

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward Short Guide

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward by H. P. Lovecraft

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Characters.....	5
Setting.....	6
Social Concerns.....	7
Social Sensitivity.....	8
Techniques.....	9
Themes.....	10
Adaptations.....	11
Key Questions.....	12
Topics for Discussion.....	14
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	15
Literary Precedents.....	16
For Further Reference.....	17
Related Titles.....	18
Copyright Information.....	19

Overview

Lovecraft was a master of suspense, and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* shows his skill at creating and maintaining tension. As the story progresses, the full extent of Charles Dexter Ward's madness is slowly revealed until the evil of the past seems ready to burst into the present with horrific consequences. The novel is primarily an entertainment, and young adult readers in particular are likely to appreciate a story about a young man who wants to know more about himself, but whose understandable desire for self-knowledge becomes a maddening obsession.

About the Author

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born August 20, 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island, a setting that he used for much of his fiction. His high-strung father was a traveling salesman who went insane in 1893 and eventually died in 1898. His mother seems to have gone dotty from the strain of her husband's illness; later, grief compounded her already neurotic behavior. She treated her son like a daughter, making him wear short pants and a girlish hairstyle until he was six. Smothered by his overly protective mother, aunts, and grandparents, he had a nervous breakdown while in high school. He lived with two of his aunts for most of his adult life and was dependent on them for emotional support.

Lovecraft was a lonely boy who occupied his time by reading books and fantasizing. As a teen-ager, he began writing stories for his own amusement, and throughout his life he regarded himself as an amateur who wrote primarily for pleasure, although in the 1930s, the need for an income made him try to behave like a professional writer. In his last years, he was helped by literary agents.

His first stories, written when he was in his twenties, were awful, and his early poetry is little better. But from this unpromising beginning, he emerged with a passion and skill for spinning fantastic tales and horror stories. He became an able critic and scholar whose *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927; new edition 1945) is widely admired by modern-day writers and scholars. His research led him to a better understanding of his craft, and he entered a mature phase with the publication of the short story "Dagon" in 1917. From then until his death, Lovecraft created an imaginary universe that fellow writer August Derleth dubbed the "Cthulhu Mythos"—after "The Call of Cthulhu," a 1926 short story.

Lovecraft worked in amateur writers clubs and supported himself by editing and ghostwriting at low fees. He published many stories in "pulp" magazines, such as *Weird Tales*, as well as poetry and essays, but never thought of himself as a fully professional writer.

The strain of poverty, emotional ills, and physical infirmities shortened his life. In 1937 he died of chronic nephritis and cancer in Providence, Rhode Island.

Lovecraft owes much of his current reputation as one of America's masters of fantastic tales to August Derleth.

During the late 1930s and 1940s, Derleth gathered and edited Lovecraft's stories. He not only culled tales out of pulp magazines but uncovered unpublished manuscripts such as *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, thus establishing Lovecraft's literary canon. In addition, Derleth completed some of Lovecraft's unfinished stories. During his life, Lovecraft encouraged friends like Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, and Derleth to contribute stories to the "Cthulhu Mythos." So compelling has been Lovecraft's visionary blend of the scientific and the supernatural that even present-day writers are drawn to the Mythos.



Characters

Critics commonly discuss Charles Dexter Ward as H. P. Lovecraft's representation of himself. This autobiographical interpretation emphasizes the physical description of Ward — "tall, slim, and bland, with studious eyes and a slight stoop, dressed somewhat carelessly, and giving a dominant impression of harmless awkwardness" — and Ward's obsession with antiquarian research as descriptions of Lovecraft, himself. When Ward is taken to be Lovecraft's persona, then his stumbling into evil may be seen as representing Lovecraft's own discovery that evil is a fundamental part of human experience.

When looked at as a character apart from Lovecraft, Ward is one of Lovecraft's most sophisticated creations.

Through most of the novel, young Ward teeters between good and evil, the present and the past. Knowledge in and of itself is good — something valuable for its own sake. Even so, knowledge of evil can be corrupting because knowledge becomes part of a person.

Ward begins as an innocent living in a city of Providence that is like a paradise, a place where the "slanting sunlight touches the Market House and the ancient hill roofs and belfries with gold, and throws magic around the dreaming wharves where Providence Indiamen used to ride at anchor." As Ward learns about its past, Providence darkens, becoming a mixture of the "wondrous or dreadful as the case may be." Providence and Ward are closely linked; when Ward brings Curwen into his life, Providence is corrupted, with ghouls robbing its graves. As a human character, Ward is ambivalent — both a hero and antihero, at once possessed by a wonderful grand obsession and villainously defiling his beloved Providence. As a symbol, Ward draws on the rich Faustian tradition, reminding readers that knowledge of facts should be tempered by ethics — the knowledge of moral conduct.

