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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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HORROR AND TERROR:
LOVECRAFT'S ALIENATED PROTAGONISTS

by

ANNE-LOUISE GIBBONS, B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Carleton University

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The four tales I have isolated from the Lovecraft canon were chosen because they are better known than most of Lovecraft's work, and appear to be the most representative of the related ideas which form the foundation of Lovecraft's horror and terror. Torn between rationalism and dreams, Lovecraft developed his tales around the question, where is reality? He juxtaposes the external world, commonly held to be reality, and the imaginary world, commonly held to be unreal, in such a way that the protagonist accepts the imaginary world as real while the external world fades into a haze where "even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me" ("The Call of Cthulhu", p. 158). The terror implicit in this situation becomes horror when the monster suddenly becomes manifest and makes physical contact with the protagonist. A sense of dislocation occurs which completely isolates

The undersigned recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
and Research acceptance of the thesis .

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

Through a close study of four of H.P. Lovecraft's texts: "The Rats in the Walls", "The Colour Out of Space", "The Dunwich Horror", and "The Shadow Out of Time", it is possible to discern a consistent pattern of terror/horror/terror.

Terror is first excited in the protagonist through language, in a dream, an artifact, or architecture. This trigger does not initially provide any coherent meaning, but does disrupt the security and sanity of the protagonist. The protagonist becomes almost hysterically fascinated which leads to the experience of horror. The physical manifestation of the 'other' creates the effect of physical and moral revulsion. Sometimes the horror leads directly to the death of the main character, but more frequently, it leads to a zombie-like existence in a limbo of terror where the protagonist is completely alienated from prosaic reality, and aware that cosmic reality is mindless, blind, and indifferent.

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INTRODUCTION

If, as Rosemary Jackson states in Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, the implicit association of the fantastic with the barbaric and non-human has exiled fantasy to the edge of literary culture,¹ then Howard Phillips Lovecraft's work, until recently, has been regarded as reposing somewhere in the abyss beyond literary culture. Scorned as formulaic hack-writing, demeaned as artistically incompetent and unimportant, defined as escapist, Lovecraft's horror stories express a desire for something that has been excluded from the cultural order. Although no comprehensive aesthetic for the novel as a genre has been developed, there is still some sense of what a novel is and is not. In contrast, the horror tale has been described as a "negative novel" and has been generally ignored in academic circles.

Dorothy Van Ghent in The English Novel: Form and Function describes the subject matter of novels as human relationships which demonstrate the direction of men's souls;² however, the subject matter of the horror story is the human soul shown in relationship with something 'other', the quest of the human ego, the 'I', coming to terms with the alien-ness of the 'other'. While Albert S. Cook

¹Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 171.

²Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953), p. 3.

suggests that the subject matter of the novel is the experience of reality as a process rather than a fixed or given set of beliefs,³ the horror tale makes no claim to the experience of reality, either as a process or as a given. But, it does make explicit claim to the power of the 'otherness' as a destructive force in the experience of reality. Horror tales focus on the unknown both inside and outside of the self, and find emptiness inside of the apparently full reality.

The popularity of oral stories of ghosts and demons, the sophisticated Gothics of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, and the free-flowing blood of Stephen King's novels must be explored. The appeal of the horror story is beyond the intellect and reason; it extends into the realm of the underworld where the ghost and demon dwell. The appeal of the horror tale appears to manifest the deepest desires of the individual about existence and probe, though in a special way, the nature of the phenomenal world.

Horror tales appear to gain popularity during different but definable eras, particularly when cultural orders are in decline. This condition generates the questions concerning the experience of reality which horror writers examine. The psychic discomfort produced by the collapse of stable thought patterns pulls the reader and the writer into a mode of experience where there is minimal differentiation between the 'self' and the 'other'. In the horror-genre, anti-social drives are confronted and psychic

³Albert S. Cook, The Meaning of Fiction, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1960), p. 1-4.

discomfort is explored and imploded. The trappings of the Gothic tale, the ruined castles, wandering ghosts, bleeding corpses, forbidden tomes, huge amounts of blood, torture and cobwebs, allow a "safe nightmare" from which the reader can wake at will. The strictly formulated Gothic Novel provides a controlled maze in which the reader must run, yet, can always escape. The genre allows the reader's identification in a romance, the voyeurism of a melodrama, and the vicarious excitement of an adventure story. Yet, the horror tale reconstitutes itself in new relationships which produce something strange, unfamiliar, different, and absolutely 'other', and as a literary form at home with dreams and visions, the horror tale touches some of the strangest and most moving facets of personal experience.

In a short story, "The Silver Key" (1926), Lovecraft writes "...that the daily life of our world is every inch as extravagant and artificial, and far less worthy of respect" than dreams because everything is "empty in a mindless universe devoid of any standard of consistency or inconsistency" (p. 387). Lovecraft pits the daily life of his protagonists against a mindless universe by isolating them in their extraordinary experiences. By precipitating a crisis of perception, Lovecraft detaches reason through which man normally navigates in the external world. Since orientation is impossible if the sun or the stars are clouded, the protagonist cannot find his position and cannot find a path out of his personal labyrinth. The protagonist thereby becomes aware of his insignificance in the vast

cosmos; he is forced to accept that prosaic reality is not full of meaning nor purpose, and that man is very likely worth nothing in the blind cosmos which "grinds aimlessly on from nothing to something and from something back to nothing again neither heeding nor knowing the wishes or existence of the minds that flicker for a second now and then in the darkness" ("The Silver Key", p. 386). Lovecraft's tales end with a sense of discomfort. The protagonist is taken into the place at the centre of the maze and left there. The enigma is neither solved nor unravelled. All the hero can do is stand and wait, immobilized by the horror of his experience and by the terror implicit in his newly realized position in the cosmos.

The four tales I have isolated from the Lovecraft canon were chosen because they are better known than most of Lovecraft's work, and appear to be the most representative of the related ideas which form the foundation of Lovecraft's horror and terror. Torn between rationalism and dreams, Lovecraft developed his tales around the question, where is reality? He juxtaposes the external world, commonly held to be reality, and the imaginary world, commonly held to be unreal, in such a way that the protagonist accepts the imaginary world as real while the external world fades into a haze where "even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me" ("The Call of Cthulhu", p. 158). The terror implicit in this situation becomes horror when the monster suddenly becomes manifest and makes physical contact with the protagonist. A sense of dislocation occurs which completely isolates

and alienates the protagonist from the 'rational' world leaving him in a state of terror open to the creature-consciousness engendered by a vast, powerful cosmos.

Lovecraft places his protagonists in situations where reason is shown to be an ineffective guide when faced with a totally new and 'other' reality. This 'other' reality is so horrific that experience with it overwhelms the protagonist and exposes him to the resultant terror. Delapoe from "The Rats in the Walls" (1923) is imprisoned in a madhouse and spends his days out of touch with prosaic reality and in a state of terror, one with the 'other'. The surveyor from "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) never sees the actual horror, but his reaction to the blasted heath and the story of the events of the Strange Days are enough to leave him terrorized by the belief that the 'other' still exists in the abandoned well. "The Dunwich Horror" (1928) presents certain problems concerning the identification of the hero. If the hero is considered to be Armitage, then prosaic reality is re-established, the tale shows that 'good' is absolute and that man can win. If the hero is considered to be Wilbur's Twin Brother, then phenomenal reality is valueless and man's position in the cosmos is tentative at best. "The Shadow Out of Time" (1934-35) dramatizes not only Lovecraft's cosmic vision, but also sharply focuses on the question of Lovecraft's alienated protagonist. In all these tales the protagonist becomes aware, through shattered illusions, of his insignificance and that he cannot find any means to authenticate

himself. He is alone without the security of his life-fictions and in a state of terror initiated by the cosmic potentialities which his experience has made known to him.

