

Madame Griselda's Reviews

"The Shunned House" by H.P. Lovecraft

Hi everybody. It's Gabrielle; I'm sitting in for Madame Griselda this week. She's in Mexico, helping some sheep herders chase down a *chupacabras*. Anyway, she asked me to review this piece because she knows I like Lovecraft's stories, so I guess I'm a little biased. But any work that involves a creepy old house, a smelly gelatinous monstrosity that absorbs people, and six carboys of concentrated sulfuric acid has to be good, right?

The creepy house in question is on Benefit Street in Providence, Rhode Island, where H.P. Lovecraft grew up, and is based on an actual house which still stands there. Termed "The Shunned House," it is a place where ugly weeds grow in the garden and the trees bear no fruit. There is also a strange type of foul scented, phosphorescent fungus that grows in the basement. The narrator's uncle, with whom he lives (a Dr. Elihu Whipple), has raised him on gothic tales, and especially on stories of the background of this particular house, which has, for some reason, piqued his curiosity. From its earliest days, it was a place where people grew mysteriously ill and died or went mad. The narrator takes it upon himself to look deeper into the history of the house, and discovers that it was constructed over the graveyard of a family of Huguenot ancestry, perhaps descended from one Jacques Roulet, who was committed to an asylum for lycanthropy. (I always thought they burned you at the stake or shot you with a silver bullet or something for that.) In any case, these folks were not devout churchgoers, which made them highly suspicious in the eyes of the townspeople of the 18th century. Since then, all generations of inhabitants of the house complained of evil smells and strange and often fatal maladies.

What better thing to do than to spend a night in the basement and check it out for supernatural phenomena? That's what the narrator and his uncle decide to do, first gaining permission from the current owner, who is having trouble keeping tenants in the place (I can't imagine why!) So, armed with flamethrowers and a Crookes Tube—God, I haven't seen one of those since my high school physics class—they take up watch in the foul old basement. I won't tell you the rest, but I think you can imagine how things go.

I think the story is somewhat autobiographical. Not the evil, nameless creature part—at least I hope not—but Lovecraft's grandfather was named Whipple, and he reared H.P. on weird stories and thrillers as he grew up. Lovecraft's father died in the psychiatric wing of Butler Hospital in Providence, and his mother, a number of years later, was committed to the same institution. What effect this had on him is unclear, but it may explain some of his anxiety related behaviors, such as his sensitivity to criticism, his never going out before dark, and his being extremely shy. He did marry, but I gather their sex life wasn't steamy romance novel stuff. Sex was a difficult subject for him, and it never appears in any of the stories I have read, though some of that may have been a product of the times, as he was writing in the 1920's and '30's. He died very young of intestinal cancer.

Lovecraft's work appeared in what are termed "pulp" magazines (the term derives from cheap wood pulp paper, which is what they were printed on). One of the most famous of these was *Weird Tales*, and he provided many stories for them. "The Shunned House" was one of these pieces, published in 1937. But he never made much money, and had pretty much spent the

family inheritance by the time he died. He wrote a couple of novels, too, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and *At the Mountains of Madness*, as well as a classic essay called *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. His most famous work, though, is probably the short story "The Call of Cthulhu," which spawned a raft of stories from himself and other writers based on his concepts of Outer Gods and Great Old Ones. August Derleth was one of Lovecraft's correspondents and often wrote stories connected with the Cthulhu mythos.

But "The Shunned House" is not a Cthulhu mythos story. It is a particularly good horror tale, told with Lovecraft's blend of dreary atmospheric setting and sense of foreboding, followed by relatively brief but horrid glimpses of the evil that lurks behind the scenes. I recommend it highly. But don't read it late at night in a quiet house!

"The Shunned House" is available for free as an e-book from [Project Gutenberg](#), or there are both paper and digital copies available at [Powell's](#), [Amazon](#), and [Barnes & Noble](#). I'll put in a plug for your local library, though; they may well have one of the many editions of Lovecraft's collected works that include this great story.

Happy Reading!

Gabrielle

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