

**UNIVERZITA KARLOVA - FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA**  
**ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR**

**H. P. Lovecraft's Fear of the Unknown and  
Unimaginable**

**BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE**

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**Studijní obor (subject):**

Anglistika a amerikanistika

Praha, srpen 2020

## **Poděkování**

Na tomto místě bych chtěl poděkovat svému vedoucímu bakalářské práce PhDr. Zdeňku Beranovi, Ph.D. za odborné vedení práce, za podnětné rady a trpělivost.

Děkuji také Mgr. Vladimíru Kučerovi za poskytnutí literatury a cenných rad.

## **Acknowledgement**

On this page, I wish to express my gratitude to my supervisor, PhDr. Zdeněk Beran, Ph.D., for his helpful guidance, critical insights and patience.

I also thank Mgr. Vladimír Kučera for providing literature and valuable advices.

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně, že jsem řádně citoval všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

V Praze dne 7.8.2020

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Prague, date 7/8/2020

## **Abstrakt práce:**

Howard Philips Lovecraft byl autorem mnoha hororových povídek, který experimentoval s nejúčinnějším způsobem, jak vyvolat strach u čtenářů. Tato práce se zaměřuje na určení zdroje strachu z neznáma, jenž Lovecraft považoval za hlavní příčinu strachu v jeho povídkách. Neznámo je v nich představováno jako utajená realita, kterou hlavní hrdinové poodhalí a pochopí rozsah skryté ohavné pravdy, které si jsou vědomi jen oni.

První kapitola po úvodu se zabývá tím, co ovlivnilo Lovecraftovo dílo, a vymezuje období, v němž působil. Začíná srovnáním s významným literárním hnutím té doby, modernismem a zdůrazňuje společné rysy, postoje a obavy jako jsou odcizení a odloučení, překotné vědecké objevy a poválečná obnova. Tato kapitola také zhodnocuje Lovecraftův postoj k převažujícím změnám ve světě a jeho milované Nové Anglii.

Následující kapitola rozebírá, jak je vytvořen prvek neznáma a definuje zastřešující koncept, kosmicismus, a převažující motiv anti-antropocentrismu. V jeho dílech se objevují další opakující se témata, která dávají vzniknout strachu z neznáma a obdobných emocí, především zlověstná povaha kosmu, zastaralý styl psaní a nezemská obraznost. Lovecraftovský horor je také zběžně porovnán s Burkovou estetikou vznešena a s podmaněním náboženským úžasem v teorii Rudolfa Otta.

V třetí zásadní kapitole je Lovecraftovo dílo přezkoumáno v rámci teorie fantastické literatury a jejího dopadu na neznámo. Kapitola se zabývá ústředními prvky hororu, atmosférou strachu, úlohou monster a hrdinů a rozdělením hororového děje. K tomu jsou použity tři zdroje: Lovecraftovy vlastní esejistická díla, především "The Supernatural Horror in Literature" („Nadpřirozená hrůza v literatuře“) a "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" („Návrhy pro psaní příběhů“), *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Úvod do fantastické literatury) Tzvetana Todorova a *Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* od Noëla Carrola.

## **Klíčová slova:**

H. P. Lovecraft, Neznámo, Kosmicismus, Lovecraftovský horor, Anti-antropocentrismus, Teorie hororu

## **Thesis abstract:**

Howard Philips Lovecraft was an author of many horror stories who experimented with the most efficient way of how to invoke fear in the readers. This work focuses on determining the source of fear of the unknown which Lovecraft found to be the main cause of fear in his stories. The unknown is presented in them as an underlying reality that the protagonists partially reveal and come to realize the extent of the hidden hideous truth that only they are aware of.

The first chapter after the introduction deals with the influences on Lovecraft's work and frames the period in which Lovecraft was active. It starts with a comparison with the significant literary movement of the time, Modernism and highlights the common features, feelings and anxieties such as alienation and isolation, rapid scientific discoveries and post-war recovery. The chapter also reviews Lovecraft's own attitude to the prevailing changes in the world and his beloved New England.

The next chapter analyses how the element of unknown is produced and defines the overarching concept of 'cosmicism' and the prevalent theme of anti-anthropocentrism. There are other recurrent topics in his works that give rise to the fear of the unknown and alike emotions, namely the foreboding nature of cosmos, archaic style of writing and unearthly imagery. Lovecraftian horror is also briefly contrasted with the Burkean aesthetics of the sublime and the subjugation by religious awe in theory of Rudolf Otto.

In the third major chapter, Lovecraft's work is subject to examination in the theoretical framework of the fantastic literature and its impact on the unknown. The considered themes are the key elements of horror, the atmosphere of fear, the role of monsters and protagonists and the division of a horror plot. Three sources are taken into account: Lovecraft's own essayistic works, mainly "The Supernatural Horror in Literature" and "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction," Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, and Noël Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*.

## **Key words:**

H. P. Lovecraft, The Unknown, Cosmicism, Lovecraftian Horror, Anti-anthropocentrism, Theory of Horror

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A scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear

– Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

## **1. Introduction: The State of the Cosmos**

Howard Philips Lovecraft is one of the authors who probed deeply into the possibilities of the genre of the fantastic; he is one of the fathers of modern horror. His legacy can be found in the works of many current authors who admit the inspiration, namely Stephen King, Jorge Luis Borges, Michel Houellebecq or Joyce Carol Oates. And then there are the readers who enjoy getting terrified.

There are many ways to invoke awe in people; there are countless phobias providing so many stimuli to raise fear. In his work, Lovecraft introduced ‘the unknown’ as the object of fear. The novelty of his approach lies in the exploration of new scientific areas and philosophical movements that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a consequence, the possibility of new, alien powers hiding among the stars arose. The newly acquired information on the universe and our own planet showed that the cosmos is so profoundly different from our world, that anything that lingers in these nooks and recesses will be fundamentally incompatible with us and intimidating. In the face of the new discoveries, everything was possible. Such a knowledge is a forbidden one and the more we uncover, the more we learn that there is to know, which again opens up vistas of new horrors. The vast,

infinite or obscure cosmic depth produced an overwhelming emotion that paralyzes and does not allow to breathe.

But Lovecraft did not create entities seeking our destruction, he made them threatening by chance. Indifference of nature, and conversely, the insignificance of humanity are the major factors of his work that bring up the feeling that we don't belong here. Isolation, insecurity and anxiety is another recurrent theme, either the world detached from the rest of the universe, or an individual separated from the society through the knowledge outside the human memory. Any presumptions about the reality are proved wrong and at the realization of the terrible truth the sole 'knower' suffers the loss of sanity at best.

The only known component Lovecraft adds into his crucible is the New England folklore. That is his traditionalist side, one that feared losing the old ancestral and cultural heritage. The transformation of the familiar places and customs which threatened to destroy *genius loci* of New England by the invasion from the outside was equally terrifying to Lovecraft.

The combination of all these elements leads to an unconscious, irrational fear of the unknown, one that Lovecraft capitalized on profusely. The unknown is eventually presented through partial revelation, as it relies on glimpses and fragments that form a larger picture which in turn becomes the ultimate source of the cosmic horror. But it was not only the unknown, it is also the indescribable, unimaginable, unreal, unpronounceable, impossible, etc. The newly discovered dark corners of the Earth and their possible hideous contents elude human recognition and understanding entirely. This is called 'cosmicism'.<sup>1</sup>

However, apart from cosmicism, there are other expressions that were introduced into the English vocabulary through Lovecraft's literary activities. 'Lovecraftian' is anything pertaining to the fear that attacks our senses in Lovecraft's stories – the cold universe, eldritch monsters, dismal scenery and imagery, even colour or music, or antiquarian writing style. It could mean anything that man was not meant to know. Similar in meaning is the 'Cthulhu mythos' which refers to the pantheon of gods, fictional grimoires, or elaborate alternative history of Earth. It represents the underlying mythology of the unknown universe that replaces our own conception of reality.

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<sup>1</sup> S.T. Joshi, *The annotated H.P. Lovecraft* (New York: Dell, 1998) p. 12.



## 2. The Pitfalls of the Modern World (And Good Old Cosmos)

At the beginning of the twentieth century the world has awakened into a new age. There were many who embraced the opportunity, but also those who regretted the loss of innocence. The new era brought previously unseen concepts such as the rise of industrialization and mechanization, scientific innovations and discoveries, and new humanistic theories that improved our daily lives. But it also marked changes in the world order. This period saw the end of the *Belle Époque* with the outbreak of the Great War. As a result, art and literature changed too.

Lovecraft certainly belonged to the latter group of those who did not welcome the abrupt disruption of the preciously preserved *status quo*, saw the change with distrust and had his own way as how to deal with the transformation; he expressed his feelings in letters and stories. Lovecraft simply reacted to the changes of the modern world. He was not the only one though, who responded through literature. There were others and these authors constituted the bulk of the modernist movement. And Modernism, as the prevalent literary and philosophical movement of his time, is reflected in his work.

Lovecraft did not consider himself a modernist, although there are elements in his work that he shared with the members of the movement. However, resolving that issue is not easy. Firstly, the definition of the modernist movement is unclear. It spans from the rejection of traditional art, realism and reason to the promotion of subjective or fragmented perspective and experimentation with new forms. The second obstacle is Lovecraft's own classification; he seems to be one of a kind, yet he had in common many features with the modernists: he wrote in the same period, reflected upon the similar events and worked with comparable ideas and images. Norman R. Gayford summarizes Lovecraft's role in the whole movement by stating that

Lovecraft rejects the modern world, but not in its entirety and not entirely for the eighteenth century. He is no purist in his antiquarianism. His letters and fiction destabilize humanocentrist philosophy. He often divorces art from philosophy and the sciences. Lovecraft was a philosophical modernist, if not an entirely artistic one. Probing the limits of art and the use of geometric images, Lovecraft enters the prose versus poetry conversation of his time. He also enters the ongoing debate regarding tradition and orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Norman R. Gayford, "The Artist as Antaeus: Lovecraft and Modernism," *An Epicure in the Terrible*, ed. David E. Schulz, S.T. Joshi (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991) p. 287.

Lovecraft was therefore not just a recluse writing his weird tales but had an interesting insight of contemporary authors with his critical attitude and opinions on the works of others. W. Scott Poole notices his relationship with one of the leaders of the movement: “Eliot represented the best and worst of this ‘modern literature’ for Lovecraft, asking the right questions and coming up with the wrong answers.”<sup>2</sup> Lovecraft reproved Eliot for running away instead of facing the harsh reality as Poole confirms:

He believed Eliot had attempted a “mad escape from the waste land he so terribly depicted.” Others had sought solace in various forms of the “neo-mysticism” that Lovecraft so heartily despised. None were willing to “draw the hard, cold, inevitable conclusions” about the cosmos, and its, indifference, that he had contemplated and attempted to theorize through the medium of his fictions.<sup>3</sup>

Lovecraft was well aware of the latest literary changes and even wrote in 1922 a mock poem called “Waste Paper: A Poem of Profound Insignificance”<sup>4</sup>. The link is obvious, it was his own version of “The Waste Land”<sup>5</sup>. There are certainly features of Modernism in the poem, perhaps even some quality of it but the intent was a mocking one. In his review, he wrote about Eliot’s poem:

We here behold a practically meaningless collection of phrases, learned allusions, quotations, slang, and scraps in general; offered to the public (whether or not as a hoax) as something justified by our modern mind with its recent comprehension of its own chaotic triviality and disorganisation. And we behold that public, or a considerable part of it, receiving this hilarious melange as something vital and typical; as “a poem of profound significance”, to quote its sponsors.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*<sup>7</sup>, he even calls the poem “a mnemonic hodge-podge”.

Lovecraft continues to demur to Modernism in general. He contemplates that

man has suddenly discovered that all his high sentiments, values, and aspirations are mere illusions caused by physiological processes within himself, and of no significance whatsoever in an infinite and purposeless cosmos. And having made these discoveries, he does not know what to do about it; but compromises on a literature of analysis, chaos, and ironic contrast.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> W. Scott Poole, “‘Historicizing Lovecraft’: The Great War and America’s Cosmic Dread,” *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, vol. 33, no. 3, Fall 2016, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Poole, 41.

<sup>4</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *To a Dreamer: Best Poems of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S.T. Joshi (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 2019) 136–140.

<sup>5</sup> T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” *Poems: 1909–1925* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1925).

<sup>6</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Conservative* (Arktos Media Ltd, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, ed. S. T. Joshi, *Collected Fiction Volume 2 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Lovecraft, *The Conservative*.

Lovecraft was looking for brothers in arms in his defiance of the changing world yet none of the modernists was up to the task as he found their art too elitist. S.T. Joshi supports this view in his analysis of Lovecraft's poetry: "In many parts of this quite lengthy poem, he has quite faithfully parodied the insularity of modern poetry — its ability to be understood only by a small coterie of readers who are aware of intimate facts about the poet."<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, there is another poem by Eliot, "The Hollow Men"<sup>10</sup>, that shows certain parallels with Lovecraft's description of the otherworldly landscapes. The disturbing imagery of the poem evokes that of Lovecraftian scenery, or an aftermath of a havoc wreaked by a malignant ageless entity on a universal scale. Eliot describes his scenery as a "dead land", "death's dream kingdom" or "valley of dying stars" which gives a feeling of a vast and lonely space. The idea of the valley itself is much larger than what the general perception is; any valley that can harbor stars must be enormous in size and intimidating. The multiple references to death do not necessarily have to represent the actual non-living condition but rather an environment that cannot support life as the poem still uses images of action or effort ("fading star", "paralysed force"). Altogether, the settings of the poem invoke a sensation of a dying land populated by wretched creatures groping together with no hope and bereft of voices. Katherine Ebury notices the abundance of references to the cold universe and states that "in this poem human emptiness and death are weighed against that of the wider cosmos"<sup>11</sup> - images that are prevalent in Lovecraft's work. Similarly to Lovecraft, Eliot sees the universe as a desolate place and just as the former leaves the readers uneasy so does the latter render them more perceptive to the disheartening content of his poem. Interestingly enough, both Eliot and Lovecraft shared their interest for the latest discoveries in the field of astronomy and physics and both employed them to invoke negative feelings and to create the dismal image of the world.

Nevertheless, no matter Lovecraft's relationship with the modernists, there are common features in both Lovecraftian and modernist works. The most obvious ones, that promote the fear of the unknown, are the topic of individualism and alienation, the inability to cope with the new changes and values, the emergence of the absurd, and the despair over the state of the world. Alienation is probably the most important one in relation to Lovecraft's work. It is a reaction to the breakdown of the old world and the emergence of a new, unknown

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<sup>9</sup> S.T. Joshi, *A Dreamer and a Visionary: H P Lovecraft in His Time* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," *Poems: 1909–1925* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1925).

<sup>11</sup> Katherine Ebury, "In This Valley of Dying Stars': Eliot's Cosmology," *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 35, no. 3, Mar. 2012, p. 139.

order. The outcome could be either positive, or negative but for a conservative person such as Lovecraft no change is welcome. Likewise, his heroes are either outcasts from the very beginning or become so after the main events of the story. They are isolated, reclusive individuals, usually with an academic or scholarly intent to compensate for social shortcomings. And in this condition they are forced to bear on their shoulders the terrible truth of their discovery. Even if they are loners already at the beginning of the story, their isolation gradually deepens as the protagonists eventually find themselves in the middle of an eldritch mayhem and there is one important condition that separates them from the rest of the world; they know.

