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## The Supernatural Story

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### Origins

To the modern reader, the stories that make up the mythology and folklore of ancient cultures are largely supernatural. Whether the storytellers originally responsible for composing, adding to, and passing on these stories necessarily thought in terms of “natural” and “supernatural” is debatable, yet the existence of such classical works as *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 c.e.; English translation, 1867) by [Ovid](#) suggests that such a distinction eventually became clear. Ovid’s stories in verse are based upon Latin mythology and deal with transformations — metamorphoses — of humans into plants and animals, a theme destined to become common in what came to be recognized as supernatural literature.

Much later collections in the same general vein include *Alf layla wa-layla* (fifteenth century; *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*, 1706-1708). Drawn from much earlier sources in Persia and Arabia, this mammoth collection has been the inspiration for innumerable other works and was translated in its most complete English version (1885-1886) by explorer Sir Richard Francis Burton. Rivaling *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* in scope and surpassing them in influence in the Western world are the tales that make up the cycle about the (perhaps) legendary King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

The stories, characters, and themes preserved in these and many other collections have proven to be a treasure trove for later writers, although science and rationalism have frequently consigned them to a kind of literary underground. Yet the emotions they deal with — from fear of death on one hand to religious ecstasy on the other — have continued to animate writers and readers alike. In mid-eighteenth century England such emotions would erupt in a most memorable way.

### The Gothic School

Although little gothic literature is read today, the movement and the impulse behind it have significantly affected modern literature. Ostensibly an eighteenth century revival of interest in medieval architecture and related matters, the movement involved a reintroduction of mystery,

awe, and wonder into literature and life. The movement was born with *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), Horace Walpole's wildly extravagant tale of a haunted castle riddled with secret passages and riven with dark plots. This short novel stood in direct contrast to the domesticated and emotionally desiccated literature of the period, and gave vent to feelings routinely denied and suppressed at the time. The work quickly attracted imitators, most of whom excelled at novel-length works.

One of the first writers to exploit the gothic in short forms was Count Jan Potocki, a Polish nobleman who wrote in French and who is said to have ended his long and accomplished life by shooting himself in the head with a silver bullet blessed by his chaplain. Potocki's great work is *The Saragossa Manuscript*, parts of which were circulated in manuscript as early as 1805 but which appeared in a complete English translation only in 1995 (as *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*). This phantasmagoric work is a long series of interwoven stories, ostensibly collected by a Walloon soldier in the Sierra Morena mountains of Spain in 1739. The stories — supernatural and erotic by turns — are narrated by a variety of roguish storytellers. The narratives often overlap, and one story is humorously framed four-deep within a series of others.

More influential were the tales of German writer, artist, and composer [E. T. A. Hoffmann](#), who more than any gothic figure before him located the fantastic in contemporary life. Ironically enough, modern readers may find Hoffmann's early nineteenth century European settings and his fascination with such subjects as automatons and Doppelgänger (doubles) equally quaint, yet the nervous energy and satirical bent of his works assure their readability. Hoffmann's best-known story is probably "The Sandman," in which a student falls fatally in love with a mechanical woman.

### **[Early American Masters](#)**

[Washington Irving](#) was the first American writer of any distinction and wrote many supernatural stories. A few, such as "The Adventure of the German Student," about a young man in Paris who spends the night with what turns out to be a guillotined corpse, are clearly in the gothic tradition. More familiar are two stories from *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819-1820): the justly influential "Rip Van Winkle," an Americanized version of European folktales of a man bewitched into sleeping for decades, and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," which pokes fun at supernatural conventions. Ironically enough, Irving also translated an episode from *The Saragossa Manuscript* by Potocki as "The Grand Prior of Minorca," but the story was assumed by readers to be by Irving himself.

[Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) is celebrated for his novels *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), both of which contain supernatural elements but which perhaps fail to exploit them fully. His story "The Wedding Knell" enlarges upon the tradition of the specter-bridegroom by describing the ceremony a long-jilted lover arranges for his equally aged bride-to-be. Hawthorne's most successful supernatural story is "Young Goodman Brown," in which an upright Puritan journeys into a forest to observe — to his horror — a witches' coven involving not only the most reputable members of his community but also his own wife. Brown, suggests Hawthorne, may simply have had a nightmare, but his life is blighted nevertheless. Here Hawthorne's ambivalence toward the supernatural results in a masterful study of morbid human psychology.