ONE

The Discovery of Yoggoth

Not hard to find is that symbol and relic of your days of wonder, for truly it is but the stable and eternal gem wherein all that wonder sparkles crystallised to light your evening path. Behold! It is not over unknown seas but back over well-known years that your quest must go; back to the bright strange things of infancy and the quick sun-drenched glimpse of magic that old sciences brought to wide young eyes.¹

The "symbol and relic" of the days of wonder rises from the dark, savage forests which greeted the Pilgrim founders of New England. From the forests, these dauntless people forged a society which spawned Hawthorne, Poe and a man Stephen King calls the "Baroque Prince of the Macabre", Howard Phillips Lovecraft. The looming darkness and fearful landscapes of both mind and nature haunted all three of these men, but Lovecraft, unlike Hawthorne, never discovered a world unbound by his family and traditions. Lovecraft spent his adult life trapped in an ever-sinking gyre of poverty, a sense of failure, and illness from which he looked outward to his days of wonder, his boyhood in Providence, Rhode Island.

Although born in Boston on August 20 1890, Lovecraft and his mother Susan Phillips Lovecraft (Susie) returned to the maternal home in Providence in 1893 because Lovecraft's father Winfield Scott, was hospitalized as violently insane until his death in 1898. The cause

¹H.P. Lovecraft, "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kaddath"; At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels, (Sauc City, Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1964), p. 379.

of death was recorded as "general paresis".² At the age of three, Lovecraft was incorporated into a genteel, wealthy family of Old Americans, a household of overprotective, indulgent adults, his grandparents and two aunts. His mother appears to have been a cross between a domineering monster, an overzealous and smothering protectress who was the epitome of the unworldly, inhibited Victorian matron with more than a generous measure of neuroses.³ Susie's neuroses became fixed upon her son, and, until her hospitalization in 1917 in the same mental hospital as her husband, "she protected, coddled, pampered and indulged the boy to a degree that even the staunchest advocate of permissive upbringing might deem excessive".⁴ She cautioned friends to stoop when walking with the child lest they pull his arm from its socket. She let him know she really wanted a girl and kept him in long curls until he was six despite his frequent demands for a haircut. Following his haircut, Susie never touched him again, so the small child grew up in a world deprived of maternal physical affection. Since he ate what he wished, read what he liked, and went to bed when he pleased, Lovecraft developed an inordinate fondness for sweets and starches,

²L. Sprague de Camp, Lovecraft: A Biography, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), p. 15.

³Darrell Schweitzer, The Dream Quest of H.P. Lovecraft, (San Bernardino, Calif.: The Borgo Press, 1978), p. 3.

⁴L. Sprague de Camp, Lovecraft: A Biography, p. 2. Since there is no definitive biography of Lovecraft, texts which are considered standard have been used.

was very well read, and developed the habit of working all night and sleeping all day, habits which stayed with him all his life. Although his eccentric working hours were the result of her indulgence, his mother explained to friends that Howard only went out at night because he was so ugly that he did not want to frighten people. Pictures of Lovecraft from his early childhood and later life show he had a long oval face with a predominant jaw, but he was not ugly. Surrounded by coddling, indulgent adults who sheltered him, Lovecraft never became acquainted with the rough-and-tumble play of other children. He gained experience vicariously through books. With the decline of the family fortune and the death of his grandfather in 1904, Lovecraft's world started to close. He and his mother moved to a smaller house a few blocks away, where they lived until his mother's hospitalization. He never recovered from the loss of the family house; he remembered those days of his youth as golden. Although he wished to reclaim his ancestral house, he could not fulfill this wish because he never had the money. His mother's destructive influence was not removed when she was hospitalized because his equally coddling, indulgent and dominant aunts took over her role.

Lovecraft was a precocious child who could read at three. By the age of fourteen he had read all of his grandfather's library of over two thousand volumes, some dating back to the sixteenth century. His life long enthusiasm for the fantastic started when his mother read him Grimm's Fairy Tales. At five, he fell in love

with the glories of medieval Islam when he read the Arabian Nights.⁵ He demanded his mother fix up his room in an Oriental motif with hangings, cushions, and incense burners. He called himself Abdul Alhazred who later, in his fiction, became the author of the dreaded Necronomicon, and declared himself a "devout Mussulman". At six, he discovered the Classics through Hawthorne's Wonder Book and Tanglewood Tales, and became "enraptured by Hellenic myths even in their Teutonised Form".⁶ Lovecraft accepted Greek Myth, but was very skeptical about Christian mythology. He was so sceptical and asked so many questions that he was dismissed from Sunday School as a corrupter of the simple faith of other infants.⁷ With his discovery of Graeco-Roman mythology, his Arabian affiliations were discontinued and Lovecraft's "religious belief" flickered out.⁸ He set himself to learning Greek and Latin and declared himself a "genuine pagan". With a half-sincere belief in the old gods and nature spirits, he built altars to Pan, Apollo and Athena. While walking at dusk, he watched for dryads and satyrs in the woods. Lovecraft states:

If a Christian tell [sic] me he has felt the reality of his Jesus or Jehveh, I can reply that

⁵de Camp, p. 18.

⁶H.P. Lovecraft, "A Confession of Unfaith", To Quebec and the Stars, Ed. L. Sprague de Camp, (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1976), p. 88.

⁷Lovecraft, p. 88.

⁸Lovecraft, p. 89.

I have seen the hoofed Pan and the sisters of the
Hesperian Phaëthusa.⁹

Although he continued to read the Classics in "standard Queen-Anne poetical translations", at eight he discovered Poe: "I struck EDGAR ALLAN POE! It was my downfall, and at the age of eight I saw the blue firmament of Argos and Sicily darkened by the miasmal exhalations of the tomb!"¹⁰ Poe was to remain a major influence on Lovecraft throughout his life. While delving into the tomb, Lovecraft also read widely in the eighteenth century, his vision of the eighteenth century was formed by Dryden, Johnson, Pope, Addison and Steele primarily, but, his conception of this era was not limited to these men, he also read many others. This reading influenced Lovecraft to such an extent that he began to speak and write in an eighteenth-century idiom. As an adult he felt misplaced in the Twentieth Century and felt he belonged in the Eighteenth Century or at least the Eighteenth Century as he conceived it. He started writing poetry at six in rhymed couplets imitating Pope and Dryden, and he wrote his first short story at eight. All of these he destroyed.

His interest in science started with chemistry at six when he demanded a chemistry lab and got one. He quickly moved through the natural sciences (astronomy became an abiding interest) and geography

⁹Lovecraft, p. 89.

¹⁰L. Sprague de Camp, Lovecraft: A Biography, p. 31.

held a great fascination for him, especially Antarctica. Astronomy was conducive to his nocturnal habits, and people would see him walking through the night to set up his telescope to study the stars. His first appearance in print was in the Providence Journal in 1906 where he denounced astrology. At the same time he wrote a letter to the Scientific American urging that observatories cooperate in order to find a trans-Neptunian planet. In 1930, Pluto was discovered. Although his interest in science continued through his life, his days as an active experimenter ended when he and his mother moved.

