

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Horror, But Were Afraid to Ask: Review of *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, by H. P. Lovecraft

by Tony Fonseca



Lovecraft, H. P. *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Ed. S. T. Joshi. New York: Hippocampus Press, 2000. 172 p.

As arguably the most comprehensive and erudite historical exploration of the horror genre, Lovecraft's extended essay, "Supernatural Horror in Literature" chronicles the evolution of the genre, from "the dawn of the horror tale," which Lovecraft identifies as dark folkloric tales and biblical excerpts, to the modern masters (Machen, Dunsany, M. R. James). What makes Lovecraft's erudite discussion pleasurable is the jest with which he discusses each author in his essay. He not only examines each author's thematic concerns and ideas; he captures their styles in a way that only an aficionado of the genre could. One gets the impression that Lovecraft didn't just study these writers—he digested and enjoyed them.

I will be the first to admit that I am not really a fan of the Lovecraftian school of horror, and as often as not find his fictional prose too ponderous and melodramatic (although I do somewhat like his Miskatonic University pieces). However, revisiting his critical essay on the genre, I find myself amazed at the breadth of Lovecraft's knowledge of horror. "Supernatural Horror in Literature" gives the impression of a serious scholar who has decided that he will be the expert in his chosen field. If for no other reason, the text is fascinating in its showing a brilliant mind at work, in a field that few have bothered to examine as intensely before.

What makes this particular edition of Lovecraft's critical essay even more special is that it is edited by S. T. Joshi, who is far and away one of the top Lovecraft scholars publishing today. Joshi supplements Lovecraft's discussion with a critical introduction which places the essay historically and sociologically, with some 35 pages of notes on the text itself, with an extensive bibliography of published works that are mentioned throughout "Supernatural Horror in Literature," and with a well-conceived index. Additionally, Joshi references modern editions and critical studies of the authors included by Lovecraft in his essay, thereby performing an invaluable service to scholars (I myself had to consult Lovecraft's "Supernatural Horror in

Literature" while researching my dissertation in the early 1990s; I would have killed for an edition this helpful) who find themselves looking back to H. P. L. for definitions and examples of "the weird tale."

Few critical works in any genre fiction ever earn the right to be called benchmark publications, or masterpieces if you will, and this is perhaps due to the nature of genre fiction itself, as it tends to be pulpish, and is therefore not taken as seriously by literary scholars. Joshi's edition of Lovecraft is one of the few that deserves that high esteem. I cannot imagine any serious scholar of dark fiction, or even fan for that matter, who wouldn't find this text incredibly enlightening, both for its theories of the origins of the genre and the psychology behind it (which I personally found to be head on), and for its introducing readers to masters and masterworks in the genre with which they may not have been familiar.

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