Sean Elliot Martin considers their greatest trauma, even more serious than the encounter with the cosmic forces:

Once faced with the evidence that their own world was, is, and always will be inhabited and dominated by non-human beings of vastly superior power and intelligence, the shift in understanding of their own history causes Lovecraft's characters to feel completely alienated from their own world and their own existence; if humans have gone for thousands of years without knowing of the existence of such beings and their vast cities, all other claims at human understanding are automatically suspect.<sup>12</sup>

One needs to be rooted in certain beliefs in order to feel comfortable and with a sense of belonging but their truth was so different from the newly experienced events that the characters could never again acquire the feeling of unity with the rest of mankind which now lives in a different reality. Characters in Lovecraft's stories rarely, if ever, fully understand what is happening to them, and often go insane if they try to do so as in World War I, as they are unable to cope mentally with the extraordinary and almost incomprehensible truths they witness, hear or discover. Lovecraft probed deeper in this topic and wrote a poem called "XXXII. Alienation"<sup>13</sup> which is part of his collection *Fungi from Yuggoth*. This is the second stanza:

He waked that morning as an older man,  
And nothing since has looked the same to him.  
Objects around float nebulous and dim -  
False, phantom trifles of some vaster plan.  
His folk and friends are now an alien throng  
To which he struggles vainly to belong.

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<sup>12</sup> Sean Elliot Martin, *H.P. Lovecraft and the Modernist Grotesque* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 2008) p. 74.

<sup>13</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *To a Dreamer: Best Poems of H. P. Lovecraft*.

Martin understands it to be a feature of Modernism as “the modernist protagonist often comes to perceive the familiar world as estranged (or even hostile) not because of any external event but because of a new awareness of the truly fragmented nature of reality”.<sup>14</sup> The questions are left unanswered, the objective reality disintegrates and they descent into madness.

But also the society itself can be likewise distancing. Lovecraft’s own short stay in New York produced several stories where the modern city is depicted as disturbing place, teeming with hostile people (“The Horror at Red Hook”<sup>15</sup>, “He”<sup>16</sup>). One does not want to be accepted in this kind of company which is as repulsive as a company of shoggoths. This shows how much Lovecraft himself felt alienated in an enormous city full of strange people with no roots in the American tradition he cherished so much. His own detachment thus contributed to the general atmosphere that cosmicism produces. It is a psychological condition, a strong xenophobia, or racism, which is an emotion he transferred into the stories, only the antagonists were more supernatural and fantastic. That is not to say that the destructive forces in the universe were a metonymic depiction of the immigrants but it certainly can be used to evoke the feeling of alienation. Lovecraft was too aesthetic for that conclusion, he truly sought to promote the cosmic fear, not necessarily the fear of destruction of one’s culture.

Also, the constant reminiscence of the past through family pedigree is a sign of Lovecraft’s affinity for the times long lost and his preference for traditional cultures, which demonstrates his aversion to new things. In some of the stories Lovecraft becomes even so diligent in explaining the historical circumstances as to state this deeply unimportant fact about one of the characters: “A sampler of hers, worked in 1753 at the age of nine, may still be found in the rooms of the Rhode Island Historical Society.”<sup>17</sup> The era of new discoveries was equally disruptive for Lovecraft but unlike the modernists he sought the safety in the past. His was not the motto: “Make it new!”

Other related modernist feature encouraging the fear of the unknown is misanthropy, spurred by dehumanization of the society either in the factories of Manchester or on the battlefield in Ypres. Lovecraft never focused on humans and their traits, in line with his view of humanity's insignificant place in the universe. The question of meaning of life was better

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<sup>14</sup> Martin, p.51.

<sup>15</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Horror at Red Hook,” ed. S. T. Joshi, *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “He,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>17</sup> Lovecraft, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*

left unanswered. In Lovecraft's interpretation this is called cosmicism. Modernism, also disappointed by the destructive efforts of mankind, did not abandon man, but rather changed its focus away from him. The events in the world, however, promoted the fascination with an individual. The attacks on fragile and vulnerable human mind of an individual combined with the failure of humanity as a whole often resulted in renouncement of the allegiance to mankind.

Similarly, in Lovecraft's stories the reality suddenly loses its meaning. A simple encounter changed not only the life of the protagonist but the state of affairs of the entire world. Whatever we thought we knew changes instantly into the unreliable, into the unreasonable, into the unknown. Although not Lovecraft's aim, he became the proponent of the absurd. He did not mock the actions and efforts of mankind, he simply found it futile. This absurdity of the world was projected into his stories especially where the pursuit of improvement, or expanding of knowledge resulted in a disaster. What could be more absurd than striving for progress and ending up with new dark ages at best, as experienced in *At the Mountains of Madness*<sup>18</sup>? A group of scientists on an expedition to Antarctica discover members of ancient monstrous race. The distance between the polar region and civilization offer safety but only for some time.

All these elements contribute to Lovecraft's aim: to invoke the fear, the insecurity in the face of the unknown phenomena. At the same time, they are not to signify that Lovecraft was a modernist author, but his work and his philosophy certainly arose from the same background as was the one of the modernists and he shared their disillusionment with the new century. In a sense, the unknown was similar to the modern since both concepts marked the unwelcome changes in the world. It was the particular response that differed; while Lovecraft's emotional reaction to the unknown was abhorrence and fear, modernists reacted by adapting the form; the absurdities of the world turned into 'the absurd' and the anxieties and insecurities resulted in the fragmentation and isolation.

There are, however, ways in which Lovecraft's texts diverge from Modernism such as his antiquarian writing style, or traditional British spelling. It is too ornamental and elaborate. Considering the target group of the readers of the genre, it once again inadvertently suited the feeling of alienation and defied the modernist attempt to start anew.

Furthermore, while the modernist authors mostly reflected the decadence of the entire world, namely the atrocities of World War I, Lovecraft had a different focus. He utilized the

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<sup>18</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, ed. S. T. Joshi, *Collected Fiction Volume 3 (1931-1936): A Variorum Edition* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017).

war infrequently and if so, then for different reasons than to judge it (for example in “The Temple” a German submarine commander discovers submerged ruins brimming with light<sup>19</sup>). For him, the unwanted change happened very locally – in New England. The influx of immigrants and the degeneration of the old Anglo-Saxon families threatened to destroy the *genius loci* more than an invasion from space. Lovecraft was a traditionalist, a regionalist, promoting his hometown of Providence. In *The Dream-quest of Unknown Kadath*<sup>20</sup> he declares his relationship to the region “that had given him birth”: “There is Providence quaint and lordly on its seven hills over the blue harbour, with terraces of green leading up to steeples and citadels of living antiquity” and “These, Randolph Carter, are your city; for they are yourself. New England bore you, and into your soul she poured a liquid loveliness which cannot die. This loveliness, moulded, crystallised, and polished by years of memory and dreaming, is your terraced wonder of elusive sunsets.” In this manner, Lovecraft was different from the modernist mainstream which purportedly abandoned the traditional values. He, however, did not seek to emphasize local dialect, customs, history, or landscape but to portray what is about to be lost due to the sudden unwanted changes. Timothy Evans observes that on his trips, Lovecraft collected a variety of early American oral, material, and customary folklore, and that “both his research and his fiction grew out of his horror at the disintegration of American culture in the face of moral, racial, and scientific chaos.”<sup>21</sup>

But Lovecraft still had literary additions ready for his native New England. He created many fictional places but while most of them were out of this world (Kadath, Yuggoth, Celephaïs), only few were located within Massachusetts (Arkham, Kingsport, Miskatonic University). He used these settings and situated a great deal of his stories in those places (“The Dunwich Horror”<sup>22</sup>, “The Shadow over Innsmouth”<sup>23</sup>). Despite being often infested with eldritch monsters, they retained their typical regional character and this refurbished New England became known as the ‘Lovecraft country’. This blend of fiction and reality made the cosmic horrors much, much closer to the threshold. Rebecca Janicker understands the evident use of both reality and fiction and observes that “Lovecraft’s creation of an alternative world is aided by his use of regional markers and also adds credibility to his fiction by heightening the sense of authenticity within the tale, in the sense that the story is close enough to accepted

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<sup>19</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Temple,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>20</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-quest of Unknown Kadath*, *Collected Fiction Volume 2 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy H. Evans, “A Last Defense against the Dark: Folklore, Horror, and the Uses of Tradition in the Works of H. P. Lovecraft,” *Journal of Folklore Research*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2005, p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror,” *Collected Fiction Volume 2 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>23</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” *Collected Fiction Volume 3 (1931-1936): A Variorum Edition*.

reality to have a least veneer of plausibility.”<sup>24</sup> Somehow, the Cthulhu mythos was always part of the folklore.

The strongest departure from the modernist values lies obviously in the subject. Fantastic literature was omitted and neglected throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the literary critics and the modernists were no different. Ursula K. Le Guin even blames the movement (together with Marxists and others) for backgrounding the fantastic literature and favouring realism. In her essay “The Critics, the Monsters and the Fantastists”<sup>25</sup> she sees fantasy, which is close to the horror genre, as an opposition to the homogenized world, in which the unknown lands far, far away, where “in the white parts of the map, lived the others, the dangerous strangers, those not in the family, those not (yet) known”, are lost. The role of a fantasist is to “restore the sense — to regain the knowledge — that there is somewhere else, anywhere else, where other people may live another kind of life.” In this vein exactly, although much more ominous, Lovecraft builds up his own stories. However, the remainder of these places inhabited by the other kind of life is as fabulous; it offers an alternative to the mundane world with mankind at its centre. The position of man is also a defining point for Le Guin who notes that the “realistic fiction is drawn towards anthropocentrism, fantasy away from it”. This observation is also in concordance with Lovecraft’s ‘cosmic’ worldview and his literature. He takes us again, in this thoroughly charted world, to the unfamiliar places where men have no central, not even important role and can once again become a prey. Instead of the pure genre of fantasy, he saw fit to employ the supernatural and the terrible to best describe the deviation from the centrality of man.

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<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Janicker, “New England Narratives: Space and Place in the Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft,” *Extrapolation*, vol. 48, no. 1, Mar. 2007, p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Critics, the Monsters and the Fantastists,” *Cheek by Jowl* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2009).



### 3. The Invitation to the Cosmic Gulfs

#### 3.1. A Horror with –ism

As Fritz Leiber points out in his essay “A Literary Copernicus”<sup>1</sup>, the authors of horror literature of the nineteenth century turned to the dead, animistic gods, the occult, or the spiritual world as after the scientific upheaval and decline of the religious feelings, fear of the supernatural was left unanchored. But Lovecraft did not find these sources of dread as appealing. His horror came from the dark gulfs of the universe where in its vastness and emptiness lurk the inhabitants that can be only hinted at. And when Lovecraft ventures into the cosmic region of fear, he uses the word ‘cosmic’ always with a negative connotation, one that man should always be afraid of. In a sense, cosmicism is Lovecraft’s masterpiece, the major work that interconnects all his stories and gave rise to a new perspective of the space around us. He wished to inspire fear of the universe itself.

The fear of the universe was not just an emotional response, it is a philosophy, an attitude to life. Lovecraft employed that feeling thoroughly; cosmicism states, that no matter how important the humanity thinks it is (even in the light of the then recent discoveries), the universe will forever remain, in its mesmerizing immensity, indifferent towards humanity. Gilles Menegaldo’s definition is particularly precise:

Beyond the veil of reality, there is something threatening, coming from outer space or another space-time continuum or already there (buried in the depths of the ocean or the desert sands or the frozen immensities of the North Pole) which makes our world nightmarish. In that cosmic perspective, man is thus an insignificant creature that fails to understand the mysteries of the universe and becomes insane when he tries.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, in the worldview that cosmicism has to offer, the universe does not care about mankind. It is not intentional though; for Lovecraft, humanity was infinitely irrelevant on the cosmic scale of time and space and the great story of life (or its negation) was being played somewhere else. There must be, and are, other worlds occupying their places in the universe. And then there are the major players, or possibly agents of cosmos, that do make the difference. They are called “The Great Old Ones”, “The Outer Gods” and “The Elder Gods”.

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<sup>1</sup> Fritz Leiber, “A Literary Copernicus,” *Something About Cats and Other Pieces* (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1949).

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Menegaldo, “HP Lovecraft on Screen, a Challenge for Filmmakers (Allusions, Transpositions, Rewritings),” *Brumal: Revista de Investigación Sobre Lo Fantástico*, vol. 7, no. 1, June 2019, pp. 55–79.

Sean Elliot Martin finds these outlandish creatures the true bearers of the meaning of cosmicism when stating that “The Old Ones are not merely anomalies in the natural order, like human corpses that have been reanimated through evil or science. They represent natural orders entirely beyond the human scope, older and more prevalent than the races of humankind.”<sup>3</sup> The reaction to the giant monstrosities could be considered a distinct type of megalophobia and xenophobia, fear of large and alien objects. Not in a modern sense of disorders in the civilized society but in the instinctual, more primitive way. It is fearing what deserves to be objectively feared for its own terrible nature rather than for the irrational and subjective view of an individual.

We truly are unique in the universe but in a different sense than we see ourselves. Instead of being in a prominent position, in this grander scheme of things mankind comes out as an actual oddity. Eventually, we are important only to ourselves, as Lovecraft blatantly puts it in a letter to Natalie H. Wooley: “Although meaning nothing *in the cosmos as a whole*, mankind obviously means a good deal *to itself*.”<sup>4</sup> We are on a verge of realization that it is us, who is alien to the Earth, to the universe, to the existence. The incompatibility is summarized in “The Colour out of Space”<sup>5</sup> where the residual miasma is described after the destructive colour have left for space:

This gas obeyed the laws that are not of our cosmos. This was no fruit of such worlds and suns as shine on the telescopes and photographic plates of our observatories. This was no breath from the skies whose motions and dimensions our astronomers measure or deem too vast to measure. It was just a colour out of space – a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it; from realms whose mere existence stuns the brain and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes.

Another excerpt from the same source is about the alien cosmos itself: “that cryptic vestige of the fathomless gulfs outside; that lone, weird message from other universes and other realms of matter, force, and entity”. Obviously such a starting position for a story is also a startling one. Even in Lovecraft’s history of the Earth we take up just a small fraction of time and we will soon be replaced by another insignificant race (coleopterous, i.e. beetle-like creatures for that matter – “The Shadow out of Time”<sup>6</sup>). Humanity simply makes no impact on the cosmos; man is barely worth of any notice. It is difficult not to be intimidated by this prospect.

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<sup>3</sup> Sean Elliot Martin, *H.P. Lovecraft and the Modernist Grotesque* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 2008) p.86.

<sup>4</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, ed. August Derleth, Donald Wandrei & James Turner. *Selected Letters: Volume V* (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1965-1976), p. 241.

<sup>5</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Colour out of Space,” *Collected Fiction Volume 2 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>6</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Shadow out of Time,” *Collected Fiction Volume 3 (1931-1936): A Variorum Edition*.

Donald R. Burleson compares the instance mankind realizes its trifling position in the universe to the touch of the glass in “The Outsider”<sup>7</sup> where the narrator learns his own terrible nature. Burleson finds the “fictional effect of making human consciousness the conduit for experiencing the reality of the cosmic scheme while showing that that consciousness is uniquely capable of reduction to suffering in its self-understood insignificance”<sup>8</sup> unprecedented in literature.

