Cults of Lovecraft: The Impact of H.P. Lovecraft's Fiction on Contemporary Occult Practices

John Engle
Cults of Lovecraft: The Impact of H.P. Lovecraft’s Fiction on Contemporary Occult Practices

Abstract
Examines a particularly troubling use of fiction: the adoption of an author’s work, against his own intentions, as a quasi-religious text for cultic practices. Lovecraft’s mythos is thus observed in the process of deliberately being made into a worship tradition by occult and Satanic practitioners, in spite of the author’s personal scientific rationalism.

Additional Keywords
Lovecraft, H.P. – Necronomicon (invented book); Lovecraft, H.P. Cthulhu mythos; Occult and fantasy; Lovecraft, H.P. – Necronomicon (invented book); Lovecraft, H.P. Cthulhu mythos

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The influence of H.P. Lovecraft on popular culture is undeniable in both the mainstream and underground. His stories have served as inspiration to dozens of subsequent writers, with his idiosyncratic style and rich world building functioning as the starting point and setting for a vast expanded universe of fiction. Lovecraft's fiction and the broader Mythos it inspired have become synonymous with the genre of weird and cosmic horror fiction. His pantheon of deities and the mythology interlinking them has become a rich tapestry for a myriad of successive authors, as well as a powerful influence on the style of horror fiction. Yet a particular subset of his adherents have taken a step further from the norms of appreciation, emulation, and inspiration, and into the realms of quasi-religious adulation. The very real world of esoteric magical and occult practices has adopted Lovecraft and his works into its canon, which have informed the ritual practices, or even formed the bedrock, of certain cabals and magical circles. This bizarre phenomenon has swept Lovecraft's work into a real world realm that has received little serious academic study. It is especially bizarre because Lovecraft himself was a committed rationalist. That core tension between Lovecraft's rejection of the occult and the occult's embrace of his fiction drives much of this essay.

This essay, divided into four sections, seeks to shed light extensively upon this unusual group of Lovecraft lovers and their practices. The first section provides context by briefly outlining the magical and occult tradition into which the Lovecraftian practitioners fit. The second section details the various major groups that have arisen that use Lovecraft and his work in their practices. The third section details Lovecraft's own real-world opinions on the occult and reality. The final section compares the claims of the Lovecraftian occultists concerning the meaning of Lovecraft's work against the very different aims of Lovecraft himself. It reflects particularly on the fact that Lovecraft himself rejected the occult and all superstitions. Ultimately this essay will demonstrate that even though Lovecraft himself was not an occultist and considered his work simple weird fiction, his works are indeed suited superlatively, if inappropriately, to co-option by real occult groups. It is in that way that Lovecraft's mythmaking has moved beyond the level of mere fiction into the realm of genuine belief.
The Western Occult Tradition

In order to fully understand how Lovecraft has come to inhabit a significant position in the contemporary occult tradition, it is necessary to understand the context into which he has been deposited. Magical and occult practice in western Europe and America was for many centuries a subject of serious religious taboo, and was thus an underground enterprise of necessity: “[R]itual magic was invariably an occult or secret undertaking. Its procedures were confided in grimoires, textbooks of ritual magic, and these became the jealously guarded jewels of the magical tradition” (Owen 100). Then in the late 19th and early 20th centuries a tremendous revival occurred in the community of ritual magicians (Owen 101). The diminishment of religious persecution and greater laxity on the part of the state toward groups promoting unconventional religious and ethical behaviors, largely the product of the Enlightenment and its descendent ideals, allowed for new avenues of intellectual and spiritual experimentation. In England, especially, many intellectuals and artists flocked to the promise of esoteric knowledge and wisdom the occultists promised.

