

Dagon and Other Macabre Tales Study Guide

Dagon and Other Macabre Tales by H. P. Lovecraft

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Contents

Dagon and Other Macabre Tales Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Dagon.....	3
Polaris.....	4
Beyond the Wall of Sleep.....	5
The Doom that Came to Sarnath.....	6
The White Ship.....	7
The Cats of Ulthar.....	8
Celephais.....	9
From Beyond.....	10
The Temple.....	11
The Tree.....	13
The Other Gods.....	14
The Quest of Iranon.....	15
Herbert West-Reanimator.....	16
Hypnos.....	18
Supernatural Horror in Literature.....	19
Characters.....	21
Objects/Places.....	24
Themes.....	26
Style.....	28
Quotes.....	30
Topics for Discussion.....	31



Dagon

Dagon Summary

Dagon begins with a sailor recounting his experience of being cast adrift in a lifeboat after a German Submarine sank his ship in the Pacific. His ship was attacked and sunk by the Germans and he, along with the rest of the surviving crew, was taken as prisoners. Eventually, the sailor was able to escape in a lifeboat. For several days he drifted in the vast ocean, exposed to the hot sun and thirsty for water. One day, after a troubled sleep of fantastical dreams, he awoke to find himself surrounded by dark ooze and what looked like land. Apparently, part of a previously submerged mountain arose from the depths during the night. After three days of sheltering himself on his stranded boat, the sailor decides to explore the newly exposed land around him. After wandering around in the harsh light of day, the sailor decides that it is more prudent to travel at night.

On the next night, spotting a strange monolith on a distant hill, the sailor sets off to explore the strange object. After climbing the object, the sailor can see that it is engraved with a host of strange hieroglyphics and pictures of bizarre creatures. One of these creatures looked like a man but with fishlike features and represented as big enough to kill a whale with its own hands. Suddenly, one of the creatures arises from the sea and heads towards the monolith. The sailor, by his own admission is now going mad after seeing the beast, runs back to his boat and does not remember how he eventually escapes. Once back in San Francisco, the sailor talks to an archeologist and learns of the fish-god Dagon, once worshiped in the Middle East, and assumes he saw the same monster. Now, back on land and addicted to morphine, his dreams are haunted by the fish-god Dagon.

Dagon Analysis

Dagon is one of Lovecraft's earliest stories, but the reader already sees the signature elements of Lovecraft's technique. Dagon is narrated in the first person, a common Lovecraft technique. Telling the story in the first person has the effect of making the horror more vivid and personal. The story has the tone of a kind of confessional and many of the details that might seem ridiculous in a normal narrative seem more credible in the first-person, even when the storyteller is not a reliable source. The only problem with the first-person story is that the narrator must live so he can tell his story. Oftentimes, instead of dying, the narrator will go mad. Sometimes Lovecraft, as he will in other stories in this collection, will put the narration in the first person but in the form of a diary that can be found by someone coming along later. This allows the narrator to die, but to keep a first-person narration style.

Polaris

Polaris Summary

Polaris begins with the narrator staring out into the night sky at the stars and noticing the constellations. Chief among those stars for the narrator is Polaris, the North Star. The narrator falls asleep and begins to dream. He sees a strange city in his dream, a city he calls Olathoe, between the peaks of Noton and Kadiphonek, in the land of Lomar. In this city, the narrator is well known in this city. He longs to be a warrior but is deemed to feeble to be a warrior. Instead, he is given the job of lookout. The enemies of the people of Olathoe, the Inutos, have camped outside of the city and are preparing to attack the city. While the bravest and best soldiers went out to meet the Inutos in the mountain pass, the narrator takes a position in the citadel tower. From his high position, he will watch the battle below and if the Inutos gain the upper hand, the narrator will light a signal fire which will draw the reserve troops into the fray.

After the narrator takes his place in the tower, though, he begins to look out at the stars and sees the North Star again. He believes the star is beckoning him to sleep and he falls asleep. Unable to wake, he dreams of the defeat of his countrymen and the death of his friends. He has failed the city and he remains, in a waking dream state, to regret his lapse and to hate the North Star that compelled him to sleep.

Polaris Analysis

Polaris is a story that uses another of Lovecraft's favorite techniques, the dream vision. In a dream vision story, the narrator will travel, in his dream, to some fantastical realm where he will engage in some heroic or anti-heroic action, in this case, defending the town against the Inutos. This story was inspired by an actual dream that Lovecraft had in which he saw the things recounted in this story. His dream stories often involve strange, ancient locales and stories of non-existent ancient peoples and their gods. The reader will see this technique in several of the other stories in this collection.

Beyond the Wall of Sleep

Beyond the Wall of Sleep Summary

This story begins with a medical internist from a mental hospital discussing the possibility that in sleep, the human mind is sometimes able to visit alternate realities. The intern says that this was only a groundless theory until he encounters a patient that makes him believe that this possibility is real. In 1901, a patient entered the mental hospital where the narrator interned named Joe Slater. Described by narrator as the upstate New York variety of "white trash" or a "hillbilly", Slater was known in his hill town as a drunk who would sleep at odd times and cry out about demonic visions in his sleep. One night, he awoke from a whiskey-induced coma to kill another man. He was subsequently arrested and put in the mental institution.

In the institution, the man continues to rant in his sleep. Despite Slater's lack of education, though, his rants are extremely literate and filled with fantastical imagery. The narrator becomes convinced that Slater cannot be the origin of the rants, given his lack of education. As a college student, the narrator invented a device that he believed could see into the dreams of other people. Convinced that the sleeping Slater is either communicating with other being in his sleep or is inhabited by one of them, the narrator begins to fix his machine. Once fixed, he puts the machine on Slater, who is increasingly in a dream state and seems to be dying. Once placed on Slater, the narrator sees a world inhabited by being made of light. He talks to one who claims to inhabit Slater's body. All humans are actually made of incorporeal light beings that are not shackled by the body. After this discussion, the light being goes off to face a demon he has been hunting that is hiding in the demon star Algol. Outside of the dream world, Slater dies and the narrator notices a faint new star near the demon star Algol that eventually disappears.