[Edgar Allan Poe](#)'s name is easily the most famous in supernatural literature, and his work represents a literary subcontinent all its own. During his four decades of life, Poe transformed the European gothic tradition, bringing an intensity and a kind of word-drunk enthusiasm to the most horrific themes and situations. Despite Poe's reputation, most of his works are not strictly supernatural, although their claustrophobia and their obsessive concern with madness, death (especially that of beloved and beautiful women), and premature burial mark them as gothic. Indeed one of Poe's most famous stories is entitled simply "The Premature Burial," and the theme is also treated in the frequently reprinted "The Cask of Amontillado."

"The Fall of the House of Usher" manages to combine almost all Poe's morbid concerns, with the "house" of its title suggesting the family dwelling place, the near-extinct family itself, and the central character's tottering sanity. Madeline Usher has apparently succumbed to a wasting illness and has been entombed by her twin Roderick, who himself suffers from a preternatural sensitivity to sounds and other sense phenomena. While Roderick's acute hearing registers the frantic attempts of his reawakened sister to escape the tomb, he lacks the moral stamina to go to her aid. During a furious storm Madeline finally breaks free, seeks out her brother, and with her last breath collapses upon him. He in turn dies instantly of fright, and the mansion collapses.

Allied with Poe's stories of premature burial are those of individuals hypnotized (or "mesmerized") prior to death, with the result that their souls are imprisoned in their bodies. Poe's most famous treatment of this theme is "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," in which the unfortunate M. Valdemar's body disintegrates instantly and loathsomely when the hypnotic spell is lifted.

Poe was an industrious writer whose success was undercut by his own intolerance and by disastrously bad luck. His young wife succumbed to tuberculosis after an agonizing five-year struggle, and Poe himself died in delirium some two years later — a death for years blamed on alcoholism but now suspected to have been brought on by disease.

### **The Victorian Period**

Famed and prolific English novelist [Charles Dickens](#) wrote a number of supernatural works, the most famous of which is certainly the short piece A Christmas Carol (1843). A shorter supernatural story is "No. 1 Branch Line, the Signal-Man," about a railway worker who receives repeated spectral warnings prior to accidents. Equally prolific but nearly completely forgotten, Dickens's contemporary Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote one of the very best haunted-house stories in "The Haunted and the Haunters: Or, The House and the Brain."

Avoiding the more extravagant clichés of the gothic school, Irish novelist and short-story writer [Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu](#) explored the psychological states of his protagonists, locating the seeds of horror and terror within their psyches rather than in external agents. According to his son, Le Fanu wrote his most frightening stories late at night by candlelight as he sat in bed, drawing upon his dreams and nightmares.

Le Fanu's most important works include the collections In a Glass Darkly (1872) and the posthumously published The Purcell Papers (1880), which reprints earlier material. The former volume, regarded as one of the most important in the history of the genre, includes the story "Green Tea" and the novella Carmilla, both presented as "cases" of one Dr. Hesselius.

"Green Tea" is routinely recognized as the prototypical story of the supernatural and recounts the ordeal of one Reverend Jennings, who is haunted — stalked might be a better word — by a malevolent monkey invisible to all but the victim himself. Although many critics have supplied "explanations" for Jennings's predicament, the truth is that he has done nothing to deserve the creature's attentions but drink quantities of green tea — a beverage not coincidentally favored by Le Fanu himself. That is, like the protagonists of later stories by such writers as [M. R. James](#) and [H. P. Lovecraft](#), the Reverend has done nothing to deserve his fate. Despite Hesselius's attentions, Jennings's ordeal progresses by increasingly disturbing degrees to the point at which he kills himself.

Besides excelling in his exploration of what would now be characterized as extreme psychological states, Le Fanu was a master of disturbing, often grotesque details — details that in another context could be absurd or even funny. In "Madame Crowl's Ghost" the wizened old woman of the title spends much of her time in bed dressed in the splendor of another age, complete with tall powdered wig, long false teeth and equally (and unnaturally) long finger nails cut to points.

In "The Child That Went with the Fairies," whose action is summarized in its title, an even more gruesome detail stands out. One of the two women responsible for carrying off the child in question is so taken with what appears to be mirthful anticipation of the victim's fate that she stuffs fold after fold of her voluminous handkerchief into her mouth to stifle her laughter.

Le Fanu influenced succeeding writers in a number of ways. M. R. James was so impressed with his work that he reintroduced the Irish master to the reading public with the collection *Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Stories* (1923). Le Fanu's use of the character Dr. Hesselius, a medical doctor concerned with the psychological states of his patients, marked the first appearance of the occult investigator — a figure developed more fully by Bram Stoker in the novel *Dracula* (1897) and by [Algernon Blackwood](#) and William Hope Hodgson in many of their stories. As the other outstanding fictional work about vampires in English, *Dracula* itself is thematically indebted to Carmilla, as are most of the many stories and novels about vampires that have been written since.

