



The Terrible Old Man

H.P. Lovecraft

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"The Terrible Old Man" is a short story by H. P. Lovecraft, written on January 28, 1920, and first published in the Tryout, an amateur press publication, in July 1921. It's notable as the first story to make use of Lovecraft's imaginary New England setting, introducing the fictional town of Kingsport.

The Terrible Old Man is a strange elderly man "so old that no one can remember when he was young, and so taciturn that few know his real name". He lives alone in an ancient house on Water Street in the town of Kingsport.

The Terrible Old Man reappears in the story "The Strange High House in the Mist" in a more benevolent role.

The Terrible Old Man Details

Date : Published (first published July 1921)

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From Reader Review The Terrible Old Man for online ebook

Michelle Elizabeth says

Seemed promising, but it ultimately did nothing for me. I can't help but feel I missed some subtle aspect that would have made me enjoy it more. Read it for free on Tor's website.

Joshua Shiohita says

This is like the movie Don't Breathe, except with a supernatural element. There's a little of Lovecraft's xenophobia present here but thankfully it doesn't taint the entire story. I liked the mystery that the old man represented, one that never got answered.

Badseedgirl says

Lesson of this short story;

Don't F*ck with old people.

Lesson learned.

JamesBellaqua says

Una historia corta pero emocionante. Me impresioné un poco, al ver que esta narración está en tercera persona; y no, en primera, como usualmente Lovecraft escribía.

Los personajes son muy llamativos, en especial, el antagonista, el terrible anciano, ya que es; un ser despiadado y cruel.

Munawar Mobin says

Another brilliant epitome of short horror stories.

Doesnt include the usual lovecraft octopus tentacles or cosmic horror but a rather different almost "normal"

citizen.

Oh, one other distinctive Lovecraftian characteristic (though I hesitate to call it a “touch”): as soon as I read the opening sentence—“It was the design of Angelo Ricci and Joe Czanek and Manuel Silva to call on the Terrible Old Man.”—I knew the three guys aforementioned must be robbers. Gathered here are members of three of xenophobic H.P.'s most dread non-Aryan peoples! *One* of them *might* be a sailor intent upon selling a small malevolent idol, but *three* members of *three separate inferior races* in collusion? Their objective *must* be robbery. Or worse.

Quirkyreader says

Oh my, this Lovecraft story was super creepy and very descriptive.

? Irena ? says

'It was the design of Angelo Ricci and Joe Czanek and Manuel Silva to call on the Terrible Old Man.'

To call on might be a bit of an understatement since these three, not being from Kingsport and lacking the knowledge of the old man strangeness (he was seen speaking to his bottles), have decided to rob the man.

Ricci and Silva go in. They leave Czanek to wait for them by the car. They don't come out.

The first time I've read about the Terrible Old Man was in *The Strange High House in the Mist* where he has a more benign role.

Lindsay says

A tale with uncharacteristically moral overtones for Lovecraft, the self-described cosmic indifferentist. I nearly gave it three stars but the concept of an old sailor communicating with his dead shipmates via resonant pieces of lead suspended in bottles blew my mindtank :-D

Marco says

Lovecraft's xenophobia is a powerful force in his work. His pathological race-induced fears are transfigured into the horrors so adroitly described in his stories. While his racist views emerge in his stories, marring and staining them, we can sometimes still appreciate the rest of the work because of that powerful, agoraphobic sense of horror and fear that he managed to convey. While we despise his views, we still admire his

tremendously powerful depictions of ancient horrors, powered by the deep anxieties and fears rooted on his views.

In the case of *The terrible Old Man*, the author fails to deliver, and all that is left are the xenophobic rants and a thin plot. Let's just say this is not one of his best short stories.

Jason says

I read this very short story while sitting in Fazoli's shortly after leaving Bentonville. I did not know anything about it prior to starting it.

