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Essay - An Introduction

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An essay by Dr James Roberts

The King In Yellow

Sometimes a story becomes more than just the territory of its creator. Sometimes it outlives and outgrows its author. In the case of Lovecraft, and many of the authors associated with him, the combined stories have evolved into an entangled mythology that has become more than the sum of its parts. And the creations evolve beyond the original stories, the various mythologies expanded upon by other authors, even to the point of self-reference. And the more effort put into setting these stories in a realistic setting (and the more complex levels writer try to act on), the more self-reference appears within these tales.

This begs an obvious question - are these authors writing about the real world? You'd assume they aren't, but how might you react if they found yourself in a situation where the only point of reference you have is a work of fiction (or what you assumed to be fiction)?

This itself suggests a further question - why would these writers been allowed to spread these stories, showing us 'the truth'? When a particular author (typically Lovecraft) is mentioned, within the confines of a story, as having written of things that now turn out to be horribly real, how is it that the various aliens and cultists failed to stop him publishing the story and terminally ended his career?

This stems from a possible misconception. We generally believe that authors have written such stories in an attempt to reveal or, at least, hint at 'the truth'. But what if the reverse is true, that the authors of such stories are trying to cover their trail, to make rumours and 'urban myths' appear to originate from a work of fiction?

Why would they do this? After all, you'd assume that these authors are trying to warn us of these dangers. They're not 'bad guys' aiming to keep us in the dark about these evil forces, are they? True, the idea of writers spreading malicious lies is unlikely (but not impossible...) and not one we'd like to entertain, but several things possibly excuse this apparent deception.

Generally, people would not give much credence to something that sounds so fantastic, without being ridiculed and derided as a mad man (what if British 'conspiracy theorist' David Icke has been telling the truth?). Alternatively, if the writer cannot be ridiculed for revealing the truth, they might expect to be 'silenced'. Is it any wonder then that the more cunning writers would want to veil their knowledge in the guise of a literary work? Not only will most fiction avoid the scrutiny of most aliens and cultists (who probably find 'escapism' through other methods) but also most literature, as 'art', enjoys a longer shelf life than works of fact? The emotional and social elements of stories are often just as relevant as in the day they were written, where as text books, particularly scientific ones, have to be regularly updated.

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stories as fiction, we're not going to adopt the same panic-ridden anxiety that we would if it was presented to us as genuine fact. In these days of internet and mobile phone, where tabloids news takes mere hours to turn around and TVs show us live footage that inspire panicked reactions, we can imagine just what the results of such 'news' might bring nowadays. That, in presenting us the proof through works of fiction we have a buffer between our minds and a cruel reality. And that, perhaps if we do finally discover 'the truth', it won't send us completely over the edge.

The 'King in Yellow' was unleashed upon the world at the end of the nineteenth century. This is true from either perspective; in the real world Chambers wrote a book of short stories and, according to these works of fiction, an anonymous author had a play of the same name published. Of course, the play is the more notorious and threatening of the two, but fortunately it is a work of fiction. Isn't it? But what if Chambers wrote his book to serve as some sort of misdirection for those seeking the play? The fact that his stories talk about the play mean that any actual knowledge of the real play could be rumoured to have simply originated in Chambers' book. By presenting the play as a work of fiction, at a time that the actual publication was being banned and taken off the shelves, the truth is hidden within the context of a series of stories. Anyone trying to find the notorious publication instead comes across the book of short stories by Chambers, and realises that perhaps it isn't really a notorious play after all. Furthermore, the individual stories might also cover up specific instances where people have suffered as a result of reading this play.

It is in this context that this document follows the trail of the King in Yellow, in the belief that perhaps both the original play and Chambers' book of short stories about it co-exist...



The Yellow Sign (the symbol)



Carcosa



The King In Yellow

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Footnote: Castaigne's 1920s

Of course, the major problem with Chamber's book is that the character Hildred Castaigne, perhaps the most notorious of the book's (human) characters, lives in a 1920's that never was. There are four ways of addressing this...

1. The Sci-Fi Version. The events are true, but relate to an alternative timeline, one that results from the history detailed at the beginning of the story. Alternatively, all of the book's stories are set in this alternative 'future', but each narrative is more concerned on the stories the people have to tell than the background history, already explained in detail by Castaigne. The 'Castaigne' known by Mr Scott, the narrator of 'The Yellow Sign', could be either the one who narrates 'The Repairer of Reputations' or his father (who is also, strangely, called Hildred Castaigne). Of course, he doesn't actually have to be either.

2. The Delusional Version. Castaigne's story is set at the same time as the others, but his illness has dressed the world in the trappings of an imaginary future, possibly to support his belief in the Imperial Dynasty of America, which apparently descends from Carcosa. Given that this lineage is highly unlikely (even if characters from the play had somehow escaped the King's judgement and found a way into the real world) how much can we trust his version of events concerning the rest of the world? In such a scenario it would make sense for Mr Scott's use of the term 'the tragedy of young Castaigne' to apply to his delusional state.

3. The Fictional Version. Castaigne's story is fabricated by Chambers, though it might have some basis in reality, whether events that did happen or characters who did exist. By setting this opening story in a fanciful futuristic time, Chambers could misdirect and detour those that sought evidence of the genuine King in Yellow within it's pages (or those who sought to track down anyone willing to tell too much of the truth) - the opening passages require something of a 'leap of faith' for a modern reader to get through if they're looking for any evidence of The King in Yellow. In this case, ties between characters in the various short stories were perhaps subtle leads to what the truth actually was.

4. Any mix of the above



to avoid the wrong sort of attention), we have to dig deeper to discover which elements have any bearing on the mythology of the King in Yellow, if any.

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