One early occultist circle, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, attracted a number of notable members, including Bram Stoker, William Butler Yeats, and Algernon Blackwood (Owen 102). Central to the Golden Dawn’s mission was a promotion of ritual magic and ceremony as a way of discovering hidden meanings to life, and to full development of the self. With a structure based in some respects on that of Masonic lodges, the Golden Dawn had a series of initiatory rituals, or degrees, through which members passed, gaining more knowledge of the organization and of the “secret knowledge” the Order professed to hold: “It was in the Second Order that adherents began to access the secrets of practical or operational magic, that is, magic as a unique undertaking through which invisible forces could be influenced and controlled” (Owen 103). Despite its extensive and selective magical tradition, one member of the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley, became dissatisfied with the practices of the Order, viewing them as merely playing at magic, and so sought elevated status within the Order’s hierarchy (Booth 116). His avowed alternative vision was of an organization that promoted and promulgated what he considered “real” magic. This desire resulted in a split within the Golden Dawn, and thus within the mainstream of the revived Western magical tradition.

Crowley joined, and quickly came to dominate, another organization, the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), which he transformed into a vehicle for his own occult beliefs. He wrote the Book of the Law, which became the guiding manifesto of the OTO, in 1904 (Kaczynski 127). Crowley claimed that the Book of the Law was dictated to him by a non-corporeal entity named Aiwass. The central religion and philosophy it describes, Thelema, remains a potent force for thousands of magical practitioners today. It promotes a form of self-development of the individual’s “True Will,” or rightful place within society and the universe, through the discovery process of ritual
magic (Hessle 5). This guiding idea has pervaded much of the occult tradition that followed after Crowley.

When Crowley died in 1947, the magical and occult tradition over which he cast so great a shadow fractured into many organizations. Some followed on to various extents from the Thelema he outlined, and many others struck out on more daring tangents. It has been into these organizational fissures that Lovecraftian ideas and themes have seeped.

**THE LOVECRAFTIAN OCCULT**

Lovecraft’s works have been woven into the tapestry of occult practices in four distinct ways. The first group of Lovecraftian occultists focuses on the use of Lovecraft’s writings as a focal point, or tool, for meditation and self-exploration exercises. This practice is most prominent in the discipline of chaos magic, or chaos magick as many of its practitioners prefer to call it. Chaos magic, the product of a significant deviation from traditional Thelemic practices, promotes a pragmatic approach toward belief systems, using them as tools for meditation and self-exploration (Greer 97). Many such belief systems are used by ritual magicians, both historical and wholly fictitious, and Lovecraft’s writings, with their singular imagery and aesthetic of cosmic horror, have become popular totemic and meditative devices for these magical practitioners, who appreciate such vividness in their contemplations. The *Necronomicon*, the most famous tome in Lovecraft’s fictitious universe, is a frequent object of such ritual magic. For many occultists who use the *Necronomicon*, such as certain groups within the Church of Satan, it does not matter whether Lovecraft’s fictional world or pantheon of terrifying deities are real. Indeed, they recognize the fiction and do not hide from it:

Satanists understand that any prop that is sufficiently stimulating can be used in personal ritual, so if the materials contained in this book send the proper chill down your spine, then certainly avail yourself of them. [...] Just don’t fool yourself outside the ritual chamber into the belief that you are using some authentic ancient tome handed down by Elder Gods to their human, or humanoid, servitors. (Gilmore)

The fact that the writings are in themselves valuably descriptive and conducive to the magical process is enough for practitioners to conduct their rituals. No other, higher meaning is necessary for them.