Beyond the Wall of Sleep Analysis

"Beyond the Wall of Sleep" is another dream related story in the Lovecraft cannon. In this story, the narrator speculates about the ultimate nature of matter and humanity and claims that all humans are actually composed of light beings. This belief reflects a vague, non-religious, spiritualism that exists in many of Lovecraft's stories. These are reflected in a general dualism that pits one group, the light, against the forces of darkness. Oftentimes in these stories, the dark forces, sometimes demons or spectral beings, are more powerful than either humans or the beings of lights; this reflects a general malevolent worldview that Lovecraft expresses in his stories. Even in this story, which on its face seems to have the light character triumph and to be relatively optimistic, the light near Algol fades, suggesting that maybe the light being was overwhelmed by the demon he was stalking.

The Doom that Came to Sarnath

The Doom that Came to Sarnath Summary

The story begins with a history of a Shepard people that, ten thousand years ago, settled in a land named Mnar on the banks of the river Ai. They founded several cities but then, needing more land for their growing civilization, they expanded to the banks of a lake and founded the city of Sarnath. Over time, the settlers realized that they were not alone on the banks of the lake and that nearby lived a race of strange creatures in the city of Ib. The creatures were descended from the moon and were green with strange faces, unlike anything human. The creatures did not talk and they worshipped a great water lizard named Bokrug, of which they made a great idol. Hating and fearing these creatures, the men of Sarnath slaughtered them and took their idol. That night, after the slaughter, the idol went missing and the high priest was found dead writing the word "doom" as he died.

For hundreds of years, the city of Sarnath flourished and every year, the people of Sarnath celebrated the destruction of Ib. On the Thousand-year anniversary, though, people began to complain of seeing the long dead mysterious creatures around the town and the lake level began to rise. The next day, the city of Sarnath was completely destroyed, so much so that not even ruins remained. With Sarnath gone, the inhabitants of Ib repopulated the area and began to worship again their god Bokrug, whose idol was never found on the site that was once Sarnath.

The Doom that Came to Sarnath Analysis

"The Doom that Came to Sarnath" exhibits several similarities with later stories. It is a history of a long dead, imaginary, civilization that has some connection with one of the "old gods." The old gods like Bokrug play prominent parts in the later work of Lovecraft and the reader will see his technique already apparent in "The Doom that Came to Sarnath." Unlike many of other of Lovecraft's stories, "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" is told in the third person to approximate a historical tale with biblical style language. The tension builds because we know that some kind of tragedy will befall Sarnath given the title, but we do not know what. The reader waits for the hammer to drop, which it eventually does in the destruction of Sarnath by Bokrug. Lovecraft does not describe the actual destruction, another technique that increases the mystery and tension in the story



The White Ship

The White Ship Summary

"The White Ship" is a story narrated by a lighthouse keeper named Bail Elton. Basil lives in the lighthouse and at night will stare out into the sea and imagine him on the water. One night he sees a white ship and a bearded man that he imagines beckons him to the ship. Once on the ship, Basil and the bearded man sail to the land of Zar, a place beautiful and sublime, but they do not disembark because those who set foot on Zar can never return to their homelands. Later, they sailed past the beautiful Thalarian, City of a Thousand Wonder, but again, they do not enter because only demons and madmen can live in that city.

Following a bird flying before their ship, the bearded man and Basil sail on to Xura, land of pleasures unattained and then onto Sona-Nyl. In the land of Sona-Nyl, there is neither time nor space, nor suffering nor death. Basil lives in this land for untold eons before one day he sees the guide bird again and he gets the desire to travel to the remote Cathuria. Cathuria, so says the bearded man, is a land past the pillars that no man has ever seen. The bearded man impels Basil to stay in the wonderful Sona-Nyl, but Basil is overcome with the desire to see Cathuria and he takes his ship past the pillars onto the rough sea.

For thirty-five days they sail, until eventually they find even rougher seas and the ship begins to break up on the rocks. Basil then finds himself back in his lighthouse watching a ship on the rocks below. Basil had failed to keep the lighthouse lighted and the ship had, in the darkness, run on the rocks. Basil would keep watch to see the white ship, but he never saw the ship again.

The White Ship Analysis

"The White Ship" is another dream story, though this time it is ambiguous whether the narrator is really dreaming or if he is actually on a voyage. One possibility is that the lighthouse keeper, while watching for ships, fell asleep and dreamed the entire voyage only to be jolted awake when the ship hit the rocks. This is the most realistic interpretation. There is also the interpretation that takes the narrator at face value and accepts the voyage as true. The interesting element of this story is the ambiguity between the two interpretations. Lovecraft will often leave open the possibility that the narrator is crazy while also suggesting that the fantastical story he is telling is true. This element of mystery that Lovecraft can create through his first-person narrative adds something to even a strange story like "The White Ship", in which nothing much happens.

The Cats of Ulthar

The Cats of Ulthar Summary

In Ulthar, there is a law that no man may kill a cat. Before this law, there was an old cotter and his wife that loved to catch and kill cats in gruesome ways. If a cat lover in Ulthar was unlucky enough to let his cat wander near the old cotter and his wife's house, he would, no doubt, never see his cat again.

One day, some travelers from the south made their way into Ulthar and stopped for a few days. Their carriages had engraved figures of humans with the heads of cats and other animals. One of travelers, a young boy named Menes, had a black kitten that he loved and played with. On the third day, his kitten went missing. He looked for his cat everywhere until eventually some of the townspeople told the young man about the cotter and his wife. The boy said a prayer to one of his gods and the visitors left.

Later, one of the town boys reported that he saw the cats of the town surrounding the cotter's home. The townspeople noticed that after this, their cats would not eat and lay about for several days. After noticing that they had not seen the cotter or his wife for several days, the townspeople went to investigate and found only two skeletons on the floor, picked clean. After this, a law was made that no one may kill a cat in Ulthar.

The Cats of Ulthar Analysis

This story takes the form of a explanation of a certain rule, in this case the rule that no one may kill a cat in Ulthar. Again we find the presence of strange, old gods, in this case the gods that Menes prays to before the deaths of the cotter and his wife. There is also the supernatural element of the cats attacking and killing a human. Both of these combine into a story that has the form of a dark fairy tale. Many fairytales explain or present some kind of rule or cautionary tale; in this case, the rule creates tension by notifying the reader that something involving the death of cats will lead to a bad consequence. In effect it acts a foreshadowing. This foreshadowing and tension building device is so effective that Lovecraft on requires four pages to weave his story of mystery and doom.

