

▼ Panel III: Lovecraft's Style and Imagery ▼



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Introduction: Style and Imagery in Lovecraft

by Steven J. Mariconda

H. P. Lovecraft's writing style is certainly the most controversial aspect of his work; it has been the target both of great praise and great blame. People like Edmund Wilson and L. Sprague de Camp believe that Lovecraft's writing style was terrible; on the other hand, everyone here believes that Lovecraft's writing style was wonderful. Those who don't believe that Lovecraft's writing style was wonderful will be asked to leave. Over the next ninety minutes we hope to steer a more moderate course on the topic of Lovecraft's style and imagery, to try to give you a better understanding and insight into why Lovecraft wrote the way he did, and to give you a feel for some of the techniques that he used. Before I turn the floor over to Norman, I would like to make some general remarks on style and Lovecraft's style in particular.

Style is a very difficult subject to pin down; we can think of a story as consisting both of content (what is said) and style (the way it is said). Style is an aspect of a piece of writing that we perceive but do not observe, what we respond to without being aware of it. The style carries the expressive meaning of what is being said. It's a means for producing different effects on the reader, and results from the fact that each writer has a unique combination of vocabulary and syntax.

Take for example a sentence from "The Statement of Randolph Carter". The narrator is waiting in a cemetery for Warren who has gone down into a crypt below. Lovecraft says, "In the lone silence of that hoary and deserted city of the dead, my mind conceived the most ghastly phantasies and illusions." He doesn't say, "In the graveyard, I was scared." What you have here is an example of how style can influence the affective part of writing — how it makes you feel. You can also see how Lovecraft used certain techniques. The doubled words — "hoary and deserted", "phantasies and illusions" — are examples of parallelism. This is one of the most typical features of Lovecraft's style, and makes for increased emphasis. We'll discuss some other distinguishing characteristics later. Briefly, Lovecraft's style was a product of the eighteenth-century volumes in his grandfather's attic that he read as a small boy.

It also helps us to understand Lovecraft's writing if we consider his objectives. As Frank Belknap Long stated

hollow, hole, and Hell). If we get past "colour", if we get past that wall, we're going to fall for a long time through nothing.

So the nouns don't help us much; there are too many of them to make sense. I discovered that there were a number of adjectives, but I'm going to skip those, because in fact there aren't too many; in this story there are fewer adjectives than nouns. The whole emotive power is actually packed into the nouns and into the verbs. I'll give you the list of verbs from the story:

blast (54), fall, bed, shrink, linger, glow, refuse (57), fade (58), burst, leave (59), grow (63), move, inhere, stir (64), change, flutter, take away, drain, fasten, shift, crawl — Mrs. Gardner reduced to all fours — puff, crumble (65), creep, wait (68), eclipse (69), brush, drag (70), scale, bulge, burn, suck, beat down, draw (71), cave in (72), bubble (73), shoot up, belch (74), twitch, claw, scratch, wriggle, pour (76), go, flare, weave (77), shimmer, run, coruscate, infect, strengthen, leave, strain, trickle, seethe, feel, lap, reach, scintillate, strain, bubble, shoot — this is the climax — (78), rise, sink down, lurk (79), eat, spread (80), feed, escape, shine, move, throw open (81), persist, and trouble (82).

My main point here is that most of these verbs are Anglo-Saxon; he puts a hell of a lot of his punch into these very basic, very simple verbs. We don't meet "blasphemous" and "eldritch" in his verbs at all; there's a lot of action, in fact, going on in Lovecraft. So the result is that this creature of natural history is so natural that we can't get to it; it is too much.

Let us now turn to "The Shadow out of Time". Here we have an interesting problem. We've got two types of creatures; one, the Great Race, has a history. I looked over the words that were about that history and discovered that there the words weren't very exciting. This is a very schematic and very unmoving history — it's very undynamic. The main history of the Great Race is a coming out of time in order to take upon themselves the historical artifacts of others. When we find them described, we find those passages that read like this:

They seemed to be enormous, iridescent cones, about ten feet high and ten feet wide at the base, and made up of some ridgy, scaly, semi-elastic matter. From their apexes projected four flexible, cylindrical members, each a foot thick, and of a ridgy substance like that of the cones themselves. (392)

This is the same language as was used with the creatures, the very nice, historical creatures, in *At the Mountains of Madness*. They are described as though they were geometrical figures which do not move. They have no dynamism to them at all. If you turn to the elder race (the real horrors that have no history whatever, which are like natural history), we don't quite know what they look like, but all their verbs — which are again Anglo-Saxon, tough, immediate verbs — suggest and keep suggesting this sort of action: they are a spiral cone, going around and around and around, whipping up the action. The wind blows and grabs and blows and grabs. So they are the ones that can change in time; they are the ones that have all the action, all of what we might consider historical, painful action. But they are what lie most beyond us, most untouchable; they are what most resemble that colour that can't be touched.

