

"THE BIG BANG IN MY PRIVATE UNIVERSE AS A SCIENCE FICTION
AND FANTASY READER AND, LATER, WRITER." —SIR TERRY PRATCHETT

THE HOUSE ON THE BORDERLAND



WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

INTRODUCTION BY BRAM STOKER AWARD®—WINNING AUTHOR RAMSEY CAMPBELL

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SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM USE

1. *The House on the Borderland* is considered one of the pioneering pieces of literature in the genre known as “Weird Fiction,” encompassing Supernatural Fiction (i.e. Fantasy and Horror) as tales embodying transgressive material. “Weird” can also be defined as something being out-of-the-norm or odd. What does weird mean to you? Are there benefits of looking at things or doing things weird, or otherwise differently than expected?
2. What do you think was author William Hope Hodgson’s purpose developing the framing narrative of the two fishermen, Tonnison and Berreggnog, to find and read the diary verbatim? Would the novel have been just as effective without them, simply as a diary itself, letting us read of the Recluse’s episodes?
3. The ending of the diary portends something awful has occurred to the elderly Recluse. Truly, however, it is up to the imagination of the reader to envision the Recluse’s fate. Did the Swine-things overrun him in his study? Did he escape to live out the rest of his life in another part of the

land? Did his deceased Love and he find a way to reunite for all of eternity? What do you think happened?

4. In deference to haunted houses, *The House on the Borderland* has numerous elements of inexplicable events leading to fright, illness, and even death. Even though the Recluse finds a spiritual/cosmic connection with his Love, why do you think he remained in that house? Would you have done anything differently?
5. The Recluse has a far-reaching vision of the future where the sun extinguishes and he envisions various human, angelic, and demonic forms. What do you think may occur in mankind's far-future?
6. The Recluse arrives at the house with only his elderly sister and his dog, Pepper, of whom he describes as his "only friend." What is the significance of Pepper in this book, and why is the dog so loved, more so even than the Recluse's own sister? Would the story have been significantly altered with use of a different type of pet than a dog?
7. What is the significance of the Swine-things? Why do you think they pursue and then invade the Recluse's home? What do they want of him?
8. There was never any explanation given as to why these events occurred to the Recluse. Did that affect your overall satisfaction of this book? Why or why not?
9. A literary theme is a main idea that a story presents, whether directly (or repeatedly) as a major theme or indirectly (or briefly) as a minor theme. An example of a major theme in *The House on the Borderland* is exploration. The book's

framing structure is prefaced on the explorations of two vacationing men who discover ruins over a vast chasm. This theme is further emphasized by the Recluse's exploration into the tunnels underneath his house and also through outer space and time itself. Additional themes are present such as love, self-sufficiency, cosmic wonder (or mystification), etc. What are some other themes you can identify within this book?

10. Physical fitness was a large part of author William Hope Hodgson's personal life, as he wrote frequently on the subject and also started a school of exercise regimes for personal training. In the book, the Recluse character is noted as being physically vigorous (even nearly unassailable), even though he is elderly. Hodgson also lived in County Galway, Ireland, where this story is set. It's often recommended (and natural) for authors to "write what they know," meaning to include elements into their stories they are familiar with. Can you think of any other connections between elements of authors' works and their personal lives? What about other creative mediums and their composers (art, music, etc.)?
11. The tone of a story is created by an author's choice of words, details, language, etc. Even though *The House on the Borderland* is written in a very vivid, beautiful language, its tone is rather stoic and rational, giving it a sense of detachment, mainly because very little seems to affect the Recluse protagonist. Do you think this tone was successful for the book? How would the book have been treated differently if it had been written in a different tone such as being more sarcastic or cheerful or dreary? Is there a particular tone you feel drawn to in stories?

12. What emotions did you feel while reading this book?
13. The story of the Recluse is only known because he kept a diary. He writes: “[this diary] may enable me to record some of the thoughts and feelings that I cannot express to anyone; but, beyond this, I am anxious to make some record of the strange things that I have heard and seen, during many years of loneliness, in this weird old building.” Do you keep a diary? Or do you at least find it helpful to organize thoughts by writing them down?
14. The Recluse writes in his diary, “I am not superstitious; but I have ceased to deny that things happen in this old house—things that I cannot explain...” Are there things or events in life that you have encountered or experienced and cannot explain?