Celephais

Celephais Summary

Kurane, an unhappy inhabitant of London, is a dreamer. He is the last of his family and is not attached to the modern world where, he believes, myth has been sucked out of the life of modern men. Despairing of his life in England, Kurane's dreams of a magical world named Celephais. Celephais is in the valley of Ooth-Nargai beside the Cerenerian Sea beyond the Tanarian hills. In Celephais, there is no time, only eternal youth. In Celephais, Kurnae wants to sail to find new land, and so he hires a sailor named Athib to take him on his ship. The two men sail on the Cerenarian Sea and enter the harbor of Serannian, the pink marble city, before Kurane finds himself awake again in his London garret.

For months after this visit, Kurane tries to find some way back to Celephais. He dreams of other lands, but not the one he desires, and eventually, losing patience, he begins experimenting with drugs so that he can get back to his beloved kingdom. The drugs do show him visions of many things, but not the streets of Celephais. Eventually, in despair, Kurane begins to walk the streets of London and stumbles over a bridge and then sees the knights of Celephais riding towards him. They have been sent to collect Kurane so that he can be the king of Celephais. He goes with them and rules Celephais. Back in London, a body is found in the water near the bridge where Kurane met the knights.

Celephais Analysis

Celephais is another dream tale, although this one has a darker edge than some of Lovecraft's previous dream stories. The main character, Kurane, is a man who prefers to live in his dreams than in reality. Eventually this desire to live in his fantasy dreamland leads to him taking various drugs and going to live in Celephais permanently. The suggestion at the end of the tale is that Kurane either commits suicide so that he can live in his fantasy land or that he dies inadvertently and ends up living in his fantasy land; in any case, death is connected with the dreamland in this story.

From Beyond

From Beyond Summary

"From Beyond" is the story of Crawford Tillinghast, told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator. Tillinghast is the narrator's friend, and he begins the story by describing how Crawford's mysterious examinations into the metaphysical have led to the man becoming weathered and thin. Tillinghast was always fascinated by philosophy, and his most ardent desire was to get to the bottom of the mysteries of the universe. His investigations into these mysteries led him to produce a machine that he believed could activate the pineal gland such that those nearby could see into the realm of a higher reality existing alongside our own. Tillinghast's explorations continued, and eventually he invited the narrator over to see the results of his experimentation.

A little before the narrator's visit, two of Crawford Tillinghast's most loyal servants went missing, and when the narrator arrived at Tillinghast's house, the servants are afraid to turn on the lights. Tillinghast shows the narrator his machine and turns it on. Once it is on, the narrator finds himself in a different realm where he sees blobs moving about. Tillinghast, who is quite clearly mad at this point, tells the narrator that they are looking into a different reality and that they must be still because there are beasts in this reality that will hunt them. When the servants turned on the lights during an earlier trial, one of these beasts killed and devoured them. The machine allows people to see into the other realm, but it also allows the creatures of the other realm to see humans. Tillinghast tells the narrator that there is a beast behind him and that he has brought the narrator here so that the beast might devour him. The narrator takes out his pistol and shoots that machine. Tillinghast dies of fright and the police conclude that Tillinghast killed his servants, despite the fact that no bodies were found.

From Beyond Analysis

"From Beyond", although not as well developed or as intricate as some of Lovecraft's later stories, is similar in many ways to some of his later stories. There is a narrator who is the friend of a scientist of some sort. The scientist is a genius but he is also mad and searching after knowledge that is forbidden in some way. The narrator, out of friendship and curiosity, is drawn into the web of the scientists and is eventually put in danger himself. The reader will see this basic form reappear in "Herbert West: Reanimator." This tale is also told from the first-person and the narration begins after the main action for the story has already taken place, another common Lovecraft technique.

The Temple

The Temple Summary

"The Temple" is the story of a Karl Heinrich von Altberg-Ehrenstein, Lieutenant-Commander in the Imperial German Navy, a captain of a German submarine during World War I. The story claims to be the log of the captain found of the cost of the Yucatan. The story begins with the submarine destroying a British freighter, Victory. According to the log, Altberg allows the crew of the freighter to man their escape ships in front of his cameras and then, after the cameras are turned off, the submarine opens fire on the British sailors and kills them. The submarine then submerges. Once the submarine surfaces again, they find one of the British sailors still clinging to the hulk of the sub. On the man they find an ivory carving of a strange looking man. One of the officers on the German submarine takes the ivory figure, believing it to be valuable, but once the figure is on board, strange events begin to occur.

Some of the sailors claim to see the faces of the dead British sailors looking at them through the submarine portholes and strange schools of dolphins begin following the submarine. Some of the German officers begin to go insane and Altberg has several of them killed to maintain discipline. Later, the engine of the submarine is mysteriously damaged and the submarine can only drive on the surface of the ocean. The submarine encounters an American warship and rather than surrender, Altberg has the submarine dive and a strange current pulls it along southward. The submarine is unable to surface again, and in desperation, several of the crewmembers mutiny, but Altberg kills them. Before he can kill them, though, they disable the submarine, leaving only Altberg and his lieutenant alive and stranded underwater.

The submarine drifts to the ocean floor, and meanwhile, Altberg's lieutenant goes crazy, clutching the ivory figure, and asks to be send out into the ocean. Altberg sends his lieutenant out through the torpedo hole to his death and the batteries of the ship slowly die. Using the submarine searchlight, and eventually going out into the water in his diving suit, Altberg explores a strange underwater temple. As Altberg begins to go progressively insane, he sees strange lights coming from the underwater temple. He decides to explore the temple, realizing that he will never be able to make it back to the sub alive. Obsessed with the light that he believes he sees in the temple, Altberg ventures out into the depths to die in the temple.