Setting

The events take place in Providence, Rhode Island, during the 1920s. At the beginning of the novel, Providence is depicted as a paradise, where the "slanting sunlight touches the Market House and the ancient hill roofs and belfries with gold, and throws magic around the dreaming wharves where Providence Indiamen used to ride at anchor." As the innocent Ward learns more about his dark past, the depiction of Providence darkens until it becomes a mixture of the "wondrous or dreadful as the case may be." When Ward brings Curwen into his life, Providence also becomes corrupted, and ghouls emerge from the shadows to rob its graves. Lovecraft shows that evil in the individual, if unchecked, spreads to corrupt the environment.



Social Concerns

In his essay, "Facts in the Case of H. P. Lovecraft," Barton L. St. Armand declares that *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* "is a fable about the problems of history itself and also a warning about the dangers of historical research." St.

Armand may go too far by suggesting that Lovecraft portrays historical study as in and of itself dangerous, but history is the principal social concern of *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. Charles Ward's antiquarian research reveals that he is descended from an evil practitioner of black magic, Joseph Curwen, whose evil was finally halted in the 1700s by the same Rhode Islanders who would later lead the colonies to independence from Great Britain. Lovecraft makes two points about history in the tale of Charles Ward's succumbing to domination by the evil spirit of Joseph Curwen: First, that there is no such thing as a thoroughly unblemished period of history; along with the idealistic leaders of 1700s, Providence also had corruption and evil. Second, as someone researches his past, it becomes part of him. People are partly products of their histories. The mixture of good and evil in *Charles Dexter Ward* is a reminder that as human beings, all people are mixtures of good and bad, just as history is also such a mixture.

Social Sensitivity

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward graphically depicts the nature of supernatural evil. This aspect of the novel makes it too frightful for children, although Lovecraft's depictions would probably not disturb a young adult for more than a moment. On the other hand, Lovecraft's monsters in his Cthulhu Mythos would appear to fall outside of the Judaic-Christian tradition. A close examination of the ethical views in the novel, however, show it to be part of the Faustian tradition and well within the Judaic-Christian framework. Evil is plainly unattractive in the novel, and the practitioners of evil suffer for their bad deeds. Good is very clearly on the side of ethical behavior. The notion that those without good sense and a sound understanding of ethics are easy prey for evil is a point well worth making.

Techniques

From the opening chapter of *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* there is little doubt that Ward's "mental disturbance" has been caused by Joseph Curwen. Ward's ignorance of his own life and times is a dead giveaway. The fun of the novel lies in its fantastic imagery, the dark and mysterious happenings that surround Ward, and the battle of wits between Ward on one side and his father and Dr. Marinus Bicknell Willett on the other. Willett represents knowledge tempered by courage and ethics. Suspense is maintained by the inevitability of a confrontation between Dr. Willett and Joseph Curwen.

Themes

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward focuses on the theme of education — a theme that was of great importance to Lovecraft. Charles Ward pursues an unbalanced education, foregoing formal academic studies for his own obsessive research into Providence's past.

Eventually, he pays a terrible price for his desire to know every detail of his ancestry. Without a critical mind, unarmed with a general knowledge of good and evil that a formal education could provide, Ward is prey for the monstrous Curwen, whose life becomes the focus of Ward's obsessive research.

Curwen could have been drawn to Ward by the young man's obsession.

Adaptations

In 1963, the motion-picture version of *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* was released by American International Pictures as *The Haunted Palace*. The events are placed in a nineteenth-century New England village.

Charles Ward and Joseph Curwen are played by Vincent Price, who as Ward slowly transforms into his own greatgreat-grandfather. Lon Chaney, Jr. appears as Curwen's hideously deformed assistant. The picture was directed by Roger Corman, a veteran of the horror film genre. The whole picture is very silly and has the cliché ambiguous ending — has Curwen really been vanquished?



Key Questions

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward offers some excellent opportunities for discussion. The direction a discussion will take will probably depend on whether discussion-group members are avid readers of Lovecraft or not. If the group is well acquainted with Lovecraft's writings, the discussion can turn to the matter of where The Case of Charles Dexter Ward fits into Lovecraft's world view, where it fits into his literary canon, and where it ranks among Lovecraft's achievements. The themes dealing with book learning, history, and rationality are common in Lovecraft and are given some of their fullest development in this particular novel.

Why the persistent emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge through reading? How does the triumph of rationality of the conclusion compare with "The Dunwich Horror" and other narratives of the battle between scientific rationality and supernatural evil? Why does Lovecraft present an ambivalent portrait of the value of history and the knowledge of history?

