

# THE CTHULHU PRAYER SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

## Third Meeting of The Providence H.P. Lovecraft Friends' Group

MAY 20, 2001 — For the third successive, writers, artists, composers and others who are fans of the writing and mythos of H.P. Lovecraft, America's greatest horror writer, gathered at the Union Station Brewery in downtown Providence for the Cthulhu Prayer Brunch. The managers of this micro brewery, famed for its excellent cuisine, assured us that our own outdoor tables would be safely separated from those of God-fearing citizens. Our own "Cthulhu Table" would be set and ready with its multitentacled party favors, and the Elder Gods would receive an appropriate burnt offering in the kitchen.

Attendees for past Cthulhu Prayer Brunches included founder Brett Rutherford, Providence's Gothic poet and small press publisher; Carl Johnson, Providence-born actor noted for his Lovecraft re-enactments; artists Pieter Vanderbeck, Pierre Ford, Jennifer Booth and Riva Leviten. Also: Joseph Cherkes, publisher of *Haunts* magazine, and newly-arrived New Jersey poet Thomas D. Jones.

The planned afternoon outing is a journey to Providence's Old North Burial Ground, to visit the grave of Sarah Helen Whitman, the poet and one-time fiancée of Edgar Allan Poe, where some of their poems will be read. Other articles in this newsletter provide some background on Poe and Mrs. Whitman.

The Cthulhu Prayer Brunches are intended to be both social and intellectual, bringing together both fellow creative artists and Lovecraft fans of all ages. Most brunches will be followed by field trips to Lovecraftian sites, film viewing, poetry/fiction readings or discussions. Artists engaged in Lovecraft-related work are encouraged to bring their work to show and share. Artists and writers may also submit work excerpts, poems, graphics files, shameless promotions of their work, and personal ads for trans-dimensional relationships.



## POE AND MRS. WHITMAN: DOOMED ROMANCE, GREAT POETRY by Brett Rutherford

Excerpted from the forthcoming second edition of *Last Flowers: The Romance Poems of Edgar Allan Poe and Sarah Helen Whitman*

Anyone who has ever thrilled to the euphony and cadences of Poe — either as a youngster, or, like myself, as a superannuated youth — has no doubt wondered: were there *others* like Poe? Was he unique in his cosmic scope, his brooding and fevered flight into worlds of fantasy, his nocturnal haunting of tombs and cypress groves? There *was* at least one other — the Providence poet Sarah Helen Whitman. This brilliant and eccentric woman was Poe's spiritual equal, and their calamitous romance was one of the great misfortunes in the history of literature. Their poetry, published here together for the first time, demonstrates not only the depth of her intellect, but the remarkable ways in which their works complement one another.

Is she Poe's literary equal? Alas, there is only one Poe. But as a companion, complement and sequel to Poe, she has much to recommend her. If you love Poe, you will like or even love Sarah Helen Whitman. If your heart is open to the passion, sorrow and tragedy of this "almost" liaison of two brilliant intellects, you will find the colloquy of their poems a wrenching one.

### Five Visits to Providence

Poe visited Providence, Rhode Island, at least five times, beginning in September 1848, to win the affections and promise of marriage of Sarah Helen Whitman. He had less than fourteen months to live when, still haunted by the death of his wife Virginia by consumption, and alienated from the New York *literati*, he began the doomed courtship.

She was born in Providence on January 19, 1803, the daughter of Captain Nicholas Power, a ship captain. Her father vanished on a journey and was presumed lost at sea. It later turned out that he had simply abandoned his Rhode Island family and settled — bigamously — in the South. When he appeared years later, remorseful, Sarah Helen's mother was transformed overnight from a respectable widow to an abandoned woman. Mrs. Power, Sarah Helen and her sister Susan Anna lived in a house on Benefit Street, a fashionable avenue perched on a hillside overlooking Providence's busy waterfront. The city's "College Hill" boasted fine mansions, classic churches and a small colonial burial ground just a few minutes' walk from their door.

Despite her mother's now deepset mistrust of the male gender, Sarah Helen was wooed and won away from the Benefit Street home. In 1828, she married John W. Whitman, a Boston lawyer and as aspiring poet and publisher. Three years later, he died, and Helen returned home. Her life there, though secluded by the standards of New York and Boston, was enriched by her correspondence with editors and fellow poets, and she saw her work published with increasing frequency.

