This type of fear-literature must not be founded with a type externally similar but psychologically widely different; the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome. Such writing, to be sure, has its place, as has the conventional or even whimsical or humorous ghost story where formalism or the author's knowing wink removes the true sense of cosmic fear in its purest sense. The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentiousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain -- a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.

140 Naturally we cannot expect all weird tales to conform absolutely to any theoretical model. Creative minds are uneven, and the best of fabrics have their dull spots. Moreover, much of the choicest weird work is unconscious; appearing in memorable fragments scattered through material whose massed effect may be of a very different cast. Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation. We may say, as a general thing, that a weird story whose intent is to teach or produce a social effect, or one in which the horrors are finally explained away by natural means, is not a genuine tale of cosmic fear; but it remains a fact that such narratives possess, in isolated sections, atmospheric touches which fulfil every condition of true

supernatural horror-literature. Therefore, we must judge a weird tale not by the author's intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point. If the proper sensations are excited, such a "high spot" must be admitted on its own merits as weird literature, no matter how prosaically it is later dragged down. The one test of the really weird is simply this--whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim. And of course, the more completely and unifiedly a story conveys this atmosphere, the better it is as a work of art in the given medium.

1. According to Lovecraft, what is the greatest kind of fear?

- A Fear of death
- B Fear of ourselves
- C Fear of the unfamiliar
- D Fear of the unknown

2. In line 6, Lovecraft uses the pronoun “it.” To what is this pronoun referring?

- A The fear of death
- B The admitted truth of his axiomatic facts
- C The horrible tale as a literary form
- D The dignity of the horrible tale

3. To what might Lovecraft be referring in lines 9 through 12?

- A Romantic idealism of human virtue
- B Gothic observations of human depravity
- C Transcendental ecological centricity
- D Post-modern nihilistic cynicism

4. Lovecraft gives all of the following reasons for the potency of the horror genre among readers except

- A Biological heritage
- B Curiosity
- C Ingrained religious sentiments
- D Freudian Analysis

5. As used in line 56, Lovecraft’s use of the word “extraterrestrial” most nearly means

- A Supermundane
- B Alien
- C Foreign
- D Xenomorph

6. The point of the third paragraph can best be summarized as

- A To outline a theory for humanity’s propensity towards irrational whimsy and superstition
- B To describe the evolutionary development of humanity’s supermundane proclivities
- C To propose a theory for the origins of religion
- D To demonstrate how the irrational clouds the human mind and prevents us from understanding deeper cosmic truths

7. What duality is central to the ideas laid out in the fourth paragraph?

- A Fear and the unknown
- B Fear and wonder
- C Religion and folklore
- D Uncertainty and danger

8. Lovecraft would most likely agree with which of the following statements?

- A Literature of cosmic fear must possess a violent destruction of the human body, which is the temple of civility
- B Literature of cosmic fear must possess within itself a sense of dread and a hint of chaos
- C Literature of cosmic fear differs from literature of physical fear in that the former creates fear without defying the laws of nature.
- D Literature of physical fear must accord to rules and possess a hint of the weird while not being overly gruesome

9. According to Lovecraft, what is “the all-important thing” in the crafting of a “weird tale”?

- A To dovetail an authentic narrative with a unique emotional profile
- B To create sensation through atmospheric touches
- C To craft a story that produces a social effect or some pedagogical end
- D To uphold the laws of nature in the service of cosmic fear

10. This passage as a whole could best be described as which of the following?

- A A philosophical exposition of the horror genre in literature, giving particular weight to a type of horror literature preferred by the author
 - B A psychological exposition on a theory of human behavior surrounding the irrational, showing how this manifests itself in horror literature
 - C A historical exposition of horror literature to the time of the author, with particular examples of the genre and its historical developments
 - D A scientific exposition on the evolutionary origins of humanity's fascination with the supernatural and supermundane, drawing on examples from evolutionary biology and psychology.
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VOCABULARY:

aesthetic
axiomatic
beneficent
boon
centricity
coeval
composite
conducted
cryptic
cynicism
depravity
deprecates
didactic
dovetail (v) (dovetailing, n)
gruesome
hereditary
idealism
insipid
keen
macabre
maleficent
malign
medium
melodramatic
moonstruck
mundane
naïve
nihilistic
numerically
obscure
optimism
pedagogical
personification
phantasmal
poignant
portentousness
potency
proclivity
propensity
prosaically
provocation
rationalization
requisite
residuum
smirking
spectral
supermundane
tenacious
vigor
vitality
xenomorphic