The subject of the *Necronomicon*, particularly its provenance and history, is one of the most fascinating aspects of the living, breathing mythology that has arisen out of Lovecraft’s fiction. The strange story of the *Necronomicon* must be given special attention here, as it is the lens through which the mass of the occult world views Lovecraft and his writing. Of course, Lovecraft himself never demurred from admitting that the *Necronomicon* was purely a work of his own invention, never
pretending any ancient or occult origin. He claimed to prefer his own invented tomes to known works on the occult because the “seriously-written books on dark, occult, and supernatural [...] don’t amount to much” (Lovecraft, “Quotes”). Lovecraft was no pretender to secret knowledge; he was a writer of fantastical literature and proud of it. To him, the works of serious occult practitioners were as bizarre and unattractive as they might be to any ordinary layman. The Necronomicon was never more than a sort of reference tool, a useful “source” of menacing quotations and baleful “knowledge” to terrify and madden Lovecraft’s characters. It was essentially a shorthand method for introducing his terrifying creations into stories, and for linking together a disparate array of grotesque creatures into a coherent pantheon. More than just linking together many of his own works, the Necronomicon has served a similar purpose for other writers dipping into Lovecraft’s world, something Lovecraft personally enjoyed and appreciated, as he explained in a letter to fellow author Robert E. Howard: “It is rather good fun to have this artificial mythology given an air of verisimilitude by wide citation” (Lovecraft, “Quotes”). According to his voluminous correspondence, it never went beyond that verisimilitude and facade of existence, and Lovecraft never even outlined its full, albeit fictive, contents. He did not do so for two fairly obvious reasons. First, writing a full account of the Necronomicon would limit the scope for its use in the fashioning of future interesting tales. If it were fully written, it would be difficult to produce useful quotations from it when convenient; as he dreamed up new horrors to fill his created world, he might find himself written into a corner. Concreteness of content would also limit the capacity of other writers to take up the name of the Necronomicon and blend it into their own storytelling. The second reason was, by Lovecraft’s own admission, a fear that he lacked “the energy and ingenuity to do it” (Lovecraft, “Quotes”). Whether this was simply an example of Lovecraft’s penchant for self-deprecation or genuine fear of lacking the ability to pull off a worthy depiction of the work, it is clear that Lovecraft preferred the mystery and versatility of a tome that is only mentioned in ominous, broken passages, hinting at things darker still.

It is the very “verisimilitude by wide citation” that Lovecraft found so amusing that has helped preserve the Necronomicon in the lexicon of serious occult lore. It has become so widely spoken of and cited in fiction and serious works alike that it has taken on an identity of its own, far exceeding the narrow bounds devised by its creator. The Necronomicon is often listed among the most well-known occult texts by casual observers, and many who are unaware of its provenance believe it to be a genuine artifact of occult study. Indeed, many people find their way to Lovecraft’s fiction after having heard about the Necronomicon. This social perspective has been reinforced over the years both by Lovecraft’s own posthumously published “History of the Necronomicon,” written as a work of fiction but taken by some readers as a genuine history, as well as by the proliferation of “real” Necronomicons, full works of occult lore often absorbing elements of Lovecraft’s fiction and the
broader Mythos of his successors. The most famous of these is the *Simon Necronomicon*. Published in 1977 by the pseudonymous author Simon, this version of the *Necronomicon* is a 263 page grimoire. Accounts by a “Mad Arab” serve as bookends to the book, which is composed largely of directions for ritual magic. The *Simon Necronomicon* makes no reference to Lovecraft and only rarely to elements of his fiction. Other than the “Mad Arab” narrator, the only other truly Lovecraftian elements are a ritual for summoning a demon called Kutulu who is “dead but dreaming,” and references to “Elder Gods.” While this work took the name of Lovecraft’s famous occult tome, it all but ignores the source material, instead devoting its contents to the Sumerian pantheon and mythology. While this *Necronomicon* has been promoted in occult circles as a genuine ancient text of magical lore, historians have roundly rejected it as “a well-constructed hoax” (Davies 268). Despite its rejection by the historical community, the *Simon Necronomicon* has sold hundreds of thousands of copies and has become one of the best selling texts on occult and magical practices in the world. It has certainly helped increase the profile of the name “Necronomicon” in occult, literary and popular cultural circles, and in doing so introduced Lovecraft to a new market of readers.