### **European Writers**

Over the years writers from several European countries contributed stories to the body of supernatural literature. In France these included renowned authors [Prosper Mérimée](#) and [Guy de Maupassant](#). Mérimée is known to readers and music lovers as the author of the novella *Carmen* (1845), but produced a masterpiece of supernatural fiction in *Lokis* (1869), a novel about a were-bear set in Lithuania. More famous still is the prolific Maupassant, whose best-known supernatural story is "The Horla," about a man who finds himself haunted by an invisible and seemingly indestructible being whom he tries to kill by burning his house — but does he succeed?

Pitched at a somewhat lower level of creativity were the works of French writers Émile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian, whose best supernatural stories include "The Man-Wolf" and the widely translated and reprinted "The Crab Spider." The latter features an escaped South American spider that has grown to enormous size.

Russian novelist [Nikolai Gogol](#) produced a number of fantastic works, including "The Nose," a famous story describing in deadpan manner the dilemma of a man whose nose has disappeared. Perhaps more striking is "Viy," an account of a seminarian's wildly horrifying sexual obsession and his ultimate destruction. Fellow Russian Alexis Tolstoi produced a classic vampire story in "The Family of a Vourdalak," which is set in Serbia.

Much later Czech writer [Franz Kafka](#) (who wrote in German) produced the famous and chilling novella *Die Verwandlung* (1915; *The Metamorphosis*, 1936), in which an innocuous salesman is transformed into an enormous insect, only to be disowned by his family. As in many European works, the supernatural element here is little more than a mechanism that allows the author to explore other concerns.

### **A Golden Age**

The four decades preceding World War I are now recognized as a kind of golden age not only of supernatural fiction but also of the supernatural story in particular. Its key figures were [Arthur Machen](#), [Algernon Blackwood](#), and [M. R. James](#) — dissimilar figures who nevertheless so thoroughly dominated the field in Great Britain that only in the second half of the century did a definite break occur in the genre's development.

Machen and Blackwood wrote what noted American supernatural writer [H. P. Lovecraft](#) termed "cosmic horror," establishing a worldview that disturbingly redefined the elements of horror to include all of creation. Lovecraft himself wrote in a similar philosophical vein, as did fellow American Robert W. Chambers and, in his novels at least, Englishman William Hope Hodgson.

Cosmic horror would resurface later in the twentieth century in many of the works of Ramsey Campbell, Clive Barker, [Stephen King](#), Peter Straub, and T. E. D. Klein.

[Arthur Machen](#) was at one time or another in his life a journalist and actor as well as novelist and short-story writer. His first success was the novella *The Great God Pan* (1890), which recounts in characteristically indirect fashion the gruesome results of a brain operation designed to allow its subject to "see" Pan — that is, to experience the true malignity of the universe. The novella's horrific climax actually surpasses the final scene of bodily disintegration in Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar." Several of Machen's most successful stories appeared soon after in *The Three Impostors* (1895), which weaves several narratives into an elaborate if not wholly convincing framework. These "embedded" stories include "Novel of the Black Seal" and "Novel of the White Powder," both frequently reprinted minus their misleading labels as "novels."

Raised on the English-Welsh border in a countryside punctuated with ruins of the ancient Roman occupation, Machen believed that a greater "reality" underlay the mundane events of modern life. As dramatized in his works, the reality was sometimes horribly intrusive, sometimes beguilingly elusive. The former tendency is illustrated in "The White People." This remarkable work, which recounts in a naïve, sing-song narrative a young girl's seduction into witchcraft, is often cited by critics as the best supernatural story ever written. Machen's belief that a stunted, malignant race of beings may have survived into modern times, giving rise to the folklore of elves and fairies, is dramatized not only in this story but also in *The Three Impostors* and *The Shining Pyramid* (1923). A less terrifying aspect of Machen's work is exemplified in the late story "N," a leisurely narrative whose various characters realize that a beautiful, transfiguring garden is sometimes to be encountered in a sleepy and otherwise wholly unremarkable suburb of London.

Along with Machen's "The White People," [Algernon Blackwood's](#) stories "The Willows" and "The Wendigo" are recognized as high points of supernatural literature. Like Machen, Blackwood wrote of experiences and states of being that are ecstatic or thrilling, although they seldom include the former writer's touches of physical horror. Blackwood wrote prolifically and although his novels are diffuse by modern standards, he excelled at the long story, a form that allowed him to develop his dramatic effects in a leisurely manner.