However, none of this means that the cosmic force takes *a priori* a hostile attitude towards humanity. The insignificance does not rise from our own size or value, but from the disproportional dimensions of the surrounding universe, that actually became enormously larger with Hubble’s discovery in 1924. The celestial objects previously thought to be inside our own galaxy were suddenly much more distant and were in fact galaxies in their own right. It is as if Edwin Hubble was already influenced by Lovecraft’s weird stories and worried about the nature of cosmos but he eventually found explanations for the new observations comforting as “these studies helped allay his fear that the laws of physics might break down beyond our home galaxy”<sup>9</sup>. The following realization that the universe goes well beyond the Milky Way galaxy and is immensely times larger could truly inspire a feeling of one’s own insignificance. From geocentric, heliocentric, and perhaps ‘galaktocentric’ view of the universe mankind eventually moved to the model where it is only a tiny piece of the enormous, abysmal pool of blackness. Science decentred the humans. And in the time of new discoveries even the supernatural suddenly seemed possible, which later crystalized in one of Arthur C. Clark’s laws: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”<sup>10</sup>

Cosmicism represents a completion of a long process of the perception of the universe and the knowledge about it. The place in the universe had been the subject of human thoughts for many centuries already. Ever since it became clear that the Sun, the Moon and the stars are celestial objects and that the distance between the Earth and them is but a huge empty space, mankind started pondering how immense the gap is on human scale. Although the perception of the universe was limited by the influence of the religion and God’s design, the knowledge of it has been gradually expanded and sooner or later it became clear, that the proportion is mesmerizing.

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<sup>7</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Outsider,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>8</sup> Donald R. Burleson, “On Lovecraft’s Themes: Touching the Glass,” *An Epicure in the Terrible*, ed. David E. Schulz, S.T. Joshi, (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991) p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Ferris, *Coming of age in the Milky Way* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1988) p. 173.

<sup>10</sup> A.C.Clark, “Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination,” *Profiles of the Future* (1962).

In his “Thoughts”<sup>11</sup>, Blaise Pascal placed the human world between the infinity (meaning the space) and the nothingness (meaning the atom), “a mean between nothing and the whole; infinitely removed from understanding either extreme.” Of the two infinities, the infinitely great and the infinitely little, he finds it impossible for man to understand any of them, especially “with a presumption as infinite as their object”. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, he already noted that the fields which we call today the theory of relativity and the quantum physics cannot be properly understood and mocked mankind for wanting to know too much.

And then came the age of Enlightenment with its prevalent optimistic idea that everything in the world will be eventually described and explained. That did not happen and the reason had in arts once again submitted to irrationality and it was the first time mankind admitted it does not have the capacity to understand everything. Enlightenment paved the way for its opposition, the Unknown. Coincidentally, 18<sup>th</sup> century was also the time of the origin of the horror genre.

The scientific research of the universe was still based mainly on observations but there were already theories of and philosophers tried to resolve such issues as whether the space was “infinite”, “incorporeal”, “eternal”, “immutable”, or whether the space is “an attribute (namely the immensity) of the First Cause”.<sup>12</sup> The dealings with the universe were made with reverence since most of the unknowns (for instance the gravity) were explained by the presence of God. This religious awe was the precursor of Lovecraft’s cosmic horror.

While discussing the cosmological aspect, there is a scientific concept that can be considered a strict opposite of Lovecraft’s cosmic philosophy. It is called ‘the anthropomorphic principle’ and it observes that the universe has the exact properties for someone like us to develop and more daring version of this consideration postulates that the universe is so finely tuned to enable life to emerge as if there was some a agenda behind it. However, by the standards of cosmicism our existence is purely coincidental.

Interestingly enough, the original meaning of the word cosmos was basically the contrary of Lovecraft’s rendition. To the ancient Greeks ‘cosmos’ signified the order of the universe, a harmonious system that gave life and shape to everything around us. The opposite value was ‘chaos’ which, apart from having the obvious meaning of disorder, represented the dark, primordial abyss that preceded the creation of the universe and later engulfed the existing world, reminding us of the biblical “and the earth was without form, and void; and

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<sup>11</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, 1669.

<sup>12</sup> Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Radford: A & D Publishing, 1957) p. 196.

darkness was upon the face of the deep.” That is certainly befitting Lovecraft’s description of cosmos.

The whole idea of uncaring universe is brilliantly summarized in a poem by Stephen Crane that precedes Lovecraft’s work<sup>13</sup>:

A man said to the universe:  
“Sir, I exist!”  
“However,” replied the universe,  
“The fact has not created in me  
A sense of obligation.”

Although Crane aimed primarily at God and nature, it works equally well in the relationship with the cosmic powers. There is absolutely no concern about mankind on the part of the cosmic consciousness. Daniel Hoffman observes that “this little fable anticipates the modern view of the universe as a field of force, and the consequent dissociation of its physical laws from our moral imperatives.”<sup>14</sup> In Crane’s interpretation the universe at least gave an answer and therefore found the man worthy of the discussion. The best the universe can do for us is to confirm our existence. Crane repeated the idea of uncaring world in the same vein in his other work, a short story “Open Boat”<sup>15</sup>. He states: “Nature did not seem cruel to him then, nor kind, nor dangerous, nor wise. But she was not interested, completely not interested.”

### **3.2. The True Effect of Cosmicism: Fear and Dread**

And then there is the cosmic fear. In Lovecraft’s stories there is no monster to suck one’s blood, demons promising eternal pain or some other malignant entity threatening the protagonist’s life. It was the dark corners of the universe and its hidden and unspeakable contents that produced the shuddering dread in the readers and insanity in the characters. Lovecraft was a master of utilizing the empty spaces between the stars. And, if they were empty, why not lease them and fill them with cosmic dread and eldritch horrors. All you need to do next is to wait when the stars are right...

The cold void must have been, and still is, overwhelming. Even a modern person who witnessed the landing on the Moon is still terrified by the idea of an enormous unexplorable

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Crane, “A Man Said to the Universe,” *War is Kind & Other Lines*, 1899.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Hoffman, “Many Red Devils upon the Page: The Poetry of Stephen Crane,” *Sewanee Review*, vol. 102, no. 4, 1994, p. 588.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Crane, “The Open Boat,” *Scribner's Magazine*, June 1897.

space that surrounds us and could harbour absolutely anything both conceivable and unconceivable. As these spaces are unearthly and bizarre, so must be whatever comes to us equally abnormal. Lovecraft's disturbing description of otherworldly scenery and alien creatures induce the notion of strangeness that must be necessarily incompatible to our own world in terms of physical properties and rationality. No matter what lives there, it wouldn't be good or evil; the notion of morality do not apply to them. The moral standards and their intentions would be out of this world as they are beyond the logic and understanding of mankind. Human perspective is simply not ready to learn or contain the truths of the cosmos. Lovecraft provides a description of one such species in "The Shadow out of Time":

a horrible elder race of half-polypous, utterly alien entities which had come through space from immeasurably distant universes and had dominated the earth and three other solar planets about six hundred million years ago. They were only partly material - as we understand matter - and their type of consciousness and media of perception differed widely from those of terrestrial organisms.

Obviously, to enhance the negative perception, Lovecraft describes the uncharted spaces as grim and alien so that nothing benevolent can be coming from there. When he started mapping the outer space for his stories, Lovecraft must have marked the territory with *Hic sunt Deī Externī*. This was a similar situation the first colonists in America experienced; the newly discovered regions were filled with the unknown.

Cosmicism does not mean only the fear of the cosmic depths. The unknown forces lurk in the depth of the Earth ("The Statement of Randolph Carter"<sup>16</sup>, "The Nameless City"<sup>17</sup>, "The Rats in the Walls"<sup>18</sup>), depth of the sea ("The Temple", "Dagon"<sup>19</sup>, "The Call of Cthulhu"<sup>20</sup>), distant territories (*At the Mountains of Madness*), or our dreams (*The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, "Beyond the Wall of Sleep"<sup>21</sup>). In "The Statement of Randolph Carter" two friends open a tomb and one of them descends into the earth, reporting his sightings. Eventually, we learn that he encounters an alien entity and never returns. "Dagon" is a story of a navy officer who is shipwrecked and discovers an emerged piece of land that brought up another ominous creature: "Vast, Polyphemus-like, and loathsome, it darted like a stupendous monster of nightmares to the monolith, about which it flung its gigantic scaly arms, the while it bowed its hideous head and gave vent to certain measured sounds." And

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<sup>16</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "The Statement of Randolph Carter," *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>17</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "The Nameless City," *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>18</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "The Rats in the Walls," *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>19</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "Dagon," *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>20</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu," *Collected Fiction Volume 2 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>21</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "Beyond the Wall of Sleep," *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

“Beyond the Wall of Sleep” tells a story of a patient in a mental hospital whose dreaming other self battles the oppressor Algol, the Demon-Star. These shocking encounters manifest the marginality of the human race. Lovecraft expressed same the idea in a letter to Farnsworth Wright from 1927:

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large... To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the insignificance of humans, they do have their role to play. The medium for the encounter with the unknown and for the revelation of the scanty facts is the protagonist. Michel Houellebecq mentions that everything the investigators needed “was functional sensory equipment. Their sole function, in fact, would be to perceive.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, in a letter to Catherine L. Moore in 1935, Lovecraft confirms that the essence of his stories is not limited to the characters: “The hero of such a story is never a person, but always a phenomenon or condition —the punch or climax is not what happens to anybody, but the realization that some condition contrary to actual law as we understand it has (fictionally) had a brief moment of existence.”<sup>24</sup> The seeming abilities and skills of the protagonists with which they deal a blow to the malignant forces are negligible for no matter how much they manage to impede the progress of evil, it is only temporary and certainly not for free. The cost is insanity or death and although they often prevail at the end of the story, never do they defeat the forces of evil. Cosmic futility is what one feels in this situation.

In order to feel threatened and frightened by the supernatural, the ‘normal’ state must be established first, that is, to recognize the laws of nature, and then subvert its characteristics. For this reason the original myths were full of changelings, succubae, vampires and other revenants; the effects of life and death and the processes of birth and aging were understandable to all and by corrupting it, the unnatural was created. Later, with Enlightenment, we broadened our views on how nature works and as a contrast, the Gothic horror and Poe’s psychological assessment of the dark nature of one’s mind was spawned. The turn of the twentieth century gave rise to Lovecraft’s horror as a response to the new discoveries in the field of astronomy (Edwin Hubble, Clyde Tombaugh), geology and

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<sup>22</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters: Volume II*, ed. August Derleth, Donald Wandrei & James Turner (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1965-1976) p. 150.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, trans. Dorna Khazeni (London: Gollancz, 2008), p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> Menegaldo.

geography (Alfred Wegener, Roald Amundsen) or biology (Charles Darwin). This scientific approach makes the events in the stories even more credible and therefore more terrifying. No hell or superstition is needed as the public began to follow secular and rational path as oppose to the medieval society and was ready to get scared by the new phenomena.

Lovecraft's horror is not a screaming horror, it is founded on suspense and gradual revelation. The information about the evil is being served slowly but in a constant, inexorable manner that leads to a terrible conclusion. The evil lurks and does not reveal itself, it does not strike. Only hints are given. In Lovecraft's imagination the horror comes with the most repugnant textures and substances and the sings of decay: ooze, fungi, or putrefaction. The abundant use of tentacles is remarkable. This is the opposite of the standard horror features such as blood, bones, or corpses, although Lovecraft does not avoid these elements either. And to satisfy the musical taste he employed the sound (or at least the description thereof) of several hellish and impious instruments. We hear "a shrill droning of pipes"<sup>25</sup>, "maddening beating of vile drums and the thin, monotonous whine of accursed flutes"<sup>26</sup>, "fanfare of supernal trumpets and a clash of immortal cymbals"<sup>27</sup> and "the shrieking and whining of that desperate viol"<sup>28</sup>, sometimes accompanied by "a deep, low moaning, as of a distant throng of condemned spirits"<sup>29</sup>.

But the space outside our own is not filled with just cosmic horrors. In the beginning of his writing career Lovecraft focused on a related, yet different topic; the Dream Cycle. Befitting the name of the genre 'weird tales', it did not necessarily invoke fear. Fatime Gül Koçsoy gives a description of the Dreamlands as "a vast, uncanny and incomprehensible dimension that can be entered through dreams. ... In spite of dealing with ordinary people in a psycho-social context, he handles creatures of a multi-dimensional world, which has its own reality and continuity."<sup>30</sup> However, the Dream Cycle is outside the scope of true cosmicism, despite the connection with the Great Old Ones (*The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*), it constituted a genre closer to dark fantasy rather than horror.

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<sup>25</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-quest of Unknown Kadath*.

<sup>26</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-quest of Unknown Kadath*.

<sup>27</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-quest of Unknown Kadath*.

<sup>28</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "The Music of Erich Zann," *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>29</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "The Nameless City."

<sup>30</sup> Fatime Gül Koçsoy, Dreams/Fantasies of Science in H.P. Lovecraft's "The Dreams in The Witch House." Feb. 2019.



### 3.3. Watch Your Language, Mr. Lovecraft

A generally noted characteristic of Lovecraft's work is the use of specific register of words and concepts. Lovecraft was adept in using vivid description with antiquarian, weird words that still brought the impression of alienness and outsidership. These are aptly combined with technical, scientific words as are the religious ones put together with trivial language ("blasphemes and bubbles"<sup>31</sup>). Distorted curves, angles, or reality, the impossible non-Euclidean geometry and the fourth dimension, it all truly sounds as if it was the science itself that brought the new threats upon mankind. Time is made ancient by expressions such as "immemorial" and "aeons". Adjectives as "cyclopean", "grotesque", "eldritch", or "blasphemous" sound otherworldly, as are the secrets in various grimoires of macabre names: "Necronomicon", "Cultes des Goules", "Pnakotic Manuscripts", "De Vermis Mysteriis", and "Unaussprechlichen Kulten". Locations where man has never been before are "Yugoth", "Celephaïs", "plateau of Leng", "Ulthar", or "R'lyeh". And last but not least are the unpronounceable names of the Great Old Ones and the Outer Gods: "Cthulhu", "Azathoth", "Nyrlathothep", "Tsathoggua", "Shub-Niggurath", or "Yog-Sothoth". The description of the last one is especially surreal: "Yog-Sothoth knows the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the key and guardian of the gate. Past, present, future, all are one in Yog-Sothoth."<sup>32</sup>

The unknown has surprisingly many characteristics too. It is "unnameable", "nameless", "unfamiliar", "unfathomable", "inaccessible" and "uncanny"; "unutterable", "unspeakable", "unmentionable", "undreamable", "unrelatable" and "inconceivable"; "unsanctioned", "unhallowed", "unwholesome" and "unnatural". Lovecraft achieves the description of the unknown by the selection of negative words that only provide a deeper obscuration for the reader. What could be a better promotion of the alien entities and their powers than a statement that none of their features can be conveyed to the reader? It increases the attraction and the desire to know more. A strong imagination at work will supply the rest.

The language of the stories is very peculiar, artificial, and perhaps even theatrical. To name a few examples, the irregularities are hyperinflated tone, abundance of adjectives (often foreign or archaic), and all the characters use the same register, very distant from the colloquial language (with few exaggerated exceptions, such as: "They's things in it I've got to try under sarten conditions that I can't git here, en' it 'ud be a mortal sin to let a red-tape rule

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<sup>31</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dream-quest of Unknown Kadath*.

