

## THE MOON-BOG

[EARLY MARCH 1921]

The saving grace of “The Moon-Bog” is that Lovecraft doesn’t appear to have cared enough about it to over-write, or at least he doesn’t fill every scintilla of narrative space with his Poe-esque spasms. On the other hand, aside from one or two concepts that will pay off big in later works—such as the notion of archaeology as the Gothic sin of ‘awakening the past’—and another intriguing example of lunar trouble (along with “Sarnath”), this story, by its very pro forma nature, is almost worse than something like “The Outsider.”

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Again, though, I like the use of Greek myth as Elder Horror.

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For racism-watchers, it’s interesting to note that despite the anti-Irish sentiments he sometimes expressed in HPL’s letters (“try and reason with an Irishman!”), the simple Irish workmen in this story are far more notable for their class than their ethnicity. They’re not even the colorful, childlike Irish country folk you meet in, say, Ray Bradbury’s Irish tales, but rather generic peasants, who drop exposition in their “wild legendry,” bustle about as servants, and then get kidnapped by the Fair Folk, er, naiads. The story could just as easily have been set in England (as its great descendant “The Rats in the Walls” was) or Pomerania or Spain; a remarkable deafness to setting from HPL, although the bog itself is a familiar New England swamp. For “The Moon-Bog,” HPL chose the setting because the piece was meant for a St. Patrick’s Day meeting of his amateur fiction group; Dunsany aside, Lovecraft doesn’t seem to have felt Ireland or the Irish to be much of an inspiration, for good or ill. Indeed, the only other

Irishmen named as such in all of Lovecraft's fiction are Detective Malone the "Dublin College man" from "Horror at Red Hook," and the "great wholesome" policeman in "Haunter of the Dark." While casting the Irish as good cops over their heads won't win Lovecraft any awards for creative thinking, it's not nearly as bad as it could have been.

In Lovecraft's correspondence with Robert E. Howard, who claimed to be of "Celtic stock," they seem to have agreed that the Celt provided a necessary leavening of poetry and magic to the hardy and stolid Anglo-Saxon, and that was about it. (Seriously, though, even in our enlightened era, who doesn't have a little bit of that antique ethnography still rattling around in their brain?) One suspects that between Dunsany, Maturin, Stoker, and LeFanu, Lovecraft may not have shared quite the disdain and contempt for the Irish that his self-image as an 18th-century Englishman would otherwise demand.

## THE OUTSIDER

[SUMMER 1921]

Just to start off, I think that there's very little that can improve on Lovecraft's own self-criticism:

*To my mind this tale—written a decade ago—is too glibly mechanical in its climactic effect, & almost comic in the bombastic pomposity of the language. As I re-read it, I can hardly understand how I could have let myself be tangled up in such baroque & windy rhetoric as recently as ten years ago. It represents my literal though unconscious imitation of Poe at its very height.*

I haven't got the vaguest idea why August Derleth made it the title tale of his first Lovecraft compendium, and I've got mostly condescending, insulting ideas why it seems to take such central place in Lovecraft criticism since. (Because it's a great, bloody obvious hook for various forms of cheap or

downright meretricious psychoanalysis, is why, for starters.) I will allow that if you're interested in Lovecraft's stories as studies of the human condition, as opposed to dissections of the human position in the universe, "The Outsider" is probably your "From Beyond." I have a very hard time believing that someone who is both as tremendous a writer, and as manifestly mediocre at (because uninterested in) characterization, as Lovecraft was, can profitably be read that way, but you pay your money and so forth.

That said, lyrically, it's just bad Poe. Derleth wrote that if discovered in an attic with no author's name "The Outsider" would "pass for a lost tale of Poe," to which I would add that there would be little doubt why Poe left it unsigned and put it in an attic. It's not that the lugubrious, purple style of the thing is bad, in and of itself—Poe could, and did, churn out prose much like it, in really good stories. But in "The Outsider," it's just not in service to anything. Where Poe uses the warm fog of such language to create a psychological sensation linking the reader and narrator while exploring the narrator's inner life, Lovecraft's wordage is just larded on to extend the distance to the ending (which he lifted from Hawthorne).

Lovecraft adds insult to injury by using an epigraph from Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes," which is as full of sex and life and genuine mystery as "The Outsider" isn't.

Amazingly enough, George Wetzel manages to say something actually interesting about the piece on a mythical level, so I'll rip him off. He casts "The Outsider" as one chapter in Lovecraft's evolving ghoulish cycle, pointing out that the tale's combination of crypts, dreams, and a decayed corpse with fading (or ancient) human memory are all topoi of Lovecraft's ghouls. For Wetzel, the ghoulish cycle begins with the unnatural extension of life through cannibalism in "Picture in the House," continues with the twin themes of self-discovery and buried ancestral horror in "The Outsider" and "The Rats in the Walls," and emerges triumphantly in "Pickman's Model" and *Dream-Quest*, where the full ouroboros pattern of the ghouls is revealed. Although it's dressing the corpse in borrowed ceremonies, I have to say this is almost a convincing reason to re-read "The Outsider."

## THE OTHER GODS

[AUGUST 14, 1921]

By comparison, here is an example of a failed Dunsany pastiche. Lovecraft attempts Dunsany's lightly terrifying (or terrifyingly light) parable mode (as shown to best effect in *Gods of Pegana* and *Time and the Gods*) and, as one might expect, comes crashing to earth like Atal the priest. "Ulthar" notwithstanding, delicate arabesque was not Lovecraft's metier, especially not in 1921, and double-especially not when he attempted to combine it with cosmic sublimity. Where Dunsany was a musical fabulist, all silver and moonbeams, Lovecraft was a Gothic architect; he worked in stone and leaded glass, and it is a tribute to HPL's powers in his own media that his later works fling up such vertiginous tracteries of language and concept (eventually surpassing Dunsany).

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I forget which writer it was (Faulkner? O. Henry?) who gave something like this advice to his colleagues: Cross out the first page of every story. Then keep crossing out paragraphs until you get to the actual beginning.

This isn't actually true with most Lovecraft. The prolonged serpentine advance from mundanity to Otherness is usually vitally necessary; Lovecraft's intricate structure requires such a survey for its foundations.

But this is not the case with a pure fable. Specifically, "The Other Gods" would be immensely better without its first five paragraphs. I'd also venture to say that it would improve mightily if it followed Lovecraft's standard terminal-climax structure and ended three paragraphs earlier. Re-read that middle section, beginning with "Hatheg-Kla is far in the stony desert..." and ending with "Merciful gods of earth, I am falling into the sky!" and see if I'm not right.