The *Necronomicon* has entered the popular lexicon by other roads as well. Most of these have been in the same sort of literary borrowing that Lovecraft enjoyed with his contemporaries. The *Necronomicon* makes an appearance in film and literature around the world. There have also been a large number of publications in the same vein as the *Simon Necronomicon*, works claiming to be genuine reprinting of ancient texts, such as Robert Turner’s 1978 hoax version, which actually included direct quotes from Lovecraft’s stories. The *Necronomicon* has also appeared in the real world as an act of jest. The most infamous of these is the Wildside Press’s 1973 edition, which consisted of 200 pages of indecipherable symbols. With an introduction by the noted fantasy humorist L. Sprague de Camp, the Wildside *Necronomicon* was not trying to hide what it was about. Similarly, Donald Tyson’s *Necronomicon* of 2004 did not make an attempt at claiming authenticity. It serves as the author’s own attempt to recreate the tome, following in the spirit of Lovecraft’s own writings. *The Necronomicon Files*, an exhaustive history of the book, has examined all the various texts purporting to be “true” magical works of ancient provenance. As is so often the case with occult books, no such evidence exists. Unlike other books of occult lore, however, we should hardly be surprised by this conclusion, since Lovecraft, its inventor, never hid anything from the public. Perhaps because of that fact it is all the more fascinating, and even astonishing, that so much interest and controversy should build up around this obscure fictional book.

Lovecraft’s writings find their second major use within occult circles that move beyond the *Necronomicon* alone and turn to using the language of Lovecraft’s broader fiction to drive dramatic spiritual experiences. This use is most obvious in some of the later ritual practices of Crowley’s own OTO. Crowley’s Lovecraftian
streak is predominantly linguistic. An inveterate borrower of other writers’ and thinkers’ work, evidenced throughout the Book of the Law and his later Thelemic work, Crowley clearly adapted some of his ritual language from Lovecraft’s fiction. The names of characters from the Book of the Law bear a striking resemblance to some of Lovecraft’s pantheon. For example, Lovecraft’s Great Old Ones see action as “The Great Ones of the Night of Time” in the Book of the Law (Grant, Magical Revival 115). The range of similarities is often striking, and even pointed out by Kenneth Grant, one of Crowley’s chief acolytes. The use of Lovecraft’s stories and characters in this fashion is not terribly surprising when one considers the singular qualities of Lovecraft’s literary style. S.T. Joshi, one of the world’s foremost Lovecraft scholars, has described that strange, affecting linguistic power that sets Lovecraft apart from other authors: “So much of the power and effectiveness of Lovecraft’s work depends on words: in many ways his stories are not plain narratives, but a kind of incantation where he seeks to create a mesmerizing atmosphere of horror and awe through the spell of language” (qtd. in Forbis). The main impact of Lovecraft on the Crowley-led subset of occult thought is in that vivid, spell-like descriptive power that can be transformed in much the same way it is for chaos magicians to meaningful spiritual use beyond its fictive origins. While Lovecraft himself was not taken with any religious or spiritual fancies himself, it is quite easy to see how someone susceptible might be swept up by his rich prose.

The symbolic, or totemic, quality is not enough for some other occultists, however, as the third group of Lovecraftian occultists takes a more unusual stance regarding the nature of the source material. These occult groups have actively incorporated Lovecraft’s imagery, aesthetic, and elements of his cosmic pantheon, into broader systems of occult practice. This is most keenly visible in the works of Kenneth Grant, who became Crowley’s chosen successor (Evans 287). With the death of Crowley, divisions arose very rapidly in the occult movement he created. Grant and his followers, while claiming the mantle of legitimate lineage from Crowley, moved the focus of the organization’s ritual magic away from Crowley and toward sources more appealing to the new leader.