<sup>32</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror," *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition*.

hold me up”<sup>33</sup>). Despite the awkward style, it offers enjoyable depictions of creatures, sceneries, architecture, death, and other things that capture readers’ attention. Here is the characterization of ‘the unnameable’ from the eponymous short story:

It had been an eldritch thing - no wonder sensitive students shudder at the Puritan age in Massachusetts. So little is known of what went on beneath the surface - so little, yet such a ghastly festering as it bubbles up putrescently in occasional ghoulish glimpses. The witchcraft terror is a horrible ray of light on what was stewing in men's crushed brains, but even that is a trifle. There was no beauty; no freedom - we can see that from the architectural and household remains, and the poisonous sermons of the cramped divines. And inside that rusted iron strait-jacket lurked gibbering hideousness, perversion, and diabolism. Here, truly, was the apotheosis of the unnameable.<sup>34</sup>

Another one is a portrayal of what might easily be the New York City which Lovecraft eventually came to despise:

Here cosmic sin had entered, and festered by unhallowed rites had commenced the grinning march of death that was to rot us all to fungous abnormalities too hideous for the grave's holding. Satan here held his Babylonish court, and in the blood of stainless childhood the leprous limbs of phosphorescent Lilith were laved. Incubi and succubae howled praise to Hecate, and headless moon-calves bleated to the Magna Mater. Goats leaped to the sound of thin accursed flutes, and Ægyptans chased endlessly after misshapen fauns over rocks twisted like swollen toads. Moloch and Ashtaroth were not absent; for in this quintessence of all damnation the bounds of consciousness were let down, and man's fancy lay open to vistas of every realm of horror and every forbidden dimension that evil had power to mould. The world and Nature were helpless against such assaults from unsealed wells of night, nor could any sign or prayer check the Walpurgis-riot of horror which had come when a sage with the hateful key had stumbled on a horde with the locked and brimming coffer of transmitted daemon-lore.<sup>35</sup>

And three shorter passages follow, one from the *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* describing vertiginous altitude: “depths of night that yawned interminably down, those depths of fear whose terrors yet could not exceed the nameless doom that lurked waiting at chaos' core.” The next one is an account of an underground assembly of fiendish creatures: “Monstrous, unnatural, colossal, was the thing - too far beyond all the ideas of man to be believed except in the silent damnable small hours when one cannot sleep.”<sup>36</sup> And the last one describes titanic architecture:

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<sup>33</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror.”

<sup>34</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Unnamable,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>35</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Horror at Red Hook”

<sup>36</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Nameless City”

The effect was that of a Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or to human imagination, with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions of geometrical laws. There were truncated cones, sometimes terraced or fluted, surmounted by tall cylindrical shafts here and there bulbously enlarged and often capped with tiers of thinnish scalloped disks; and strange beetling, table-like constructions suggesting piles of multitudinous rectangular slabs or circular plates or five-pointed stars with each one overlapping the one beneath.<sup>37</sup>

The number of descriptive words is striking and many of them lack the poetic quality. There are geometrical shapes and technical expressions. The formal aspect of the text is rugged and in places even as hideous as the object they describe. For a beginner, Lovecraft's stories are not easy to follow. Exaggerated diction is present, as if to compensate for the low genre, the publication in cheap pulp magazines. As a whole the work seems to be part of an obscure, occult culture, similarly to the cults that worship the Great Old Ones, whose various names are difficult to pronounce for what cannot be named cannot be dealt with properly. Instead of describing the indescribable, Lovecraft focuses on the effect of the text. Each of these words has a connotation that every reader connects with unearthly concepts. A simple set of words such as "revolting", "shunned", "unvisitable", "amorphous", or "stygian" alone evokes an image out of this world. Lovecraft obviously narrates through the meaning of the words but also through the text itself.

The combination of all these elements only accentuates the state of alienation and fragmentation, and contribute to reader's experience of exotics and fascination. A healthy mind would not employ such a language, yet at the same time would not create such macabre stories. Lovecraft's solitary soul, his education and the view that everything shall be resolved by white male protagonists with academic background created a literary style that is immediately attributable to Lovecraft, his trademark. Michel Houellebecq realizes that not only it does not diminish Lovecraft's popularity, it enhances it: "Such emphatically inflated passages evidently present a stumbling block to erudite readers; but it is imperative to point out that it is these very passages that the true fans prefer."<sup>38</sup> The uniqueness of the style is evidenced in another Houellebecq's statement: "no one has ever attempted to imitate these passages where he sets aside all stylistic restraint, where adjectives pile upon one another to the point of exasperation."

There are those who consider Lovecraft's language a sign of how bad a writer Lovecraft was. He certainly failed to impress Edmund Wilson who, in his review of

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<sup>37</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*

<sup>38</sup> Houellebecq, p. 88

Lovecraft's work called "Tales of the Marvellous and the Ridiculous"<sup>39</sup> states that "the only horror is the horror of bad taste and bad art" and points out that the language leads the readers away from the fear as the focus changes from the content to the form. This was in 1945 when Lovecraft was not yet recognized as an established writer of horror fiction.

Then there are those who believe the language contributes to the overall cosmic atmosphere of the Lovecraftian setting. Joyce Carol Oates's defends Lovecraft as a Puritan drawing on the American past,<sup>40</sup> and Donald R. Burleson demonstrates how Lovecraft's language affects the reader's perception of the text through such an archaic narration.<sup>41</sup> Lovecraftian horror is now considered inseparable from such a language.

### 3.4. What Does Cosmicism Look Like?

To convey the atmosphere in his stories to the readers, Lovecraft often enjoyed likening his imagery to the works of other authors, mainly painters but also writers. The former group consisted of Salvator Rosa (1615 - 1673), Cornelis Huysmans (1648 - 1727), Henry Fuseli (1741 - 1825), Francisco Goya (1746 - 1828), the pre-Raphaelites, Gustavo Doré (1832 - 1883), Sidney Sime (1865 - 1941), Anthony Angarola (1893 - 1929), Nicholas Roerich (1874 - 1947) and "the mediaeval chaps who did the gargoyles and chimaeras on Notre Dame and Mont Saint-Michel"<sup>42</sup>. All these names are referenced in his stories but he was also a fan of John Martin (1789 - 1854) of whom he wrote to Vincent Starrett. Lovecraft noted he

was enthralled by the darkly thunderous, apocalyptically majestic, & cataclysmically unearthly power of one who, to me, seemed to hold the essence of cosmic mystery. (...) Night; great desolate pillared halls; unholy abysses & blasphemous torrents; terraced titan cities in far, half-celestial backgrounds whereon shines the light of no familiar sky of men's knowing; shrieking mortal hordes borne downward over vast wastes & down cyclopean gulfs where Phlegethon & Archeron flow.<sup>43</sup>

The writers referenced by Lovecraft are John Milton (1608 - 1674), Thomas Moore (1779 - 1852), Edgar Alan Poe (1809 - 1849) or Charles Baudelaire (1821 - 1867). Lovecraft's friend Clark Ashton Smith (1893 - 1961) could be in both categories. The

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<sup>39</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Tales of the Marvellous and the Ridiculous," *The New Yorker*, Nov. 1945.

<sup>40</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, "The King of Weird," *The New York Review*, Oct. 31, 1996.

<sup>41</sup> Donald R. Burleson, "Lovecraft and Adjectivitis: A Deconstructionist View," *Lovecraft Studies*, Issue 31, 1994.

<sup>42</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "Pickman's Model," *Collected Fiction Volume 2 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>43</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters: Volume II*, p. 219.

provided demonstrative listing definitely helps to imagine the scenery and atmosphere Lovecraft had in mind for cosmicism even without reading any of Lovecraft's stories. A worthy successor of the Lovecraftian visual art was certainly H.R. Giger (1940 - 2014), famous for giving form to the Alien creature, but he also created a series of paintings called 'Necronomicon'.



**Kanchenjunga by Nicholas Roerich. The author is mentioned in *At the Mountains of Madness*.**

Due to the fact, that cosmic fear is very much based on imagination and the mood one feels toward the bleak cosmos, it might be possible to capture it on a painting but it renders Lovecraft's stories almost impossible to turn into a film. Although there were many attempts to adapt Lovecraft's stories for the screen, namely works of Stuart Gordon which, despite their qualities, fail to capture the gist of cosmicism as they produce a rather gothic atmosphere. The focus of these film is primarily on monsters, which causes the fear of the cosmos to elude the audience. In general, it is safe to pronounce Lovecraft's works difficult to adapt for the screen.

Luckily, there are films that in one way or another agitate the cosmic impression or are visually Lovecraftian. They don't necessarily need to be direct adaptations of Lovecraft's tales but they still show how Lovecraft's influence spreads over to other types of art. The best approximation is probably *Prometheus*<sup>44</sup> by Ridley Scott. In conformity with the idea that the main protagonists are but agents who make the revelation about the hostile universe, a crew

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<sup>44</sup> *Prometheus*, dir. Ridley Scott, 2012.

funded by a sick billionaire travels to another planet to find an extra-terrestrial race that could possibly be the creator of life on Earth. There are some insipid characters and logical inconsistencies, however, the overall mood about the threat from the unknown part of cosmos is vividly preserved. The main plot is a quest for the truth hidden among the stars, which involves scientific approach and religious-like undertones. Looking for the Makers, the crew eventually uncovers the appalling truth about the origins of mankind and its search for knowledge has the capacity to instigate the destruction of humanity. The whole Alien franchise is based on this premise but *Prometheus* is the first to introduce the mythology behind it.

The film features scenery that can be easily attributed to Lovecraft's imagination. The dismal imagery and weather, the dark or toxic colours of the alien planet and the bizarre artistic representation such as frescoes, or bas-reliefs feel like the walk through the Nameless City. The music of the opening scene by Marc Streitenfeld sounds very optimistic as if introducing new, life-changing discovery but when contrasted with the subsequent events of the film it becomes mocking and ominous.

Another film of cosmic horror is Paul W.S. Anderson's *Event Horizon*<sup>45</sup> from 1997. It depends less on the atmosphere and shows a tragic practical example of an encounter with alien cosmic powers without much explaining the origins. It is also rather detailed in depicting the gruesome consequence, which is unlike Lovecraft's stories but opens up the vistas of what exactly humanity might find if it reaches too far. The story shows the fate of a spaceship and its crew that got lost close to the planet of Jupiter and suddenly reappeared five years later. The rescue mission only discovers that there are unknown places where mankind should not tread, that is not mentally compatible with whatever is out there.

John Carpenter's film *The Thing*<sup>46</sup> is another piece of Lovecraftian classic. It depicts how easily humans succumb to another life form coming from space, how strange to the universe we truly are. The creature is something so absolutely alien to us that even on the cellular level it annihilates our identity. Also the generic name 'the thing' (for both the movie and the creature) gives the impression of indescribability. It imitates, it has no form of its own. The story is a loose adaptation of *At the Mountains of Madness* and is reminiscent of an encounter with a shoggoth.

All these movies trace their origin to Lovecraft's stories. They feature a group of scientists in a remote, isolated place with no hope of help, dealing with an unknown threat

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<sup>45</sup> *Event Horizon*, dir. Paul W.S. Anderson's, 1997.

<sup>46</sup> *The Thing*, dir. John Carpenter, 1982.

coming from the space. And all of them emphasize that we don't know the universe as well as we believe we do and excellently capture the mood the possibly hostile universe inspires in us. These films (and many other similar ones) are now considered to belong to the genre of science fiction and from this perspective Lovecraft can be labelled a science fiction author. It is very suitable that the 'cosmic' element has a wider impact on art.

The analogy of cinematographic and literary works enables to delve deeper in the aesthetics of Lovecraft's written world. The unimaginable is suddenly available for the readers, the burning desire to taste the unknown is satiated by a visual rendition of the text. The story, and most importantly, in the imagery is enhanced by the film adaptation as the reader is given a chance to compare her or his imagination, to analyse the fear invoking elements in two different media. Although Lovecraft's stories are built on the premise of the unknown which requires that no additional information is released, in the practical instances above the appropriate visualization contributed to the overall experience. Out of the many possible depictions that Lovecraft intentionally leaves to the reader's imagination, there can be one that, if chosen well, can superbly materialize the idea Lovecraft had in mind, and more importantly, achieves the same effect as its literary counterpart: cosmic fear. A truly good example of a fitting choice was H.R. Giger's alien.

On the other hand, the difficulty of filming Lovecraft's stories lies mainly in his style of writing. The archaic, otherworldly expressions such as 'eldritch' or 'macabre' are not words of physical description, and of course, non-Euclidean geometry evades any visualisation. The same applies to other properties perceived by senses ("The Music of Eric Zann" – a mute old man playing the viol in order to satisfy "the blackness of space illimitable" with "fantastic, delirious, and hysterical" melodies, "The Colour out of Space" - a meteorite with a peculiar indescribable colour lands on a farm and starts to change all living things). Lovecraft relies heavily on the atmosphere and that is one feature that might be lost on the silver screen. Using a narrator is a potential a solution but narration of this extent is not a common feature of films. This aspect of Lovecraft's stories renders his imagination practically non-adaptable for screen.

There are other films featuring Lovecraftian themes such as Michael Mann's *The Keep*<sup>47</sup> (the otherworldly landscape), Alex Garland's *Annihilation*<sup>48</sup> (modern variation of "The Colour out of Space"), Susanne Bier's *Bird Box*<sup>49</sup> (a possible depiction of coming of

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<sup>47</sup> *The Keep*, dir. Michael Mann, 1983.

<sup>48</sup> *Annihilation*, dir. Alex Garland, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> *Bird Box*, Susanne Bier, 2018.

Azathoth), Roy Ward Baker's *Quatermass and the Pit*<sup>50</sup> (discovery of an ancient race that created intelligent life on Earth) or Ken Russell's *Altered States*<sup>51</sup> (tapping on something beyond our understanding but also something dangerous to us, something of deeper meaning, something hideous). On the other end of the scale can be placed the movie *The Haunted Palace*<sup>52</sup>, a loose adaptation of *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* in which young Charles Dexter Ward seeks the truths about his maternal great-great-great-grandfather only to find out that his evil ancestor wants to remain in this world no matter the cost.

The change of the Charles Dexter Ward into an evil character of the kind of Roderick Usher or Prince Prospero shows how little Lovecraft's philosophy was understood in 1963. The work makes it clear that the director Roger Corman saw him just as another Gothic author and the film was an extension of the Poe film cycle with Vincent Price. Nonetheless, even a failed attempt may serve as a tool to better define cosmicism as the visual, sound and musical aspects of movies help to understand the feeling the cosmos stirs up.

### 3.5. The Cosmic Philosophy

As mentioned above, cosmicism is not represented only by the fear of cosmos, it is also regarded as a philosophical movement. Deriving ideas solely from Lovecraft's stories, it is capable of answering general and fundamental questions, such as the value of knowledge and reason, it can distinguish moral categories, or assess the meaning of life. Cosmicism is not only about the dark side of the universe and Lovecraft's stories are not meant just to invoke fear. Nevertheless, considering the genre of the stories, the prospect is not really optimistic. Cosmicism presumes the meaninglessness of all mankind and everything else, for that matter. The universe is not here for us, it is not here for anyone. It just is.

