

On the Death of James Whale
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British-born film and stage director James Whale lived most of his adult life in southern California. He is best known for directing the sophisticated and morbidly humorous horror classics “Frankenstein” and “Bride of Frankenstein” in the 1930s. By the 1950s he was retired, essentially discarded by the Hollywood movie studios. The material below is drawn from James Curtis, *James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

On a typical day, James Whale would rise at 7:00 a.m., shower, shave, dress up in suit and tie, and have breakfast. At 8:30 he would go a studio next to his house and read the newspaper and paint. “He loved to paint flowers and still-lives, and he also tried a few copies,” a friend reported. “He’d say, ‘Well, today I’m going to paint something like a Degas,’ or he’d go through an art book or magazine and say, ‘I think I’ll try to paint that.’” At 1:00 he would return to the house where he would eat a lunch consisting of cold cuts, salad, and tea or, when it was hot, a bottle of beer. Then he would return to the studio, or sunbathe by the pool, or friends might drop by for conversation and cocktails. Dinner was at 7:00, and then he would watch television or go to a movie, or have friends over for Scrabble or bridge. Once in a great while, he would visit friends at their homes.

On the night of December 1, 1954 an electrical fire engulfed his garage, which was attached to the house. The gas tank in the car blew up. The fire threatened to spread to the house. Whale went to the buffet in the dining room and found his cigars and put them under his arm and walked back outside and calmly watched as the firefighters battled the blaze. Repairs were made quickly and Whale resumed his quiet routine.

In the spring of 1956, at dinner he said, “Ummmmm . . . I feel strange”--but he let it pass. He didn’t see a doctor until weeks later when a mild stroke was diagnosed. A few months later, he suffered a second stroke. He came stumbling down the stairs without his clothes and made no sense when he tried to speak to the maid. He was taken immediately to the hospital for sedation and observation.

On May 29th, 1957, Whales showered and shaved and got dressed up as usual. After breakfast, he went to his studio and took a piece of personal stationary from the drawer. It had his name and address printed on the top.

James Whale
788 South Amaldi Drive
Pacific Palisades, California
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In a blue ballpoint pen he wrote:

To ALL I LOVE,

Do not grieve for me. My nerves are all shot and for the last year I have been in agony day and night—except when I sleep with sleeping pills—and any peace I have by day is when I am drugged by pills.

I have had a wonderful life but it is over and my nerves get worse and I am afraid they will have to take me away. So please forgive me, all those I love and may God forgive me too, but I cannot bear the agony and it is for the best for everyone this way.

The future is just old age and illness and pain. Goodbye all and thank you for all your love. I must have peace and this is the only way.

Jimmy

He sealed the note in an envelope on which he wrote TO ALL I LOVE and laid it face up on the blotter. He then walked to the pool and threw himself into the water, striking his forehead, seemingly in an attempt to knock himself out.

Whale's maid, Anna Ryan, found the body when he failed to answer the intercom for lunch.

As I write this in March of 2008, I am the same age to the day as James Whale was on May 29th, 1957.

No.