The Temple Analysis

This story, like "Dagon", takes place in the ocean during World War One. The German commander, Altberg, is cruel and obsessed with his own Prussian heritage and his dedication to discipline. He is brutal with his men, eventually killing all of them, and he also guns down the prisoners that he took from the British freighter. Needless to say, the reader doesn't exactly feel sympathy with this cruel, evil man but, despite this lack of

sympathy, Lovecraft is still able to increase the tension in the story and the sense of doom approaching. It is hard to know where the horror of this story is given the very real horror that Altberg inflicts on the world around him. In many ways, he is the monster and since it is unclear whether the temple is merely a hallucination or real, it remains possible that the story is really about the monster Altberg and his abuse of those around him. He finally succumbs to the evil and the madness that he has created rather than to an external danger.

The Tree

The Tree Summary

"The Tree" is the story of two sculptors in ancient Greece, Musides and Kalos. The two men were both master sculptors and no one could tell which was better. They were also the best of friends with the utmost respect for each other's work. While they were both great sculptors and friends, they were very different temperamentally. Musides liked to visit the market place and revel and talk with the townspeople, while Kalos like to stay in the olive grove and think. Both men were summoned by the tyrant of Syracuse to build a statue of Tyche. Both men began working on the statue. Over time, Kalos began to fall inextricably ill. Musides would stay by his friend's side and sometimes go off to his reveling. Eventually Kalos succumbed to his illness and died. Before he died, he asked his friend Musides to plant an olive branch near his head in his grave. Musides promised to do so and also to build a magnificent tomb to house his great friend. After his friend's death, he carried out both tasks. The olive branch grew into a great olive tree that had the shape of a man. It grew over the tomb and the roof of Musides' house. Musides claimed that he could hear noises coming from the tree, and he was afraid. Eventually Musides notified the tyrant that his statue was completed. Later, during a great storm, the olive tree collapsed and crushed the tomb of Kalos and Musides' house, killing Musides.

The Tree Analysis

"The Tree" is a strange story. There are hints in the story that somehow Musides is responsible for the death of Kalos and this is why the tree kills him, but this goes against Lovecraft's characterization of Musides and his relationship with Kalos, so it is hard to believe. There is also, in the background, the presence of the god Pan who dwells in the olive grove. Kalos is a devotee of Pan and it is possible that the tree is partly the spirit of Pan though, again, it is not clear why it kills Musides. There seems to be an element of mystery in the art of sculpture that both men are uncovering, possibly angering the god and hence the death of both men, but this is also unclear.

The Other Gods

The Other Gods Summary

"The Other Gods" takes place in Ulthar and includes a character from "The Cats of Ulthar", a young boy, now a young man named Atal. Atal is the apprentice of the High priest, Barzai the wise. Barzai desires to climb the mountain Hatheg-Kla, the home of the great gods, or gods of the earth, to watch their dancing and celebrations. The climb is long and fraught with dangers, all those who have attempted it before have not come back, but Barzai, obsessed with his goal of seeing the great ones, takes Atal to climb the mountain. Once at the top of the mountain though, they find, not the great gods of the earth, but the "other gods" of outer hell that guard the gods of the earth. Atal is shook by a feeling on his way up the mountain and avoids encountering the other gods while Barzai goes to them and is never seen again.

The Other Gods Analysis

This story is notable for expanding the mythology of Ulthar and the related religion. The story takes place in an imaginary land, but Lovecraft also makes it seem as if it might have occurred in the distant, pre-historical past. The horror in these types of stories comes from the implication that these gods and devils are still with us. Even though they are forgotten they can still rise up, as they did at Sarnath, and harm us.

The Quest of Iranon

The Quest of Iranon Summary

"The Quest of Iranon" begins with Iranon, a young singer of songs, entering the granite city of Teloth. The people of Teloth, though, are very somber and have no interest in laughing or singing. Iranon tells all about his desire to see the city of Aira, from whence he came, and he seeks information about the city, though no one knows anything about the city of Aira. Eventually, after being spurned by the whole town, Iranon meets a young man named Romnod. Romnod is interested in Iranon's tales and wants to join him on his journeys. Romnod suggests that the head to the city of Oonai, which Romnod suggests may be Aira under a different name.

Their journey to Oonai took many years and along the way, Romnod grew from a boy to a young man, while Iranon stayed the same age. Once they reached Oonai, they found a city that, while not Aira, welcomed the singing of Iranon. In Oonai, they drank and danced all day and Romnod engaged heavily in the reveling. Over time, though, the people of Oonai tired of Iranon's songs and eventually the drinking of Romnod took its toll on his health. After his companion died, Iranon left the town, still in search of Aira.

After leaving Oonai, Iranon finds an old Shepard and he asks whether the Shepard knows of Aira. The Shepard tells Iranon that he does indeed know of Aira because a beggar named Iranon told him about it as a boy. Iranon realizes that Aira is just a part of his imagination and he instantly ages considerably before going into the desert to die.

The Quest of Iranon Analysis

"The Quest for Iranon", although not as dream tale, shares some similarities with Kurane, though the main characters are diametrically opposed. Kurane is disaffected and longs for his fantasy land of Celephais, whereas Iranon is not really disaffected at all. Furthermore, Iranon believes his fantasy world, Aira, to be real, and rather than searching for it in his dreams, he looks for it on earth. In "Celephais", the search for the dreamland leads to the death of the main character who then goes on to live in his fantasy land, whereas Iranon dies upon learning that Aira is a fantasy. Once he learns that the ideal for which he has sought his whole life exists only in his head, Iranon loses the eternal youth he has had his whole life and dies.

Herbert West-Reanimator

Herbert West-Reanimator Summary

"Herbert West-Reanimator" is the story of a strange doctor, Herbert West, obsessed with reanimating dead humans so that they might live again. In medical school at Mistkatonic University, Herbert West met and became friends with the narrator. It is also there that Herbert West began his strange experiments. When the narrator begins the story, he notes that West is not missing and it seems appropriate to explain the entire story of West's descent into madness. In college, West develops a theory that the human body is entirely mechanical, and if reanimated properly, the mind could still remain intact. They begin experimenting on corpses in the medical school but soon have to move to a new lab hidden away on the outskirts of town. Eventually they pay a grave robber to dig up a fresh body, believing the reanimating serum will only work on fresh dead humans. At first the serum does nothing and the two men move to another room. Not long after, however, they hear a strange scream and a lantern is knocked over, burning down their workhouse. They assume the body is burnt in the flames but later they here that there are claw marks on the grave of the dead man.

