

Sample file

TRAIL OF CTHULHU

Shadow Over Filmland



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DOUBLE FEATURE

"FURTIVENESS AND SECRETIVENESS SEEMED UNIVERSAL IN THIS HUSHED CITY OF ALIENAGE AND DEATH, AND I COULD NOT ESCAPE THE SENSATION OF BEING WATCHED..."

-- H.P. LOVECRAFT, "THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH"

On the surface, the two great streams of horror that flowed out of the 1930s would seem to have little in common. H.P. Lovecraft's "cosmic materialism" grew in intricate patterns of words, building sublime dread from the hints and edges revealed by modern science and technology. The "monster rally" horror films of Carl Laemmle Jr's Universal Studios (and even moreso Val Lewton's horror films for RKO), by contrast, kept the dialogue to a minimum and let light, shadow, and sound breathe life into the very same supernatural horror clichés that Lovecraft had dismissed as defunct relics of the previous century.

Lovecraft certainly dismissed the Universal horrors. In a 1933 letter, he wrote: "Last year an alleged *Frankenstein* on the screen would have made me drowse had not a posthumous sympathy for poor Mrs. Shelley made me see red instead. Ugh! And the screen *Dracula* in 1931 – I saw the beginning of that in Miami, Fla. – but couldn't bear to watch it drag to its full term of dreariness." Hollywood repaid the compliment, waiting until 1963 to adapt any Lovecraft tale to the screen (*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*), and even then

hiding it under an Edgar Allan Poe title (*The Haunted Palace*).

But underground, appropriately enough, the two rivers blend. Both Lovecraft and Laemmle drew their archetypes from the Gothic "terror-tale" wellsprings of Shelley, Stoker, and Stevenson. And both responded to, and reflected, the terrors characteristic of their times. Hence, Lovecraft's re-tuning of the old horror standards, and the films' "Silver Nitrate Gothic" blend of timeless legend and modern tension, can combine to throw a black-and-silver spotlight on the Mythos – or paint a Mythos shadow behind the made-up monsters -- for *Trail of Cthulhu* gaming.

Lovecraft Meets the Wolf Man

"I MAY BE ABLE TO BRING YOU PROOF THAT THE SUPERSTITION OF YESTERDAY CAN BECOME THE SCIENTIFIC REALITY OF TODAY."

-- DR. VAN HELSING, *DRACULA*
(TOD BROWNING, DIR.)

For all Lovecraft's dismissal of the "childish folk-elements" of the previous

century's horror fiction, he was unwilling to completely abandon them in his own work. His earlier fiction happily trades in such standard tropes, and even his later hyper-scientific horrors recapitulate and reshape the Gothic horror archetypes rather than rejecting them entirely. This brief examination of Lovecraft's treatment of these standards may inspire *Trail of Cthulhu* Keepers to likewise project the classic figures through a Cthulhoid lens.

The Vampire

Lovecraft's tales actually include two traditional vampires. The monstrosity in the basement of "The Shunned House" is a pseudo-scientific translation of the disembodied blood-drinking spirits of New England folklore; it absorbs the entire personality and life-force of its victims, and engages in a sort of mesmeric possession similar to Lugosi's (and Stoker's) *Dracula*. The "vampiristic attacks" in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* are carried out by a "lean, lithe, leaping monster with burning eyes which fastened its teeth in the throat or upper arm and feasted ravenously." To seal the deal, this vampire is even the resurrected corpse of a black magician, namely Joseph Curwen. Slightly widening our examination we find two more near-vampires. A different black magician, the witch Keziah Mason in "Dreams in the Witch-House," nurses her familiar Brown Jenkin on her own blood, "which it sucked like a vampire." (Brown Jenkin also echoes the traditional vampire's connections to dreams and rats.) Wilbur Whateley's twin, the invisible Son of Yog-Sothoth, fed on cattle "sucked most dry o' blood." Other elements of the vampire recombine in the titular "Colour Out of Space," which drains the life-energies of its victims and drives