

Professional Incubus, The

Szerző: Howard Phillips Lovecraft • Év: 1924

It has often been remarked that fiction is the weakest point in amateur literature, and I do not think the belief is a mistaken one. None can deny that we have nothing in the field of the story which may be compared with the poetry of Samuel Loveman, the essays of James F. Morton, Jr., the critical analyses of Edward H. Cole, or the phantasies of Frank Belknap Long, Jr. True, Mrs. Edith Minter produces work of the highest quality—but unfortunately only the most infinitesimal fraction of this appears in the amateur press. Our loss is the outside world's gain.

The generally assigned cause for our fictional debility is lack of space, and this factor is certainly a potent one. For the adequate development of a story idea, ample room is an absolute essential; and this we are unable to provide for under present financial conditions. But of late I have come to believe that there is another cause; a cause extending very deeply into the composition of the American scene, and affecting us because of our slowness in making a certain distinction. This cause is the hopeless inferiority and inartistry of the entire standard of American bourgeois fiction, and the neglected distinction is that between successful professional fiction and honestly artistic attempts at self-expression in the narrative.

If the object of amateur journalism were to train likely young plodders in the skilled manual labour of professional fiction carpentry, no one might justly protest at the existing condition. But the idea has been held by some that amateurism is synonymous with aesthetic sincerity, and with the loving craftsmanship for its own sake which is art. If this is so, we are on the wrong track; for there is nothing of art or true merit in the "salable short story" which too often forms the model of our efforts. I do not think any meritorious short story could be sold to an average professional magazine of the popular class except by accident. He who strives to produce salable fiction is lost as an artist, for the conditions of American life have made art impossible in the popular professional field.

Editors and publishers are not to blame. They cater to their public, and would suffer shipwreck if they did not. And even when one transfers the blame to this larger unit, one cannot justly be very savage in his blaming; for analysis shews that most of the trouble is absolutely inevitable—as incapable of human remedy as the fate of any protagonist in the Greek drama. Here in America we have a very conventional and half-educated public—a public trained under one phase or another of the Puritan tradition, and also dulled to aesthetic sensitiveness because of the monotonous and omnipresent over stressing of the ethical element. We have millions who lack intellectual independence, courage, and flexibility to get an artistic thrill out of an original and realistic situation, or to enter sympathetically into a story unless it ignores the colour and vividness of actual human emotions and conventionally presents a simple plot based on artificial, ethically sugar-coated values and leading to a flat denouement which vindicates every current platitude and leaves no mystery unexplained by the shallow comprehension of the most mediocre reader.

That is why our professional fiction is unworthy of the emulation of any literary artist. Editors, however, cannot logically be blamed. If any magazine sought and used artistically original types of fiction, it would lose its readers almost to a man. Half the people wouldn't understand what the tales were about, and the other half would find the characters unsympathetic—because these characters would think and act like real persons instead of like the dummies which the American middle classes have been taught and persuaded to consider and accept as human beings. Such is the inevitable condition regarding the enormous bulk of fiction which sets the national standard and determines the type of technical training given all fictional students even in our best universities.

But even this is not all. Added to this, as if by the perversity of a malign fate, is the demand of an overspeeding public for excessive quantity production. Simply put, the American people demand more stories per year than the really artistic authors of America could possibly write. A real artist never works fast except by mood, and never turns out large quantities except by rare chance. He cannot contract to deliver so many words in such and such a time, but must work naturally, gradually, sometimes very slowly, and always as his psychological state determines; utilising favourable states of mind and refraining from putting down the stuff his brain turns out when it is

tired or undisciplined to such effort. Now this, of course, will not do when there are hundreds of magazines to fill at regular intervals. So many pages per month or week must be filled; and if the artistic writers lag behind, the publishers must find the next-best thing—persons of mere talent, who can learn certain mechanical rules and technical twists, and put forth stuff of external smoothness, whose sole merit is in conforming to patterns and rehashing the situations and reactions which have been found interesting to the people by previous experience. In many cases these writers achieve popularity because the public recognises the elements that pleased it before, and is satisfied to receive them again in dexterously transposed form. Actually, the typical reader has very little true taste, and judges by absurd freaks, sentimentalities, and analogies. So it has come to be an accepted tradition that American fiction is not an art but a trade—a thing to be learnt by rule by almost anybody, and demanding above all else a complete submergence of one's own personality and thought in the general stream of conventional patterns which correspond to the bleakly uniform view of life forced on us by mediocre leadership. Success therefore comes not to the man of genius, but to the clever fellow who knows how to catch the public point of view and play up to it. Glittering tinsel reputations are built up, and dumb driven [...] hundreds of otherwise honest and respectable plumbers take correspondence courses to crush their individuality and try to be like these scintillant "great ones" whose achievements are really no more than mere charlatanry.

Such is our fictional situation—indiscriminate hordes of writers, mostly without genius, striving by erroneous methods toward a goal which is erroneous to start with! One sees the thing at its zenith in periodicals like *The Saturday Evening Post*, where men of more or less real talent are weighed down with the freely flung gold which forms the price of their originality and artistic conscience. A fearful incubus—which only a few adroit or daring souls ever shake off. But here in amateurdom there is no gold to weigh us down or buy our conscience. Here, if anywhere, we ought to be able to write for the love of writing and the thrill of aesthetic conquest. Shall we not at least strive to do this, in order that our institution may be a thing of real dignity and value instead of a rather ridiculous caricature of the tawdry professional sphere?