The idea that the philosophy behind cosmicism was more important for Lovecraft than fear is supported by Robert M. Price's notion: "His aim was not to make reader feel that supernatural entities (i.e. gods) exist. .... Rather, he sought to stimulate the removal of the natural *limits on human perception* so as to provide a full view of the horribly empty (naturalistic) cosmos"<sup>53</sup>. It is not a nihilistic view *per se* as nihilism denies meaning and reason, or rejects the features pertaining to the anthropocentric position of the world. On the

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<sup>50</sup> *Quatermass and the Pit*, dir. Roy Ward Baker, 1967.

<sup>51</sup> *Altered States*, dir. Ken Russell, 1980.

<sup>52</sup> *The Haunted Palace*, dir. Roger Corman, 1963.

<sup>53</sup> Robert M. Price, "Lovecraft's 'Artificial Mythology'," *An Epicure in the Terrible*, ed. David E. Schulz, S.T.Joshi (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991).



larger scale the universe operates perfectly fine without us and our notions of natural laws, logic or ethics are irrelevant. It has its own sense which we do not understand.

There are structures and principles that keep the universe in shape while it thrives under the rule of entities, caretakers, who admit no interference from humans. Our own nihilistic feeling of uselessness, no purpose or value is in fact correct; all the achievements gathered within millennia are suddenly diminished and inherently noble qualities of humans and humanism mean nothing in comparison to the vast indifference of the rest of the universe. We know for a fact that the universe will by far outlive everything men represents.

Mankind is losing the objective ground for evaluation its own significance, realizing it is its own benchmark for its qualities, virtues or accomplishments. Cosmicism could be called extreme existentialism, as it brings up the uncertainty about the role of humanity in the uncaring universe, an existential crisis on a large scale. Lovecraft is giving up on mankind; not as an angry disappointed man (despite the fact that his stories also serve as an outlet for his racism and xenophobia) but a member of the society reconciled with the fate of mankind. He embraces the truth of reality, does not get overwhelmed by despondency. Lovecraft is no proponent of pessimism, or nihilism, rather an 'annihilism'.

Lovecraft himself was an atheist and his relation to religion had influence on the theory of cosmicism. For him, there was no God nor Devil, neither the protector nor seducer of mankind. As they are both tied to an insignificant species, so does their role dwindle. The universe, as the protagonist of Lovecraft's stories, doesn't need the Christian figures, doesn't allow for them. No prayer ever helped against the forces of cosmos. Although there are 'good' gods (Nodens opposes Nyrlathothep in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*), they are acting merely accidentally in concordance with the men's wishes rather than as a result of our invocations. The coincidental alignment makes these gods no better than the remaining cosmic forces and by ignoring humans they are actually contributing to the sense of alienation.

Lovecraft's stories didn't require the existence of Hell either. There are no moral imperatives to observe, and therefore no reward or punishment is promised. Authenticity and proximity of the danger makes the doom imminent without any chance of salvation. While the Hell is a result of personal behaviour, in Lovecraft's world everyone is damned without exception. In this view, the essential religious question of free will is irrelevant here. Individual people are temporarily free to live their lives the way they see fit and even die happy in their ignorance, but when it comes to the fate of the world as a whole, no outcome of human actions will change the unconcerned attitude of the universe.

### 3.6. The Sublime in Lovecraftian Horror

In the terms of literature or aesthetics, there is a concept similar to Lovecraftian diffusion of terror, referring to the quality of greatness beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement, or imitation. It is called ‘the sublime’ and was originally applied to the objects of nature that induce a paralysis of body and mind alike. Initially used to describe what one feels standing in front of massive and spectacular mountains, it can now apply to anything that produces an overwhelming sensation through immense size, obscurity, magnificence, the contrast of light and darkness, or sound.

The most prominent of the philosophers who tackled the issue was Edmund Burke. To better define the sublime, Burke in his essay<sup>54</sup> marks it mutually exclusive with the concept of beauty despite the fact that both these ideas can be equally fascinating and enthralling. That is not to say that they are in an opposition; that which is sublime is not ugly or foul but in contrast to the sublime, the beautiful is characterised by small size, delicacy, familiarity and tenderness.

An inherent part of the sublime is delight, to which Burke adds that pain and terror, if not violent and destructive, “are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror” and calls the highest degree of it “astonishment.” According to Rodolphe Gasché, this notion of astonishment “is nothing but the sudden awareness of being alive. In astonishment life becomes preserved in that it is constantly renewed”<sup>55</sup> as it wakes all the senses when the shock and paralysis fades away and considers it “the operator, as it were, that turns terror into delight.”<sup>56</sup> The emotion of terror is hereby turned aesthetically into a productive emotion which in turn causes the terror to be an enjoyable emotion.

Burke also ruminates over the cause of the terror. He finds several sources and states about one of them that

to make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. (...) Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings.”

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<sup>54</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757.

<sup>55</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, “...And the Beautiful? Revisiting Edmund Burke’s ‘Double Aesthetics,’” *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy M. Costelloe (New York: Cambridge University Press 2012) p. 29.

<sup>56</sup> Gasché, p. 28.

By incapacitating the formation of clear ideas, obscurity displays a strong resemblance to the fear of the unknown in both the source and the feeling it produces.

In this vein, the overall effect of the object of the sublime is fully applicable to Lovecraftian horror. In the latter, the aesthetic goal is to invoke fear which is achieved by the invocation of mesmerizing size of the universe, the enormity of time and the incomplete knowledge thereof. It captivates readers' minds with the delightful horror and gives them a profound experience that does not cross the boundaries of the dangerous and still remains in the realm of art.

Some scholars suggest that it is not the case, that Lovecraft's conception precludes the effect of the sublime in his stories. Vivian Ralickas makes clear that humanity and common sense are the prerequisites for the effect of the sublime to take place. As a consequence, Lovecraft loses the sublime through the insignificance of human existence. She states that

cosmic horror therefore issues from the same source as the sublime, which in part explains their likely conflation in the minds of some readers: an experiencing subject faced with phenomena that overwhelm its senses and cognitive faculties. Contrary to either Burkean or Kantian sublimity, however, which asserts the centrality of the human subject, the poetics particular to cosmic horror relegates it to the sidelines by reversing the order of priority that sublimity establishes between the subject and its objects, privileging the latter over the former.<sup>57</sup>

However, the emotion itself is essential rather than the source or the effect of the emotion; the specific objects of fear and awe Lovecraft refers to still retain the features of the sublime: greatness and overwhelmingness, for his sublime lies in the uncanny ideas; the titanic edifices breaking the rules of geometry; the insignificance of mankind in contrast to the densely populated universe throughout time and space; the enormous volume of knowledge that is hidden from us but can hurt us irreparably; the immense span of time must one stay alone to forget who he or she is. In Burke's interpretation, the sublime often relates to an aesthetically pleasing objects. This is not the case of cosmic horror. The main difference, not banishing the sublime from Lovecraft's stories, is that Lovecraft uses purely negative images of terror, which stimulate the sensation of irrelevance. The comparison with cosmic horror stands, as the resultant emotion is the same.

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<sup>57</sup> Vivian Ralickas, "'Cosmic Horror' and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Art*, 18.3 (2007) p. 367.

### 3.7. The Religious Feeling for Azathoth

Lovecraftian horror does not come entirely without religious overtones. The experience is not the typical confrontation with an evil creature but it often corresponds to an encounter with a divine entity. Cthulhu, Nyarlathothep or Yog-Sothoth are frightening but worthy of awe at the same time (it is no surprise there are so many cults in the stories). This relationship is similar to that of the religious experience described by Rudolf Otto<sup>58</sup>, who analysed the nature of ‘the holy’ in different religious systems. One of the elements is ‘the numinous’ which reflects the effect of godly presence in two, seemingly opposite sides; it tempts us, entices us, but at the same time it terrifies us, inspires awe in us. The former is called *mysterium fascinans*, the latter *mysterium tremendum*.

Otto himself is unable to define the term, but in order to explain the numinous, he bids the readers to compare the feeling to that one feels when in connection with a supreme being, God. The numinous is an empirical category, a non-rational, non-sensory experience whose primary and immediate object is outside the self. It resembles the primitive feelings of awe our ancestors experienced when they encountered an unknown force they did not understand. It did not have to be hostile but it had powers to destroy. But it also had powers to create, to assist. A good example is a lightning that could kill but also give fire. The thunderous sound effect only enhanced the numinous experience. This emotion most likely lies at the root of the first worships and religions.

The best definition Otto can offer is that it is “the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.”<sup>59</sup> This is also similar to the reverence to highly esteemed members of a society, kings or patriarchs that become legendary or semi-mythical figures, only stronger in effect. “It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *Mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures.”<sup>60</sup> Two accompanying feelings are unapproachability and overpoweringness.

The numinous is both fascinating and tremendous (in the older sense of the word). While it might seem that the *fascinans* is positive and the *tremendum* is negative, it is not so. *Fascinans* also causes the creature to tremble, to feel insecure, it is “something that entrances him; and beside that in it which bewilders and confounds, he feels a something that captivates

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<sup>58</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy, An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Humphrey Milford, 1936).

<sup>59</sup> Otto, p. 10

<sup>60</sup> Otto, p. 13.

and transports him with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication.”<sup>61</sup> *Tremendum*, on the other hand, resembles the emotion of fear but Otto denies the comparison. It is “a quite specific kind of emotional response, wholly distinct from that of being afraid.”<sup>62</sup> This emotion comes from the greatness of the numinous object, not from its overwhelming power. Obviously, the manifestation of the *mysterium tremendum* still needs to be approached very carefully.

For this purpose, in terms of good and evil, Otto separates the numinous from the other, more obvious component of the holy, which is the absolute ethical, moral attribute, the complete goodness that is present, for example, in the Christian god. Therefore this extracted feeling of numinous must be neither positive or negative, and applicable to other entities that do not profess to goodness. Surely, the devil-worship also includes such a feature without the element of kindness, and what is potent and benevolent can very quickly turn into potent and malevolent.

Otto uses the term “wholly other” which represents the object of mystery, with its origin beyond our world and understanding, and “whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb.”<sup>63</sup> This notion suggests testing the theory also on supernatural elements such as a ghost, which he does and explains why it attracts reader’s attention. He reasons that “it is the weird thing itself that allures the fancy.” And this is achieved

because it is a thing that ‘doesn’t really exist at all’, the ‘wholly other’, something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one, and which at the same time arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind.... this element in the numinous consciousness, the feeling of the ‘wholly other’, is heightened and clarified, its higher modes of manifestation come into being, which set the numinous object in contrast not only to everything wonted and familiar (i.e., in the end, to nature in general), thereby turning it into the ‘super-natural’, but finally to the world itself, and thereby exalt it to the ‘supramundane’, that which is above the whole world-order.<sup>64</sup>

The combination of the two *mysteria* is what shapes Lovecraftian horror. The acquired knowledge is alluring, the investigator yearns to learn the truth. The truth which has the power to change the world in a profound way. On the other hand, with the revelation comes the terrible realization. Therefore, when the protagonists encounter the unknown that has the

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<sup>61</sup> Otto, p. 31.

<sup>62</sup> Otto, p. 13.

<sup>63</sup> Otto, p. 28.

<sup>64</sup> Otto, p. 29.

capacity to destroy the Earth and to profoundly alter the human perspective of the universe and the position in it, they tend to look at it with awe, with the feeling Otto calls ‘the numinous’. In the end, the protagonist, and the readers, stand together staring in the face of reality knowing that they will be annihilated along with the rest of the world. The last part is, of course, an addition to Otto’s theory but is apt for the whims of a divine being.



**The Coming of Azathoth by Richard Luong. Azathoth with the numinous reaction from his followers.**

Noël Carroll expresses objections to the comparison of the religious feeling and the feeling invoke by horror stories. He explains the numinous as

tremendous, causing fear in the subject, a paralyzing sense of being overpowered, of being dependent, of being nothing, of being worthless. The numen is awe-ful, resulting in a sense of awe. The numen is also mysterious; it is wholly other, beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar in such a way that it induces a stupor, a blank feeling of wonderment, an astonishment that strikes one dumb, a kind of amazement absolute.<sup>65</sup>

For Carroll, the source of the fear are monsters and those are either known, or at least must be subjects to physical laws. They cannot possess god-like properties, “nor does one feel worthless before (or dependent upon) the monsters of horror as one might before a deity.”<sup>66</sup>

Although he dismisses the connection between the numinous and horror and states that it cannot be a general condition for horror-feeling, there certainly is a correlation between it

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<sup>65</sup> Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 165.

<sup>66</sup> Carroll, p. 166.

and cosmic horror. For this reason it must be fully applicable to Lovecraftian horror in which something outside our own world that permeates into our surroundings causes fear, wonderment, bewilderment and perhaps, dark ecstasy of pleasure and pain. The rapture changes into awe, the awe changes into dread. Horror and fear are more earthly, tangible emotions, but it is difficult to separate them thus from the rest of the spectrum of emotions and aesthetics. There are many critics to Otto's theory. However, it is unimportant whether he is correct in the field of religious studies and philosophy. The description helps to introduce Lovecraftian horror.

There is an obvious similarity of Otto's concept with Burke's notion of the sublime. Although one is a religious emotion and the other an artistic one, they both refer to the aesthetic experience that stems from the insignificance of the observer.

## 4. The Theory of Horror; Where to Look for the Unknown?

### 4.1. Enter the Fantastic

Lovecraft openly dealt with the supernatural, a phenomenon that is part of the weird and appeared in pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Stories* or *Tales of Magic and Mystery* to which Lovecraft was a loyal contributor. In doing so, he declared his stories to be in the realm of the fantastic literature. Defining any phenomenon is always difficult and to define the fantastic or horror literature is no different. The supernatural has been in the oral tradition since the dawn of mankind and is now deeply embedded in our myths, legends and in the way we think. To define the fantastic literature is to separate it from the rest of the art that has stemmed from the same cultural background. Therefore, rather than defining it as a whole and distinguishing it from the other genres, only an attempt to demonstrate some of its features should be sufficient. Lovecraft himself explains the pitfalls of definitions. “Naturally we cannot expect all weird tales to conform absolutely to any theoretical model. Creative minds are uneven, and the best of fabrics have their dull spots.”<sup>1</sup> In the end, is the definition of fantastic literature really so important in order to enjoy it?

There are many different genres pertaining to the group called ‘the fantastic’: science fiction, fantasy, horror, superhero, cyberpunk, steampunk, dystopian, new weird, post/apocalyptic, alternative history, and so on. Horror is one of the oldest ones. There are, of course, medieval stories that would fit into today’s classification of fantasy, however, at the time of their formation they were all meant as a serious, at best allegorical, readings, such as religious parables or moral treatises. Some of Shakespeare’s plays contain supernatural elements but ghosts and sprites were far from being considered fictitious at that time and a place such as Belmont was as real and remote as Athens or Verona. But even without a proper definition, horror literature is easily recognized. The reason behind it is very precisely described by the name of the genre: it invokes fear and horror.

The aesthetics of horror is, of course, not comparable to the horror one perceives when being chased by an angry mob or a rabid dog. Up until a certain point fear was inseparable from danger. The horror raised by a story in a book or a film is a relatively new emotion we can experience without the actual threat of life or integrity. It can be called a ‘safe fear’; the

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<sup>1</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, „Supernatural Horror in Literature,“ *Collected Essays, Volume 2: Literary Criticism*, ed. S.T. Joshi (New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2004) p. 82–135.



reader feels the horrific impact yet is at the same time aware of the fact that nothing is going to happen to her or him. It gives them a chance to deliberately induce fear in themselves, to experience something without terrible consequences, which is what most likely spurred the popularity of the genre. This kind of fear is purely for entertainment.