When she sent her first romantic valentine to Poe, she had been a widow for fifteen years. Devoted to the care of her aging mother and a manic depressive sister, she had become a well-known Providence literary figure and eccentric, dressing in flowing Isadora Duncan-like shawls and scarves and alarming conventional neighbors with her fondness for pagan mythology. At the Athenaeum, the Greek temple library, she passed as an incarnation of the temple goddess and even once wore Athena's helmet to a party there. Such things were just not done in a city that still outlawed "reveling" on the Sabbath.

Poe had seen Helen three years earlier during a brief visit to Providence. On a late

## MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY DRINKING SONG

created for  
THE FIRST CTHULHU PRAYER  
BREAKFAST

*Yog-Sothoth! Yog Sothoth!*  
Bless our broth!  
*Tekelili, Tekelili!*  
Bend the knee,  
Drink the tea!  
*Nyarlahotep! Nyarlahotep!*  
Nothing rhymes with Thee!  
*Azathoth! Azathoth!*  
Not more broth?  
*Herbert West?* Be my guest!  
*Dexter Ward* — but not possessed!  
*Ech Pi El! Ech Pi El!*  
Taste the ale!  
*Cthulhu! Cthulhu!*  
Union Brew! Union Brew!



night walk, he had glimpsed her in the garden behind and below her Benefit Street house, clad in her distinctive attire of slippers and trailing shawls and scarves. She was enjoying a particularly balmy evening and an intense moon; he was mesmerized by the image of her amidst roses. Because of the late hour, Poe and his companion did not address her, but watched her vanish into the house.

Only later did Poe learn that "Mrs." Whitman was a widow, and that her poetry was of the first rank. With mixed motives, he decided to intensify their exchange of poems — initiated by her in February 1848 — into a full fledged courtship. Poe, by this time broken in health, presented a terrifying but irresistible persona to the retiring woman, who was 45 to Poe's 39 years of age.

On good days, his poetry, his eloquence, and his ambitions for his prospective magazine, *The Stylus*, won over even Helen's suspicious and protective mother. His lectures on the Lyceum circuit were well-attended, and for that public, Poe appeared to be a man of colossal intellect, in command of himself and full of vaunting confidence about the power of intellect. (In his last lecture, "Eureka," he would take armchair cosmology to unseen heights.)

On other days, Poe's wild demeanor and behavior alarmed and terrified the Whitman family. He assured Helen that his "problems" with drinking were all behind him, and then, somewhere between Benefit Street and his hotel, the spectre of the bottle would greet him. For several wild days, he walked the streets of Providence, his face contorted in the aftermath of a dose of laudanum.

Unknown to Helen, the overdose was a dramatic gesture intended to be suicidal — or intended to seem so — for the benefit of another woman.

Helen did not know — and did not believe it even when the evidence was presented decades later by a diligent Poe biographer — that there was an invisible "other woman" who knew all about the courtship. The sympathetic Annie Richmond, in nearby Lowell, showered Poe with sympathetic and sisterly affection, and she was on his mind constantly even as he professed exclusive and passionate love for Helen.

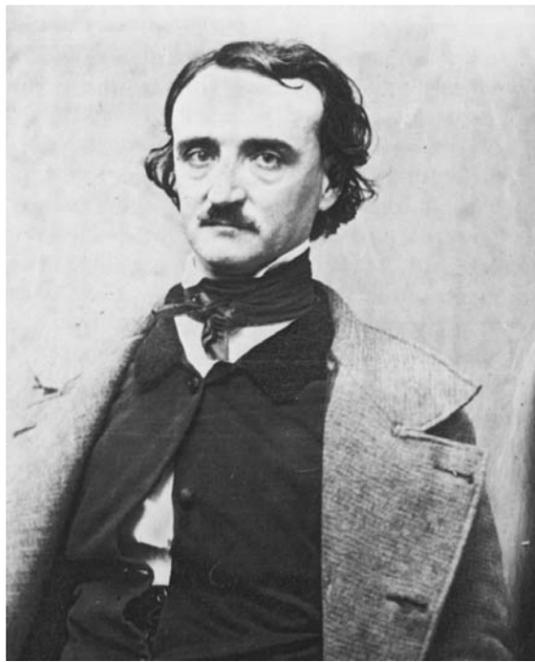
One gets the impression of spies behind every lamppost on Benefit Street, and informants lurking in the stacks at the Athenaeum. During the courtship and brief engagement, Sarah Helen received letters and visits from "disinterested" but usually vengeful persons who warned her about a liaison with Poe.