In quick summary, I would suggest that documentary style in Lovecraft means that which cannot be documented.

"The Colour out of Space" as the History of H. P. Lovecraft's Immediate Family

by John McInnis

As we undertake an autobiographical reading of "The Colour out of Space", we can gain a different perspective of Lovecraft's classic tale, a short story which might be viewed as a dramatic narrative of the Whipple V. Phillips family and its decline as Lovecraft experienced it in his childhood and youth.

Imagery of the story's background comes from a trip which Lovecraft made in October of 1926 with his aunt Annie Gamwell to the Phillips family homeplace in Moosup Valley near Foster, Rhode Island. Lovecraft's letter of October 26, 1926, to Frank Belknap Long records that the trip was a "devotional survey" that covered "those forms of landscape whose images are permanently burnt into my pastoral soul", and that the pastoral pictures which he saw here had molded his personality and were "scenes whose spirit and atmosphere are ineffaceably stamped on the

quintessential germ-plasm bequeathed to me down a long line of rustick progenitors" (SL II.81).

The power of these images is multiplied by the curious "then and now" tone of the story that comes from H. P. Lovecraft's having been to the place twice before his return in 1926 — once for two weeks in 1896 and again for a day's visit in 1908 (ibid.). The telescope used by the story's surveyor had its origin in the telescope that Lovecraft must have taken on virtually all his travels — especially on this trip by bus to Moosup Valley.¹

During the bus trip, Lovecraft and his aunt have seen the historical old Fenner farmhouse, which stands, as Lovecraft says, in the region "devastated to create the new Scituate reservoir". This reservoir is most likely the model for the Arkham reservoir being built in "The Colour out of Space", because initial work on it had begun in 1913, but the filling of it had only just begun in 1925.

Later Lovecraft and his aunt came to the family homeplace, a farmhouse once owned by his uncle James Phillips but now lost to the family. Lovecraft writes:

Altogether, I was prodigiously imprest with the beauty of the whole picture; and wisht ardently that I might buy back the place which passed from the family some half-century ago. . . . It is now tenanted by the parvenu newcomers who took it fifty years ago, . . . and has quite sadly deteriorated since our forebears had it. I can even see a marked falling off since 1908, when I was last there. . . .

The house pleased me as much as it did in 1896, and I envy'd afresh the rag carpets and the wealth of the colonial furniture.

This Phillips house and its environs is the setting for "The Colour out of Space", while certain financial reversals incurred by grandfather Whipple V. Phillips' irrigation experiment in Idaho's Snake River Valley during the 1880s and 1890s inspired much of the plot. Possibly in 1882, the year of the meteorite, Mr. Phillips and others formed the Owyhee Land Development Company (incorporated in Rhode Island) to dam the Bruneau River at its junction with the Snake River in order to irrigate thousands of acres of the rich but arid Snake River Plain. The bursting of this dam in 1900 virtually wiped out the company and also most of the Whipple Phillips estate, perhaps also leading to the elderly man's death by stroke at the age of seventy in March of 1904. The story narrates this catastrophe from the child Lovecraft's point of view (as perhaps seen through letters from Phillips to his grandson). The story also describes the resulting family crisis at 454 Angell Street.

This disastrous dam break appears as one of Lovecraft's typical dreams. In it the tide flowed out, exposing the Seekonk River bed to sight. People watching this outflow saw something come out of the sky, descend to the earth in a cloud of smoke, and strike the Providence shore near Angell Street. Watchers screamed, "It has come at last!" Lovecraft ran to the scene of disaster and saw that "By this time the river-bed was fully exposed — only the deep channel filled with water like a serpentine stream of death flowing through a pestilential plain in Tartarus" (SL I.113-14). Here is the meteor of our story, and here, too, is the failure of the Snake River dam, seen in the exposure of the Seekonk River's channel as a serpentine stream.

The characters of the story are members of the immediate Phillips family: Mr. Phillips, his daughter Susan Phillips Lovecraft, her husband Winfield Scott Lovecraft, and his grandson Lovecraft himself. The story's meteorite suggests the "crash" of the family disaster, but it is also a symbol of what Lovecraft remembered of his ill father's "off color" behavior at 454 Angell Street during the fall and winter of 1892-93, when this sick man was secluded for social reasons at the Phillips home. Here Winfield Lovecraft's manic-depressive paranoid actions worsened to the point that he had to be committed to Butler Hospital for the Insane (seen in the story as the lightning storm and meteor disappearance).

While Winfield Lovecraft was kept at home, his young son could have observed him at close range — especially when the father was in the melancholic phase of his manic-depressive disease, when he would lie like a rock in bed. While the patient was in this state he could be treated pathologically, and Dr. George Wilcox, the family physician, seems to have brought two local pathologists into the case — Dr. Charles V. Chapin, the local Superintendent of Public Health, and his assistant, Dr. Gardner Swarts. These three men are the "professors" in "The Colour out of Space", and the curious child must have watched closely as the pathologists treated the patient's bedsores antiseptically with silver nitrate, carbolic acid, or idoform — substances which turned the skin to shades of black and brown.

