

“Something was creeping and creeping”:  
An Interview with S. T. Joshi on  
Lovecraft’s Craft, the Weird and the Bizarre

There are few writers as eerily fascinating in their renditions of the phantasmagoric as H. P. Lovecraft. As this year’s theme for *Critical Imprints* is the Supernatural, who better than S. T. Joshi to steer us effortlessly into this spectral realm that beckons exploration? A renowned writer and an unquestionable expert on Lovecraft, S. T. Joshi has dedicated many years of his life, time, and research to studying this strange writer and his weird fiction.

Apart from Lovecraft, S. T. Joshi specialises in fantastical and supernatural fiction on a broader spectrum. He has also provided noteworthy criticism on modern writers such as Stephen King.

Luckily for us, S. T. Joshi’s brilliance does not deter him from engaging with enthusiastic audiences. Even in the harsh circumstances of the pandemic, he generously agreed to take time off his schedule in order to respond to a prepared interview questionnaire on H. P. Lovecraft, making this volume of *Critical Imprints* doubly special.

His free spirit and vast knowledge shine through in each answer, only increasing our knowledge of the peculiar genius who said: “Almost nobody dances sober, unless they happen to be insane.”

*Interviewed by Hemalatha Sridhar*

**When did you first become acquainted with the works of H. P. Lovecraft? What are some of the reasons why you were so impressed by his writing that you ended up specialising in it? Which of his works is your personal favourite?**

I first read Lovecraft when I was about 13. I had become interested

in both mystery fiction and horror fiction (I had a lesser interest in science fiction, but that subsided quickly). I of course read such masters as Edgar Allan Poe and Ambrose Bierce—and then I stumbled upon Lovecraft, who was then (early 1970s) still little-known, although becoming more popular. I was simply overwhelmed by his richly textured prose and by the incredibly original imagination he exhibited in his tales. Fairly soon—while still in high school—I began studying Lovecraft as best I could. There were few resources at the time, but I tried to hunt them down. For many years, my favourite story is the short novel *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931), Lovecraft’s extraordinary depiction of alien entities coming from outer space and settling in Antarctica. And yet, this is a difficult work for a beginner to understand; I had tried to read it as a teenager and frankly found it beyond my intellectual capacities! But I read it later and found it exceptionally powerful.

**Do you think Lovecraft’s literature might be considered dated today? If not, why would the millennial readership take to this fascinating yet obscure writer’s fiction?**

Lovecraft’s fiction is the very opposite of being dated. This is because he actually neglects (by design) to discuss such mundane features of daily life as money, human relations, class distinctions, and so on. So his work is easier to understand than that of the “social realists” of his day (e.g., Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, etc.). Lovecraft was single-mindedly focused on the weird: he believed that “phenomena” were the true “characters” in his stories, not the human figures who populate them. And because Lovecraft so frequently emphasises the fragility of human existence in the midst of the immense realms of space and time, this message carries even more resonance today than in his own time: we are all too aware how tenuous is our existence on this planet, and how such forces as climate change, nuclear holocaust, and other things could bring that existence to an end.

**In most of the stories of Lovecraft that I have read so far, the author frequently warns readers that man is better off not pursuing the unknown cosmic horrors beyond his ken, because there is no way to come back unscathed from them. Yet, this threshold is almost always crossed. What, then, do you think Lovecraft indicates about human nature?**

Lovecraft's frequent claim that the terrors his characters are facing are "unnamable" or "not to be described" was something of a rhetorical device: he usually sets about describing those very terrors to the best of his ability! What Lovecraft is stressing is that his "monsters" are very different from the standard ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and witches of previous weird fiction. His creations are profoundly original and stem from a thorough grasp of philosophy (Lovecraft was a forthright atheist), science, and psychology. He was always doubtful of our ability to endure the chilling reality of our own insignificance in the universe.

**The writer's fantastical tales seem to possess a recurring motif of mental degeneration due to horrific experiences. How would you associate Lovecraft with mental health issues, a subject of vital importance today? Did the writer have his own inner demons?**

There is no question that Lovecraft had his own mental troubles, and that some of them may have influenced his work. His upbringing was unusual: his father died when he was 8 years old, and his mother was both emotionally distant and at times overprotective. I believe Lovecraft was emotionally stunted by this experience, and that is why his own brief marriage was such a failure. Lovecraft was also in constant poverty, and that must have had some effect on his temperament. But he was also supremely rational and intellectual, and his quest for knowledge acted as a sort of counterweight to his own personal difficulties.