After turning her finances over to her mother and securing a vow of temperance from Poe, she finally consented to the marriage. Poe was bitterly insulted by the family's insistence that Helen's inheritance be "protected" from her husband-to-be.

Caught in the web he had made for himself, Poe was now expected to return to New York with a wife he could not afford to support. The Imp of the Perverse took over. He indulged in a few drinks in his hotel. He scribbled a note of renunciation and farewell to Helen, in an agitated hand.

The next day, the engagement was shattered in a scene of poetic hysterics. After hours of waiting for Helen in the Whitman parlor, her reluctant appearance provoked an outburst. Poe threw himself at Helen's feet and tore off part of her dress. Helen sniffed a handkerchief soaked in ether, then passed swooning into oblivion from the terrifying scene.

Some accounts here say that Helen's mother and sister gave Poe a thorough rebuff, and he retreated with William Pabodie, a Whitman family friend and fellow poet, never to return. Other accounts say that Poe was treated kindly even after his outburst, and that a doctor was called, and that Poe was ushered out under the



doctor's advice to Pabodie's house, "where he was kindly cared for."

Within a matter of days, everyone knew, from Providence to New York, how Poe had courted and lost the poetic Mrs. Whitman. Each telling of the scene in the parlor became more melodramatic, until it finally seemed that the militia had been called to remove the drunken poet from the premises.

Later, Helen published a poem to tell Poe indirectly of her undying affection for him. Poe, for his part, may have written "Annabel Lee" to memorialize their romance. But before they could ever meet again, Poe was dead — found in a stupor on a Baltimore street during the crazed days of a local election.

Sarah Helen Whitman lived for three more decades. In 1853, she published the poems she had written to and about Poe. In 1860, she published *Edgar Poe and His Critics*, a small but well-reasoned defense of Poe's writing and reputation. Although she seldom left Providence, she published her poems in major magazines and newspapers, and maintained correspondence with writers around the world. Her loyalty to Poe and her unselfish help to Poe biographers over the decades helped turn the tide of popular opinion against those who had depicted him as an amoral villain. Helen's achievement is one of the great vindications in literary history.

### A Literary Romance

Poe's flirtations with the literary women of his day are perfect examples of his contradictory nature. There is nothing more typical of the poetic impulse than to fall into an abstract, other-worldly infatuation with someone unattainable. Poe attracted the attentions of a number of women poets. In the hothouse society they frequented, they all met and competed for the attention of the real poetic lions. They wrote valentines and structured acrostic verses around their names and initials. They encouraged passionate, personal letters and guarded their *billets doux* closer than their jewelry.

This might seem to the jaded modernist a mere prelude to adultery. In Poe's case these poetic flatteries were likely the only "embraces" actually exchanged. Some of

Poe's friendships with his lady poets were conducted in the full presence and acquiescence of husbands and other family members. Poe's letters and poems were scarcely secret, and Poe thought so little of the heated missives from poetesses that one such letter was seen in his cottage in full view of his wife, mother-in-law and other visiting ladies. (And thereby hangs another soap opera scandal, with committees of outraged ladies calling at Poe's Fordham cottage demanding the return of letters...)

Poe was always in control of these "literary" passions because he blithely regarded *all* the women poets of America as substantially lower in intellect. To him, they were sensitive and clever, but hardly serious. Their poems and letters to him were praise; his to them, flattery and gallantry. In both types of exchanges, hyperbole was expected.

This is not to say that Poe's affections for various women, including Sarah Helen Whitman, were unreal. Poe seems even to have understood how this aloof literary and intellectual passion would be his battery. An early poem, "Romance," rather clearly spells out his feeling of being foredoomed to impossible, but fructifying, infatuations:

I could not love except where Death  
Was mingling his with Beauty's breath —  
Or Hymen, Time and Destiny  
Were stalking between her and me.

These couplets could very well be the motto of Poe's entire romantic life: his attraction to women doomed to die of consumption; for safely married women; for women too old to properly return his passion (the first Helen of his boyhood, and, perhaps, even the wife of his adoptive guardian, Mr. Allan); and for Sarah Helen Whitman, whom Destiny indeed marked for a mismatch.