Painted thus antiseptically and lying in the fetal position, the rock-life stuporous patient could have left memories suggestive of a meteorite in the mind of the adult artist, especially if the child had heard one of the physicians use the term "meteorism" for the tympanitic distention of the patient's abdomen. The globule in the meteor

¹Winfield Townley Scott, "His Own Most Fantastic Creation", in *Marginalia*, ed. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1944), p. 316.

is a bulla or giant blister in a gangrenous carbuncle on the back of the patient's neck. The meteor's unusual heat is from the hectic fever so symptomatic of the patient's bedsores and staph infections, and the meteor's shrinkage comes from the patient's loss of weight from not eating. The meteor disappears when the patient goes into remission and is sent back to work for the Gorham Silver Manufacturing Company's Chicago office. While there, he breaks down, and family doctor Wilcox must sedate, return, and commit him to Butler — activity apparent as the story's big electrical storm.

When the meteor disappears, the farm disasters begin. Lovecraft has no fewer than five parts to play in the story of these dramatic occurrences. Each of these personas is a piece of the adult artist's self split away from the others. Nahum Gardner's three sons represent Lovecraft from birth to fourteen years old, his age when his grandfather died in 1904; Old Ammi Pierce is Lovecraft from the time after Phillips' death to the death of Lovecraft's mother and his removal from 598 Angell Street; and the surveyor is Lovecraft at the time he wrote the story in 1927. Nabby Gardner is Susan Lovecraft and Nahum Gardner is Whipple V. Phillips. Much of the weirdness of the story comes from Lovecraft's transposing the arid western ecology of the Snake River Valley as perhaps described in his grandfather's letters back home to the eastern and more temperate environmental scene of the old James Phillips home in Moosup Valley of western Rhode Island.

In keeping with this western ecology, the long-leaping rabbit Ammi sees is a western jack rabbit; the odd woodchuck killed by the MacGregor boys is a marmot — the woodchuck's western cousin. The oversized strangely colored skunk-cabbages are a larger variety of the same plant from the Northwest. The horde of farm-invading insects are a plague of western grasshoppers (called locusts by the Mormons); while the eerie trees with branches that move with no wind are the western quaking aspens, whose limbs tremble with the least of breezes. The large, glossy orchard fruit comes from the richness of the arid soil. But when the dam breaks and the irrigation fails, everything dehydrates and turns to the gray dust of the "blasted heath".

Back home in Rhode Island, the family was in its own process of disintegration. Susan Lovecraft's Butler Hospital medical record describes her as "a woman of narrow interests who received with a traumatic psychosis, an awareness of approaching bankruptcy".² She was literally scared to death, and the story describes her disintegration as Lovecraft saw it happen.

The Gardner well is a kind of time tube which contained some traumas that had arrested Lovecraft's emotional development. Most notable of these are two visits which he made to Butler in 1893 and 1894 to see his father. The resulting traumas (Lovecraft was three at the time) were psychic deaths, and we see their fictive recreation in the suicides of Thaddeus and little Merwin.

Probably through contamination of the well water on the Phillips property by the outhouse, everyone there gets dysentery. When the health department officials (Dr. Chapin, Dr. Swarts, and others) return to the Phillips property (family doctor Wilcox having died in July of 1897), they discover this pollution by use of florescein, an aniline dye used as a tracer to trace infection from the outhouse to the well. The story's eerie well-glow comes from this test by the health officials, and the climactic "explosion without a bang" of the Gardner house is what the fourteen-year-old Lovecraft may have seen of his beloved home's fumigation, a health department process of disinfection (a process incidentally terminated by Superintendent of Public Health Chapin as useless in 1906).

The ripping and crackling of the Gardner mansion was the Phillips' bankruptcy made audible. The house at 454 Angell Street was sold and would stand until 1961, but Lovecraft was barred from it for the rest of his life. He and his mother moved to 598 Angell Street, the story's Ammi Pierce perspective. The last name of this character, Pierce, expresses perfectly Lovecraft's attitude of mourning, because he has been thoroughly wounded and even devastated by those childhood experiences which he has recounted in "The Colour out of Space".

Other Elements in "The Colour out of Space"

by R. Boerem

Among the many stories by Lovecraft which critics have found interesting, "The Colour out of Space" isn't prominent, which is a little unusual for a number of reasons. After "The Colour out of Space" was published, it received a three-star rating in O'Brien's *Best Short Stories of the Year*; a poll of Lovecraft fanciers listed "The Colour out of Space" second only to "The Dunwich Horror" in popularity; it has been twice filmed, if that is any indication of its popularity — twice filmed not in sequels, but by different companies at different times. More importantly, Lovecraft himself felt

²Ibid., p. 319.