The dean of the medical school, Halsey, distrusts West's experiments and bans him from using university cadavers for his research. At about that time, though, a typhoid epidemic breaks out in town and West has a huge collection of cadavers to work with, though there is no success. At one point, the dean dies and West attempts to reanimate him. Halsey does reanimate but is crazed and violent, he beats West and the narrator and then goes on a cannibal-murdering spree, killing twelve people before being arrested and thrown in a psychiatric hospital.

West goes on to open a private practice outside of Boston and continues his reanimation experiments. At one point he finds a boxer who has been killed in an illegal fight and tries to reanimate him. The reanimation seems to fail and the two men bury the body. Later, they see the reanimated boxer, who has killed and eaten a child. West shoots the boxer and reburies it. Later, the narrator finds West at home and West tells the narrator that he has perfected a reanimation serum that preserves the body at the time of death. He claims to have found a dead traveling salesman and injects him with the serum. The salesman awakes and attacks West, claiming that it was West who killed him. They re-kill the salesman and dispose of his body.

Years later, West and the narrator volunteer to serve as Army doctors in World War I so that they might procure even more fresh corpses. West begins reanimating severed body parts as well as whole corpses. A Major Sir Eric Moreland Clapham-Lee takes an interest in their work and after he is killed and decapitated, West tries to reanimate his body and head. Both the body and the head reanimate and the head speaks separate from the body. Just then, their building is shelled and destroyed and West assumes the Major was also killed. Later, back in their town after the war, strange stories circulate about a man with a head that looks like it is made of wax doing strange things, including

causing a riot in the mental hospital to rescue Halsey. Later, strange men show up at West's house and give him a box which he refuses to answer and throws into the fire. The Reanimated corpses stream in, led by the Major, and disembowel and decapitate West. The narrator tells the police this story, but they refuse to believe him.

Herbert West-Reanimator Analysis

"Herbert West-Reanimator" is the longest story in this collection and one of the longest early stories that Lovecraft wrote. It is told in a series of installments and Lovecraft was paid individually for each installment. The story has elements of the Frankenstein story and Lovecraft even mentioned, at one point that he was intentionally trying to follow Mary Shelley's story. It involves many of the elements the reader has seen in some of his other short stories, including the narrative device of using a narrator to describe the events of a friend. This technique was used in "From Beyond" and it increases the sense of madness and allows the main character to be killed off at the end without having to sacrifice a first-personal point of view. Even though this tale is less strange in some ways than Lovecraft's other tales, it engages in similar metaphysical speculations. There is discussion, in the story, between the narrator and West about whether the body is purely mechanical or whether there is a non-physical soul also attached to the body. While West seems to be obsessed with reanimating bodies just to reanimate bodies, the narrator is more concerned with investigating the possibility of life after death. Of course, the narrator never has his question answered because the reanimated dead are either homicidal maniacs or not interested in talking.

Hypnos

Hypnos Summary

"Hypnos" begins with the narrator finding a strange man convulsing in a railway station. The two men become friends and live together. The narrator sculpts busts of his friend during the day and at night they talk. They are both eager to explore the realms of sleep, believing that in some forms of dreams they can travel to places that are normally inaccessible to the human mind. They begin to use strange drugs to bring on visions and dreams but, though they do see many things, they are unable to articulate the things that they see to each other. During one dream, the two men travel further than they had before but encounter such terrors that they, once awakening, decide to sleep as little as possible with the aid of drugs so as to not have to travel back to that horrible place. After each sleep, the men begin to age considerably. Eventually his friend falls into a sleep that he cannot awake him from. Startled, the narrator passes out, and when he awakes, his neighbors tell him that he has never had a friend and that he has been all alone the whole time. On the base of his statue is the work Hypnos.

Hypnos Analysis

"Hypnos" is a dream tale with a darker edge. Like "From Beyond", it deals with another realm where there are strange dangers and horrors. There is also the presumed madness of the narrator, who believes he is living with a friend but, as one finds out, is only hallucinating the friend. The horror in this story comes partially from the misguided desire of the narrator to know things that he should not know and the unknowable dangers that exist in the other realm and harm him are really only products of his own, twisted, mind.

Supernatural Horror in Literature

Supernatural Horror in Literature Summary

"Supernatural Horror in Literature" is an essay where Lovecraft explains his approach to horror in the context of the history of horror stories throughout the ages. Lovecraft argues that horror is such an important and effective genre because our fear of death and also of the unknown is so powerful at arousing strong emotions. Even if that is the case, there are still several different forms of horror, of which Lovecraft believes that, what he calls the "literature of cosmic fear", which he believes to be fundamentally different from tales that focus merely on gruesome stories or on incidental fears. Cosmic fear is fear that is aroused by pointing to the fundamental mysteries of the universe, including the certainty of our own deaths. These stories are judged not only by their use of character or plot, but more by the type and intensity of emotions that they arouse.

Lovecraft then goes on to give a history of horror tales starting with the Medieval and moving through the Gothic until the peak of the post-Gothic, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. As Lovecraft argues, *Frankenstein* was a masterpiece and began a good run for the cosmic horror story. This line of horror culminates in the American, Edgar Allan Poe who, according to Lovecraft, utilized his knowledge of psychology and philosophy to break free from the Gothic cliché to create a new and more powerful horror story. Lovecraft then goes on to explain the lineage of American writers of what he calls "weird tales" including Hawthorne and Ambrose Bierce. He then catalogues the British and finally the modern masters, who include Dunsany and Machen.

Supernatural Horror in Literature Analysis

Dagon and other Macabre Tales is a collection of several short stories, mostly written early in H.P. Lovecraft's career. Almost all of them were written for publication in small magazines and while none of the stories here show the mature form that Lovecraft would exhibit later in life, these early stories do have elements of his later fiction.