In his story, "The Imp of the Perverse," Poe also defined the impulse which drove him to his quixotic passions — yea, to do the very thing that he knew would be the worst possible course of action in a given situation. He wrote:

a paradoxical something, which we may call perverseness,...through its promptings we act without comprehensible object...we act for the reason that we should not...the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable force which impels us, and alone impels us, to its prosecution...It is a radical, a primitive impulse—elementary...The impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing, and the longing...is indulged...There is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient, as that of him, who shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge...I am one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse."

### Poe and Helen Reconsidered

Poe's courtship of Sarah Helen Whitman has been dismissed by some biographers as a mere attempt to find a suitable, moneyed lady, a source of funds for his magazine project.

Doubtless, Poe sought Helen with some pecuniary intentions. This was typical for a nearly indigent male in a society abundant with landed widows. Yet he knowingly, perversely, chose a lady poet whose work he already admired and respected, with whom he was foredoomed to engage in anything *but* a businesslike marriage proposal.

What should have been a leisurely process of familiarization, family approval and eventual nuptials, became a frenzied, desperate passion fraught with contradictions. The closer he came to eliciting the commitment of Helen, the more he was reminded of his purely "platonic" affection for Annie Richmond in Lowell. The more Helen and her family insisted upon his abstinence, the more the Imp of the Perverse drew him to a defiant and conspicuous plunge into drink.

### NEXT MEETING

SUNDAY JUNE 10th  
(WANING GIBBOUS ATTIRE,  
WITHIN LEGAL LIMITS)

11:30 am, Union Station Brewery  
Exchange Place, in Kennedy Plaza.  
Program to be announced for "field  
trip" after the brunch.

Advance Orders Are Now Being Accepted for the new, expanded edition of *Last Flowers: The Romance Poems of Edgar Allan Poe and Sarah Helen Whitman*, to be published in hardcover in September. The book is illustrated by Providence artist Richard Sardinha.

To place an advance order, send \$19.95 to

THE POET'S PRESS  
95 HOPE STREET #6  
PROVIDENCE, RI 02906



Poe's suicide attempt, leading to the dazed, twisted "Ultima Thule" days in which he haunted the Whitman parlor and walked the streets of Providence with concerned friends and well-wishers, was understood by Helen to be an overdose from something Poe had bought from a druggist to "calm himself."

Actually, it seems to have been a desperate measure to attract Annie into a more serious relationship, which would, in effect, "rescue" him from Helen. He had intended to take the drug in Boston, board a train for Lowell, and arrive at Annie's door in his death throes. Instead, he vomited up most of the drug, and good Samaritans got the dazed, confused Poe on a train "home" — to Providence. What was in his tormented mind? Annie would save him ... from himself ... from Helen ... and perhaps his Byronic gesture would convince her to leave her staid husband ... and perhaps — but here we are at the edge of the maelstrom. Men on the eve of marriage have done stranger things.

But drugs or no drugs, Annie or no Annie, Poe's despair in Providence was anything but the reaction to a business deal gone sour. Helen, cool as Athena, appealed to his best Nature — Annie was mother, sister, chaste and untouchable, another man's wife. A moth between two candles, Poe twisted and whirled. Even Poe's arch-rationalist detective Dupin would have been hard-pressed to make sense of this behavior.

### Helen's Providence

Sarah Helen Whitman lived in what is most kindly described as an intellectual backwater. Notwithstanding the presence of a major university — "native" Providence was a city mostly concerned with politics, religion, local history, and the outer trappings of culture. It was not a cosmopolitan city. As far as I can ascertain, Providence never had a literary silver age, let alone a golden one. It is a place that viewed visiting intellectuals with suspicion, and native ones with indifference, if not scorn.

Sarah Helen sums up the dreariness of literary Providence thus in another letter to Ingram in 1874: "Though called the wealthiest city of its size in the Union, it has no magazine or other literary periodical." (Her friend Pabodie tried for years, unsuccessfully, to start a literary journal.)

Helen's escapes to Boston and New York, her correspondence, and the intimate circle of her local admirers comprised her whole literary milieu. She emerged now and then as a "civic" poet, called upon to write an occasional piece for a dedication of a monument or graveyard, and then vanished into that most familiar state of poets — "taken for granted." The editors of *Harper's* and other journals coaxed poems from her, which she pretended to submit with only the greatest reluctance. Some were published anonymously — a despicable practice of editors which deprived many literary

women of their due, since women were most often the ones "sheltered" under the mantle of "Anon." A poem such as her "Hours of Life" might have made the reputation of a young male poet. A poem published and attributed to "a lady of our acquaintance," however, was assumed to be the work of a dilettante.

