

Disciple of Dagon

**Clark Ashton Smith and
the Cthulhu Mythos**



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Clark Ashton Smith
(1893-1968)

For here, apart, dwells one whose hands have wrought
Strange eidola that chill the world with fear;
Whose graven runes in tomes of dread have taught
What things behind the star-gulfs lurk and leer.
Dark Lord of Averoigne - whose windows stare
On pits of dream no other gaze could bear.

H.P. Lovecraft, 1936

During the 1930's, three American writers of fantasy and horror fiction contributed to an interlinked, correlative catalogue of work, consisting of short stories and novelettes, which later became known as the Cthulhu Mythos. These stories concern the return to Earth, after millenia of absence, of certain trans-dimensional gods and entities, the Mythos taking its name from the central deity. The first, and most important of these writers was Howard Philips Lovecraft, of Providence, Rhode Island. The second, more widely known for his tales of epic fantasy in exotic settings, was Robert Ervin Howard, of Cross Plains, Texas. The third, and equally fascinating writer, sculptor and painter, was Clark Ashton Smith.

Clark Ashton Smith was born on January 13, 1893, in Long Valley, California. Like H.P Lovecraft, he could trace his ancestry back to New England and Europe - his mother's family, the Gaylords, part of the Huguenot Gaillards, had fled to New England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

Smith's father, Timeus Smith, travelled extensively in early life, finally settling in the town of Auburn, California, where he was to remain until his death in December, 1937. And it was here, on a 39 acre backwoods estate only six miles from his birthplace, that Clark Ashton Smith also lived and worked for the greater part of his life, sharing a four-roomed wooden cabin with his ageing parents.

A highly sensitive child, Smith found school life unbearable¹, and after five years his parents took him out of grammar school. From this time on, Smith was wholly self-educated, gaining a comprehensive mastery of English usage, as well as enough of French and Spanish to compose verse in these languages. He began writing in earnest at the comparatively early age of eleven, and by 1910 he was selling his stories to such magazines as *The Black Cat* and *The Overland Monthly*.

However, it was for his poetry that he initially received public attention and acclaim - his first collected volume, *The Star Treader and other Poems* appeared two years later. This volume was greeted with front page reviews in the San Franciscan press, who hailed Smith as "the Boy Genius of the Sierras" and "the Keats of the Pacific Coast". In 1918, the prestigious Book Club of California published a second collection - a deluxe edition of *Odes and Sonnets*, with an introduction by Smith's close friend and mentor George Sterling. In these early days, Smith moved freely in the artistic and bohemian circles of San Francisco, which at this time included such literary figures as Jack London, Ambrose Bierce and Dashiell Hammett.

By 1922, however, interest in Smith's poetry was beginning to wane, and his next publication, *Ebony and Crystal* was issued privately, financed by Smith himself. Lovecraft described the long poem "The Hashish Eater", contained in

this volume, as the “greatest imaginative orgy in English literature.” Smith was greatly influenced by his favourites of this period - the works of Poe, William Beckford’s *Vathek*, and Sir Walter Scott’s tales of the Arabian Nights - which left a permanent impression on his own elaborate and lyrical style. It is important to remember though, that it was Lovecraft, in correspondence to Smith dating from August 1922, who first urged him to begin experimenting with the newly-popular horror fiction genre. (Lovecraft was later to send samples of Smith’s writing to Edwin Baird, editor of “Weird Tales”, and suggest that he contact Smith with regard to publishing his stories.)

Over the next decade, Smith contributed to over fifty magazines, including “The Yale Review”, “The London Mercury”, “Asia”, “Wings”, and “The Philippine Magazine”. His translations from Baudelaire (another important influence) were included in an anthology of *The Flowers of Evil* published by the Limited Editions Club. But it was not until May 1930, with the publication in “Weird Tales” (an American pulp magazine specialising in horror and supernatural fiction) of a narrative entitled paradoxically “The End of the Story”, that Smith embarked upon what was to be a major contribution to the literature of the fantastic. From that date until 1934, when he virtually stopped writing, he produced over 100 short stories, mostly for magazines such as “Weird Tales”, “Strange Tales” and “Wonder Stories”, and “Stirring Science Stories”. The best of these were anthologised as *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933), *Out of Space and Time* (1942), *Lost Worlds* (1944), *Genius Loci and other Tales* (1948), and *The Abominations of Yondo* (1960). He also started and abandoned, two novels.

Fritz Leiber, another contributor to the Cthulhu Mythos, has compared Smith’s stories to “Innsmouth Jewellery; like strange

ornaments, the metal elaborately inlaid and fired, studded with unknown semi-precious stones, from an unknown and timeless culture.” Certainly, one of the strongest characteristics of Smith’s prose is its sheer over-abundance of outré detail and occurrence, almost a kind of descriptive excess. (This verbal extravagance is at its most extreme in his science-fiction and science-fantasy pieces.) However, another aspect soon becomes apparent to the reader, the dry humour and irony which underlies many of his stories. To a degree, these qualities help to offset or counterbalance some of his more acute deviations into purple prose.