He was primarily tutored at home until he entered high school at fourteen. He maintained an A average until he was sixteen when because of ill-health, he left school for good. Whether his health was truly fragile, as his mother insisted, or whether he suffered psychosomatic disorders is impossible to say, although biographers have tried; all that can be positively stated is that ill-health plagued him all his life.¹¹ When he left school in 1906, Lovecraft took to his bed and did not get up until 1914, when as L. Sprague de Camp states, "he started to rejoin the human race". From 1914 Lovecraft spent his life in busy literary activity; however, little of this activity was commercial. Lovecraft's very limited social activity, interaction outside his family, his upbringing, and his mother's influence convinced him that he was a "gentleman". There

¹¹de Camp, p. 27-31.

are two meanings for the word gentleman.¹² One is a person who enjoys independence, never mentions money, and has social virtues such as politeness and courtesy. The second, an older meaning, is one who belongs to a hereditary social class below the nobility but above people who must work for a living. The Lovecraftian ideal of a gentleman was a person who was passive, static, and unambitious; one who has:

a far greater net return from life which can be obtained through a repudiation of the overspeeded modern ideal & a return to the sane classic principles of old which recognise the superiority of being over doing & emphasis the necessity of civilised leisure, & of an easy going reflective & savouring process if one is to extract any solid or enduring satisfaction from the events of existence. The 18th century has the right idea...¹³

This Classical ideal of a gentleman has value if the gentleman has a sufficient private income; Lovecraft did not, and was handicapped not only by his ideal of a gentleman, but also by his lack of training in anything. He wrote only to please himself and his friends; when his works were published often it was in spite of him rather than because of him.

Lovecraft was a professional amateur, first an amateur scientist, then an amateur journalist, and finally, an amateur author. He never considered himself a professional writer. He printed his first journal in 1899 for his family. It contained a few

¹²de Camp, p. 54-57.

¹³de Camp, p. 56.

essays about his chemical and astronomical discoveries and passages from textbooks. He continued to publish his own work in a journal called the Conservative which brought him to the attention of the UAPA, United Amateur Press of America, which he joined in 1917. He was elected president and served one term, finally settling in as a member of the editorial board. During this time Lovecraft wrote only poetry and essays which were published by other amateur journals. 1923 saw him join the rival National Amateur Press of America and also serve a term as president. Amateur journals continued to publish Lovecraft's poetry and essays until The Vagrant introduced Lovecraft as a writer of weird stories by publishing "The Tomb" and "Dagon". It was at this time that Weird Tales was being organized for publication. This famous pulp magazine was edited initially by Edwin F. Baird and was designed to make money. After much urging from his friends, Lovecraft submitted five tales to Baird who bought all five. In the edition of October 1923, "Dagon" was commercially published in Weird Tales and Lovecraft was, for the first time, paid for writing. Lovecraft's reaction was:

I sent "Dagon", "Arthur Jermyn", "Cats of Ulthar", "Hound" and "Randolph Carter" to Weird Tales. The editor reply'd that he liked them, but could not consider their acceptance till I sent them in double-spaced typing. I am not certain whether or not I shall bother. I need the money badly enough - but ugh! how I hate typing! Mayhap I'll try "Dagon" alone - following others only in case of definite acceptance. I abhor labour.¹⁴

¹⁴H.P. Lovecraft, Selected Letters: 1911-1924, Vol. I, Ed. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1965), p. 225.

Although he accepted the money, Lovecraft never really became a professional. Not only did he "abhor" typing, but he refused to allow any changes in his manuscripts. The tales were published exactly as he submitted them, or they were not published. As his main source of income was his writing, it should have occupied a great deal of his time; unfortunately he spent much of his time maintaining his ties with the amateur press. A friend, W. Paul Cook, requested an essay on Gothic or horror tales and Lovecraft spent a year researching and writing "Supernatural Horror in Literature". But, correspondence was his main interest. Lovecraft answered every letter he received. He wrote on the average of ten to fifteen (20-30 page) letters per day. Five volumes of his letters have been published and it is estimated, by Lovecraft scholars, that there are enough letters to fill ten more volumes. The amateur press and letters did not provide the income that Lovecraft required, but his writing which did, came a poor third in his priorities. To supplement his meager income, Lovecraft ghosted and revised for other writers. In many cases, although the nominal author is named, Lovecraft is the actual author because the work had been completely rewritten by him.

It was through his amateur press associations that he met his wife. In 1924, Lovecraft made two drastic alterations in his life; he married Sonia Green, a Russian Jewess, and moved to New York City. Ordinarily it is not necessary to identify a person by ethnic or religious labels, but because of Lovecraft's rabid

ethnocentricity, racism, these facts become important. Lovecraft was raised in a tradition which was hostile to everyone who was not a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. In 1912 he read The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century by Houston Stewart Chamberlain which provided a pseudo-scientific basis for his belief in the Aryan Superman. Lovecraft was at least consistent in his belief; he loathed Jews, the Irish, Czechs, Slavs, Blacks and everyone else was "a bastard mess of stewing mongrel flesh without intellect, repellent to eye, nose and imagination".¹⁵ Yet, in contradiction, he married a Russian Jewess while many of his closest friends belonged to one or more of his abhorred categories, and all who knew him recall Lovecraft as the kindest, most generous and generally admirable person they ever knew. His wife suggested a solution to this contradiction, "I think he hated humanity in the abstract".¹⁶ Since his ethnocentricity plays no direct part in his fiction, it can be largely disregarded as a textual element; however, it would be naive to think it played no part in his work. "Dunwich Horror", "The Lurking Fear", "Arthur Jermyn", "Pickman's Model", and "Rats in the Walls", to name a few, represent an almost organic representation of the sins of the father being visited upon the son. These tales graphically depict the results of "bad blood" and degeneracy.

The question of marriage raises the question of sex. It must be mentioned that Lovecraft's tales are devoid of any explicit

¹⁵L. Sprague de Camp, Lovecraft: A Biography, p. 253-255.

¹⁶de Camp, p. 5.

sexuality. In fact, his fiction is almost devoid of women. Women are mentioned in only two tales "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Thing on the Door Step", and in both stories the women are vessels for something monstrous. This lack of both sexuality and women has raised the question of Lovecraft's sexual proclivity. Sonia Lovecraft in her letters said that he could perform and was an excellent lover, but he just was not interested. In a letter to J.V. Shea, 4 Feb 1934, Lovecraft wrote:

The whole matter [sex] was reduced to prosaic mechanism - a mechanism which I rather despised or at least thought non-glamorous because of its purely animal nature & separation from things as intellect & beauty ... ¹⁷

This suggests that Lovecraft was not interested in any sexual experience although it has been mentioned that he was a latent homosexual. But, this labelling is difficult to prove one way or the other. Lovecraft himself states he thought homosexuality ended with the Greeks, and says of homosexuality that it is "... repugnant to the overwhelming bulk of mankind", and "I simply could not consider the abnormal state without physical nausea".¹⁸ Whether the lack of sexuality in both his writing and his life is due to a repressed or sublimated sex drive, his physical rejection by his mother, or the Victorian concept of sex as sin, we cannot know. What is knowable, is that Lovecraft wrote weird tales in which male-female relations

¹⁷de Camp, p. 32.

¹⁸de Camp, p. 190.

play virtually no part.

Apart from many short trips and two years in New York, Lovecraft lived most of his life in Providence. New York was a disastrous experience for him. He felt he was dying in the large city and could only live in New England. His marriage was not a success, probably due to his inability to find work. He hated the swarms of foreigners who infested the city destroying, according to him, its heritage. When he returned to Providence, he exorcised his feelings for New York in a great spurt of writing. He finished and sold "Pickman's Model", "The Silver Key", "The Strange High House in the Mist", "The Colour Out of Space", finished but never sold "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kaddath", and started the "The Strange Case of Charles Dexter Ward". Although he wrote a cycle of sonnets under the title Fungi from Yuggoth in 1930, until he died in 1937, Lovecraft's main work continued to be in the vein of fantasy. As his writing matured, there appears to be a shift from purely horrible tales to stories which straddle the boundary between horror and science fiction. Two of his last tales "The Shadow Out of Time" and "In the Walls of Eryx" raise a question as to genre. Are they science fiction or horror stories, or are they both?