She visited Emerson, and overcame her grave reservations to meet Walt Whitman when that controversial poet visited Providence. The former "lacked warmth," but the latter won her over by his integrity and eloquence. She confessed, however, that she had to tear out a full third of the pages from *Leaves of Grass* before she could have the book remain in her house.

Even consenting to meet Walt Whitman made Sarah Helen Whitman a member of Providence's *avant garde*. Years earlier, one of the most influential families in Providence broke off with Sarah Helen because she professed to have read and liked Shelley. Anyone who even *read* the works of an atheist could obviously be denied access to the proper kind of society in New England. For some reason — perhaps a siege of requests by her friends and Poe's — Helen chose to publish a volume of her poems in 1853. Her decision was no doubt also influenced by her conviction that she would soon die. (She still had more than two hypochondriacal decades left.)

Her first book, *Hours of Life and Other Poems*, published in her fiftieth year, was printed by Knowles, Anthony & Company under the aegis of George H. Whitney, a Providence bookseller and publisher. The edition was small and the poet was still giving away copies twenty years later. The volume includes the major poems she had written to and about Poe.

*Edgar Poe and His Critics* was published in 1860.

Sarah Helen Whitman's collected poems were issued in a memorial edition a year after her death, in 1879, by Houghton, Osgood and Company, printed by The Riverside Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The third and last printing was in 1916.

### Helen Whitman's Beliefs

It is easy to look with a smile at the constellation of beliefs that made up "advanced" thinking in the 1850's to 1880's. On the surface, Sarah Helen Whitman belonged to the highly stratified, conventional world of a sensible, money-making seaport. With this came Christianity, stultifying sermons, and stern proscriptions against sensual indulgence.

At the same time, however, people read and spoke of things that were far afield from the narrow universe of the church steeple. The goods and new images from the China Trade. Scholars began for the first time to "compare" the cultures and beliefs of East and West. Emerson looked East, and liked what he saw. Greek and Latin classics were there, and a large number of men and

women could read for themselves of the glories of the ancient world — a world that mocked Puritanism.

Sarah Helen Whitman was a well-read classicist. She knew Virgil, and her love of the classics even extended to appearing at social functions in the robes and helmet of Athena. She read Shelley and the Romantics, and she translated German supernatural ballads, Goethe, and Victor Hugo. Her correspondents included Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mallarmé and other continental writers, as well as many domestic writers and editors.

Although "conventional" images and themes recur throughout her poems, Sarah Helen Whitman was an original, eccentric and Romantic. Had she been free of her duties of caring for her mother and sister — had she flown with Poe to New York or Boston — there is little doubt that her originality would have blossomed or even exploded. What a loss to art when artists are enmeshed in family affairs!

While half the population was obsessed with industrialization and the accumulation of wealth, the New England *avant garde*, led by the transcendentalists, were opening new doors to the spiritual and supernatural. This bipolarity of practicality and dreaming makes American intellectual life fascinating. The same minds who fought for Darwin against the Bible, fought for Abolition against the profits of slavery as a Christian "Crusade," dabbled in spiritualism, and loved horror tales and Gothic poems.

Both poles are an enduring part of our heritage, and many of our most creative minds have contained a large dose of both tendencies. Providence's other great writer, H.P. Lovecraft, was the epitome of a materialist rationalist whose art consisted of a vast Mythos of dreams and nightmares. Walt Whitman understood this intellectual complexity when he wrote: "Do I contradict myself? Very well — I contradict myself. I am large — I contain multitudes."

Sarah Helen embodied those polarities, indeed. She had the humanity and courage to be an Abolitionist. She had the strength and prudence to know that Poe had to stop drinking to save his soul. He failed her in the classic way the alcoholic "tests" loved ones — by an overt act of defiance, followed by a plea for help and salvation.

Helen's dreaming side included a refined and individual brand of spiritualism. Essentially, she nodded assent with the Christians on the issue of the immortality of the soul. But *her* afterlife is more pagan than Christian — a place where lovers are reunited, justice prevails, and punishment — that favorite bugaboo of Puritans — is not even mentioned. It is a benevolent vision of a "here and now" survival of souls — a comforting and harmless dream. She makes it clear in her poetry that she rejects the smiting God — the Old Testament Jehovah whose shadow still darkened New England.