Grant, an avid reader of Lovecraft, was the first occult leader to begin seriously incorporating Lovecraftian influences into his writings and ritual processes, a decision that has rippled through the world of occult practice to the present day. Unlike the Chaos magicians, Grant’s view of Lovecraft’s work is that it is genuine supernatural source material (Grant, Aleister Crowley 94). Grant presents the opinion in several of his writings that Lovecraft was not only a writer of fiction, but also a channeler of true magical, occult forces. He claims that Lovecraft’s Necronomicon, for example, is in fact a real non-fiction work originating from another plane of existence, accessible only through the world of dreaming: “It is not unlikely that Blatavsky, Mathers, Crowley, Lovecraft and others are reading from the same akashic grimoire” (Grant, Outside 167). Grant’s claim is that Lovecraft and his fiction arise from the very
same extra-dimensional font as *The Book of the Law*, and that its occult pedigree is thus beyond dispute. His argument serves to wrap an air of occult significance around Lovecraft’s person, finding in him the identity of some kind of hidden prophet whose works can only be truly understood by the initiates of the magical school. Grant’s occult organization, the Typhonian Ordo Templi Orientis (TOTO), which ultimately broke away from the mainline OTO, continues to use Lovecraft’s works and themes within their ritual structures, alongside the more prosaic mythologies of ancient Egypt and Greece. Many strange and bizarre rites have been performed by the group over the years, including a kind of Lovecraftian sex magic that involved, according to Grant’s description, a certain amount of what could only be called “tentacle play” (Harms and Gonce 122). Yet beyond these rather unsettling outbursts of ritualistic enthusiasm, Grant’s adherents have continued their ritual practices in the name of the Lovecraftian deities within the bounds of their understanding of their significance.

Also fitting within this third group is a subset of the Church of Satan, specifically the adherents of Michael Aquino, who was a deputy to Anton LaVey, the Church’s founder. Aquino wrote much of the *Satanic Rituals*, and incorporated elements from Lovecraft’s fiction into ritual magic, including the so-called “Ceremony of the Nine Angles,” in which many of Lovecraft’s pantheon are invoked. The ritual most closely reflects Lovecraft’s description in “The Dreams in the Witch House”:

As time wore along, his absorption in the irregular wall and ceiling of his room increased; for he began to read into the odd angles a mathematical significance which seemed to offer vague clues regarding their purpose. Old Keziah, he reflected, might have had excellent reasons for living in a room with peculiar angles; for was it not through certain angles that she claimed to have gone outside the boundaries of the world of space we know? (657)

Aquino’s efforts serve, much like Grant’s, to attribute an occult significance to Lovecraft and his writings that extends beyond the bailiwick of fiction. His adoption of the arcane and unnatural geometry that marks the edifices of Lovecraft’s deities is a stirring example of how fictions can be conjured into a semblance of reality. In this way, Lovecraft’s works have been transplanted into the TOTO’s canon as “true” knowledge, and part of Thelema.

The fourth and final “sect” of Lovecraftians has taken the mythology of Lovecraft a step farther still than either Grant or Aquino, adopting Lovecraft’s universe from whole cloth, not just building it into their Thelemic ritual practices, but making it the very core of their occult endeavors. Chief among these is the Esoteric Order of Dagon (EOD), which takes its name directly from the cult that plays a central role in Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (Prevost). The organization is nearly as secretive as its fictional counterpart, operating through an online presence that restricts access to all but initiated members. The leader of the organization, Paul...
Remi Prevost, describes Lovecraft's fiction in similar terms to Grant and Aquino: "These stories and novels contain hidden meanings and magickal formulae unknown even to their creator" (Prevost). Yet the EOD position on Lovecraft does not stop there:

Lovecraft suffered from an acute inferiority complex, which prevented him from personally crossing the Abyss in his lifetime. He remained a withdrawn and lonely writer who retained a rational, skeptical view of the universe, despite the glimpses of places and entities beyond the world of mundane reality, which his dream experiences allowed him. He never learned the true origin of the tremendous vistas of cosmic strangeness that haunted his dreams. (Prevost)

To the EOD, Lovecraft was a visionary mystic, a real world Pickman, who was incapable of understanding the true sinister power of his art (Lovecraft, "Pickman's Model" 197). This represents a significant diversion from most literary lionization, in which authors are usually placed on pedestals, their flaws washed away by the growth of their charms in the eyes of adherents. Lovecraft, to the contrary, is under this strain of thought an inferior, someone who was given a glimpse of the truly fantastical and rejected it because he was too weak to embrace it. Rather than mythologizing and raising up the author, the EOD attempts to shake him off so that only his writings remain. For the more ordinary stock of reader, who see Lovecraft as a hugely creative writer of fiction, the EOD position can seem to be on the border of genuinely offensive.