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was a true eccentric, a tall, lanky recluse given to periods of ill-health eking out an existence on his weird fiction, his ghosting fees, many of which he never collected, and a small inheritance. He was aware of the world outside of Providence through books but never really joined it. It is difficult

to place this man in the twentieth century. His style of writing echoes eighteenth-century models and has none of "... Hemingway's machine-gun fire" which cannot be read aloud without a "sore throat or hiccoughs".¹⁹ His tales contain none of Faulkner's "assigning rather too much significance to the human personality and emotions".²⁰ They are tales which bring a "shudder of repulsion and physical horror" and "of cosmic wonder",²¹ instead of reflecting "our modern mind with its recent comprehension of its own chaotic triviality and disorganisation", as Lovecraft once said about T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land".²² Lovecraft died on March 15, 1937, as he lived, alone. His contribution to weird fiction is his philosophy of cosmic indifferentism, and the view of man's minute position in that universe:

... common human laws and interests and emotions have no significance to the vast cosmos-at-large. ... To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all.²³

¹⁹H.P. Lovecraft, Selected Letters: 1932-1934, Vol. IV, Ed. August Derleth and James Turner, (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1976), p. 32.

²⁰Lovecraft, Vol. IV, p. 125.

²¹Lovecraft, Vol. IV, p. 15.

²²L. Sprague de Camp, Lovecraft: A Biography, p. 109.

²³H.P. Lovecraft, Selected Letters: 1925-1929, Vol. II, (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1968), p. 150.

His tales do not display the traditional supernatural, ghosts and demons in relation to man, but creatures with the same indifference to man that man demonstrates towards creatures lower in the Great Chain of Being. The other side of his fiction, his dream-quests and dream-tales are a reflection of the only happy time he knew, his childhood in his grandfather's house. Unlike Randolph Carter, the central character of "Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath", who found the "symbol and relic" of his days of wonder, Lovecraft could never recapture "the quick sun-drenched glimpse of magic that old sciences brought to wide young eyes".

TWO

Sources of Horror and Terror

The one test of the really weird tale 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.¹

Lovecraft was a connoisseur of weird tales, as his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" shows. Although written for an amateur journal, W. Paul Cook's The Recluse, it was not as de Camp suggests "a piece of frivolous self-indulgence"² but is, despite some omissions, thorough-going and highly preceptive, and amounts to a bellwether in the field of fantasy criticism.³ The essay delineates "the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown"⁴ which is crystallized in horror stories, weird tales, and describes the development of these tales from "the most archaic ballads, chronicles, and sacred writings" to the early twentieth century.

In a letter to Frank Belknap Long dated 27 February 1931, Lovecraft writes of his view of the fear of the unknown:

¹H.P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature", Dagon and Other Macabre Tales, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1965), p. 350.

²de Camp, Lovecraft: A Biography, p. 245.

³Donald Burleson, H.P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 155.

⁴Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature", p. 347.

It is inevitable that a symbolic aesthetic outlet will be demanded...under all phases of cosmic interpretation, as long as a sense-chained race of inquirers on a microscope earth-dot are faced with black, unfathomable gulph of the Outside, with forever-unexplorable orbs and its virtually certain sprinkling of utterly unknown life-forms. A great part of religion is merely a childish and diluted pseudo-gratification of this perpetual gnawing toward the ultimate illimitable void. Superadded to this simple curiosity is the galling sense of intolerable restraint which all sensitive people (except self-blinded earth-gazers like little Augie Derleth) feel as they survey their natural limitations in time and space as scaled against the freedoms and expansions and comprehensions and adventurous expectancies which the mind can formulate as abstract conceptions.⁵

Lovecraft's mention of "self-blinded earth-gazers like little Augie Derleth" refers to his pupil August Derleth who preserved and propagated Lovecraft's writings, and raises the issue of the accuracy of the most frequent quotation, found in all but recent criticism. This quotation is attributed to Lovecraft by Derleth:

All my stories, unconnected as they may be, are based on the fundamental lore or legend that this world was inhabited at one time by another race who, in practising black magic, lost their foothold and were expelled, yet live on the outside, ever ready to take possession of this earth again.⁶

Dirk Mosig and S.T. Joshi, both noted Lovecraft scholars, have searched in vain for this quotation because it flies in the face of both Lovecraft's philosophy and his bleak cosmic vision. It is true

⁵H.P. Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1971), p. 295.

⁶August Derleth, "H.P. Lovecraft and His Work", The Dunwich Horror and Others, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1963), p. xiii.

that the stories are unconnected; there is no pantheon of gods in Lovecraft's canon. It is also true that the tales put forth the idea that the earth had once been inhabited by other races which wish to regain possession of this "microscope earth-dot". But, what is an affront to anyone who has read Lovecraft is the clause, "in practising black magic, lost their foothold and were expelled". The words "black magic" with all their resonances assume a white magic or counter-force which performs the act of expelling. By using this concept, Derleth has reinforced an anthropocentric universe where man is at the mercy of malevolent Old Ones which engage in a perpetual battle with the forces of good.⁷ This is not unlike the way the Judaeo-Christian God and His angels confront Satan and his demonic hordes. Admittedly, the crucifix and holy water have been replaced by star-stone amulets: but the function of the talisman remains the same, to banish the evil and save mankind. Hence, Derleth's protagonists go forth armed with magical talismans, secure in the knowledge that they will be protected and rescued by the cavalry in the form of the Elder Gods, benign deities representing the forces of good. In contrast, Lovecraft's protagonists go forth completely alone to confront creatures, which if not actively destructive to mankind, are at the very least cruelly indifferent, as western man is indifferent to an ant. There are no talismans or protection and no rescue. Lovecraft's protagonists survive only through chance

⁷Dirk W. Mosig, "H.P. Lovecraft - Myth-maker", Four Decades of Criticism, Ed. S.T. Joshi, (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980), p. 104-112.

happenings such as not looking back. Unlike Lot's wife, they are not given any instructions to disobey; it is up to them to do as they must and suffer the consequences.

In view of Lovecraft's philosophical stance, it would be impossible for him to write about black magic. He was a "mechanistic materialist" and was totally devoid of any dualistic belief in either religion or the supernatural. "The materialist denies that any standard is divine or absolute", and affirms that materialism frees the conceptions of conduct from those supernatural fetters which impart a false perspective and cause the religious believer to lose "his moral sense as soon as he loses his faith".⁸ The mechanist accepts that the cosmos is "in a state of balance betwixt formation and disintegration - evolution and devolution":⁹

The world, life and universe we know, are only a passing cloud - yesterday in eternity it did not exist, and tomorrow its existence will be forgotten. Nothing matters - all that happens happens through the automatic and inflexible interacting of the electrons, atoms and molecules of infinity according to patterns which are co-existent with basic entity itself. The general idea is that of a kaleidoscope with its endless rearrangements. There is no object or purpose in ultimate creation, since all is a ceaseless repetitive cycle of transitions from nothing back to nothing again.¹⁰

⁸H.P. Lovecraft, "The Materialist Today", Something About Cats and Other Pieces, 1949 rpt: (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), p. 156.