The theme of history is by itself worthy of a full discussion. As Ward becomes increasingly knowledgeable in his own history, evil becomes increasingly noticeable in the community of Providence, with even graves being desecrated. Why does Lovecraft extend the evil effects of Ward's obsession beyond Ward himself to the community at large? Can he mean that personal evil inevitably translates into community evil? Is Lovecraft emphasizing an anti-intellectual theme, or does he mean to show through the contrast of Ward and Dr. Willett that unbalanced learning can make one susceptible to evil, while balanced learning enables one to battle evil?

The Faustian theme can be fun to discuss, too. For instance, a comparison of The Case of Charles Dexter Ward to Marlowe's Dr. Faustus can raise significant, sometimes disturbing, questions about the value of knowledge and whether the obsessive pursuit of knowledge can unbalance the mind. How much knowledge is too much? Can there be any such thing as too much knowledge? Why is it that Curwen can exploit Ward, but the knowledge of Dr.

Willett can not only fend him off but ultimately defeat him?

1. In The Case of Charles Dexter Ward, Lovecraft's own interests in history and philosophy pay off with a complex tale of supernatural intrigue that incorporates some very large ideas. One of these ideas is history itself. Of what value is history in the novel? How well developed is this idea? Is the novel successful as a cautionary narrative?

2. Another big idea is that of the pursuit and possession of knowledge.

Lovecraft himself was largely self-educated beyond high school, having had a nervous breakdown while in high school that pretty much ended his formal education. He might just be commenting on his own obsessive behavior and eccentric desire to be a



neoclassical intellectual like those of the eighteenth century, but *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward's* thematic development suggests a more complex working out of the nature of learning than mere self-indulgence. The novel does not beg the issue of whether knowledge is good; it confronts it directly in almost every scene. Does Lovecraft mean that knowledge is bad? Does he mean that certain kinds of knowledge are bad?

Does he suggest that certain methods of acquiring knowledge are bad, while others are good? Does he succeed in creating a grey area in which knowledge can be good or bad?

3. One way to resolve the novel's ambiguities is to shift one's focus from knowledge to understanding. A person can know something without understanding it. Is it possible that Ward needed guidance to help him understand what he was learning, that the value of Dr. Willett's education was that he could understand what he learned, that he could place it in context whereas Ward could not?

4. Curwen is possessed of great mystical knowledge. It enables him to defy the passage of time, and it gives him access to great powers. Why is it that for all his knowledge he creates an inadequate disguise?

5. Is knowledge our best defense against evil?

6. With Curwen's incarceration, will the mysteriously evil events in Providence cease? Will the city become bright again?

7. What is the significance of the eighteenth-century defeat of Curwen by Providence's revolutionary leaders?

8. What is the process whereby Curwen's occupation of Ward's body is uncovered? Was it inevitable?

9. Is ancient evil inevitably going to come afoul of modern society? Does it lose its power when it becomes antiquated?

10. How successful is Lovecraft's characterization of Ward? Does he come off as a credible human being? Is his transformation credible?

11. As is often the case with Lovecraft's fiction, the nature of the central evil of the tale is easily guessed early in the narrative. What holds our attention? Is the Faustian theme one that still can grasp and hold the imagination of modern readers?



Topics for Discussion

1. What happens to Charles Dexter Ward at the novel's end? Is this fair to Ward? Why would Lovecraft have Ward perish?
2. Throughout *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* are references to Yog-Sothoth of the Old Ones. Why? Do the references enhance your enjoyment of the story? If so, how? If not, what do they do for you instead?
3. The evil Curwen is very knowledgeable in the black arts, yet Dr. Willett destroys him with an incantation. What qualities does Dr. Willett have that enable him to outwit Curwen?
4. Why is Ward such an easy victim for Curwen?
5. The conflict between good and evil in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* is primarily a battle of wits. Is this combat between minds entertaining? How does Lovecraft maintain suspense in the novel? If you prefer more physical action in a novel, what kind of action would you add to this novel? How would you change the plot to include action without confusing the story?
6. *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* is a frightful story of a young man who is destroyed by an obsession with the past.

What might Lovecraft be trying to communicate in this story about selfdestruction? Does it bother you that the young man is overcome by evil?

7. Many young readers like *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* for its fantasy rather than its horror-story qualities.

What about the novel would make it a satisfying fantasy adventure for some readers? Could this account for why Lovecraft's books are read by many people who do not normally read Gothic novels?

8. What do you think of Dr. Willett. Is he an appealing hero? If not, what traits does he seem to be lacking? How would you change the character to make him more appealing? Would your changes affect the plot?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, Lovecraft mentions many place names in Providence, Rhode Island. Look up maps of Providence in the 1700s and the 1920s, then make a map of your own showing all the places mentioned in the novel. How accurate are Lovecraft's descriptions of Providence, past and present? Has the city changed in any important ways since Lovecraft's time?

2. Read Marlowe's *Tragedy of Doctor Faustus* and compare Faustus with Ward. Can anything important about Ward's characterization be learned by comparing him to Faust? What?