For the EOD, Lovecraft's "visions" are very real, or at least contain aspects of the real. This perspective has led to the EOD embracing a philosophical and magical discipline that seeks to invoke and gain access to the power of the Lovecraftian pantheon, or whatever entities Lovecraft was channeling from beyond the void. The EOD's subgroup, the Miskatonic Alchemical Expedition, are

a coordinated anarchistic group endeavor to create an environment in which dreams/phantasies/visions are projected outward within our working group (Circle). We assist individuals to reify their internal Universes within waking consciousness with intentionality & responsibility. (Siebert)

While all this talk of magic may seem absurd to a rationalist reader, it is surely no less reasonable a stance than is an acceptance of the Thelemic holy books of Crowley, LaVey, or Aquino. Ultimately, serious practitioners of magic and Thelema are not committed to any rational or empirical defense of their practices. They believe what they are doing is real and that it has a meaningful significance in their perception of reality. Organizations like the EOD and similarly aimed Lovecraftian occult circles like the so-called Order of the Trapezoid, the TOTO, and indeed all Thelemic groups,
seek to tap into a truth outside our reality, a truth many of them believe Lovecraft hints at in his writings.

**LOVECRAFT ON THE OCCULT**

With all the fascination individuals, both occultist and layman, fastened on the occult elements of Lovecraft’s works, it seems as if many readers nearly take for granted the author’s obsession, or at least profound interest, in the study of the esoteric and occult. This presumption is no doubt reinforced when one considers the presence of so many of the other lions of horror fiction contemporaneous and recently previous to him, from Blackwood to Stoker, among the ranks of the magically initiated. Lovecraft’s stirring, crawling prose is evocative of a cosmic terror that far surpasses other writers, which is perhaps why he is latched onto by occultists more readily than other literary figures. Yet the reality of Lovecraft’s opinions and perspectives is radically different from that expectation.

Lovecraft, for all his singular and moving descriptions of occult practices in the secret places of the world, was in reality a skeptic and rationalist with a sense of the solidity of the universe and natural world: “Lovecraft’s early studies in the natural sciences, as well as his absorption of the atomism of Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius, led to his espousal of mechanistic materialism” (Joshi, “Introduction” 23). This materialistic and scientific approach to reality is a far cry from the depictions of the maelstrom of unreality and chaotic otherworldly forces that pervade his fiction. One of the central deities, Azathoth, is, after all, a creature of unfathomable chaos, of terrifying power and incomprehensible motivation:

> [O]utside the ordered universe, where no dreams reach [is] that amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the center of all infinity—the boundless daemon sultan Azathoth, whose name no lips dare speak aloud, and who gnaws hungrily in inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond time and space amidst the muffled, maddening beating of vile drums and the thin, monotonous whine of accursed flutes. (Lovecraft, *Dream-Quest 3*)