The majority of Smith’s tales of cosmic horror take place in locales far removed from the mundane world - in other dimensions, on other worlds, in the distant past or far future. Certain groups of stories are linked by a common imaginary setting - “Hyperborea”, the mythical northern continent, claimed by Madame Blavatsky to have been the earliest terrestrial civilisation; “Zothique”, a land at the very end of Earth’s life-span; or “Xiccarph”, a distant planet teeming with exotic flora and fauna. Another story-cycle is set in the imaginary medieval kingdom of Averoine. His strongest narratives, however, take place in Smith’s own neighbourhoods of San Francisco and Auburn. Against these commonplace everyday backgrounds, his trans-dimensional horrors seem all the more effective.

Though Clark Ashton Smith was undoubtedly influenced in his poetry by the English Pre-Raphaelite and French Symbolist poets, it was the work of the New England writer H.P. Lovecraft which was to prove the single most important influence on his fantasy fiction. Of the contemporary writers who contributed to Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos, Smith was the most prolific, encouraged by Lovecraft himself. Lovecraft welcomed the additions to the cosmology of the Old Ones, and incorporated

them into his own works in progress. To the original pantheon of deities (Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, Dagon, Hastur, Nyarlathotep and Shub-Niggurath), Smith contributed such entities as “the black and amorphous god Tsathoggua”; the spider-god “Atlach-Nacha”, and the primal deity, “Ubbo-Sathla”. To the Mythos list of infamous and forbidden grimoires - the “Necronomicon”, “Unausrechlichen Kulturen” and “Cultes des Goules”, he added “The Book of Eibon, a collection of dark and baleful myths, of liturgies and incantations both evil and esoteric.”

Less superficially, Smith was able to imbue his mythos tales with a sense of the vast epochs of time, the strange eons through which the Old Ones have slumbered, awaiting the time when the stars are right, and they will again rule the earth. In “Ubbo-Sathla”, a modern day occultist discovers a magical crystal through which he regresses, via past incarnations and atavistic reversions, to the protoplasmic source of all terrestrial life. In a quotation from the ‘Book of Eibon, Smith describes this entity in a phrase very reminiscent of Lovecraft’s ‘Old Ones -

“...For Ubbo-Sathla is the source and the end. Before the coming of Zhothaquah or Yok-Zothoth or Kthulhut from the stars, Ubbo-Sathla dwelt in the steaming fens of the new-made Earth.”

In “The Return of the Sorcerer”, a young scholar is hired by a wealthy recluse living in Oakland, California, to translate passages from the “Necronomicon” - Smith includes within the text of the story a passage from the most famous of Lovecraftian grimoires. His next piece in print, “The Tale of Satampra Zeiros” (published in the November 1931 issue of ‘Weird Tales’), contains the first reference to the god “Tsathoqua”. Lovecraft had incorporated this deity into his

own story, “The Whisperer in Darkness”, in the following passage;

“Its from N’Kai that frightful Tsathoggua came - the amorphous toad-like god-creature mentioned in the Pnakotic Manuscripts and the Necronomicon and the Commorian myth-cycle of Klarkash-Ton.”

“Klarkash-Ton” is of course a reference to Smith himself - the “Commorian myth-cycle” refers to his series of stories set in Hyperborea. As “The Tale of Satampra Zeiros” was published two months after Lovecraft’s story, it would appear that Smith had shown Lovecraft a copy of the manuscript sometime before 1931.

Another tale in the same sequence, “The Door to Saturn”, introduced the Hyperborean wizard, “Eibon”, as well as presenting more information concerning Tsathoggua, naming the beings which spawned him, and the planet (Saturn) from which he descended to the Earth. “The Nameless Offspring”, published only a few months later in *Strange Tales*, begins with another long quotation from the “Necronomicon of Abdul Alhazred”;

“Many and multiform are the dim horrors of the Earth, infesting her ways from the prime. They sleep beneath the sea and in subterranean places...”

This piece clearly shows Smiths deepening interest and involvement with the basic themes of the Cthulhu Mythos. Though only eight of Smiths stories² can strictly be classed as belonging to the Cthulhu Mythos, if the usual criteria of the inclusion of related god-names, locations and grimoires are

applied, others certainly share the atmosphere and structure of the typical mythos tales. Such stories include “Genius Loci”, “The Treader of the Dust”, “The Seed from the Sepulchre”, and “The Devotee of Evil” - there would seem to be a good case for their inclusion in the mythos on purely stylistic grounds.