Blackwood's best stories take place in the remote wilderness, for which he held and conveyed a mystical regard. "The Willows" is set on a tiny, lonely island in the Danube River increasingly overgrown with willows; two canoeists trapped in a flood sense that they are victims of malevolent forces from another dimension. "The Wendigo" is set in Labrador, Canada, and dramatizes a Native American legend concerning a supernatural creature which steals human beings and conveys them across the sky, at the same time burning their feet — sensations that, not coincidentally, signal frostbite.

Nearly as dramatic is "The Camp of the Dog," set on a Swedish island in the Baltic Sea and dealing with a werewolf. This story also features a recurring character John Silence, an occult detective. Other notable John Silence stories include "Ancient Sorceries," set in a French village whose inhabitants assume the form of cats to attend a witches' Sabbath, and "Secret Worship," about a sect of Devil worshipers in the Black Forest of Germany (where Blackwood himself was educated). Most of this occult detective's cases appeared in *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary* (1908).

[M. R. James](#) was a noted academic and scholar who wrote and told ghost stories for the amusement of his friends and students, often at Christmas. His scholarly works are now largely forgotten, but his stories — issued in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911), *A Thin Ghost and Others* (1919), and the deliciously titled *A Warning to*

the Curious (1925) — are the best of their kind, elegantly and concisely told and all the more chillingly effective for their deceptively offhand manner.

As the titles of his first two collections indicate, James wrote for the most part about antiquaries, amateur seekers after ancient inscriptions, old books, and the like. His most famous story may be "The Mezzotint," in which a print of an old house inexplicably reveals the successive stages of a ghastly crime — the kidnapping of an infant by a shrouded, skeletal figure. In this case James suggests a motive, but in most of his stories supernatural intrusion is occasioned by little more than meddling on the part of the "curious." In "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad," an antiquary uncovers an ancient whistle, and, intrigued by its Latin inscription (in translation, "Who is this who is coming?"), unwisely decides to find out.

Like Le Fanu, James was a master of the telling detail, however briefly glimpsed. In "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad," the presence summoned has a face resembling "crumpled" linen. "The Ash-Tree" involves creatures living in the tree of the title, and the first glimpse the reader catches of one in the moonlight carries the chilling impression that it is running up the trunk on more than four legs — an image more powerful than the detailed view James subsequently gives us. The vampire story "An Episode of Cathedral History" is enlivened by equally suggestive details.

So effective were James's seemingly straightforward techniques that several of his friends — particularly E. G. Swain and R. H. Malden, both of whom dedicated volumes to him — wrote stories in a similar vein, producing material with suitably antiquarian themes but little originality. James's works are now recognized as prototypically English ghost stories but have proven difficult to imitate effectively.

### **Other British Writers**

Three British figures stand apart during this period for their originality: M. P. Shiel, William Hope Hodgson, and [Lord Dunsany](#). Shiel wrote prolifically in a variety of forms and genres — science fiction, the detective story and novel, the adventure novel — displaying a rich vocabulary and a taste for the arcane that often appealed more to other writers than to the general public. His most remarkable stories include "Xélucha" and "Vaila" from *Shapes in the Fire* (1896), works indebted to Edgar Allan Poe but written in an even more ornate style than Poe's. "Xélucha" is a fantasy of necrophilia set in a bizarre, wildly imagined London. "Vaila" (to some extent a retelling of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher") takes place on a remote, wind-swept island in the North Sea and involves a brass house literally chained to the island and doomed by a family curse.

Shiel rewrote "Vaila" as "The House of Sounds" and included it in *The Pale Ape and Other Pulses* (1911), along with "Huguenin's Wife." Set on a Greek island recreated with as little regard for "reality" as was the London of "Xélucha," this story concerns a murdered wife who returns to life as a huge, feathered, winged cat. Shiel's most haunting work is "Dark Lot of One Saul," about a sailor thrown overboard in a barrel and sucked down by a current to an air-filled cave far beneath the surface of the sea. The sensations of utter solitude and — oddly enough — spiritual awe conveyed by this story have seldom been equaled in print.

William Hope Hodgson's best works are his novels, but he wrote two series of exceptional supernatural stories as well. One series featured an occult detective somewhat reminiscent of Algernon Blackwood's John Silence. Carnacki the Ghost Finder (1913) collected several of these cases, while an expanded edition of 1948 added three more. Typical is "The Whistling Room," about a house haunted in a most horrendous and original fashion. Other, more loosely connected stories were set at sea (where Hodgson spend eight years), and appeared for the most part in *Men of the Deep Waters* (1914) and the posthumous compilation *Deep Waters* (1967). One of the best of these is "The Voice in the Night," in which a marooned, fungus-covered couple

approaches a ship by night in a rowboat to beg for food. Hodgson was one of the most original writers of his generation, and his death at an early age during World War I may have robbed supernatural fiction of its most talented modern writer.

Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, better known as [Lord Dunsany](#), began publishing during this period, and although he wrote prolifically until the mid- 1950's, his works continued to reflect the period in which he found his voice. Dunsany produced works in a variety of forms, including drama and the novel, although his first stories — collected in *The Gods of Pegāna* (1905) and *Time and the Gods* (1906) — have proven to be his most influential. These volumes create a new, fanciful pantheon. Its ostensible ruler was Mana-Yood-Sushai, who in turn created a host of gods, who in turn created something like the modern world.

Many of Lord Dunsany's subsequent stories evoke equally magical worlds. An outstanding example is "The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save for Sacnoth," a mock-heroic yet powerful fantasy about the banishment of an evil being who visits the earth every 230 years on a comet. Dunsany also wrote a series of entertaining volumes concerning the fanciful adventures of a sailor named Joseph Jorkens.

Another odd man out was Hector Hugh Munro, known to the reading public as "Saki." [Saki's](#) many stories are brief and sardonic — very English equivalents of Ambrose Bierce's tales. A typical example is "Gabriel-Ernest," a werewolf story whose calculated cleverness and coldness are more horrifying than many more conventional horrors. Several of Saki's frequently reprinted stories are not literally supernatural. "Sredni Vashtar," for example, concerns a put-upon little boy who worships a pet ferret which subsequently disposes of the boy's despised female guardian. "The Open Window" turns upon a frightening practical joke. Like William Hope Hodgson, Saki died in the World War I.

A number of British writers famous for other achievements nevertheless contributed important work to the supernatural field. An outstanding and unsettling story from prolific Anglo-Indian writer [Rudyard Kipling](#) is "The Mark of the Beast," in which a foolish Englishman profanes an Indian temple and is transformed by its leper guardian into a werewolf. Best known for his stories about private detective Sherlock Holmes, [Arthur Conan Doyle](#) wrote in a variety of genres, including the supernatural. One of his most memorable contributions to this field is "The Captain of the 'Pole Star.'" The story of a ship sailing through the Arctic winter and commanded by a captain who longs for his dead fiancé, it achieves a chilling unity of setting and theme.

Several other British writers are known to readers for one or two works only. In "The Seventh Man," about a party of six desperate men who sense that there is a seventh among them, Arthur Quiller-Couch wrote a story of the Arctic as striking as Doyle's. During his short life Richard Middleton produced only a handful of stories, among them the humorous and frequently reprinted story "The Ghost Ship" and the shocking "On the Brighton Road." By contrast [W. W. Jacobs](#) lived a long and productive literary life but is remembered solely for "The Monkey's Paw." This story's carefully paced narrative and its theme — the terrible price to be paid for challenging fate — make it one of the best of any genre in the language. In "How Love Came to Professor Guildea," Robert S. Hichens wrote of an emotionally sterile academic haunted by a love-sick and apparently imbecilic spirit. Although his writing career extended to mid-century, Oliver Onions produced his best-known work, the novella *The Beckoning Fair One*, in 1911. A carefully paced study of a writer fatally possessed by his own creation, it has been rated one of the classic works of the supernatural.

### **[America at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century](#)**

The two most important writers of supernatural fiction in the United States around the beginning of the nineteenth century were [Ambrose Bierce](#) and Robert W. Chambers. A veteran of the U.S. Civil War turned journalist, Bierce produced stories and sketches ranging from the sardonic to

the cruel to the horrifying. His collection *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891; also known as *In the Midst of Life*, 1898) includes the classic and frequently reprinted stories “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” and “The Damned Thing.” The former re-creates the final desperate fantasy of a hanged man, while the latter deals chillingly with a bloodthirsty but invisible carnivore. “The Death of Halprin Frayser” is a maddeningly convoluted story of incest and murder from beyond the grave — a necrophilial mixture so disquieting that Bierce may not have been able to deal with it more directly. A tired and embittered man, Bierce disappeared in Mexico in late 1913, ostensibly on his way to report on the Mexican revolution.

One of Bierce’s most haunting stories is “An Inhabitant of Carcosa” in which the narrator awakens in a ruined city and only gradually realizes that he has long been dead and that the ruins are those of his beloved city. This story was to influence the younger American writer Robert W. Chambers, who incorporated the dreamlike Carcosa into several of the stories in his landmark collection *The King in Yellow* (1895).