⁹Lovecraft, "The Materialist Today", p. 158.

¹⁰Lovecraft, "The Materialist Today", p. 158.

These beliefs led Lovecraft to the conclusion that man is utterly insignificant, "All that we know, see, dream, or imagine, is less than a grain of dust in infinity,"¹¹ in a meaningless, vast, purposeless cosmos governed by blind, impersonal (mindless) streams of force.¹² Because this "mindless" force is ever in a state of flux, Lovecraft concluded that man is ever at the mercy of the inexorable action of causality:

Determinism - which you call Destiny - rules inexorably; though not exactly in the personal way you seem to fancy. We have no specific destiny against which we can fight - for the fighting would be as much a part of the destiny as the final end. The real fact is simply that every event in the cosmos is caused by the action of antecedent and circumjacent forces, so that whatever we do is unconsciously the inevitable product of Nature rather than our own volition.¹³

The blind cosmos rolls relentlessly onward, in spite of man, not because of him, and man's fate rests not in his own hands or mind but in this perpetual movement of evolution and devolution. Hence, to be concerned with man's position in the universe is futile, so that to be indifferent is to be sane. The Stoics suggested that fate was a cart to which man was tied, and behind which he could either be

¹¹H.P. Lovecraft, "Time and Space", Something About Cats and Other Pieces, p. 50.

¹²Dirk W. Mosig, "H.P. Lovecraft - Myth-maker", Four Decades of Criticism, Ed. S.T. Joshi, (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980), p. 105.

¹³H.P. Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, Ed. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1965), p. 132.

dragged or walk with dignity. Lovecraft modified this by suggesting that sanity could only be maintained by an attitude of dignified indifference to both the cart and the cosmos:

I am ...an indifferentist... I do not make the mistake of thinking that the resultant of the natural forces surrounding and governing organic life will have any connexion with the wishes or tastes of any part of that organic life-process ... The cosmos doesn't give a damn one way or the other about the especial wants and ultimate welfare of mosquitoes, rats, lice, dogs, men, horses, pterodactyls, trees, fungi, dodos, or other forms of biological energy.¹⁴

These views about man's position in the cosmos are pessimistic; however, Lovecraft was not pessimistic about man's ability to acquire knowledge about the cosmos, although his pessimism did extend to man's ability to cope with the knowledge he found:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents...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.¹⁵

In this opening paragraph of "The Call of Cthulhu", Lovecraft does not suggest that some knowledge is forbidden and to search for this knowledge has a Faustian result; he states that man does not have the

¹⁴Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 39.

¹⁵H.P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", The Dunwich Horror and Others, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1963), p. 130.

capacity to prevent mental disintegration when faced with the boundless reaches of space and what is spawned there. Lovecraft's "mechanistic materialism", "determinism", and "cosmic indifference" do not preclude, at least for him, a morality. In fact, he was very moral, according to all the people who knew him. In the face of his bleak cosmic vision or because of it, Lovecraft sought refuge in traditionalism and social convention:

All is illusion, hollowness and nothingness - but what does that matter? Illusions are all we have, so let us pretend to cling to them; they lend dramatic values and comforting sensations of purpose to things which are really valueless and purposeless. All one can logically do is to jog placidly and cynically on, according to the artificial standards and traditions with which heredity and environment have endowed him. He will get most satisfaction in the end by keeping faithful to these things.¹⁶

Thus, his tales incorporate a morality based on a code of conduct which is "a matter of taste and breeding, with virtue, delicacy and truthfulness as a symbol of gentility".¹⁷ Lovecraft's sense of morality came from the upholding of tradition and following the social conventions of his social class, social conventions which were gleaned from books rather than experience and were based on his perception of the order and harmony of the eighteenth-century neo-classical period. Hence, the degenerate Whateleys in "The Dunwich Horror" are immoral because their degeneracy represents a disruption of Lovecraft's concept of traditional American values

¹⁶Lovecraft, "The Materialist Today", p. 159.

¹⁷Lovecraft, "A Confession of Unfaith", p. 90.

activated by mating with something from outside. This mating allows the destruction of the illusion of harmony and order; the Whateleys do not keep faith with the "artificial standards" of tradition; they rather open the gate to another dimension, and the creatures who come through this gate will destroy all of man's illusions as well as his physical existence.

This to Lovecraft is the greatest sin. All of the degenerate, mongrel cults which inhabit Lovecraft's fiction are attempting to open some gate which will result in the destruction of tradition and illusion. Since illusion is all man has between himself and insanity, the illusion must remain. Derleth's representation in the famous quote, which alludes to black magic, implies a rejection of Lovecraft's philosophy, and as such distorts his work to a considerable degree.

The central focus of Lovecraft's work is not as Derleth asserts. That Lovecraft expounded the philosophy of a "mechanistic materialist" does not deny the possibility that he could have created a dualistic universe. Because writers often create in their imaginative works ideas that are at odds with their capacity as thinkers. But, Derleth's interpretation suggests two conclusions which are not supported by the texts of Lovecraft's tales: one, that the "good" gods will always be there to rescue and protect mankind from the "bad" gods, and second, deriving from the first, the idea that man can win in any battle with the "evil" gods.

It is not difficult to see how Derleth formulated his "Cthulhu

Mythos" because Lovecraft did create a universe' peopled with creatures, Conscious Beings, and not atoms. And although these beings are terrifying and 'other', they tend to expand rather than reduce the sense of cosmic mystery, to crystallize "that burning & inextinguishable feeling of mixed wonder & oppression which the sensitive imagination experiences upon scaling itself & its restrictions against the vast & provocative abyss of the unknown".¹⁸ Thus, whatever his philosophical perspective, the effect of Lovecraft's work is to evoke a universe inhabited by powerful, sentient beings which tend to counter the sense of emptiness which can be engendered by looking into a clear night sky.

Derleth's limited point-of-view, his lack of sensitivity, appears, according to Lovecraft, to stem from a need to explain the cosmos in terms of absolute values and "the quack pretensions of the various religious circuses".¹⁹ What is significant, about Lovecraft's work is that, although his beings emphasize demon-figures not unrelated to neopaganism, occultism, and Christianity, these demon-figures do not embody the concepts of good and evil. They are mere creatures struggling to maintain their existence in a cosmos completely indifferent to the continuance of any species. In such a cosmos good and evil become relative and no species wins because there is no "God" to protect any side.

¹⁸Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 294.

¹⁹Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 295.

There is a suspicion that Derleth intentionally misrepresented Lovecraft's views in order to further his own work which is centred in the "Cthulhu Mythos" because, when asked to produce the quotation, Derleth got angry and refused.²⁰ Researchers who have combed the John Hay Lovecraft Collection at Brown University have been unable to find the famous quotation; however, there is a paragraph in a letter to Farnsworth Wright, 5 July 1927, which states:

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 things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all.²¹

Perhaps Derleth paraphrased this letter without any intention to defraud. Unfortunately, all that can be positively stated is that Derleth's controversial quotation is more applicable to his conception of an anthropocentred universe of good and evil than it is to anything that Lovecraft ever wrote.

There are few decaying castles and no grand mountains for Lovecraft; most of his major works bring terror and horror into the sunlight of the everyday world. Lovecraft's life among the topography and architecture of New England forms the basis for all

²⁰Mosig, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 109.