Many of Smith’s plots also echo those found in Lovecraft’s fiction - for example, “The Hunters from Beyond”, which bears a close resemblance to Lovecraft’s story, “Pickman’s Model”. In both, an artist’s representation of sub-human monsters are revealed to be taken ‘from life. The theme of this story may also in a sense be symbolic., for Smith was himself a prolific visual artist, producing a huge number of paintings, drawings and sculptures, many of subjects which parallel his written work. His colour paintings of bizarre vegetation and fungi depict landscapes from his imaginary worlds, Hyperborea and Atlantis. He also illustrated scenes from his own stories, and those of Lovecraft,³ executed in watercolor and crayons.

Though these images are stylistically rather crude, they have an underlying primitive power, and have been favourably compared to the paintings of the symbolist, Odilon Redon, particularly with regard to Redon’s later colour work. In his memoir of Clark Ashton Smith, E. Hoffman Price describes his first viewing of Smith pictures:

“Pencil - crayon - watercolour - many, pen drawn, with inks of diverse colours, these being done in laboriously minute detail. Some were two-dimensional equivalents of his sculptures. Other were ornate and highly stylized representations of plant life which appeared to be merging with the animal kingdom.”

Of greater interest perhaps are Smith's miniature sculptures pieces, mostly small enough to be held in one hand. Amongst these are subjects from the Mythos, as suggested by titles such as 'Cthulhu', 'Dagon', 'Tsathoggua', 'The Outsider, and Hastur'; others are bizarre heads like those of Easter Island. These pieces, often carved from the rare and unusual stones found in the California foothills, evoke comparison with certain forms of pre-Columbian and Polynesian artefacts. Concerning these sculptures (which Smith fired in his kitchen stove) Price recalls:

“many were android: subhuman, quasi-human, superhuman -comfortably gross- acutely devilish - stupidly comfortable -sinister - malicious - full figures - busts - mere heads...”

Unlike Lovecraft, who was a conspicuously introverted and self-effacing individual, Smith also worked at a variety of non-literary occupations - as a fruit-picker, lumberjack, digger of wells, gardener and hard-rock miner - and seems to have enjoyed a robust, outdoor existence. These part-time jobs also allowed him to produce highly individual stories without the need to consider their commercial potential, as he never had to rely soely upon the revenue from his literary and artistic endeavours. Smith also had a liking for strong liquor - again in marked contrast to Lovecraft's apparent abstinence.

In the spring of 1934, for no apparent reason, Smith's copious output of stories came to an abrupt end. From this time until his death in 1961, he produced only a handful of tales, despite the fact that he had become one of the most prolific and popular of the "Weird Tales" writers, and was at the height of his creative powers. It seems as if the informative current which

had found its outlet in Smith fantasy fiction had been cut off or withdrawn. This is all the more remarkable when considered in parallel to Lovecraft's career - he also stopped writing shortly after this time, and died within a year and a half of completing his last story.

In the same way as an Occult lodge may be established in order to transmit a particular magical current over a particular period of time (perhaps determined by astrological considerations), it appears that the 'Lovecraft Circle' of writers⁴ provided, in the late Twenties and early Thirties, a focal point or 'receiver' for the elements of the Mythos. The fact that this process was largely a subconscious one, merely demonstrates that it is when the imagination is operating most strongly, and helping to block' the rational, conscious mind, that the transmissions of 'magical' knowledge is likely to occur. In the words of Clark Ashton Smith (from a letter to Lovecraft):

"My own standpoint is that there is absolutely no justification for literature unless it serves to release the imagination from the bonds of everyday life."

"The Devotee of Evil" (1933) presents, through the character Jean Averaude, Smith's intuitive speculations concerning the nature of the 'Power of Evil', which he delineates in the following passage

"...I do not think that the power is personal, in the sense of what we know as personality. A Satan? No. What I conceive is a sort of dark vibration, the radiation of a black sun, of a center of a malignant eons - a radiation that can penetrate like any other ray - and perhaps more deeply."

‘For a long time past, my life-work has been to ascertain its true nature, and to trace it to its fountain-head. I am sure that somewhere in space there is a center from which all evil emanates.’

These statements are remarkable in that they foreshadow so precisely certain esoteric doctrines revealed by Kenneth Grant in his “Typhonian Trilogy” and other books. (These include such concepts as ‘the Black Sun’, ‘the Kali Yuga’, transplutonic power-zones, and the influx of magickal energies from the star Sirius.). In *Cults of the Shadow* (1975), Grant himself refers to Clark Ashton Smith as ‘one of the major visual interpreters of the Cthulhu Mythos’, and goes on to state that ‘It is claimed by the Lovecraftian Coven that Smith is working with Les Ophites - a sect of the Black Snake Cult - from the ‘other side’.