The collection begins with the story "Dagon" one of Lovecraft's first published stories. "Dagon" is the story of a sailor in World War I, set adrift in a lifeboat that inadvertently finds an ancient monolith inscribed with the images of a sea-god named Dagon. The monster Dagon appears and the sailor runs off and, though he goes mad with fright, he escapes. The next story, "Polaris" tells the story of a dreamlike fantasyland and the malevolent influence of the North Star on one man in the fantasy. "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" tells the story of an internist at a mental hospital who has invented a machine to read the dreams of other people. When he uses his machine on a homicidal maniac, he sees that the man is a being of light trying to escape from his fragile body. "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" is the tale of a city thousands of years ago that disrespected the water-lizard god, Bokrug, and paid for it with its own destruction. "The White Ship" is a strange story about a man in a lighthouse who goes on a strange

journey in a white ship to mysterious lands. "Celphais" is the story of a man so obsessed with his own dream world that he sacrifices his life to live in his dreams. "The Cats of Ulthar" is the story of a town that has a law against killing cats because of a time in the cities past when an army of cats rose up and killed several people who had been abusing them. "From Beyond" is the tale of a man who has learned too much about the spectral world that surrounds him and decides to make contact with being beyond this realm. The consequences for his interest in the world beyond are immense.

"The Temple" is the story of a German submarine commander whose brutality to his men leads to his own destruction in a strange underwater temple. "The Tree" is a story of two sculptors, as close as brothers, who are lead to their own deaths in pursuit of their art. "The Other Gods" is the story of the high priest Barzai and his encounter with strange, other gods who end up killing him. "The Quest of Iranon" is the story of a journey of an ageless man who dies when he learns that his ideal is just part of his imagination. "Herbert West-Reanimator" is the story of a man so obsessed with reanimating the dead that he sacrifices all common sense and morality to this goal. "Hypnos" is the strange story of a man who tries to investigate the world of sleep. Finally, "Supernatural Horror in Literature" is a historical examination of the development of the horror genre in literature.

Characters

Herbert West appears in Herbert West-Reanimator

Herbert West is a doctor, trained at Miskatonic University, who developed a serum that he believes will reanimate corpses. While at college, he experiments on several cadavers, and although he has some preliminary positive results, he ultimately fails at reanimating a corpse. He is convinced that the failure of his experiments is due to the fact that his corpses are not fresh enough, so he spends some time acquiring fresher corpses first by hiring grave robbers and eventually by killing a man himself so that he can try to immediately reanimate him. As he begins to see more and more success, his obsession with reanimation grows. He eventually succeeds in reanimating his previous rival and dean of the medical school, Halsey. Halsey turns into a murdering cannibal, but this only redoubles West's desire to reanimate more effectively.

Eventually, West seems to become more and more obsessed with reanimating purely to reanimate. His once clear love of science and knowledge has given way to a obscene desire to experiment on corpses. It is while in the military that West is most successful in reanimating his former friend, the Major. By this time, the narrator is more afraid of West, who has gone completely mad and lost any shred of human morality or decency. Eventually, West is killed by his own creations in a gruesome fashion. Like doctor Frankenstein, his monsters killed their creator. The narrator is left to tell the police about this gruesome story, though the police do not believe the narrator.

The Old Gods appears in Several Stories

The Old Gods are not a character in any particular Lovecraft tale, but rather figure into several of his stories. These are gods of the ancient past that were worshipped by old, sometimes non-human creatures. These gods are very powerful and inscrutable to most modern men. They exist in both the dreamland stories and the stories that take place in the present day. Dagon is an old god, as is the water lizard Bokrug. These two gods have the form of fish or lizards, something common in many of the old gods. While in modern times, our gods are fairly abstract and worshipped out of love; the old gods are worshipped out of fear. They are appeased more than worshipped, the worship seems to be of avoidance and appeasement rather than actually out of love. When humans have the bad fortune of encountering these gods, as in "The Other Gods" it usually ends in the death or madness of the human. There is an assumption in the background that the "Old Gods" are the true rulers of the earth and that humans are, unknowingly, living as tenants in the home of the "Old Gods." This is part of the impact of "Dagon." The narrator goes mad once he sees the "Old God" partly because he realizes that he, a human, is no longer master of the planet or his environment. Compared to the "Old Gods" humans are merely pests, pests that can be eliminated if necessary. It is this sense of vulnerability that creates the horror of stories with the Old Gods.



Dagon appears in Dagon

In the story of the same name, Dagon is the name of an ancient part man part giant sea-god that the sailor believes he saw. In ancient times, though, Dagon was an actual sea-god worshipped by the northern neighbors of the Jews and is mentioned in the bible.

Joe Slater appears in Beyond the Wall of Sleep

In "Beyond the Wall of Sleep", Joe Slater is the man from the hills, described as over forty and an alcoholic who lives in an isolated community in the mountains. For some unexplained reasons, he begins to have strange vivid dreams that eventually lead him to murder a man and be committed to a mental hospital.

Bokrug appears in The Doom that came to Sarnath

Bokrug is the water lizard god worshipped by the inhabitants of Ib in the story "The Doom that came to Sarnath." After Ib is destroyed, the idol of Bokrug is taken to Sarnath and 1,000 years after this destruction, Bokrug arises from beneath the lake to destroy Sarnath and reinstate the inhabitants of Ib.

Basil Elton appears in The White Ship

Basil Elton is the guarder and the keeper of the North Point lighthouse. The lighthouse, and the duty to run it, was handed down from Basil's grandfather, to father, to him. Basil believes he sailed with a bearded man on a white ship through fantastical lands before finding himself back at the light house.

Menes appears in The Cats of Ulthar

Menes is one of the dark wonderers from the south that arrive in Ulthar. He has no parents and spends his time playing with a black kitten. After his kitten goes missing and is murdered, he calls down a curse from one of his gods that leads to the death of the cotter and his wife.

Kurane appears in Celephais

Kurane, the protagonist of the story "Celephais" is the last of his family, an upper class but disillusioned inhabitant of London who wants to live in his dream world of Celephais.



Crawford Tillinghast appears in From Beyond

Crawford is one of the main characters of "From Beyond." Tillinghast is the best friend of the narrator and is obsessed with metaphysical investigations, which lead him to ultimately build a machine to see into the nether realm that surrounds everyday life.