²¹H.P. Lovecraft, letter to Farnsworth Wright, 5 July 1927, as quoted in Mosig, p. 110.

his works and sharply divides his tales from classical Gothic literature. Lovecraft's arena is the haunted regionalism of New England where his verisimilitude of time, place, and events adds impact to his work. As William Faulkner captures the colour and feel of the South, so Lovecraft transforms the witch-savaged possibilities in the New England landscape and legends into "... an attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim."²² The key words are "known universe", for Lovecraft's knowledge of his countryside allowed him to create memorable places such as Arkham, based on Salem, Miskatonic University, based on Brown University, Kingsport, based on Marblehead, and Innsmouth, based on Newburyport. Because these inventions are founded on actual places, a topographical consistency adds credence to the realism. Lovecraft once wrote to his aunt Lillian Clark:

My life lies not among people but among scenes - my local affections are not personal, but topographical & architectural.... I will be dogmatic only to the extent of saying that it is New England I must have - in some form or other. Providence is part of me - I am Providence....²³

As his writing during his exile in New York demonstrates, Lovecraft required New England, indeed he could not even survive, as

²²Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature", p. 350.

²³Letter to Mrs F.C. Clark, John Hay Library, Brown University, as quoted by Barton St. Armand, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 174.

a writer, outside of Providence. On the whole, Lovecraft's work and self-perceptions present an interesting paradox, a contradiction explicit in the eighteenth century itself: for there we have the Enlightenment with its rationality and civility juxtaposed with the Gothic tales of horror and terror of Radcliff, Lewis, and many others. Lovecraft viewed himself as a rational man of the Enlightenment, a detached spectator of the world, and as such should have been able to write anywhere; however, he combined this perception with a nineteenth-century sensibility which delighted in feeling, mood, imagination, dreams, the night, and a longing for things past. Thus, he could only write in an atmosphere which powered his dreams and imagination. Since Lovecraft felt himself misplaced in time, he required a sense of place, and this place was Providence. The contradiction between the life of reason and the art of dreams appears in many writers of weird tales and often forms the pivot upon which they revolve. Into seemingly staid New England, Lovecraft introduces places and persons which open gates to realities which destroy man's most cherished illusions.

Lovecraft's most cherished illusions were destroyed when he was very young and probably account for his sense of dislocation which takes hold of the man of reason and science and pulls him into a nightmare where he is compelled to gaze at the void of madness. It is well-documented that Lovecraft wrote from his dreams; not that he transcribed his dreams directly (except in the case of "The Statement of Randolph Carter" which is a direct dream transcription), but

"dream pictures" were the foundation of most of his tales.²⁴ Yet, the man of reason questioned his right to claim authorship of the things he dreamed, "I hate to take credit, when I did not really think out the picture with my own conscious wits"²⁵ Lovecraft's divided world - reason and dreams - is precisely what one would expect from a writer whose conscious alignments are at odds with his experience. His life was one of continual dislocation. His removal from his father at the age of two, his dominating but neurotic mother's hospitalization, the emotional security of his childhood destroyed by the death of his grandfather, and finally the safety of his physical world shattered by the loss of the treasured family home forced Lovecraft into the position of relying on something besides his reason to maintain his sense of balance. Alone in the physical world due to circumstances beyond his control, he was in essence alienated by and from life. Although his work contains old demons, his sense of dislocation and alienation in the universe is very modern.

The essence of Lovecraft's horror and terror is contained in the dualism of man. The implicit question Lovecraft asks is, where is reality, in the prosaic world or in the imagination? He develops his stories as a battle between the imaginary made actual and the prosaic made illusion. Here are the roots of Lovecraft's terror;

²⁴Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 97.

²⁵Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 97.

nightmares become concrete while science and knowledge fade into illusion. It is the juxtaposition between the external world commonly held to be reality and the imaginary world commonly held to be unreal that forms the backdrop in front of which his protagonists must re-evaluate their epistemology in terms of their experiences. Lovecraft's characters discover they no longer have any grounds for knowledge because the familiar illusion has been destroyed and the nightmare vision appears too real to be dismissed, yet too uncomfortable to be accepted. There is no conclusion, no peace in extinction. There is no hell; all the character has is continuation in a world from which he is alienated by the destruction of his illusions and the knowledge that he alone realizes that reality is in truth something other than that which the world supposes.

Lovecraft did not limit his work to cosmic drama; he also wrote stories embodying horror of a more local variety. Although most of these are short stories, they are interesting because they amply demonstrate Lovecraft's sense of place and the realism by which he gives consistency and plausibility to his plots. In his early short stories Lovecraft introduces narrative devices, thematic motifs and horrors which reappear in his longer works where they are perfected. His primary rule of crafting a weird tale was that no story can "truly produce terror unless it is devised with all the care & verisimilitude of an actual hoax".²⁶ By using the word

²⁶Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 193.

'actual' Lovecraft is suggesting that there is a difference between the hoax which is meant to deceive and the hoax which is a literary device. The 'realistic' details contained in the tales provide the reader with a facade of familiarity which is completely shattered by the intrusion of the horror. Lovecraft's hoax is analogous to comedy where the comic character is placed in situations which harmlessly engage the reader's attention, yet present no great threat to either the reader or mankind at large. He felt the author must forget about technique and "build up a stark, simple account, full of homely corroborative details, just as if he were actually trying to 'put across' a deception in real life".²⁷ Lovecraft built the hoax with one part of his mind, a hoax realistic and coherent enough to fool the rest of his mind. His weird tales are devised as carefully as a "crooked witness prepares a line of testimony with cross-examining lawyers in his mind".²⁸ One part of Lovecraft's mind took the part of the lawyer while another part took the part of the witness in order to find "false spots in the original testimony" so the tale can produce a maximum effect. Lovecraft uses current events such as earthquakes and floods, accurate scientific terms, actual locations, historical personages all juxtaposed with fictive events, scientific terms, locations and people. He keeps the events of each tale just off the tapestry of history, but embeds the tale in historical

²⁷Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 193.

²⁸Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 193.

surroundings. This coupling of the real and known with the fictive adds force to the hoax and keeps the reader off balance. There is always a question as to which is real and which is fictive. His hoax-crafting is not always successful, as in the testimony of many a crooked witness the deception sometimes goes too far and strains credibility. But, if credibility of action is demanded of horror tales, the genre collapses. Horror stories by their nature must be incredible, but Lovecraft attempts to provide a modicum of realism, if not in his characterizations, at least in his settings and the character's emotional reactions to horror and terror.

In his fiction there is a continual looping of time. The foreordained past engulfs some poor unfortunate whom the blind cosmos has incidentally chosen to place on the treadmill of its cycles. The happening is strictly a matter of chance, nothing can come of it, no quest for integration is involved, and the actors are not chosen because they are unique, but because they just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. Many of his tales explore the dream-reality enigma. Reality based on collective agreement and knowledge is destroyed by the interference of the cosmos which confuses the protagonist's perception of what is real and what is dream. Whether the past has irrupted into the present, or the dream-reality enigma is explored, or both, the result is the same. The protagonist is shattered, while the potentialities he is forced by his experience to accept would not be believed by a pedestrian world. The portal to this new reality is always found by chance, and

the protagonist usually loses any tangible proof of his experience. But proof would destroy the hoax. The haunting quality of Lovecraft's work comes from the conclusion that the tale could be a real event, even though the reader knows that this is impossible. Lovecraft creates this haunting quality not only through monsters, but primarily through the technique of the hoax.

What supports the hoax is just the right mood and atmosphere. To Lovecraft, mood is all important. In "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" Lovecraft states:

In writing a weird story I always try very carefully to achieve the right mood and atmosphere, and place the emphasis where it belongs. One cannot, except in immature pulp charlatan-fiction, present an account of impossible, improbable, or inconceivable acts and conventional emotions. Inconceivable events and conditions have a special handicap to overcome, and this can be accomplished only through the maintenance of a careful realism in every phase of the story except that touching on the one given marvel. This marvel must be treated very impressively and deliberately - with a careful emotional "build-up"-else it will seem flat and unconvincing.²⁹

By achieving just the right mood and atmosphere, combined with enough realism to create a hoax, Lovecraft fashioned tales in which horror and terror stalk.