While traditionally there are different types of horror, Lovecraft recognizes types of fear. Not in the sense of the effect on the reader but the source of that effect, namely the unknown. Lovecraft was, of course, aware that there are fears of other things (war, mundane death) as he showed in his poem “The Conscript”<sup>2</sup> but his aim was to introduce the unknown and the fear it evokes as a reaction to the modern world. And once again, the unknown cannot be defined or explained away.

This work is not a quest for the unknown.

## 4.2. Lovecraft’s Affection for Horror

In order to read and enjoy Lovecraft, it is not necessary to worry about the reasons of what stimulates the fear produced by horror stories. For example, Josef Škvorecký suggests<sup>3</sup> the most suitable conditions for reading Lovecraft in order to enjoy the horror story the best; in other words, to get scared. It won’t do any harm though to consider some of the elements of Lovecraft’s work.

Perhaps the best theoretical source for the analysis of Lovecraftian horror to start with is the one made by Lovecraft himself. He was a skilful essayist after years of practice in the form of multitude letters he wrote to his contemporaries (he wrote around 100 000 letters<sup>4</sup>). The two main works in this field are “Supernatural Horror in Literature” finished in 1927 and “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction”<sup>5</sup> from 1933. The former focuses briefly on the definition of Lovecraft’s horror and then continues with an overview of the history of horror, or as Lovecraft calls it, “the weird tales”. The latter is his essay on a construction of story of the same kind with few interesting notes on the genre. Lovecraft, however, embodied several other mini-essays in some of his short stories. The opening of the “Call of Cthulhu” became

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<sup>2</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *To a Dreamer: Best Poems of H. P. Lovecraft*, 183–184.

<sup>3</sup> Josef Škvorecký, “Podivný pán z Providence,” *H.P. Lovecraft: Hrobka - Příběhy a vize z let 1917-1920* (Praha: Plus, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The H. P. Lovecraft Archive, 1998 – 2020, [www.hplovecraft.com/internet/ahcfaq/written.aspx](http://www.hplovecraft.com/internet/ahcfaq/written.aspx)

<sup>5</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction,” *Collected Essays, Volume 2: Literary Criticism* (New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2004) p. 175–78.

immortal in the theory of horror, while “The Unnamable”, “Pickman’s Model” or “Celephaïs”<sup>6</sup> also shed light on Lovecraft’s thoughts.

The “Supernatural Horror in Literature” opens up with the most defining sentence of Lovecraft’s work: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” The ability to formalize the fear of the unknown into a literary concept is his greatest achievement. Even the way he structures the argument is attractive; that among all the fears imaginable the fear of the unknown assumes a prominent position and in turn fear is superior to all other emotions. It seems now that all Lovecraft did was to simply discover the principal human emotion.

He was aware that not only the intensity of fear, but also its ancient origin is exceptional; it has been with mankind from the very beginning. In Lovecraft’s interpretation this means a timespan of countless aeons. If the fear of the unknown is extremely old and deeply rooted in our subconscious minds and instincts, so must be the unknown itself as it requires an ignorant perceiver as a foil, one whose judgement turns the objective into the subjective. The development of the unknown therefore follows the one of fear as it “became for our primitive forefathers a terrible and omnipotent source of boons and calamities visited upon mankind for cryptic and wholly extra-terrestrial reasons, and thus clearly belonging to spheres of existence whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part.” And the stigma of the unknown that it produces consequences beyond our control still persists.

For obvious reasons, there is no definition of the unknown, Lovecraft only bids the readers to adopt “a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from everyday life” to enjoy the “spectrally macabre” and feels confident that even without the right attitude the fear of the unknown will not disappear because “no amount of rationalisation, reform, or Freudian analysis can quite annul the thrill of the chimney-corner whisper or the lonely wood” and adds that the

children will always be afraid of the dark, and men with minds sensitive to hereditary impulse will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse.

The first development of the idea of the unknown thereby started along with the formation of fear as a response to the phenomena men did not understand. And since the more memorable of those were the negative ones (death, disease), “it has fallen to the lot of the darker and more maleficent side of cosmic mystery to figure chiefly in our popular

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<sup>6</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “Celephaïs,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

supernatural folklore.” All these objects of religions and superstitions later constituted the underlying cultural features, their origin forgotten, yet the fear, the awe connected to them, prevailed. Lovecraft states that the “cosmic terror appears as an ingredient of the earliest folklore of all races, and is crystallised in the most archaic ballads, chronicles, and sacred writings” and adds manifestations of these residues: ceremonies, rituals and tomes. Although it is no longer apparent what these abstract models did represent, they are still surrounded with the aura of mystery. In the end, however, it is not really important how close to the truth Lovecraft is in these historical assumptions concerning the evolution of mankind’s attitude towards myth and magic since it demonstrates his observations that gave rise to his own mythos.

The unknown, although undefined, can be still situated in space and time and Lovecraft placed it in the cosmos. He observes that despite the fact that “the area of the unknown has been steadily contracting for thousands of years, an infinite reservoir of mystery still engulfs most of the outer cosmos” as mankind constantly makes progress in different scientific areas and as a result it turns the unknown into the known. At the beginning of the twentieth century the universe was still a great mystery observable mostly through the lenses of telescopes and it was unimaginable for the cosmos to become as explored as the rest of the world that surrounds us. As the science gradually reduces the domain of the unknown, it will eventually backfire and bring out truths that are better left hidden.

The necessity of fear and the unknown in Lovecraftian literature leads to the essential element: the atmosphere. Lovecraft is an ardent proponent and notes that

atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation. (...) Therefore we must judge a weird tale not by the author's intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point. (...) The one test of the really weird is simply this -- whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim. And of course, the more completely and unifiedly a story conveys this atmosphere the better it is as a work of art in the given medium.

Through the atmosphere, Lovecraft also makes distinction between the ‘ordinary’ and the cosmic fear. He states that “the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome” is „not the literature of cosmic fear in its purest sense.” It should have

a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness

and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the dæmons of unplumbed space.

That puts the horror genre in a unique position. There is no reason to divide a horror story, structure it, or analyse it into smaller elements in order to capture or distil the emotion fear (structuring a horror story may be suitable for other purposes, however). Only the single, unified effect of the whole matters. It produces a binary system of evaluation: a story does evoke fear, or not. Obviously, it also depends on the reader, whether they get scared, or not, but Lovecraft was confident about the universality of the fear of the unknown. When he discarded author's intention, it made no difference if the author succeeded in his or her aim to make the story scary but whether there is an objective effect on the reader. Thus both characters and events are secondary in regard to the atmosphere or mood.

This idea is similar to Roland Barthes' in essay "The Death of the Author"<sup>7</sup> from 1967 who also argues that the creator and his creation are not related. David Javet agrees with both of them and notes that Lovecraft's work should not be interpreted in the way Lovecraft would have intended. Unfortunately, Lovecraft never saw his work achieving popularity and has never been given a chance to influence the formation of the mythos. Javet believes that there is an ongoing effort to increase Lovecraft's status to compensate the initial rebuff of his work. He states that "from a strong desire to re-establish Lovecraft's authorship, the scholars felt the need to strengthen the audience's view of Lovecraft as an author."<sup>8</sup> In his assessment, Javet adds that the Cthulhu mythos was not truly created by Lovecraft as the author but by the readers. He might be right in the philosophical sense but it is true in the actual sense; Lovecraft never dreamt of a unified mythology. On the other hand, there are many letters in which Lovecraft explained the lore of his stories but that does not mean that he wanted to promote his position; he simply continued to look after his own work.

In the lesser essay called "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" Lovecraft not only discusses the manner of writing his stories but also confesses his reasons for selecting weird fiction as the genre of choice. In his writing he wishes both as an author and a dreamer "to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis."

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen*, no. 5–6, 1967.

<sup>8</sup> David Javet, *The Pen that Never Stops Writing: The Lovecraft Mythology* (Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, 2010) p. 62.

Lovecraft feels the urge shared by many of his predecessors, his readers and his followers to delve into the unknown and revel in the experience of being on the verge of discovery yet at the same time fearing the result it may bring. The desired effect is not to uncover it and spoil the impression but to feel “a burning curiosity about unknown outer space, and a burning desire to escape from the prison-house of the known and the real into those enchanted lands of incredible adventure and infinite possibilities which dreams open up to us”. These fantastic perspectives therefore cannot be found in the world of the real, of the known, of the human.

As a writer of horror fiction, he still relates these images to the human condition of repulsion and rejection. “Horror and the unknown or the strange are always closely connected, so that it is hard to create a convincing picture of shattered natural law or cosmic alienage or ‘outsideness’ without laying stress on the emotion of fear.” This is not to say that what is different is to be merely feared. It can be worshipped, it can be mocked but the result is always the same; one feels out of place. This cosmic xenophobia is accompanied by the effect that negates the feeling of the natural and familiar. Also, the relation between the unknown and the horror creates a parallel to his assertion that “uncertainty and danger are always closely allied”.

In order to avoid being flat and unconvincing, and to remain alien, the “impossible, improbable, or inconceivable phenomena” must be rare in the stories and its careful placing within the realistic frame helps in building up the marvel. And, “being the principal thing in the story, its mere existence should overshadow the characters and events.” It is possible to extract from this notion the principal goal Lovecraft strives to achieve. If a mere existence of the marvel is more significant than any other element of the story, then it is sufficient for it to be just looming large on the horizon and no actual action is required from it to perform. As a consequence, what does raise fear is the knowledge of its existence, or contrariwise, as long as it remains unknown, the world is in a state of seeming safety.

Analogous to the first essay is the notion on atmosphere because that, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction. Indeed, all that a wonder story can ever be is a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood. The moment it tries to be anything else it becomes cheap, puerile, and unconvincing. Prime emphasis should be given to subtle suggestion – imperceptible hints and touches of selective associative detail which express shadings of moods and build up a vague illusion of the strange reality of the unreal.

In his reflections, Lovecraft oscillates between the expressions “weird story”, “weird fiction” and “weird tale”. He basically uses the term “horror” only for the emotional response akin to fear and rarely for the genre as we understand it now. On top of that, it seems that his

definition of the weird includes Stoker's *Dracula*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, James' *The Turn of the Screw* or Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. Apparently, the expression was not entirely distinguished and was understood mostly as a continuation of the Gothic and the opposite to the preceding mainstream literary movements, e.g. Romanticism and Realism. Lovecraft's contemporaries and fellow writers of the weird include Ron Howard's dark fantasy style of Conan, Seabury Quinn's occult detective De Grandin or science fiction of H.G.Wells. Defining the weird is therefore not easy; even more so if a new term "New Weird" arose in the last few decades, with a different meaning (the oldest representative is probably Lewis Carroll and China Miéville being the most known these days). However, in today's definitions the weird is a mix of fantasy, science-fiction and horror<sup>9</sup>, which fits perfectly Lovecraft's work.

As Lovecraft further developed his essayistic style in some of his short stories, various random points and ideas can be extracted from them. For instance, the narrator of "The Unnamable" is also a literary author and Lovecraft projects his own ideas of writing onto him. The narrator, called Randolph Carter, Lovecraft's alter ego, describes his literary preferences concerning the 'discovered' unknown as he "was too fond of ending my stories with sights or sounds which paralysed my heroes' faculties and left them without courage, words, or associations to tell what they had experienced." Even though the unknown is impossible to define positively, Carter at least tries to describe the unnameable in a discussion with his friend. They take a ghost as an object of their interest:

Moreover, so far as aesthetic theory was involved, if the psychic emanations of human creatures be grotesque distortions, what coherent representation could express or portray so gibbous and infamous a nebulosity as the spectre of a malign, chaotic perversion, itself a morbid blasphemy against Nature? Moulded by the dead brain of a hybrid nightmare, would not such a vaporous terror constitute in all loathsome truth the exquisitely, the shriekingly *unnamable*?

In the parallel with the unknown it appears that something that cannot be even imagined now seems feasible to define but that is not the case. The two debaters only put together attributes of a being that defies aesthetics but does not necessarily elude description. This story from 1923 predates the 'great texts'<sup>10</sup> of true cosmic horror as listed by Houellebecq ("The Call of Cthulhu", "The Colour out of Space", "The Dunwich Horror", "The Whisperer in

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<sup>9</sup> China Miéville, "Weird Fiction", ed. Mark Bould et al., *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Houellebecq, p. 41.

Darkness”<sup>11</sup>, *At the Mountains of Madness*, “The Dreams in the Witch House”<sup>12</sup>, “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, “The Shadow out of Time”) in which Lovecraft solidified his focus on the true unknown.

In “Celephaïs” Lovecraft shows his taste for the fantastic and explains how the element, originally present in every child, gets gradually eroded by the mundane life. That does not apply to everyone since

some of us awake in the night with strange phantasms of enchanted hills and gardens, of fountains that sing in the sun, of golden cliffs overhanging murmuring seas, of plains that stretch down to sleeping cities of bronze and stone, and of shadowy companies of heroes that ride caparisoned white horses along the edges of thick forests; and then we know that we have looked back through the ivory gates into that world of wonder which was ours before we were wise and unhappy.

This summary expresses a rare positive opinion towards anything extraordinary.

“Pickman’s Model” is another story of an artist who, to Lovecraft’s liking, revels in the macabre and morbid. The story offers a description of what a true art of this genre should compare to “because only a real artist knows the actual anatomy of the terrible or the physiology of fear - the exact sort of lines and proportions that connect up with latent instincts or hereditary memories of fright, and the proper colour contrasts and lighting effects to stir the dormant sense of strangeness.” This is very much like what one can imagine Lovecraft is attempting in his own writings.

The last essay-like excerpt is the first paragraph of “The Call of Cthulhu” where Lovecraft ponders over the moment when the *status quo*, the equilibrium is finally broken by the sciences that push us outside the safety of the blissful ignorance and the unknown becomes the known:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

This is the assumption fitting for most of Lovecraft’s stories as the new partial discoveries threat to unveil the true shape and form of the universe.

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<sup>11</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” *Collected Fiction Volume 2 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>12</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “Dreams in the Witch House,” *Collected Fiction Volume 3 (1931-1936): A Variorum Edition*.

### 4.3. Todorov's General Theory of 'The Fantastic'

Lovecraft's essay was written a hundred years ago and the genre has since much changed. That, of course, did not preclude some theorists to contribute to the discussion using examples mostly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of them Tzvetan Todorov who formulated the definition of the fantastic stories. Although the fantastic is not equal to the genre of horror, it can be understood as a generic term subsuming horror as an example of the fantastic. In his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*<sup>13</sup>, Todorov distinguishes between the uncanny that is represented by the real although somewhat dubious ending of a story, and the marvellous where there is always a supernatural element needed in order to explain the fantastic. Todorov requires the main character (and the reader) to hesitate between the two solutions until the very end.

His definition is rather academic but its importance lies in the discovery of one aspect of the fantastic literature that can be used to assess Lovecraft's stories. No actual Sophie's choice is necessary but something in the story must provoke uncertainty in the implied reader to ask a question whether the plot in the book is real, or at least possible. Obviously, one cannot take into account psychotic behaviour, logical inaccuracies or anachronistic mistakes in novels. It must be narrowed down to certain situations that defy the laws of natural order. It is difficult not to use the word 'fantastic' for these kind of situations.