This vision of boundless cosmic horror lying just beyond the thin skin of our material universe, a malevolent chaos waiting to boil into our reality and extinguish all life and rationality, is profoundly affecting. It is that sheer force of descriptive power that has served to attract real world occultists like moths to the flame. Yet Lovecraft was a devotee of science and reason and utterly rejected all superstitions: “Although he greatly appreciated the esthetic beauty of the myths and traditional beliefs of the past, he fully accepted the implications of the information available to his probing scientific intellect, and abandoned all traces of religious and superstitious beliefs at an early age” (Mosig 34-35). For Lovecraft, the occult represented a rejection of the scientific worldview to which he subscribed. Beyond his fiction, he had little time for such superstitious ritualizing.
Lovecraft's views of the occult are made clear by his depictions of it in his stories. Healthy, well-adjusted people do not participate in the dark and eldritch rituals Lovecraft describes. Always the cultists are backwoods or inbred degenerates, barely human any longer. These are not figures of worth in the eyes of Lovecraft, but horrible monstrosities, grotesque parodies of humanity. It is this very disgust at these ritual practitioners that helps to highlight further some of Lovecraft's literary message: it is clear from Lovecraft's letters that he was a believer in an ordered universe, but he was also preoccupied with the decay of civilization and the slow degeneration into decadence that awaits human societies (Joshi, "Introduction" 23-28). It is this fear and preoccupation that seems to drive his descriptions of horrifying creatures, rather than any honest belief in terrors beyond the human ken. Lovecraft's great fear concerned the fragility of human civilization: "We must recognise the essential underlying savagery in the animal called man [...]. We must realise that man's nature will remain the same so long as he remains man; that civilisation is but a slight coverlet beneath which the dominant beast sleeps lightly and ever ready to awake" (Lovecraft, "At the Root" 111). Lovecraft's writing is crammed with depictions of, and concerns about, the degradation of humanity, both intellectually and culturally. For him the thin veneer of civilization is easily rubbed away and the culture, art, and civility that humans build with it. Living through the World Wars and Depression, it is quite easy to understand his fears of the death of civilized living. His historical learning only reinforced the fear that what civilization existed would not survive in the long run.

Frequently Lovecraft's stories feature degraded humans who have made unholy covenants with the more terrible monsters for which his fiction is more famous. These fallen humans seem to represent that creeping decline and decay that lays peoples low. The short story "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" offers one of the most striking descriptions of such a pact. In it, the inhabitants of the titular town have surrendered themselves to the power of the Esoteric Order of Dagon, "a debased, quasi-pagan thing imported from the East a century before" (596). The citizens of Innsmouth have made a Faustian bargain with hideous sea creatures such that, in exchange for good fishing, they degrade physically and mentally into a more primordial state akin to the monsters they serve: "There certainly is a strange kind of streak in the Innsmouth folk today—I don't know how to explain it, but it sort of makes you crawl" (591). It is that complacence and senescence of civilizations and peoples that Lovecraft abhors and which he expresses so powerfully in his prose. Giving into the bestial qualities of humanity, as the occultists of his fiction consistently do, is the true terror. Lovecraft evokes this feeling powerfully in one of his most celebrated stories, "The Call of Cthulhu" with a description of one occult ritual: "There are vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities particular to beasts; and it is terrible to hear the one when the source should yield the other" (179). A voluminous knowledge of history made Lovecraft acutely aware of how brittle a
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civilization can be, and the effect of the crawling chaos of time and human decadence. Lovecraft’s real lens was anthropological, not cosmological. The real terror was in humanity itself, something his occult followers seem frequently to neglect in their appropriation of his work. Occultists do not understand that the things in which they revel were the very things Lovecraft found most unsettling about the human condition.

It is still strange, though, that anyone, even practitioners of the darker veins of ritual magic, should actually be attracted to the notion of communing with, let alone actually unleashing, the terrifying beings Lovecraft describes upon the world. It is a great irony that the people most deeply invested in Lovecraft’s work, the dedicated occultists fixated on his fiction, are the types of people whom Lovecraft most feared: the proponents of irrational anti-civilization. The rationale is somewhat clear for some such practitioners, such as Phil Hine, who thinks of the Lovecraft deities, “not as demonic entities to whom he must enslave himself with a Faustian pact, but as personifications of natural forces whose energies can be tapped” (Harms and Gonce 121). This view can be understood only with a jettisoning of much of the most powerful descriptive passages Lovecraft has to offer, text that in no uncertain terms depicts an altogether inhuman and unnatural malevolence. Kenneth Grant’s reading of the Lovecraftian gods is somewhat truer to the source material, citing the goal of his ritual magic as being in alignment with the depictions in “The Call of Cthulhu”: “The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy” (“Call” 183). Grant’s reading of Lovecraft seeks to cast his deities into the role of teachers, yet it is clear, even by his own admission, that the teaching would consist mostly of the anarchic insanity described in the stories. From an analytical standpoint this seems like a very strange admission; while there are many strands of left-hand path, or dark magic, practice in the world, most involve some sort of payoff, usually in the form of power or pleasure (Evans 197). Yet the “payoff” in this case seems to be mind-bending agony and the destruction of all sanity in the world. The need to reconcile this “outcome” with the desire to bring it forth is the product of two factors: first, the realization of many practitioners that what they are doing is make-believe, and second, in the case of serious believers, the willingness to creatively contravene the depictions laid out by Lovecraft. Of course, all of this fear of dangerous outcomes never bothered Lovecraft, since, according to him at least, his stories are pure fancy and a creative exercise on his part, without any otherworldly influences acting upon him.