Karl Heinrich von Altberg-Ehrenstein appears in The Temple

Karl Heinrich von Altberg-Ehrenstein was a Lieutenant Commander in the Imperial German Navy during World War I. He commanded a submarine that sunk the British freighter Victory and after a failed mutiny attempt, his submarine was damaged and sunk to the bottom of the ocean where he found an ancient city and eventually died while exploring the ancient temple in the city.

Barzai appears in The Other Gods

Barzai the wise is the high priest of Ulthar who maintains the rites to the "great ones", the earth gods. There is some indication that he was the person who suggested the rule in Ulthar forbidding the killing of cats and his apprentice is Atal who witnessed the strange attack of the cats in the other story.

Iranon appears in The Quest of Iranon

Iranon is a golden-haired ageless youth who travels from town to town singing songs about his lost homeland Aira. He claims to be the prince of Aira, but once he learns that Aira is just a figment of his imagination, he dies.



Objects/Places

Monolith appears in Dagon

A monolith is single structure that arises from the ground. Sometimes manmade, monoliths can also be mountains or other geological formations that are not surrounded by other formations.

Piltdown man appears in Dagon

Piltdown man was thought to be an ancient form of human. Piltdown man was eventually exposed as a hoax.

Algol appears in Polaris

Known as the "Demon Star" Algol is a bright star in the constellation of Perseus. In many different cultures, Algol is considered unlucky and in various astrological systems it is considered an evil omen.

Sarnath appears in The Doom that came to Sarnath

Sarnath is an imaginary town from the story "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" on the banks of a lake in the land of Mnar. It is eventually destroyed utterly by the water lizard god, Bokrug.

Ib appears in The Doom that came to Sarnath

Ib is a city, populated by strange, green moon creatures that worship Bokrug, across the lake from Sarnath.

Ulthar appears in The Cats of Ulthar

Ulthar is the town with the strange rule that no cat may be killed. This rule was put in place after two townspeople were killed by a gang of cats as revenge.

Celephais appears in Celephais

Celephais is a dream world created in the imagination of Kurane. There is no time in Celephais, only eternal youth and Kurane eventually becomes kind of his fantasy world after he dies.



Pineal Gland appears in From Beyond

A gland in the brain that produces melatonin and serotonin. It was once believed, most famously by Descartes, to be the "seat of the soul" and the key to understanding consciousness.

Syracuse appears in The Tree

Syracuse was once a Greek city state in Sicily, a colony that eventually became a power in its own right. Often ruled by a tyrant, the Greek name for a ruler who did not inherit his crown, and one of these invited Plato to come and make the laws for his city.

Miskatonic University appears in Herbert West-Reanimator

Miskatonic University is a made up university in the town of Arkham that Lovecraft uses in several of his tales.

Themes

Forbidden Knowledge

Many of the stories here deal with the theme of forbidden knowledge. There is always a sense in the background of most of these stories that there is some knowledge that men are not supposed to have. Once this knowledge is gained, madness or death usually results. In "Dagon" the knowledge is the knowledge of the existence of the "Old God" Dagon and more importantly that there are powerful creatures that control the world without our knowing it. In "From Beyond" the knowledge is explicitly the ability to perceive the other realm that exists all around us. Even here there is the presence of a malevolent force that is hunting the humans. In "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" the narrator interacts with Joe Slater who, in his dreams, has learned about another world of light beings and demons. In "The Other Gods" this theme is quite explicit and it is only from seeing the "other gods" that Barzai presumably dies. In "Herbert West-Reanimator" the main character is searching for the knowledge of how to recreate life and, ultimately, what makes life. Although he finds the solution to his problem, he creates monsters along the way and sacrifices his own sanity, morality, and ultimately his life in the search of this forbidden knowledge.

Forbidden knowledge is forbidden because humans are too fragile to absorb the knowledge without breaking. There is a background theme running through all of Lovecraft's work that there are things going on in the world that we do not know about and that if we did know about them, it would destroy us. In some sense, his fiction is an attempt to show us aspects of that hidden world.

The Power of Dreams

Several of the stories in this collection deal with the power of dreams, though in different ways. In "Polaris", the line drawn between the dreaming state and the waking state are not sharply delineated and it is unclear in that story which aspect is real. In "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" the dream state takes over the body of Joe Slater, eventually killing him. The narrator, who is able to peer into Joe's dreams, encounters a "true world" of light beings and demons. The assumption in many of these stories is that the dream is real whereas the waking life is, in reality, more like a dream.

In Celephais, Kurane is most at home and happy when he is in his dream world of Celephais. Eventually he dies so that he can live forever in his dream world. In the "Quest of Iranon" however, the dream is unattainable. Aira, Iranon's dream city is his ideal and the search for that city is his reason for living. So long as he has Aira as a goal, he is able to stay young. Once he realizes that the dream is a fantasy, however, he immediately dies. In these two stories, Lovecraft seems to be saying that dreams are important, they are ideals that we strive for and that help us live meaningful lives but

when dreams overtake reality completely as they do in "Hypnos" only madness and death can be the ultimate results.

The Malevolence of Nature and Man

For Lovecraft, the world is a dangerous evil place. There is no loving god who has created a world for the benefit of his creatures; rather there are powerful forces that live in the dark recesses of the planet that can destroy humans at any time if they chose to do so. These forces are best avoided as is the knowledge that leads us to the "Old Gods" but humans are, by nature desirous for knowledge and hence will seek out these forces. Even when they cannot be totally avoided, these forces need to be respected and placated. We see in the "Doom that came to Sarnath" how disrespect for Bokrug and his people led to the utter destruction of Sarnath by the powerful god Bokrug.

We also see in Herbert West the vision of humanity as basically evil and depraved. When men are shorn from life and reanimated they reappear as homicidal, cannibalistic lunatics. Lovecraft seems to be saying here that mankind is basically evil by nature. This evil can be held in check by the rules of society, which are basically all lies. When men search and find true knowledge, they will realize this and throw off the shackles of society and revert to their insane, evil natures. We live then, for Lovecraft, in a fragile world of stability where there is a fine line to separate madness and violence from peace.