3. Why would Lovecraft have not published *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* in his lifetime? Why would he leave his manuscript sitting around? What does this say about Lovecraft as a person?

4. Lovecraft's writings not only influenced Gothic literature but he himself helped other writers with their works.

How did Lovecraft help other writers?

Why did he spend so much time helping others rather than working on his own stories? Who are a few of the betterknown writers whom Lovecraft helped?

How does his influence show up in their writings?

5. *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* touches on the Cthulhu Mythos, an imaginary universe in which many of Lovecraft's stories take place. Describe the Mythos. What are its chief gods?

Why is it malevolent? Did Lovecraft give it a history that explains why the Mythos' monsters would be interested in earth?

6. Providence shows up in other writings by Lovecraft. How does he portray the city in his works? Is he consistent?

Can you draw any conclusions about what he liked and disliked about Providence?

7. Read *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and some short stories by Lovecraft. Was he a better novelist or short story writer? Why? How are the novels and stories different from each other?

8. August Derleth collected and edited the writings of Lovecraft. How much of Lovecraft's work is actually Derleth's?

Literary Precedents

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward belongs to the Faustian tradition. In the 1590s, the English playwright Christopher Marlowe borrowed from an old German legend and wrote *Dr. Faustus*, a tragedy depicting a learned academic who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for unlimited knowledge. In *Faust*, Part I (1808) and Part II (1833), Goethe elaborates on the philosophical implications of the Faust legend and the implications of the themes of knowledge and damnation. Goethe takes the Neoclassical view that human rationality is itself a truth.

Lovecraft's character Charles Dexter Ward is Faustian in his relentless search for knowledge and in his succumbing to evil. Lovecraft incorporates Marlowe's portrait of absolute evil into his novel, although the role of the devil is replaced by Yog-Sothoth and the Old Ones. Implied in *Dr. Faustus* is the idea that Faustus is controlled by Mephistopheles, who while pretending to serve him actually only shows Faustus illusion — lies, not knowledge. Lovecraft does this one better by having Curwen supplant Ward. Lovecraft also incorporates the idea of human rationality into his novel. Ward is undone by his irrationally unbalanced education, and Dr. Willett triumphs by taking a rational approach to solving the insane problems presented by vampirism, grave robbing, and Joseph Curwen.

Indeed, Curwen is undone by his own irrationality and the modern world's science. "You were a fool, Curwen, to fancy that a mere visual identity would be enough," declares Dr. Willett. "Why didn't you think of the speech and the voice and the handwriting?" The rational person's ability to understand the irrational has enabled Dr. Willett to penetrate Curwen's demonic schemes; Curwen, all appetite and selfishness, has failed to think through the problems presented by his schemes. In fact, in a modern world of science, in which there is even psychology — the science of the mind — Curwen is eventually locked up in a mental ward, because his insane behavior is detected and rational minds have developed medical treatments for the mentally unbalanced. This response by society to the weird behavior of Ward /Curwen echoes the Frankenstein tradition of Gothic literature; there is no place in the modern world for the monstrous.

For Further Reference

Beetz, Kirk. "H. P. Lovecraft: 1890-1937." In *Popular World Fiction: 1900-Present*, vol. 3, edited by Walton Beacham and Suzanne Niemeyer.

Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1987. Repeats some of what is said in the present article but offers in-depth discussions of "The Dunwich Horror" and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, as well as *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*.

Carter, Lin. *Lovecraft: A Look Behind the Cthulhu Mythos*. New York: Ballantine, 1972. Describes the Mythos.

de Camp, L. Sprague. *Lovecraft: A Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 1975.

This standard biography by an admirer of Lovecraft, features sensitive criticism as well as biographical detail.

De Camp's reflections on Lovecraft's amateurism are particularly cogent.

Derleth, August. "H. P. Lovecraft and His Work," in *The Dunwich Horror* by H. P. Lovecraft. New York: Lancer, 1969. An introduction to a collection of Lovecraft's stories, it is one writer's tribute to a friend, offering insight into Lovecraft's life and work.

Joshi, S. T., ed. *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980. This collection of articles includes new studies written for this volume. Includes the most influential articles on Lovecraft such as "A Literary Copernicus" and offers a useful index.

Wilson, Colin. "H. P. Lovecraft: 1890-1937." In *Science Fiction Writers*, edited by E. F. Bleiler. New York: Scribner's, 1982. A good introduction to the major issues of Lovecraft's fiction.

Related Titles

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward is part of the Cthulhu Mythos because of its reference to Yog-Sothoth, an Old One, and the implication that Joseph Curwen's evil powers are related to the Old Ones. However, the novel is primarily concerned with the Faust tradition, and the Cthulhu Mythos does not play a central part in it.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress

Cataloging-in-Publication Data



Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994