In Lovecraftian literature, this hesitation is in a sense as important as the supernatural itself in order to provoke fear. To bring forth the unknown an important part of the story must be, to a certain point, unsure. Both the reader and the character must hesitate about the nature of the one key element which is obscured by various possible explanations, and on the revelation of which depends the fate of the protagonist and the end of the story. This idea promotes the significance of the unknown since the fear of the unknown is incompatible with a definitive solution of the conflict. Obviously, the expectations about the possibility of the supernatural being in play is necessary and the presented dilemma alone is capable of stimulating reader's response.

The difference from Todorov's assessment is that it is not as important whether it ends one way or another. The experience is the same, it provokes and challenges the reality; the unknown does not need to, or perhaps even must not, be resolved to have its effect. It contradicts Todorov's idea because in Lovecraft's horror the reader's response is imminent,

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<sup>13</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Úvod do fantastické literatury*, trans. Vladimír Fiala (Prague: Karolinum, 2010).



the unknown triggers the imagination immediately without waiting for the conclusion. The climax does not come with the hesitation at the end of the story when the revelation comes and determines whether it is the realm of uncanny, or the marvellous. In Lovecraft's horror story, as the atmosphere is the key, the reader is either frightened or not, no matter the explanation. It is important to distinguish between the plot of the actual story and the underlying extent of the unknown.

For Todorov, fear is not a defining element of the fantastic. This may be a correct assumption, but fear certainly is a defining element of horror. In these stories this is the only effect that matters. Rather simplistic view, but considering the fact that Todorov bases the fantastic literature on hesitation only, not so audacious after all. A good horror story may contain other elements such as an inferior position of women ("The Yellow Wallpaper"<sup>14</sup>) or ecological catastrophe (*The Day of the Triffids*<sup>15</sup>), on the other hand, if it produces no fear, it cannot be regarded a horror. There are many stories (books and films alike) that deal with zombie outbreaks but are comical in their nature, an approach to extraterrestrials can be solely scientific, and vampires are often being portrayed as romantic creatures. Fear is the essence of horror, which Lovecraft indirectly confirms: "a weird story whose intent is to teach or produce a social effect, or one in which the horrors are finally explained away by natural means, is not a genuine tale of cosmic fear".<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, Todorov states that the pure horror (whatever the definition is) is in the area of the uncanny. In the same paragraph he reiterates the definition of the uncanny; it describes events that can be explained by rational phenomena yet are unbelievable, unusual, shocking, strange, unsettling and remarkable.<sup>17</sup> And Todorov readily comes up with another difference between the uncanny and the marvellous; in the former, the horror is linked exclusively with the feelings of the characters, while the latter provides an event that defies reason without considering the reaction of the characters<sup>18</sup>. Although this division is somewhat arbitrary, according to it, and based on Lovecraft's emphasis on the atmosphere, his stories should belong to the realm of the marvellous. The characters' feelings are unimportant, what matters is the level of fear it is capable of attaining. Characters are mere readers' guides through the emerging marvel. Lovecraftian horror should be therefore part of the marvellous, not the uncanny. Apart of that, it must be noted that a realistic explanation in

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<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper," *The New England Magazine*, 1892.

<sup>15</sup> John Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (London: Michael Joseph, 1969)

<sup>16</sup> Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature".

<sup>17</sup> Todorov, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Todorov, 43.

Lovecraft's stories would not produce the intended effect of cosmic horror; it would be very dissatisfying to simply state that all the experienced horror was but a dream.

Todorov continues by stating that the marvellous corresponds with the unknown, unseen phenomenon that is about to be resolved<sup>19</sup>. That is also applicable to Lovecraft's cosmic stories and no matter the various genres they could possibly fall into, based on this definition they must form a sub-genre of the marvellous. There is no single story with a plausible mundane explanation in Lovecraft's repertoire; the unknown, that is the complete picture of the state of the universe, remains shrouded but is partially revealed enough for the investigators to come to an understanding of its terrible nature. Also, no work of Lovecraft's ends in an ambiguous way. He hints at the cosmic dreads throughout the story and the reader always knows there is something lurking on the verge of our own universe. If there is an absolute axiom in Lovecraft's stories it is that the hideous things are true and beyond human grasp.

The element closest to the definition of the uncanny is the proclamation of madness, often made by the shocked narrators. A mad mind of an unreliable narrator may certainly explain the strange happenings and thus render the story natural and leave it in the area of the uncanny. Such a plausible resolution is exactly what the characters wish for, yet such a proclamation is hinted at at the beginning of the particular stories without ever resolving it as ever being true. In the end, no narrator is confirmed to have become mad and the reader is left without doubts that all that has been told was the truth.

This brings us to another point of contact with Lovecraft's work - the idea of the narrator-protagonist. According to Todorov, such a narrator is perfectly suitable for the uncanny as it promotes hesitation while an objective narrator is mostly utilized in stories that require no confirmation or denial of the supernatural (the marvellous)<sup>20</sup>. Unlike the character, the objective narrator should not lie and therefore deprives the reader of the hesitation over character's hardships. Lovecraft employs this kind of narrative in most of his stories yet often the terrible outcome of the fantastic encounter is very early disclosed and allows for no space for hesitation. As the objective narrator should not lie, there is no reason not to believe them despite the fact that the majority of these narrators state at the onset that their story is unbelievable or admit they may have gone mad. Lovecraft, an active letter-writer, probably pictured himself at the centre of the action but the first person narrative is also a tool to bring the reader closer to the story. In this he is in concordance with Todorov who states that the

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<sup>19</sup> Todorov, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Todorov, 73.

narrator-protagonist also allows the readers to identify themselves with the story and allows them to enter the fantastic world. Todorov also speculates that the reader who undergoes the process of identification expels themselves from the reality.<sup>21</sup>

By the end of his book, quite unexpectedly, Todorov disqualifies fear from the marvellous for the reason that anything supernatural that occurs must be happening in a world where the supernatural is allowed and common. It cannot be therefore out of ordinary.<sup>22</sup> Bhagwati Prasad responds to this statement by claiming that “to say that supernatural events happening within a supernatural world cannot be disturbing, would be much the same as claiming that nothing happening within this world, according to the natural laws of this world, can be disturbing.”<sup>23</sup> There truly are stories, such as science fiction or fantasy literature where this supernatural order is taken as a norm and those are the scenarios supporting Todorov’s claim. They seek to present an alternative to the reality to stir imagination and use the fantastic parts merely as a setting. The conflict usually remains human. But in Lovecraft’s stories, the supernatural, or more precisely the unnatural, walks hand in hand with the unknown to create fear and shock and must be therefore disturbing. It is the connection of the unknown with the fear that forms building blocks of the cosmic horror.

Despite the ambiguity about categorization of horror stories within the realm of the fantastic, there is another Todorov’s assumption which can be used in connection to fear. He claims that the emotional perception of an object can in some instances become so strong that the reader becomes oblivious about the object of the perception<sup>24</sup>. This is the case of fear, especially in a situation where the object of fear functions as a transition to another, more fearful conclusion as it confirms what was initially considered only a legend and myth. This is the case of many Lovecraft’s stories (“The Shadow out of Time”, “The Thing at the Doorstep”<sup>25</sup>) where the protagonists learn that the sinister happenings, in these cases mind transfers, reveal the existence of a greater power. In the first story it is a race from the past monitoring the Earth’s history, in the other it is a user of black magic stealing bodies to gain an eternal life. However, one does not need to know exactly what or who the perpetrator is but once the understanding of greater threat takes place, the emotion of fear always lingers.

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<sup>21</sup> Todorov, 146.

<sup>22</sup> Todorov, 144.

<sup>23</sup> Bhagwati Prasad, “Fantastic Literature: Understanding Todorov’s Idea,” *International Journal of Education & Applied Sciences Research*, Vol.2, Issue 3, Mar. 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Todorov, 91.

<sup>25</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Thing at the Doorstep,” *Collected Fiction Volume 3 (1931-1936): A Variorum Edition*.

Lovecraft wanted the reader to be immersed in the story, to nearly become part of it. As Todorov points out<sup>26</sup>, Lovecraft considered the fear to be the essential product of a horror story which operates as a mere agent to deliver it. The stories themselves are not the primary aim, which also explains why so many of them resemble each other or are retelling a similar plot (“Dagon” and “The Call of Cthulhu” – an appearance of a benthic deity in a sudden upsurge of the sea bottom, “The White Ship”<sup>27</sup> and “The Silver Key”<sup>28</sup> – a journey in the Dreamlands, “The Picture in the House”<sup>29</sup> and “The Terrible Old Man”<sup>30</sup> – an elderly man is a grave danger to his unwelcome guests). As long as fear is invoked, the stories do not need to be unique, on the other hand, their resemblance helped in the consolidation of the unified Cthulhu mythos.

#### 4.4. Carroll’s Monster-centred Horrorverse

One of the modern contributors to the efforts of defining literature of fiction, who is not afraid to use also films as examples, is another literary critic, Noël Carroll and his book *Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. He offers a more practical and less philosophical analysis than Todorov and also, he focuses on horror stories only. For the purpose of his work, he proposes the term ‘art-horror’, an emotional effect with its arrangement of characteristic structures, imagery, and figures in the genre. He adds that the term as an opposition to the ‘natural’ horror, which is based in the dangerous or even gruesome reality. This negative definition also suggests that Carroll deals with the type of fiction that contains supernatural elements. Moreover, he believes the essence of horror is in the “conflict between humanity and the inhuman, or between the normal and the abnormal.”<sup>31</sup> The duality is like Lovecraft’s but while Carroll’s focus is on the human part, Lovecraft uses it only as a foil to present the inhuman and the unknown. The ‘art-horror’ is similar to the proposed expression ‘safe horror’, for in both instances it is an effect that has no dangerous consequences and allows readers and viewers alike the pleasure of fear.

Carroll structures his analysis of horror in a way that presupposes a monster at the centre of the story. This includes witches, werewolves, ghosts, demons, extra-terrestrials or a

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<sup>26</sup> Todorov, 33.

<sup>27</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The White Ship,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>28</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Silver Key,” *Collected Fiction Volume 2 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>29</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Picture in the House,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>30</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Terrible Old Man,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>31</sup> Carroll, 126.

fog, along with more unique creatures such as Godzilla, the Devil, Mr. Hyde, or Pinhead but it can certainly also mean abstract concepts, as we can be dealing with the beasts within us, or fanaticism of a crowd. All of it is more or less tangible, a specimen of evil causing misery and pain that can be fought and perhaps vanquished. For Carroll, the monster at play, in order to qualify as an object of art-horror, must be both terrifying and repulsive. He states that “the character’s affective reaction to the monstrous in horror stories is not merely a matter of fear, i.e., of being frightened by something that threatens danger. Rather threat is compounded with revulsion, nausea, and disgust.”<sup>32</sup> Later, he adds

furthermore, it is crucial that two evaluative components come into play: that the monster is regarded as threatening and impure. If the monster were only evaluated as potentially threatening, the emotion would be fear; if only potentially impure, the emotion would be disgust. Arthorror requires evaluation both in terms of threat and disgust.<sup>33</sup>

This is an element that Lovecraft examined to the full extent, however he did not deem the two components inseparable. The cosmic fear of the unknown did not require repulsive monsters yet he enjoyed them abundantly. His description of the monsters and the trails they leave behind was without comparison.

Lovecraft distinguishes other two categories of monsters (although the boundary between the two groups is not clear-cut). His earthly monsters certainly meet the two conditions; they evoke fear and repulsion by their physical description (e.g. the Dunwich horror, Cthulhu, night-gaunts, shoggoths). But the inhabitants of the cosmic abysses evoke more than just the fear and repulsion. It is a sacred awe produced not by direct description but by the circumstantial display of their powers and especially by the vague yet ominous epithets (“The Great Old Ones”, “The Outer Gods”, “The Elder Things”; or individually “The Blind Idiot God”, “Daemon Sultan”, “The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young”, “The Lurker at the Threshold”, “The Crawling Chaos”).

The latter entities are too remote to be repulsive to the eye for what is never seen cannot physically disgust the beholder. That is Lovecraft’s intention; although he describes the lesser creatures with a meticulous precision, sometimes even using geometrical objects as models, he never provides this kind of description to introduce the major antagonists of the universe. By the given hints Lovecraft leaves it to the reader to picture for themselves the entities far beyond the capabilities of language and makes them repulsive to the mind.

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<sup>32</sup> Carroll, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Carroll, 28.

But there is another reason for this differentiation. While Carroll places monsters at the centre of a typical horror story, the plot revolves around them and escalates by the confrontation with them, Lovecraft does not always occupy himself with common monsters. The prototypical list given above does not usually apply to his stories; he would rather use a dark magician, a mad scientist raising the dead, a terrible old man, or a ghoulish painter. However, in most of the stories the antagonist is the universe itself and the monsters are present only to show how awful the state of things became while mankind was not watching. This is the fundamental difference that defines Lovecraft's writing and cosmic horror.

Even if there are any malignant entities present in the stories they are not the real adversaries but mere harbingers of forces even more sinister. They are the tip of an iceberg and Lovecraft's cosmic beings are so terrible because they force those who come into contact with them to realize that within the universe there exist entities whose very essence is so different mankind cannot hope to comprehend. They threaten to destroy everything only through its existence and part of the terrifying experience is the fact that it is not just us who learn about the other things, they learn about us too. Therefore, every other of Lovecraft's stories could possibly end up with the annihilation of the Earth should the story continue with the full realization of the final premise and it's the narrator's death, madness or seclusion that prevents the crisis from the further development. However, what the narrator does not tell is not prevented from happening. In the end, every Lovecraft's story is but a prelude to a grander symphony (or cacophony) of the cosmic play.



**Cthulhu by Andrée Wallin. The most famous of Lovecraft's Monsters.**

For this reason, all the vampires, ghosts or demons pale before the cosmic dread since they are horrible in their own nature but they do not bring an entirely new order, new hierarchy of rules. They do constitute objects of good horror stories and they, too, represent a violation of laws we feel positive we know, yet it does not run as deep as to threaten the existence of mankind itself. These common monsters have been part of the well-established human mythology for thousands of years, which renders them indigenous in the field of anthropology. Although it seems reasonably safe to state that no one has ever seen an elf or a banshee, they are not part of the true unknown for they have never threatened to cause the fall of mankind and a use of specific charms should reliably ward them off. Lovecraft's universe signifies an entirely new level of fear-object.

Carroll also works with a plot division of horror stories for the purpose of typology. According to him, a typical horror story consists of different combinations of four key separate parts, those being onset, discovery, confirmation and confrontation (the complex discovery plot<sup>34</sup>). As Carroll's approach presumes that the antagonist of a horror story is a monster, the plot culminates with the encounter with this creature. This is done in four logical steps.

The onset is the introduction of the supernatural element, the monster, either to the characters or to the readers. Discovery is exposing the source of the supernatural, identifying the monster, again either as a new information to the characters, or as part of their intentional investigation. Confirmation involves a broader comprehension, or recognition of the existence of the monster, possibly disclosing vital information about it to the authorities. Confrontation is the final stage of the encounter with the monstrosity resulting either in the death, banishment or submission of the creature, or the defeat at the hands of it. Various stories may exclude the onset part and the monster appears with the full realization of its power right in the discovery part, they may consist only of the onset and confrontation where the hero has no time to evaluate the characteristics of the monster and is immediately forced to fight it, or they can be pure confirmation in case the discovery took place before the story began and there follows no confrontation. Carroll also offers a specific subtype of a plot, the overreacher plot. The main difference is in the fact that the monster is not discovered but experimentally created.