Style

Point of View

The Point of View of all of these stories is told either in the first-person or in the third person objective. The majority of the tales are told in the first person and this seems to be one of Lovecraft's favorite literary techniques. The narrator of the story is either the main character or the friend of the main character. In most of these stories, the narrator is telling the reader after the action occurred. In one case, "The Temple", the narrator is reading from the first person account of Altberg whose log was found on shore. In "Herbert West-Reanimator" and "From Beyond", the narrator is the friend of the main character whose has gone mad while the narrator observes. In "Beyond the Wall of Sleep", the narrator is engaging with one of the characters, Joe Slater, and telling us about his response but is not really an actor in the story himself.

Reliable narrators, however, tell many of the quasi-historical or dream tales, in the third person. In "The Doom that came to Sarnath", the narrator discusses without passion the destruction of Sarnath by Bokrug. Similarly, in "The Cats of Ulthar" the destruction of the cotter and his wife by the cats is told in a way that makes us believe that the narrator is not involved in the action. "The Other Gods" has the same format. These stories are told in a way that an ancient myth or fairy tale might be told rather than as a confessional piece of horror.

Setting

There are three main settings for all of these stories, the ancient past, the imaginary present, and various dream worlds. The stories dealing with the ancient past are very far in the past, before recorded human history. In this past there are strange cities like Sarnath and Ulthar and the strange, "Old Gods" rule from the depths. Many of the characters in these stories overlap and sometimes they reference each other. In "The Quest of Iranon", Iranon references the old city of Sarnath and in "The Other Gods", one of the main characters, Atal, is also in "The Cats of Ulthar."

The stories that take place in the imaginary present day take place at the same time that Lovecraft was writing, in the early twentieth century. "Dagon" "The Temple" and "Herbert West-Reanimator" all involve World War One to one degree or another. The war is a horror in its own right, though Lovecraft mostly avoids using the war itself to generate terror. This is not true, however, of "the Temple", where much of the terror comes from the brutality of the German submarine captain.

The stories that take place wholly within the dream world are really only the "White Ship" and "Polaris". "Celephais" takes place largely in the world of dreams, though the main character actually lives in modern day London. Similarly with "Hypnos." The dream

worlds though exist as independent setting in their own right and are not completely parasitical on the non-dream settings.

Language and Meaning

Lovecraft is famous; some might say infamous, for his strange language. The names of his quasi-historical settings like Ulthar, Sarnath, and Ib are strange and evoke prebiblical names. His characters also have bizarre names like Kurane, Iranon, Barzai, and Atal. The "Old Gods" have the strangest names of all, including Bokrug and Dagon. Dagon was actually a Philistine god and so it is clear that he took that name from real history. His other names seem to be attempts to recreate similar sounding names. Furthermore, Lovecraft uses odd, baroque sounding adjectives and language to describe his scenes. The effect is, in many ways, similar to the work of Poe and Baudelaire, who also used similar language. Those two precursors, however, were using language appropriate for their time, whereas Lovecraft is using language that was considerably more antique by the time he wrote his stories. Still, the weirdness of his language does add an otherworldliness to his stories that defiantly creates the intended effect.

Lovecraft's language also contributes to his concerns and his approach to horror. For him, horror is the result of dark, metaphysical processes and inherent tendencies in the hearts of men, not merely the threat of violence. Horror is the result of learning too much about serious things. It is necessary then, to create this effect by using high sounding language. The language also separates the reader from his everyday world and makes him more open to the possibility of mystery and horror.

Structure

The book itself is a collection of sometimes-related short stories. The longest and most intricate of these stories is "Herbert West-Reanimator", which has several sub parts and was originally serialized. Some of the stories are only a couple of pages long and almost all were originally published in a magazine. Lovecraft is a master of the short story style and his stories follow a similar form that one finds in Edgar Allan Poe and Ambrose Bierce. The story will begin, often, with the narrator regretfully explaining that some recent horrific event has happened such as the disappearance of a friend and then go on to start at the beginning of the tale and take us through it step by step. "The Temple" utilizes this basic structure but with a twist since Altberg's log is found by someone else on the beach and hence his stories actually proceed linearly. This cyclical story telling technique is effective because since one already knows where the story is going, to one degree or another, and the tension is increased because readers see the events in the narrative leading up to some horrible conclusion. Each new event in the narrative then, is pregnant with meaning in a way that it would not be if one did not already know that the story was going to lead to a horrific conclusion. Even "The Doom that Came to Sarnath", though it uses a different narrative technique, accomplishes the same end by having the word "doom" in the title.

Quotes

"The end is near. I hear a noise at the door, as of some immense slippery body lumbering against it."

Dagon, p. 13

"Not even the mines of precious metals remained. DOOM had come to Sarnath."

The Doom that came to Sarnath, p. 37

"It is said that in Ulthar, which lies beyond the river Skai, no man may kill a cat"

The Cats of Ulthar, p. 46

"Kurane was not modern and did not think like others who wrote."

Celephais, p. 50

"That Crawford Tillinghast should have ever studied science and philosophy was a mistake."

From Beyond, p. 57

"The light in the temple is a sheer delusion, and I shall die calmly, like a German, in the black and forgotten depths."

The Temple, p. 80

"Barzai the wise they never found, nor could the holy priest Atal ever be persuaded to pray for his soul's repose."

The Other Gods, p. 91

"That night something of youth and beauty died in the elder world."

The Quest of Iranon, p. 98

"We followed the local death-notices like ghouls, for our specimens demanded certain qualities."

Herbert West-Reanimator, p. 101

"The next night devils danced on the roofs of Arkham and unnatural madness howled in the winds."

Herbert West-Reanimator, p. 109

"But I might not be mad if those accursed tomb-legions had not been so silent."

Herbert West-Reanimator, p. 132

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."

Supernatural Horror in Literature, p. 141

Topics for Discussion

Why does Lovecraft believe that fear is the most powerful human emotion? Is he right?

Explain the relationship between the monster Dagon and the monster Bokrug.

What effect does the use of first-person narratives have on the tension in many of Lovecraft's stories?

Compare and contrast Kurane and Iranon and their dream worlds.

Several of Lovecraft's endings are ambiguous. Give two examples of stories with ambiguous endings and explain the effect and cause of the ambiguity.

Give two examples of stories where the quest for forbidden knowledge leads to disaster.

Do Lovecraft's stories have clear morals? Give examples.