The two primary emotions upon which weird tales pivot are horror and terror. Horror allows both thought and action because the object provoking the excitation is concrete, hence can be

²⁹H.P. Lovecraft, "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction", Marginalia, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1944), p. 139.

comprehended, with all its limitations, in the consciousness. On the other hand, terror inhibits physical action, except for panic flight, and excites the imagination because the object provoking the emotion is not concrete but nebulous; hence the mind races in an attempt to comprehend and understand both the source and the limits of the presence. Edmund Burke says of the sublime and the beautiful, that although black and white may soften and blend creating something new, the power of black as black, and white as white are stronger "when each stands uniform and distinguished".³⁰ Horror and terror are related emotions which cannot co-exist; the presence of one cancels the other; they are eternally held apart, as are the black and white spaces of the Yin and Yang. In many ways horror and terror are opposites with different sources and resultant manifestations; however, the gap between them appears minuscule, thus these words are often used synonymously.

Lovecraft was a mechanistic materialist who had "reluctantly dismissed free-will forever in favour of determinism" and believed in no gods or ideal forms.³¹ He thought that since "The wishes, hopes, and values of humanity are matters of total indifference to the blind cosmic mechanism" transcendence was impossible. There was nothing to transcend to or from, hence, his horror tales do not even

³⁰Edmund Burke, "On the Sublime and Beautiful", ed. Charles W. Eliot, (New York: P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, The Harvard Classics, 1909), p. 102.

³¹H.P. Lovecraft, "A Confession of Unfaith"; p. 92.

posit the possibility of salvation, but reflect the indifference of the cosmos and the ethereal phantom of happiness whose simulacrum comes fully to none and even partially but to a few, and whose position as the goal of all human striving makes life a grotesque mixture of farce and tragedy.³² This bleak outlook could have led Lovecraft to despair, but he countered this possibility by his fictions which, although they denied transcendence, authenticated his vision of life. He centred his life on his concept of the eighteenth-century gentleman of breeding, tradition, and sensibilities, and this "fictional" life pattern is reflected in his tales. His protagonists, socially isolated, pursue a life of learning, alternate between the emotional states of horror and terror. They move back and forth, never resting until the end of the tale catches them in a state of terror in which they despair of ever authenticating the experience of ordinary life. They are caught between the horrific illusion which is external reality, and the terror of man's insignificant position in the cosmos.

Explicit in the state of horror and terror is the fear of the unknown and unknowable which, although the focus changes, have always been the major thematic concerns of horror literature. For centuries the acquisitiveness of Satan for souls and eternal damnation have been a means of exploring the unknown and unknowable. This fear was anthropomorphized into legions of the damned and various hordes of

³²Lovecraft, "A Confession of Unfaith", p. 92.

undead. The first Gothic tales represented the devil and his hordes as Catholic clerics and monks housed in cloisters and monasteries which Protestant England considered the essence of damnation. The unfamiliar, uncanny atmosphere created, in the reader's imagination, a space where confrontation with the fear of the unknown was intensified. With the rise of Newtonian physics and the decline in the force of Christian theology, the devil lost his potency as a creator of fear. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein alters the Faustian motif from the search for all knowledge and power, represented by Marlowe's Faust, to a scientific search for the essence of life. Poe focuses this fear on the monstrous in the mind of man, while Arthur Machen embodies this fear in Pan and other ageless nature entities who symbolized for him the Darwinian-Freudian "beast" in man.³³

Algernon Blackwood centres this fear in occultism and spiritualism with their assertion of the preternatural power of thought and feeling.³⁴ Continued advances in science, particularly astronomy, opened new vistas and possibilities to centre the fear of the unknown, because the more dark, endless space that is discovered, the more there is to discover. H.G. Wells and Jules Verne found vast space a source of testing to pit man against, and in so doing created a new genre, science fiction. But, Lovecraft was one of the first writers of horror tales to look to the undiscovered cosmos as the

³³Fritz Leiber, Jr. "A Literary Copernicus", Four Decades of Criticism, p. 51.

³⁴Leiber, p. 51.

source of the fear of the unknown because "Lovecraft's rationalistic intellect could conceive no weirder or more bizarre happening than a dislocation of natural law - not ghosts, daemons, or the supernatural, but the suspension of the laws of Nature".³⁵

Since Lovecraft's weird tales follow a pattern of movement from terror to horror and back to terror, it is essential that the differences between these emotional states are clearly defined. Ann Radcliff's distinction that terror expands the soul outward and wakens the faculties to a high degree of life, while horror contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them³⁶ comes from Edmund Burke. The causes and results of terror and horror which Burke mentions in his essay "On the Sublime and the Beautiful" are manifold, but the main distinction is that terror results from grand "things" from which arise "the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force",³⁷ while horror results "when things possess disagreeable qualities, or such as have indeed some degree of danger, but of a danger easily overcome, they are merely odious; as toads and spiders".³⁸ Devendra Varma further

³⁵Mosig, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 106.

³⁶Ann Radcliff, "On the Supernatural in Poetry", New Monthly Magazine, Vol. 7, (1826) p. 49-50; quoted in Literature of the Occult, ed. Peter B. Messent, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), p. 15.

³⁷Burke, p. 49.

³⁸Burke, p. 73.

explores the distinction in The Gothic Flame.³⁹ The difference between terror and horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization - between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse. Terror creates an intangible atmosphere of spiritual psychic dread that the indefinable presence might manifest suddenly. There is an utter inability to judge or cope with the extent of the power this presence can exercise, probably for evil and malignant ends. Conversely, horror lacerates the mind by establishing actual cutaneous contact with the grand cause of terror suddenly manifest. When contact is made, horror is excited and the soul withers in the loathsome, awful, and strikingly repulsive. Horror and terror are "heterogeneously yoked", and make a combined attack on the mind, so that horror approaches violence in its intensity, while terror when sufficiently violent embodies horror. Terror excites anxiety, apprehension, and dread of the half-sensed unknown, while horror fascinates with the revulsion, loathing, and disgust of the known and realized. Yet, each state can exist independently. Terror without horror apprehends the sublime and engulfs one in the numinous. Horror without terror fragments and debases as it did Kurtz in Heart of Darkness.

According to G.R. Thompson there is a distinction between the Gothic tale and a story of Dark Romanticism. The dark romantic evokes an image of the lonely, isolated self, pressing onward despite

³⁹Devendra P. Varma, The Gothic Flame, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957), p. 130.

all obstacles while either indulging of struggling with an internal evil, the very conflict being in fact the source of energy. Thompson plays down literary Gothic as evocative of images of ghosts, demons, trapdoors, and castles; it is, he argues, a literature produced for a mass audience with the implication that it is merely a literature of surfaces and sensations.⁴⁰ He notes further distinctions. Dark Romanticism is the drama of the mind engaged in the quest for the metaphysical and moral absolutes in a world that offers shadowy semblances of an occult order, and allows for the attainment of some Sisyphus-like or Promethean semblance of victory. In contrast, the purely Gothic vision ends in despair, pain and annihilation and presents a picture of man as external victim - a victim of both himself and something outside himself.⁴¹ These differences result in a somewhat different view of horror and terror.