Included in *The King in Yellow* are five fantastic stories that display a dreamlike — or more accurately nightmarish — logic, most of them involving a play that drives readers mad. Perhaps the most effective story in the collection is “The Repairer of Reputations,” an unsettling amalgam of themes and ingredients. Set in what was then the future — the United States in 1920 — it posits a benevolent dictatorship in which suicide has been institutionalized. Narrating the story is a dilettante who believes that his cousin is heir to an American monarchy and who plots to usurp the throne and serve the King in Yellow. There are clear indications that the narrator is mad, and yet the apparently accurate details of the narrative are themselves so suggestive that the issue is unclear. Unfortunately Chambers wrote little else in this vein, and the rest of his vast output has been forgotten.

Two highly esteemed American mainstream writers from this period produced notable ghost stories. These were [Henry James](#) and [Edith Wharton](#), friends and mutual admirers who spent much of their time abroad and whose works were influenced by English and European models. James wrote the most ambiguous and thus most debated (if not most read) work of supernatural fiction in the language, the novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Equally haunting are such stories as “The Jolly Corner,” in which a figure much like James himself returns from a long period abroad to confront his double — who never left home. Edith Wharton’s most striking stories of the genre are “Afterward” and “Pomegranate Seed,” both psychologically acute studies of married relationships threatened from beyond the grave.

Other American writers of the supernatural from this period include Ralph Adams Cram and F. Marion Crawford. Cram was an authority on gothic architecture and became an important architect himself. His single collection, rich in European color, is *Black Spirits and White* (1895), and its most notable story is “The Dead Valley,” about a malevolent piece of landscape that anticipates similar works by Algernon Blackwood.

Like Chambers, F. Marion Crawford wrote prolifically in other veins but is remembered almost exclusively for his few supernatural works. Crawford’s most important collection was *Wandering Ghosts* (1911; published in Great Britain as *Uncanny Tales*), which included “For the Blood Is the Life,” an atmospheric and frequently reprinted vampire story. “The Upper Berth” is an atypically restrained story about the haunted berth of a steamship.

### **[Great Britain Between the Wars](#)**

The period after World War I found a number of prominent British writers specializing wholly or in part in supernatural fiction. By this time a number of themes had become standard: ghosts, haunted houses, vampires, werewolves, and so on. Readers knew what to expect from stories on such themes, and writers (and the periodicals and publishers for whom they worked) were able



to tailor their stories to the public's expectations. As always, however, the most creative among them were able to breath new life into what had become old formulas.

A prominent exemplar of this trend was the urbane and highly prolific E. F. Benson, whose career began before the war. Many of Benson's supernatural nature stories recall the visionary works of [Algernon Blackwood](#), although they lack the sense of personal belief that distinguishes Blackwood at his best. "The Man Who Went Too Far" involves Pan and "The Temple" an ancient ruin in Cornwall; both recall similar works by Arthur Machen, although once again minus the intensity of the earlier writer. Benson is perhaps most familiar to readers of the supernatural for "Mrs. Amworth," one of the best vampire stories ever written. Several other, perhaps more original stories such as "Caterpillars" (1912) feature strikingly loathsome crawling creatures — in the case of "Caterpillars" as begetters of disease.

Another prolific writer, H. Russell Wakefield, suffered much the same fate as Benson — to have been born too late to help shape the genre at which he so clearly excelled. Wakefield's best works include two noted haunted house stories, "The Red Lodge" (based on the writer's personal experience) and the dramatically brief "Blind Man's Buff." "He Cometh and He Passeth By" includes a character based on the infamous occult practitioner Aleister Crowley. Wakefield continued writing until 1961, but his most representative works were produced much earlier.

Throughout this period a few highly individualistic British writers produced works so unusual that it is difficult to fit them comfortably into any tradition. The most outstanding was Walter de la Mare, who wrote frequently for or about children, often in the form of novels and poetry. One of his best and best-known stories is "Seaton's Aunt," an ambiguous and disturbing study of psychological vampirism worthy of Henry James. "Miss Jemima" describes a young girl who avoids the fate described by Le Fanu in "The Child That Went with the Fairies." In "The House" Mr. Asprey takes one last look around the house from which he is being evicted; only gradually does the reader realize that Asprey is dying and that the house is his life.

Another original figure was John Metcalfe, who produced troublingly ambiguous stories that often defy logical explanation. "The Double Admiral," for instance, involves a retired and ailing Navy man who sets out with two friends to investigate a mysterious island that he insists lies just on the horizon. Yet the party never reaches its goal; instead, they pass another boat very much like their own, at which point the admiral dies. Suddenly and inexplicably the party finds itself sailing back toward land, where subsequently the admiral — or is it his double? — is found to be very much alive, and joins them to discuss a most disturbing dream.

Although he spent the years after World War II in Hollywood as a screenwriter, [John Collier](#) was born in Great Britain and produced his most memorable work before the war. His stories recall Saki's in their brevity and urbanity. Typical is "Evening Primrose," in which a young man attempting to live in a department store after hours discovers that he is not alone.