SUMMARY

Three burglars (all minorities from immigrant families in early 20th century America) try to rob a retired ship captain known as the "Terrible Old Man", unaware of the man's evil reputation or his strange behavior after spending most of his life sailing in some of the less known regions of the world.

OVERALL: 2 out of 5

This story is an unfortunate case of missed opportunity and half-baked ideas. There is some initial atmosphere built and a mystery alluded to, and then things turn into a rather simple story that relies on a cheap "scare" that doesn't do much by today's standards. If Lovecraft had allowed two of his thieves more time to explore the Terrible Old Man's house and unlock just a few of the mysteries around him and his journeys, it would have been far more satisfying.

RATINGS BY CATEGORY

CHARACTERS: 2 out of 5

The only redeeming aspect of the characters in this story is the mystery that surrounds the Terrible Old Man himself. His history is teased but not delved into.

The three crooks who try to rob the title character are stock "degenerate immigrants" that Lovecraft loved to use, but they at least feel like human characters with motivations, fears, and desires.

PACE: 3 out of 5

I went into this story not knowing what to expect, and it establishes things in short order. I thought it was slightly disjointed between the initial setup and the narrative that followed, but it still made for quick reading.

STORY: 1 out of 5

The story here isn't that good. A good mystery about the title character is hinted but not explored, and the fate of the three would-be robbers is ambiguous and unfulfilling.

DIALOGUE: N/A out of 5

There isn't really any dialogue in this story so I have decided not to rate it at all.

STYLE/TECHNICAL: 2 out of 5

There isn't anything special in the writing here. A creepy atmosphere is established early on, and it isn't ruined, but it isn't fulfilled either.

Ken says

Three robbers pay a visit to a reclusive old sea captain with a rumored stash of hoarded gold.

This is the first in a series of stories about the fictional town of Kingsport written by Lovecraft. While the story is just so-so, it did interest me in reading more about Kingsport.

3 STARS

Latasha says

the terrible old man don't play that game honey!

TOM says

A fairly underwhelming short regarding a strange old man who lives alone and ends up brutally murdering three men who attempt to rob him.

He possess strange bottles containing small pieces of lead suspended from strings, which he talks to and has built bizarre painted stone sculptures in his front garden which resemble 'Eastern idols' ... nice details, but the story could have been expanded to be more complex and unsettling.

Andrew Leon says

"The Terrible Old Man" might be the most normal of Lovecraft's stories, the most "normal" one I've read, anyway. Which is not to say that it's not a horror story, but it's not a weird, tentacled monster horror story.

This is going to be all spoilery, by the way, because the short story is quite short, and there's no way to talk about what I want to talk about without giving it away. But you should still read it because 1. it's short, and 2. it's that good.

I'm not saying that Lovecraft invented this type of story, but this is certainly the earliest example that I know I've read of this type, the type where the perpetrators become the victims.

So...

There's an old man, an ex-sea captain, who lives alone and is rumored to have vast stores of treasures. Or something. No one really knows because the old guy keeps to himself and everyone is afraid of him. But,

then, three new guys arrive into town, hear about the guy, and decide that they will rob the old man. They'll torture the location of the hidden treasure out of him if they have to.

Except one of the guys, the driver, isn't too keen on the torture part, so he tells his two buddies to go easy on the old guy. And that's the last he sees of them as they head to the house and he waits in the car. Not long after, he hears screams coming from inside the house and assumes it's the old guy... until he finds the old guy staring at him from the gate with a wicked grin on his face.

Seriously, go read it.

Now, one of the things I read about this story is that it's a prime example of Lovecraft's racism... wait! What? I'm sorry; I just don't see it.

Yes, the men from out of town are "foreigners" in that they are not from the small town where everyone knows about the terrible old man. You have to outsiders come in who don't know any better. I think you have to read awfully deep between the lines to turn this into some kind of warning to outsiders to stay out.

Or maybe I just don't know enough about Lovecraft.

However, not knowing more than I do, I say this is a really great read.
