



Nightmares in Decay: The Edgar Allan Poe Illustrations of Harry Clarke

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Often acclaimed as the finest Irish illustrator of all time, Harry Clarke (1889-1931) first turned his hand to depicting the works of Edgar Allan Poe around 1914. Poe's work was ideally suited to Clarke, who drew in an intricate style often reminiscent of Aubrey Beardsley, and was fascinated by the weird and macabre. By 1919 Clarke had produced 24 drawings to accompany a new edition of Poe's "Tales of Mystery and Imagination". It became a best-seller, and was reprinted in 1923 with an additional 8 full-colour plates by Clarke.

NIGHTMARES IN DECAY features full-page reproductions of all 32 of Clarke's Poe illustrations, including all 8 full colour plates, as well as vignettes and rare variations. It also includes a lengthy illustrated biographical introduction to Clarke, his life and his entire artistic oeuvre by D M Mitchell, making a total of over 50 illustrations.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Harry Clarke (1889-1931) was the greatest of all Irish stained glass artists, as well as a brilliant painter and book illustrator, comparable with Aubrey Beardsley, Edmund Dulac and Kay Nielsen, and influenced by the Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements. His illustration work included *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope, Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales, Fairy Tales by Charles Perrault, *Faust* by Goethe and Selected Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne - but his illustrations for Poe remain his dark masterpieces.

Member of underground band 'Photographed by Lightning from 1984 to the present, releasing music on Fierce (home of the Pooh Sticks), Situation Normal and ONEIROS MUSIC labels. Author of "Savoy - A Serious Life", a biography of Savoy Books and a study of the New Worlds 60s SF scene and its legacy. (pub Savoy Books) ("Winner of the International Horror Guild Award for Outstanding Achievement (best nonfiction title), 2004"). Short fiction, interviews and articles have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies including 'Rapid Eye', 'Beat Scene', 'Nox', 'Cold Cuts III', and 'Impulse'.

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In his "Philosophy of Composition" Edgar Allan Poe claimed that his purpose as a writer was to make the realization of a work of art depend on a prior, methodical organisation of its elements in view of producing a desired effect. However much he may have believed that this was the sum and total of his work, even a cursory analysis of a dozen of his pieces will show that although he 'moulded' and 'shaped' the material consciously and meticulously, the source of his inspiration was always buried somewhere deep in the caverns of an apocalyptic subconscious, hung with vast storm clouds and pierced by lightning flashes. In his biographical notes of Poe, Baudelaire declared "Literary jealousies, infinite vertigo, marital woe, the humiliation of poverty; Poe fled all of it in the darkness of his drunken stupor as if in the darkness of the grave. For he drank not as a lush, but as a barbarian." The power of Poe's writings stems from the frisson between his high intellectual faculties on the one hand and his atavistic self-destructiveness on the other. Harry Clarke's illustrations for Poe's tales do not merely depict various scenes from the tales (often with a fair bit of artistic license as regards interpretation) but also perfectly capture the mood of despair and nihilism, coupled with the hysterical laughter of the infinite one often imagines when reading Poe's pieces. All Clarke's distinctive trademarks are there; the ornate and profuse use of detail and decoration, and the sinuous lines and stylised postures of the figures, still graceful but now also contorted into expressions of maniacal obsession, depravity and insanity, horror and mortal terror. Often, rather than graphically depicting the dynamic events described in a story, the illustration seems more like some weird still-life or a frozen Byzantine icon. Frequently figures cluster together in enigmatic and symbolic groupings reminiscent of the witches and devils in Goya's "Los Caprichos". But despite the macabre and often grisly subject matter, the effect one comes away with is of a transcendent beauty - a 'convulsive beauty' as Andre Breton called it - created by the tension between irreconcilably opposed elements placed in abnormal juxtaposition, or the chance meeting of normally distant and unlikely material; in this instance, the horrific or melancholy subject matter and the exquisitely graceful execution of the drawings.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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