### [America Between the Wars](#)

Although Edward Lucas White apparently wrote many of his stories before World War I, most were published later in *Lukundoo and Other Stories* (1927). The powerful title story — detailing a physiologically grotesque instance of retribution upon an explorer in Africa — is often reprinted. Stranger still are "The Snout," about a baboon-headed dwarf who collects artistic representations of those similarly afflicted, and "Amina," about a race of were-beings in Persia. White claimed that many of his vivid stories had their origins in the nightmares from which he suffered all his life.

The major American writer of supernatural fiction in the post- World War I period was [H. P. Lovecraft](#), a reclusive writer who nevertheless maintained many friendships by correspondence. Lovecraft was fascinated by the past and cultivated an archaic, adjective-rich style that many

readers find tiresome. Initially influenced by Lord Dunsany, he in turn influenced many of his contemporaries and successors.

Lovecraft's major contribution to supernatural literature is the "Cthulhu Mythos," a pantheon of imaginary beings inspired to some extent by Dunsany's more benign creations. Introduced in the story "The Call of Cthulhu" and elaborated in such stories as "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Shadow out of Time," the mythos is an imaginative reconstruction of history that posits the existence of malignant entities — Yog-Sothoth, Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, and the like — driven from our planet in ancient times but eternally striving to gain reentry. Like the protagonists of M. R. James's stories, Lovecraft's characters are forever stumbling upon some abominable "truth" — to their detriment.

There were few outlets for horror or fantasy fiction in the United States during this period, and Lovecraft and similar writers found themselves consigned to low-paying, sometimes poorly produced markets such as the magazine *Weird Tales*. The result was that supernatural fiction was cut off from the development of "mainstream" fiction in the United States, to the ultimate detriment of both camps.

Fellow writers [August Derleth](#) and Donald Wandrei were so impressed with H. P. Lovecraft's work that they founded Arkham Press with the purpose of preserving his works in book form. The press's first volume was the collection *The Outsider and Others* (1939), regarded as a landmark in the history of supernatural fiction. Arkham went on to publish a number of significant works, including many more Lovecraft volumes, but the press's very success among a small if avid readership further isolated what was becoming a distinct genre. Dozens of other writers — including Derleth himself — subsequently took up Lovecraft's rich and suggestive mythical framework for one or more stories, but, like the imitators of [M. R. James](#), they seldom produced memorable work.

Four other writers — Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Seabury Quinn, and Henry S. Whitehead — were also closely identified with *Weird Tales*. Clark Ashton Smith wrote several series of darkly fantastic tales set in such mythical locales as Hyperborea and Zothique, realms evoked with the fervor but not the skill of Poe and Shiel. Robert E. Howard wrote adventure stories in a more robust, straightforward mode — a subgenre that would come to be known as "sword-and- sorcery" — and is remembered primarily for his larger- than-life character Conan, a prehistoric adventurer. Like Lovecraft, Howard was to be exploited by other writers anxious to adopt his themes and complete the stories he left unfinished at his early death. Seabury Quinn produced a long series of colorful but crude stories and novels about occult detective Jules de Grandin.

Standing somewhat apart from these three in terms of literary quality was Henry S. Whitehead. Whitehead wrote stories of West Indian voodoo based on long experience in the Virgin Islands, including several — "Passing of a God" and "Cassius" — reminiscent of White's "Lukundoo" and apparently based on similar folkloric material.

Late in the 1930's Fritz Leiber initiated a series of earthy, light-hearted heroic fantasies with "Two Sought Adventure" (later retitled "The Jewels in the Forest"). Featuring two characters named Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, the story and several sequels appeared in the magazine *Unknown*, a short-lived competitor to *Weird Tales*. Leiber revived the series after the war, and it stands in interesting contrast to Robert E. Howard's cruder series.

### **[The Later Twentieth Century](#)**

The outstanding writer of short supernatural fiction in postwar Great Britain was probably Robert Aickman, who called his psychologically rich works "strange stories." Although a few fall into recognizable categories — the award-winning "Pages from a Young Girl's Journal," for instance, is

about an initiation into vampirism — most resemble John Metcalfe's works in refusing to provide easy answers. The outstanding example is perhaps "The Trains," in which two girls lodging in a strange house near a railway experience a series of disorienting and wholly inexplicable events. In "Ringing the Changes" a recently married couple discover that the bells disturbing their honeymoon are awakening the dead.