**Lovecraft is fairly unfamiliar in India. Can you tell us something**

**about how he came to write such quaint yet spine-chilling tales? Did his personal experiences provide him with the impetus to do so?**

This question would take many pages to answer! Let us start with a comment by Lovecraft himself in a letter: “I should describe mine own nature as tripartite, my interests consisting of three parallel and dissociated groups—(a) Love of the strange and the fantastic. (b) Love of the abstract truth and of scientific logick. (c) Love of the ancient and the permanent. Sundry combinations of these three strains will probably account for all my odd tastes and eccentricities.” This is a highly accurate summary of his temperament. Because Lovecraft spent almost his entire life in New England (the oldest settled part of the United States), he came to love that region and set many of his tales there, describing the landscape with meticulous care. His devotion to science (chiefly chemistry and astronomy) led him to create a fusion of weird fiction and science fiction, especially in such tales as “The Colour out of Space” and *At the Mountains of Madness*. His tales are filled with all manner of autobiographical hints and references, and sometimes his friends and colleagues make appearances under different names.

**I have encountered references to Lovecraft in plenty of American cinema and television. Does he still have an active fan club in the United States?**

Lovecraft’s popularity in the United States and the world continues to increase exponentially. When I first became interested in him, in the 1970s, his work was just on the verge of becoming popular through paperback editions. Now he has appeared in all manner of different media—films, television, comic books, video games, role-playing games, etc. etc.—and he has also attained critical acclaim as a pioneering writer in his field. The volume of his *Tales* (2005) that was published by the Library of America was an acknowledgement of his canonical status in American literature. And his work has

now been translated into more than 30 languages, from Russian to Chinese to Serbo-Croatian to Estonian. (I am not certain about Arabic translations, but I suspect there are some.) I see no end to Lovecraft's increasing celebrity.

**“The Call of Cthulhu” begins with a quotation which contains the phrase “forms of which poetry and legend alone have caught a flying memory and called them gods, monsters, mythical beings of all sorts and kinds...” What do you think Lovecraft is saying about the role of the artist here? Did this apply to his artistry as well?**

Lovecraft had a high regard for the role of the artist in human civilisation. He believed that artists must be sincere above all things—and that they must not cater to a given audience or be concerned about the monetary benefits accruing from the sale of their work. This was a bold and noble stance, and resulted in personal suffering (he refused to alter a work merely to generate a sale in the crude “pulp magazines” of the day) but also in the endurance of his work well beyond that of his contemporaries. Writers of weird fiction occupy a special place of their own. He once wrote: “The imaginative writer devotes himself to art in its most essential sense... He is a painter of moods and mind-pictures—a capturer and amplifier of elusive dreams and fancies—a voyager into those unheard-of lands which are glimpsed through the veil of actuality but rarely, and only by the most sensitive. He is one who not only sees objects, but follows up all the bizarre trails of associated ideas which encompass and lead away from them. He is the poet of twilight visions and childhood memories, but sings only for the sensitive.”

**With a penchant for creating dark, murky backdrops alongside events triggering abject terror and psychological degradation, do Lovecraft's works at times seem formulaic?**

It is remarkable how many variations Lovecraft is able to generate

on a relatively small number of basic plot ideas. It can be seen that several of his earlier tales were rewritten in later years, with the result that the ideas were vastly expanded and made more profound. On occasion one finds Lovecraft falling back on some of the formulas he had created, but these stories form a minority in his overall output.

**We see no instances of hope or redemption in his macabre tales. What was Lovecraft’s opinion of the human condition? What might have caused it to be that way?**

One cannot interpret the “philosophy” or psychology in his fiction simplistically as exactly mirroring Lovecraft’s own attitudes. He is, after all, writing weird fiction, whose purpose is to terrify. In that sense, he is writing about issues that terrify him personally, rather than expressing his own beliefs in a straightforward manner. Lovecraft did believe that human beings were ultimately insignificant in the vast cosmos-at-large, and much of his fiction is intended to stress this point. He also believed that human civilisation would eventually collapse, and that other entities would take over the earth. But these were largely abstract concerns. He was, in his personal life, passionately devoted to the preservation of his society (and especially the physical tokens of the past, whose continued existence gave people a sense of being part of an historical continuum), and toward the end of his life he became a moderate socialist who hoped that society and government could be refashioned to help all citizens, not just the wealthy. Even so, I think it is safe to say that Lovecraft did not have much faith that such a reformation of society would occur.

**How were Lovecraft’s works different from those of his contemporaries? Do you hold any of these contemporaries in high esteem as well?**

Although Lovecraft was strongly influenced by such of his predecessors and contemporaries as Edgar Allan Poe, Lord Dunsany, Arthur Machen, and Algernon Blackwood, he evolved a highly original

outlook that he called “cosmicism,” where the immensities of space and time were at the forefront. This outlook was, he knew, very rare in fiction, and it became his signature achievement. He also had a large group of friends, colleagues, and correspondents with whom he kept in close touch. (He may have written as many as 80,000 letters in his lifetime; about 5000 survive, coming to about 4.5 million words.) Such of his associates as Frank Belknap Long, Donald Wandrei, Robert E. Howard, and Robert Bloch have attained celebrity in their own right, and much of their work is of considerable interest. August Derleth claimed to be Lovecraft’s chief disciple (he also became his first publisher), but his weird work is on the whole mediocre and unoriginal.