Some of her beliefs, though, are just plain silly. She read Agrippa's *Occult Philosophy* and other works of hermetic and cabalistic lore. She came to believe in "the power of names and the significance of anagrams." But lest we blame her too quickly, let's remember the wide variety of fads that permeated the 19th Century, including animal magnetism, phrenology, electrical cures, astrology, faith healing, and table-tapping spiritualism.

Cheap books and the popular press gave the purveyors of pseudo-science large audiences (then as now). The advent of railroads took people to the cities to hear charlatans and quacks, and brought the scoundrels to the small towns for "Lyceum" lectures.

Amidst the popular frenzy of seances and mediums, Helen clung to her belief in an afterlife, while dismissing with scorn the charlatans who claimed to be able to converse with the dead. On one occasion she loaned some memento of Poe to a medium, but she was not surprised when the seance did not produce the hoped-for visitation.

Her studied attitude toward the supernatural is one that is in league with Poe's, and almost identical with Lovecraft's a generation later. She wrote, "I have a conviction not to be shaken that the occult sciences cover great truths, dimly discerned & obscured by superstition, doubtless, but nevertheless truths."

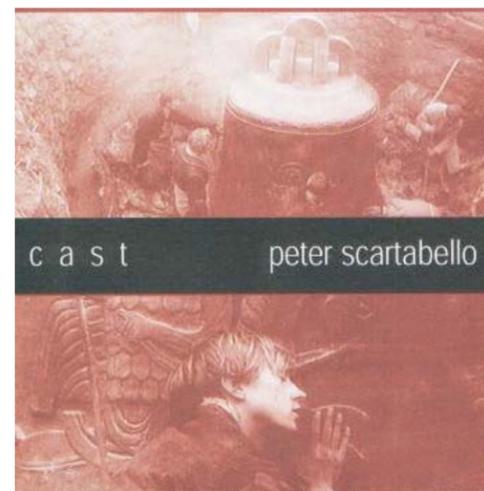


## THE OLD GENT'S FRIENDS



**Carl Johnson's** April 1 memorial for H.P. Lovecraft, which included readings of poems and an excerpt from the play *Night Gaunts*, is the eighth time this Rhode Island actor has organized and run these well-attended events. Carl provided a couple of photos of celebrants at the gravesite, including, of course, his own window-shattering visage and a shot of an actor friend performing the climactic passages from "The Rats in the Wall."

Composer **Peter Scartabello**, whose music often turns to Lovecraftian themes, turned up at a recent graveside ceremony to place a Cthulhu-related orchestral score against HPL's tombstone. Peter has now founded his own CD label, **Yuggoth Records**, to publish his work. His first CD, titled "Cast," is out now. It includes a moody string quartet composed in 1997 and played by Providence's own Charleston String Quartet (the resident quartet on the Brown University campus until the High Mormon cut them from the budget a couple



of years back.) Charles Sherba, first violinist, is also concertmaster of the Rhode Island Philharmonic.

Scartabello's quartet involves the playing of microtones (notes between the written notes), but we found his work so engaging that a little "strange tuning" really didn't interfere with our pleasure. After all, the inhabitants of the Hyades have a 36-note scale, albeit in the X-ray spectrum.

The second piece on the CD is "Electro Magma," for bass clarinet and tape, which, Peter indicates, "sonically depicts the death of our sun and consequently the earth ... the earth will finally become a ball of molten rock and magma will wash upon itself in waves. The tape material depicts this progression. The sound of the clarinet can be seen as a disembodied being observing a



barren and lifeless planet." It begins with the bass clarinet playing moodily over what sounds like *The Wind Chimes at the World's End*, and then plunges into tympanic and chthonic darkness.

You can get this CD from Peter for \$10. Send a check payable to Peter Scartabello at Yuggoth Records, 24 Prospect Road, South Kingstown, RI 02879. All proceeds from the sale of this CD will go toward the recording of the composer's "Yuggoth Set."

**Pierre Ford** and **Jennifer Booth** are shown at the extreme left, at a recent Lovecraft gathering when they were afflicted with the "Innsmouth look." Behind and below them, formal and becaped, is another Lovecraft celebrant, **Christian Henry Tobler**, of Oxford, Connecticut.

**Keith Johnson**, Carl Johnson's twin brother (but Carl has more of the Yog-Father in him), read Lovecraft's poem "Death" at the last two ceremonies. We draw the line at the Johnsons, and the Pinkertons at Swan Point are advised not to admit any Whatelays.