In July, 1953, Smith was asked what he considered to be his own contribution to the Mythos. He replied:

“I believe I added about as much to the Cthulhu Mythos as I borrowed - Tsathoggua and the Book of Eibon were my creations, and were promptly utilized by Lovecraft.”⁵

Clearly, an equally important resultant of Clark Ashton Smith’s additions to the Mythos can be seen as being their substantiation, both of Lovecraft’s material, and of the channels through which it was transmitted.

In late 1954, Smith married Mrs. Carol Dorman, a divorcee with three teenage children, in Monterey, and moved to set up home with his new family in nearby Pacific Grove. Despite a

succession of minor strokes, he continued to earn a small income by tending other people's gardens. Though his wife remained vague on the subject, it appears that Smith became deeply interested in Buddhism during his last years, if not actually converted. He died on August 14, 1961, aged 68.

NOTES

1. Like Lovecraft, Smith was also affected during childhood by periods of ill-health, caused by some unidentified condition.
2. See appendix
3. F. Lee Baldwin, in a biographical sketch of H.P. Lovecraft published in "Fantasy" magazine, April 1935, describes the first appearance of his story, "The Lurking Fear": "Later in 1922, 'Home Brew' published 'The Lurking Fear' as a four-part serial with illustrations by Clark Ashton Smith, whom he met through amateur journalism."
4. This included Frank Belknap Long, August Derleth, Henry Kuttner and Robert Bloch. (Of his fellow 'weirdists', Smith only met Donald Wandrei and E. Hoffman Price in person.)
5. It appears that Lovecraft also worked for an unnamed client on a story which featured Smith's toad-god Tsathoggua. However, when the client submitted this tale to Farnsworth Wright, then editor of "Weird Tales", it was rejected, and the manuscript has since been lost.

GLOSSARY

ABHOTH: “the gulf of slimy fission which is the mother and father of all uncleanness”, this being is “the coeval of the oldest gods.”

AFORGOMON: God of the Cycles of Time.

ATLACH-NACHA: The huge spider-god. Described in “The Seven Geases” as having “a kind of face on a squat ebon body, low down amid the several-jointed legs.”

BOOK OF EIBON: “...rare volume of occult lore, which is said to have come down through a series of manifold translations from a prehistoric original written in the lost language of Hyperborea. The remote fabulous original was supposed to have been the work of a great Hyperborean wizard, from whom it had taken its name. It was a collection of dark and baleful myths, of liturgies, rituals and incantations, both evil and esoteric.” (“Ubbo-Sathla”)

CYKRANOSH: “The name by which Saturn was called in Mhu Thulan.” Saturn is the planet from which the god Tsathoggua came to earth in former aeons.

HZIULQUOICMNZHAH: A god of Cykranosh - related to Tsathoggua.

TSATHOGGUA (alt. Zhothaquah, Sodaqui): "...his head was more like that of a monstrous toad than that of a deity, and his whole body was covered with ... short fur, giving somehow the suggestion of both the bat and the sloth."

"These rumours were, that Eibon was a devotee of the long-discredited heathen god, Zhothaquah, whose worship was incalculably older than man; and that Eibon's magic was drawn from his unlawful affiliation with this dark deity, who had come down by way of other worlds when the Earth was no more than a steaming morass ("The Door to Saturn").

The Hyperborean worshippers of Tsathoggua relate to the fertility cults of Hekt in ancient Egypt (see Kenneth Grant, *Outside the Circles of Time*)

UBBO-SATHLA: "...for Ubbo-Sathla is the source and the end. Before the coming of Zhothaquah or Yok-Zothopyh or Kthulhut from the stars, Ubbo-Sathla dwelt in the steaming fens of the newly-made Earth; a mass without head or members, spawning the gray, formless efts of the prime and grisly prototypes of terrene life ... And all earthly life, it is told, shall go back at last through the great circle of time to Ubbo-Sathla." ("The Book of Eibon")

XEXANOTH: "The Lurking Chaos."

Appendix

The Cthulhu Mythos Stories of Clark Ashton Smith

The Return of the Sorcerer, *Strange Tales*, September 1931
The Tale of Satampra Zeiros, *Weird Tales*, November 1931
The Door to Saturn, *Strange Stories*, January 1932
The Nameless Offspring, *Strange Tales*, June 1932
Ubbo-Sathla, *Weird Tales*, July 1933
The Holiness of Azederac, *Weird Tales*, November 1933
The Seven Geases, *Weird Tales*, October 1934
The Coming of the White Worm, *Stirring Science Stories*, April
1941

Books by Kenneth Grant

The Magical Revival, Muller, 1972
Aleister Crowley & The Hidden God, Muller, 1973
Cults of the Shadow, Muller, 1975
Images & Oracles of Austin Osman Spare, Muller, 1975
Nightside of Eden, Muller, 1977
Outside the Circles of Time, Muller, 1980