Cosmic threats from beyond reality were not what caused Lovecraft himself to feel genuine unease. Rather, he was frequently beset by a somewhat more prosaic worry: Lovecraft “confessed, acutely, that his very love of the past fostered the principal strain in his aesthetic of the weird—the defeat or confounding of time”
Destruction by a creature like Azathoth, or Cthulhu, was not a realistic concern, but rather the power of time itself to destroy and corrupt all things, to inevitably lay low civilizations, no matter how grand. That was what fascinated and horrified Lovecraft. This perception of time is perhaps best described in “The Crawling Chaos,” in which entropy finally brings about the end of the world. The work is haunting for the very reason that it excludes Lovecraft’s usual bag of monsters, leaving nothing to fight or from which to run—because there is no escape from the ravages of time. Viewing the contemporary Lovecraftian cults in this context, it seems clear that they miss from the starting point the most significant thematic elements of Lovecraft’s work, which are reduced to a pastiche of the cosmic monster movie, ignoring the profound vistas of cosmic horror of which they truly speak.

While the question of Lovecraft’s own opinions on his fiction, and on the occult generally, is now answered, a final question arises of whether there is any serious value in the use of his works for practitioners of the occult.

SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

The final question is answered by the very existence of so many practitioners of Lovecraftian occultism. While they often fail to grasp, or perhaps simply ignore, Lovecraft’s own opinion of the occult and his fiction, they do all find something in it that serves as an irresistible draw. The amount of time and energy spent contemplating the esoteric and magical significance of Lovecraft’s fiction may seem bizarre to the layman, yet it is a thing that has intense devotees, even if their shows of appreciation for Lovecraft’s creative talent might be of a bizarre, or outright unsettling, variety. They are the sorts of people who would likely not respond in any meaningful way to a demonstration of Lovecraft’s true views, a conclusion that can be drawn from the fact that those views are readily available to the keen searcher. These adherents represent the very essence of mythic believers.

All occult practice must seem strange to the outsider, and while mistaking Lovecraft’s personal distaste for the occult for occultist wisdom may seem a grave error, it has not stopped practitioners’ unconventional quests for enlightenment. It is hard to find serious fault with such people, even if their behavior is not the most reverent to the source material. After all, the most garish, monstrous rituals that the worst of them get up to are far less dark than much of what Lovecraft described. It may seem monumentally silly to the uninitiated that people who consider themselves practitioners of “real” magic attach themselves to a writer of fiction, particularly one who openly disdained their modes of expression, which he considered fanciful and irrational. Yet the irony of Lovecraft’s opinion cannot genuinely be expected to move those who are willing to stake their beliefs in the realm of magic. Truly, once one has accepted such a belief structure, it becomes fanciful for an observer to expect serious, rational consideration of such beliefs by practitioners.
What ultimately remains to be seen is whether, as deeply unlikely as it is, cults of Lovecraft will one day succeed and find a door to the extra-dimensional reality so vividly and horrifyingly depicted in the literature. Whether they would really like what they find there is another question.

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**About the Author**

John Engle is a long-time reader of H.P. Lovecraft and student of Western occultism. Graduate of Trinity College Dublin and the University of London, he is currently pursuing and MBA at the University of Oxford.
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