Aickman's first collection was *We Are for the Dark* (1951), which he wrote with Elizabeth Jane Howard. Howard would subsequently establish a reputation as a highly regarded mainstream novelist, but one of the stories she contributed to this volume — "Three Miles Up," about a party of boaters on a canal who suddenly and frighteningly discover that they are no longer landlocked — equals Aickman's best. Like Howard, a number of other mainstream British writers produced memorable supernatural stories from time to time. These include [Graham Greene](#), [Elizabeth Bowen](#), [Muriel Spark](#), and [John Fowles](#).

Two other prolific and widely read British writers — Ramsey Campbell and Clive Barker — have worked largely within the supernatural genre, although the visceral content of their stories shows a clear American influence. Campbell has written many novels, although his flat style works most effectively in the claustrophobic stories collected in such volumes as *The Height of the Scream* (1976) and *Dark Companions* (1982). Like Campbell, Clive Barker has frequently utilized urban settings, most notably in his *Books of Blood* (1984-1985; 6 volumes). One of the most memorable stories collected here is "The Midnight Meat Train," in which a New York subway train is utilized to supply human carcasses to the "City Fathers" living far below the surface. Despite his grotesque subject matter, Barker writes with a bright and fluid style.

British writer [Angela Carter](#) drew inspiration from sources as disparate as fairy tales and surrealism, producing a fantastic mixture displayed in such collections as the appropriately titled *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974). Her most famous story is "The Company of Wolves," in which a girl who clearly grasps the subtext of the fairy tale of Little Red Riding-Hood eagerly climbs into bed with the wolf.

Prolific American writer [Ray Bradbury](#) has been active in a number of genres, but his reputation rests on his science fiction and fantasy — categories that in Bradbury's case frequently overlap. Bradbury began publishing in the mid-1930's, hitting his stride with *The Illustrated Man* (1951) and *The October Country* (1955). Stories such as "The Small Assassin," about a pregnant woman who senses the evil nature of the baby she is carrying, display Bradbury's pessimistic side, but his later works are gentler, imbued with nostalgia for a kind of Midwestern American golden age.

The most famous figure in modern American supernatural fiction is [Stephen King](#), a phenomenally popular author who has pioneered a rebirth of public interest in the genre. While King writes primarily in longer forms, several of his American contemporaries and near-contemporaries — T. E. D. Klein, Thomas Ligotti, and Dennis Etchison — have excelled at the short story. Klein's story "The Events at Poroth Farm" is indebted to both H. P. Lovecraft and Arthur Machen and was expanded into the outstanding novel *The Ceremonies* (1984). His collection *Dark Gods* (1985) reveals the same influences, making him one of the few writers to have profited from exposure to Lovecraft. Etchison's stories in *The Dark Country* (1982) reflect the contemporary American landscape of highways and strip malls and drifters. Justly famous is "It Only Comes out at Night," a nightmarish account of late-night events at a rest stop. Ligotti's densely poetic and surreal stories have appeared in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (1989) and *Noctuary* (1994).

In the decades after World War II several prominent mainstream American writers produced outstanding supernatural stories, bridging to some extent the gap that had arisen before the war. These include Paul Bowles, who has acknowledged his indebtedness to folktales, hallucinogenic drugs, and his own subconscious. Among his most effective stories are "You Are

Not I" and "Allal," both involving the transfer of a protagonist's personality into another body, in the latter story that of a snake.

Argentinean [Jorge Luis Borges](#) was undoubtedly one of the preeminent fantasists of the nineteenth century, a prolific writer obsessed with mazes and mirrors. Borges's imaginative universe was vast — he drew inspiration from sources as disparate as *The Arabian Nights'* Entertainments and the work of H. P. Lovecraft — and his influence has been worldwide. Although he began writing fiction in the 1930's, his best works appeared in the following decades, and he did not reach an English-speaking audience until the 1960's. In one of his most famous stories, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," an entry in a unique volume of an encyclopedia suggests the existence of another, exotic world — one that henceforward begins to infiltrate the reader's. "The Aleph" concerns a tiny iridescent sphere, accidentally discovered in a cellar, that encompasses infinity. "Everything and Nothing" deals with one of Borges's favorite themes, the mystery of identity, in the form of a confrontation between William Shakespeare and God. *Manual de zoología fantástica* (1957; with Margarita Guerrero; *The Imaginary Zoo*, 1969, revised as *El libro de los seres imaginarios*, 1967, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, 1969) is a fantastic and delightful bestiary.

Essay by: Grove Koger

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### **Cross References**

[The Fantasy Novel \(Topical Overview—Critical Survey of Long Fiction, Fourth Edition\)](#)  
[Theory of Short Fiction \(Topical Overview—Critical Survey of Short Fiction, Second Revised Edition\)](#)

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