At first it seems that Carroll allows no space for Todorov's hesitation but it could actually resonate in either the onset or the confirmation part. Instead of following the first

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<sup>34</sup> Carroll, 99.

appearance of the monster, the onset may start with a mere suggestion of the supernatural. In this case, the horrific events established in the opening part of a story contain a depiction of a gruesome murder only, without any leads as to who or what committed it. The confirmation, on the other hand, is the prologue for the confrontation and should represent the slowdown of the pace of the story and reevaluation before the final clash, similar to the hesitation about the nature of the monster. Of the remaining parts, discovery is the most conclusive and the most detailed part of any horror story; the discovery is either made or is not. The confrontation is also rather straightforward but the final battle can end in a doubtful way that allows a sequel.

Carroll makes reference to Lovecraft in this vein by stipulating that “Pickman’s Model” is a pure discovery plot. The story is about an artist who makes outstandingly vivid paintings of brutal, morbid and ghoulish scenes. The main character later discovers that the models for his paintings were real images. Here, Carroll highlights not only what is the hallmark of this particular story, but provides the characterization of Lovecraft’s work in general. The sole discovery of the unknown is the main premise for almost all of his works. It can be followed by a confirmation or confrontation but it is rarely preceded by the onset because of the narrative style of the testimonies. On most occasions, the protagonists do not attempt to uncover the truth as a part of confirmation. But when they do, they immediately wish they never had.

Lovecraft’s stories do not necessarily revolve around the presence of a monster either; the revelation procedure works equally well with the dark truths of the cosmos. Lovecraft is therefore not as dependant on the existence of monsters and his plot does not culminate in the final confrontation. In “The Dunwich Horror” when the monster is defeated, the professors realize its terrible lineage: “You needn’t ask how Wilbur called it out of the air. He didn’t call it out. It was his twin brother, but it looked more like the father than he did.” Lovecraft works in detail with the unknown, with the actual forces that produced or unleashed the monster. The discovery then aims at the forbidden knowledge instead and the unknown usually does not make the confrontation possible. If so, it often results in insanity. In other words, the death of the final monster brings no relief to the characters because they realize the far reaching terrible implications even if the encounter is victorious. The final part of Carroll’s division leads in Lovecraft’s stories to another discovery, one that is left without confrontation. Instead, the reaction to this should be, as Lovecraft suggests, a flee into a peace and safety of a new dark age.

With the emphasis on the discovery plot, the stories are at times similar to detective or conspiracy stories. Consider the opening line from “The Thing at the Doorstep”. “It is true



that I have sent six bullets through the head of my best friend, and yet I hope to show by this statement that I am not his murderer.” Likewise, the beginning of *The Statement of Randolph Carter* is as follows: “I repeat to you, gentlemen, that your inquisition is fruitless. Detain me here forever if you will; confine or execute me if you must have a victim to propitiate the illusion you call justice; but I can say no more than I have said already.” The theoretical conspiracy of Cthulhu is suggested in “The Call of Cthulhu”: “I hope that no one else will accomplish this piecing out; certainly, if I live, I shall never knowingly supply a link in so hideous a chain.”

The existence of the unknown in Lovecraft’s stories does not at all impart the application of Carroll’s definition of a plot; it rather helps to demonstrate in what way are Lovecraft’s stories different from a typical horror story. On the other hand, Lovecraft has developed his own classification of types of horrors (or as he calls them ‘weird stories’) and also suggests five elements thereof. He identifies four distinct horror types<sup>35</sup>. The first one expresses a mood or feeling only. As touched upon above, Lovecraft considers the atmosphere of the story so important, that he finds it possible to build the whole story around it. Good examples in his work are the works from his Dream Cycle such as “Memory”<sup>36</sup> which tells of a discussion between a genie and a demon remembering the species called ‘Man’, or the short musing stories, e.g. “What the Moon Brings”<sup>37</sup> where the moon and low tide reveal a surreal landscape of dead city.

Another type is a pictorial conception, a story leading to a terrible image resembling an impressionist painting. Similar to the first type in the way that it should be capable of invoking fear without action. Again, the Dream Cycle can be taken as an example but it requires more depiction (“The White Ship” – a dreamer sets out for a journey to mythical cities, eventually reaching places too dangerous), or stories resulting in a shocking image (“The Moon Bog”<sup>38</sup> – draining a bog in a haunted location has dire consequences).

The third type revolves around a general situation, condition, legend or intellectual conception, one that is known and shared by others and an author may use them as symbols and allude to them knowing the readers will understand it without further explanation. This refers also to commonly familiar figures and events, similar to classical mythemes such as a baby in a basket found on a river, or a hero defeating dragon. There are not many stories in Lovecraft’s repertoire that would fit this description and if there are, they are altered, or

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<sup>35</sup> Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction”.

<sup>36</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “Memory,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>37</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “What the Moon Brings,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>38</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, “The Moon Bog,” *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

modernized. The legacy of Frankenstein's monster is obvious in "Herbert West – Reanimator"<sup>39</sup>, the main character of which is also a prototypical necromancer who raises the dead who become his doom. "Dreams in the Witch House" features a witch but she is not in league with the Devil but with an alien race. She comes in dreams and incites the protagonist to perform a sacrificial ritual. Still, Lovecraft traces the origin of the witch to the Salem trials.

The last type explains a definite tableau or specific dramatic situation or climax. This is possibly the best candidate for the unknown. Always containing a concrete, not previously seen or experienced situation, is the key for the discovery. The general knowledge is not welcome here; Lovecraft had to present a new case of horror, employing mostly the newly made scientific discoveries (*At the Mountains of Madness*, "The Colour out of Space"). Obviously, the stories can contain a fusion of these types.

In addition, Lovecraft mentions five elements of weird stories<sup>40</sup>. The first is the basic, underlying horror or abnormality, e.g. a condition, or an entity. This could be the unknown. This abnormality is manifesting itself in an inauspicious way which Lovecraft calls "the general effects or bearings of the horror". Unlike the discovery part in Carroll's book, this would be more universal, an underlying ominous effect introducing the evil part of the story. Perhaps not so obvious in the plot itself, rather from Lovecraft's style of writing, e.g. the constant reminder of the troubled position of humans in the universe or the use of the archaic adjectives.

Next is "the mode of manifestation - object embodying the horror and phenomena observed". Using Carroll's formulations, the embodiment would be the monster ("The Dunwich Horror") or experiment ("Herbert West - Reanimator") and the phenomena for example portentous dreams ("The Call of Cthulhu" – Cthulhu calls on sensitive people in their dreams from the city of R'lyeh) or animosity of the locals ("The Rats in the Walls" – the narrator moves to his inherited estate to uncover a terrible truth about his ancestors; the country folk avoided and hated the place).

The next ones are "the types of fear-reaction pertaining to the horror", that is the response of the protagonists. It resembles confrontation but on a more general level. It can refer to any reaction from investigation, flight, or retelling the story to the readers. The last one is "the specific effects of the horror in relation to the given set of conditions". This is an element that will differ in each horror story based the particular scenario. Are there rats

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<sup>39</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "Herbert West – Reanimator," *Collected Fiction Volume 1 (1905-1925): A Variorum Edition*.

<sup>40</sup> Lovecraft, "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction".

running in the walls? Ancient creatures walking the Earth again? Or are the alien powers hungry for alien music?

Still, the most interesting part of Carroll's book in relevance to Lovecraft is his approach to the unknown as he states that "horror stories are predominantly concerned with knowledge as a theme."<sup>41</sup> While Lovecraft considers the unknown to be the source of the cosmic fear, the search for the discovery of the unknown is the driving force for Carroll. He acknowledges its value in the horror stories, mainly because „the energies of the narrative are then devoted *to proving* the monster's existence. Such a plot celebrates the existence of things beyond the boundaries of common knowledge"<sup>42</sup> and "rendering the unknown known is, in fact, the point of such plots, as well as the source of their seductiveness."<sup>43</sup> Obviously, the unknown does not need to be represented only by the monsters so the claim that "the presentation of the unknown calls forth the desire to know more about it" can be also applied to Lovecraftian horror.

The classification of plots and their four stages revolve around the unknown. In the complex discovery plot humanity learns that there are things in the universe that should be taken into consideration, on the other hand the overreacher plot warns against going too far in order to uncover the truth. In the former the knowledge is menacing, in the other one strives to understand it. Lovecraft uses both types of plots. The majority of his stories fall under the complex discovery variant, some represent the other (*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, "The Statement of Randolph Carter", and "Herbert West - Reanimator"). However, in all his stories the newly acquired knowledge is presented as undesirable and even if it is not sought after in the discovery plot, the protagonist leaves the arena suspecting that he has learnt more than it was appropriate to know. The only exception in the philosophy of the unknown is "The Strange High House in the Mist"<sup>44</sup>. When the main character of the story learns the secret of the house high above the city of Kingsport and uncovers the unknown, he loses, or is perhaps robbed of, his adventurous spirit. The story is, however, part of the Dream Cycle, not yet a cosmic story, and the mythology is slightly different.

Nevertheless, it is indispensable for the horror genre to contain the manifestation of the unknown. The effort to uncover what lies behind the yet undiscovered mystery which, if left unchecked, causes pain and death, and the desire to know the truth despite the horrible

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<sup>41</sup> Carroll, 127.

<sup>42</sup> Carroll, 127.

<sup>43</sup> Carroll, 127.

<sup>44</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, "The Strange High House in the Mist," *Collected Fiction Volume 2 (1926-1930): A Variorum Edition*.

consequences, are the essence of horror. Not only the stories but also the motivation of the readers to read it, watch it, or perhaps live it, is driven by the wish to experience the quest for the unknown. As Carroll states, “the point of the horror genre (...) is to exhibit, disclose, and manifest that which is, putatively in principle, unknown and unknowable.”<sup>45</sup>

Lovecraft in fact works on two levels of the unknown. They are part of the same family but one is larger and contains the other one. The first is the one that frames the main part of story, the basic conflict apparent from the outset of the story that the protagonist needs to resolve, e.g. exploring the entrance to demonic depths (“The Statement of Randolph Carter”), investigating the existence of floating creatures during a flood (“The Whisperer in the Darkness”) or simply keeping an agitated neighbour company (“The Music of Erich Zann”). It is a typical structure of any story that ends with a resolution.

The second type of the unknown appears at the conclusion of the main part as a result of protagonist’s action. The end of the investigator’s adventure marks a beginning not of a new story or event but the realization of the terrible consequences, the hidden implications of ‘what just happened’. Therefore, while most horror stories end with any kind of a closure, Lovecraftian horror opens new vistas to another, greater unknown which also poses a greater threat, and is not, cannot be, resolved, or prevented.

Some stories, be it a book or a film, provide a last scene that overturns the previous achievements, e.g. the monster is not dead, or spawned an offspring before its demise, and the world is in danger again. Lovecraft’s stories are nothing of that sort as they offer no solace or temporary hope of better days to come. Hero’s discovery serves only the purpose of the introduction of the higher level of the unknown and the true threat.

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<sup>45</sup> Carroll, 127.

## 5. Conclusion: Not of this World

H.P. Lovecraft played his role in the history well. He was a sorry character, but there is no need to be sorry for him. He was a prophet of the universe whose task was to usher mankind into the new anti-anthropocentric era. He preoccupied himself with an idea that the universe and our world are profoundly disparate which constituted a serious blow to mankind's self-confidence. After millennia of living in the darkness, the turning on the light made us realize that there are others living with us.

He used the concept to introduce the cosmic horror in literature, the most important lesson of which was 'Be afraid of the cosmos and the things it hides'. Although it is a matter of emotional response in the readers of pulp magazines Lovecraft managed to turn it into a philosophy. This extension is probably the reason Lovecraft was not forgotten as were so many other authors of the genre. Cosmicism became the paramount of his work and an influential movement with an overlap in other branches of art. The result is images of alien, otherworldly sceneries and entities, bleak premises of the fate of mankind, uncaring unfathomable universe and the fear of the cosmic abyss. And when all these suggestive elements are nothing but anticipated features of the outside world, they coalesce into the idea of the unknown.

Lovecraft was given many all-explaining epithets: 'A Self-hating Humanist', 'An Epicure in the Terrible', 'A Literary Copernicus', and 'An Odd Gentleman from Providence'. For those who might doubt whether he was a creature of cosmos rather than a human being there is his link to the Earth in a form of an inscription on his tombstone "I AM PROVIDENCE". In his short story aptly named "The Outsider", he wrote: "unhappy is he to whom the memories of childhood bring only fear and sadness" as if excluding himself from the company of all the cheerful people. But once again, there is no need to be sorry for him. Should he have a happy life, there would be no Cthulhu waking us in our dreams.

## Appendix

H. P. Lovecraft bibliography in alphabetical order:

The Alchemist (1908)  
At the Mountains of Madness (1931)  
Azathoth (June 1922)  
Beyond the Wall of Sleep (1919)  
The Call of Cthulhu (1926)  
The Case of Charles Dexter Ward (1927)  
The Cats of Ulthar (1920)  
Celephaïs (1920)  
The Colour out of Space (1927)  
Cool Air (1926)  
Dagon (1917)  
The Descendant (1926)  
The Doom That Came to Sarnath (1919)  
The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath (1927)  
The Dreams in the Witch House (1932)  
The Dunwich Horror (1928)  
The Evil Clergyman (1933)  
Ex Oblivione (1921)  
The Festival (1923)  
From Beyond (1920)  
The Haunter of the Dark (1935)  
He (1925)  
Herbert West—Reanimator (1922)  
History of the Necronomicon (1927)  
The Horror at Red Hook (1925)  
The Hound (1922)  
Hypnos (1922)  
Ibid (1928)  
In the Vault (1925)  
The Lurking Fear (1922)  
Memory (1919)  
The Moon-Bog (1921)  
The Music of Erich Zann (1921)

The Nameless City (1921)  
Nyarlathotep (1920)  
Old Bugs (1919)  
The Other Gods (1921)  
The Outsider (1921)  
Pickman's Model (1926)  
The Picture in the House (1920)  
Polaris (1918)  
The Quest of Iranon (1921)  
The Rats in the Walls (1923)  
The Shadow out of Time (1935)  
The Shadow over Innsmouth (1931)  
The Shunned House (1924)  
The Silver Key (1926)  
The Statement of Randolph Carter (1919)  
The Strange High House in the Mist (1926)  
The Street (1920)  
Sweet Ermengarde (1917)  
The Temple (1920)  
The Terrible Old Man (1920)  
The Thing on the Doorstep (1933)  
The Tomb (1917)  
The Transition of Juan Romero (1919)  
The Tree (1920)  
The Unnamable (1923)  
The Very Old Folk (1927)  
What the Moon Brings (1922)  
The Whisperer in Darkness (1930)  
The White Ship (1919)

Lovecraft's stories are also available at:

[archive.org/details/TheCompleteWorksOfHPLovecraft\\_201412/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/TheCompleteWorksOfHPLovecraft_201412/mode/2up)

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