**What is your opinion on the scenario of supernatural fiction today?**

We have, for the past several decades, been in the midst of a tremendous resurgence of weird fiction. There was a brief time—roughly the 1970s and 1980s—when horror fiction was a bestselling phenomenon, with the work of such writers as Stephen King, Peter Straub, Clive Barker, and Anne Rice. But their work is on the whole quite inferior to genuine weird artists such as Ramsey Campbell, T. E. D. Klein, Thomas Ligotti, and Caitlín R. Kiernan. Most weird fiction today is published in the “small press,” and there is a great deal of fine work being written. These writers are generally not concerned about writing “best-sellers,” but are instead approaching their work in the same manner as Lovecraft: they are concerned about sincere “self-expression,” seeking to convey their personal visions in as artistic a manner as possible.

**According to you, what is the impact that Lovecraft has had upon modern writers who specialise in the Uncanny? Have you noticed any writer who bears a similarity with Lovecraft’s style or technique?**

Lovecraft has had an immense impact upon weird writing today. Some writers have chosen to imitate Lovecraft directly, writing blatant pastiches of his work. (I have chronicled this material in my book *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos* [2015].) But other writers—such as Caitlín R. Kiernan, Jonathan Thomas, Lois H. Gresh, Donald Tyson, and many others—have used Lovecraft’s ideas as simply a springboard for the expression of their own ideas and conceptions. These writers have done fine work without being in any way obviously imitative of Lovecraft.

**Are you acquainted with the works of any Indian writers of the supernatural? Have you read them in translation or in the original?**

I’m sorry to say that I have not read a single Indian writer of the supernatural! I imagine much good work has been done by such writers, and I would be interested in reading them. I would have to read them in English, as I can no longer read or speak my native language of Marathi.

**What are the other genres and writers that are close to your heart?**

In college I actually read extensively in Latin and Greek literature and also in ancient history and philosophy—but I cannot pursue that kind of work now, as it requires a high degree of specialisation. I have always been interested in literary satire—from Juvenal to Jonathan Swift to Ambrose Bierce to H. L. Mencken to Nathanael West and Gore Vidal. And I just wrote a book about the detective/crime story, *Varieties of Crime Fiction*. That genre has always been dear to me, although I recognise that it does not have the aesthetic range of many other genres.

**Do you have any future academic projects lined up? Do you plan to continue with your research on Lovecraft or branch out?**

Lovecraft himself has led me to branch out into other authors and other areas of literature and thought. I have done a great deal of work on such of his own influences as Ambrose Bierce and Lord Dunsany. And Lovecraft's bracing atheism has led me to speak out on the subject myself and to write and compile several books about atheism. My main current project is the preparation of Lovecraft's complete surviving correspondence for publication—in an estimated 25 volumes. Already, about 15 volumes have been published, and several others are close to being ready to appear. I am also publishing many volumes of the essays and journalism of H. L. Mencken.

**Has the pandemic affected your academic schedule adversely? Do you see yourself actively participating more in webinars now? If so, would you be interested in attending one happening in India?**

Because I have been working as a “freelance” writer from home since about 1995, my daily life has not been substantially affected by the pandemic. I am happy to work at home, surrounded by my books, papers, and other paraphernalia assembled over a lifetime of research. And with so much material now available online, I do not have to venture to libraries (which remain closed here) very often for research purposes. So I would certainly be interested in attending a webinar in India!

**Have you ever thought of teaching creative writing techniques to aspiring writers of the supernatural? Any nuggets of wisdom for young writers in India who wish to dabble in this genre?**

Although I have never taught at a university, I have actually helped a great many novice writers privately. They have sought me out and sent me their stories, and I have tried to advise them and also tried to get them published if their work is of sufficient quality. Among my chief “disciples” are Jonathan Thomas, Michael Aronovitz, and Curtis M. Lawson. If I have any advice to offer, it is that one read the best work of this genre, both old and new, before attempting to

write in it. It always helps to know the history of your field before you attempt to make your own contribution to it. Weird fiction offers tremendous possibilities for literary expression, and one must not be concerned about trying to make a lot of money or pleasing a wide audience. Let us recall what Lovecraft said: “The opinions of the masses are of no interest to me, for praise can truly gratify only when it comes from a mind sharing the author’s perspective. There are probably seven persons, in all, who really like my work; and they are enough. I should write even if I were the only patient reader, for my aim is merely self-expression.”