Basing oneself on Thompson one might argue that the chief element of the Gothic is not so much terror or horror, but a dread created by an atmosphere which combines terror with horror and mystery. Terror suggests a frenzy of physical pain, dismemberment, and death. Horror perceives of something incredibly evil or morally repellent, Mystery, caused by the perception of a world that stretches far beyond the range of human intelligence, often a morally

⁴⁰G.R. Thompson, "A Dark Romanticism: In Quest of a Gothic Monomyth", Literature of the Occult, ed. Peter B. Messent, (New Jersey: Prentice-hall, Inc., 1981), p. 31.

⁴¹Thompson, p. 39.

incomprehensible world, produces a nameless apprehension.⁴² Joel Porte suggests that the psychological-cum-moral ambiguity which exists within terror creates anxiety.⁴³ Barton St. Armand states that in the literature of horror, the transcendent feeling of the sublime is replaced by a numinous, nameless dread.⁴⁴ According to Robert D. Hume, the central form of Dark Romanticism is essentially an acute perception of evil with little move toward either solution or escape, which results in existential agony and damnation through despairing pride.⁴⁵ But, although nameless apprehension, anxiety, dread, and existential agony explain the results of horror and terror, such multiplication of theories leaves us ultimately with no clear description of exactly what horror and terror are, and succeed in blurring rather than clarifying the terms.

Stephen King, the modern master of the horror tale, in his book Danse Macabre, a book on the horror phenomenon as represented in books, movies, radio, and television, throws a light on the

⁴²G.R. Thompson, "Romanticism and the Gothic Tradition", The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism, Ed. G.R. Thompson, (Washington State: Washington State University Press, 1974), p. 3.

⁴³Joel Porte, "In the Hands of an Angry God: Religious Terror in Gothic Fiction", The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism, p. 44.

⁴⁴Barton Levi St. Armand, "The Mysteries of Edgar Allan Poe: The Quest for a Monomyth in Gothic Literature", The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism, p. 80.

⁴⁵Robert D. Hume, "Exuberant Gloom, Existential Agony and Heroic Despair: Three Varieties of Negative Romanticism", The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism, p. 123.

difference between the perception of horror and terror in the twentieth century. He states that terror is the anticipation of what is behind a closed door, while horror is seeing exactly what is behind the door, "What's behind the door or lurking at the top of the stairs is never as frightening as the door or the staircase itself".⁴⁶ Because of this, King's opinion is that artistically, the horror story is almost always a disappointment, a "classic no-win situation". In this view the writers of frightening tales must beware of opening the door and diffusing the terror; they would succeed better by keeping the door closed and maintaining the suggestive dreamlike effect.⁴⁷ Lovecraft, King maintains, was a writer who would open the door, but just a crack, leaving the reader with only the vaguest intimations of what the protagonist actually saw. Although King delineates the moment of change from terror to horror, he never really comes to grips with the implications of these emotions in Lovecraft's work.

Lovecraft, even though his writing style is reminiscent of the past, particularly of Poe, uses concepts that are essentially modern. Aware of the exciting potentialities implicit in science, Lovecraft could not, because of his philosophy, foresee any possible social progress through science because nothing can really matter or change the eternal cosmic cycles. Cosmic space becomes a means

⁴⁶Stephen King, Danse Macabre, (New York: Berkley Books, 1983), p. 111.

⁴⁷King, p. 113.

through which he could extend his imaginative horizons, but he fills up space with creatures, demons, and powerful entities which only reinforce man's insignificant position. These demons are in essence biological nightmares which come straight from his fears. The sea and everything in it was to Lovecraft a home of the 'other', though he did not always place his creatures in the sea, but projected them into the vastness of space. Lovecraft's monsters like Cthulhu, the flying crabs from Yuggoth, the Shoggoth, and the creatures from "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" are combinations of various forms of sea life, and come into the imagination from a world disrupted by Darwinism. Richard Jefferies, as had Whitman, in "The World Beneath the Brine", expresses awe-struck feelings about creatures from the sea:

How extraordinary, strange and incomprehensible are the creatures captured out of the depths of the sea! The distorted fishes, the ghastly cuttles; the hideous eel-like shapes; the crawling shell-encrusted things; the centipede-like beings; monstrous forms, to see which gives a shock to the brain. They shock the mind because they exhibit an absence of design ...they call up a vague sense of chaos, chaos which the mind revolts from...these miserable hideous things of the sea are not anti-human in the sense of persecution, they are outside, they are ultra and beyond.⁴⁸

Lovecraft, extending the idea of Whitman and Jefferies, breathes life and intelligence into these creatures. Filtering everything through the sensibility of a disciple of Machen and Dunsany, Lovecraft gives the reader threatening forces resembling the reborn ancient shaggy

⁴⁸Richard Jefferies, The Story of My Heart, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1913), p. 43-44.

gods, but with an extra-terrestrial dimension inspired by his cosmic sense and by modern astronomy and biology in general.

The key to Lovecraft's work is the tension between the perception of an apparently regularized and ordered universe, and a universe of great powers - forces outside of man. Particularly sensitive protagonists come to see a crack in space that reveals another reality that is very different from commonly-held reality. They learn that man is insignificant and blind to the 'real' nature of the cosmos and virtually powerless. This new knowledge is usually acquired accidentally or as the result of "rational curiosity". There is no hope of salvation; the reality they encounter is irrelevant to such concerns. And the vision of the 'other' proves so shattering that the protagonist can no longer function within pedestrian reality.

Terror in Lovecraft is the intimation of the forces that extend beyond man - it may be conveyed in language (a ritual or forbidden tomes like the Necronomicon) or in a dream, an artifact, a statue, or in architecture. These are not initially given any coherent meaning but they begin to disrupt the security and sanity of the protagonist. The tendency is for the hero to become hysterically fascinated by the terror-inducing object or texts; this leads to the experience of horror, because when the being finally appears there is a panoply of sights, sounds, and smells which create the effect of physical revulsion. Sometimes the horror leads to death; at other times it leads to a zombie-like existence in a limbo of terror.

Underlying the terror of these forces is that the protagonist cannot communicate with them. Although this may be partially overcome, ultimately, as Lovecraft's philosophy shows, human knowledge is insufficient. Underlying the horror is some fear of contamination, perhaps Lovecraft's own fear of going mad (as his mother and father did) or his fear of 'pollution' by the 'lower classes' who were becoming more powerful and evident.

Whatever the sources, Lovecraft's ability to portray these threats is striking and his success is that he holds his protagonists up against the unfolding terror/horror/terror with rigorous singlemindedness, and leaves them alone, alienated from the comfort of prosaic reality, in a mindless, blind, indifferent cosmos.

THREE

Tradition and Evil: "The Rats in the Walls"

Even though there are numerous ways to categorize Lovecraft's weird tales, all the stories appear to have a common foundation which is the perception of a new and unsuspected reality and the attempts of reason to come to terms with this 'other' reality. In a 1922 letter to Frank Belknap Long, Lovecraft wrote that pure, ice-cold reason, the highest of organic faculties, superimposed on emotion gives man his sole contact with things outside of himself.¹ In all of his tales Lovecraft detaches "pure, ice-cold reason", by isolating this high faculty from contact with the world outside, thus forcing reason to re-evaluate itself in the light of the new experience. "The Rats in the Walls" and "The Colour Out of Space" dramatize how reason reacts when faced with a crisis of perception.

Isolated sounds in the dark lose their familiarity and become the harbingers of something other; "The Rats in the Walls"² was born from "a very commonplace incident - the cracking of wallpaper

¹Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 173.

²H.P. Lovecraft, "The Rats in the Walls", The Dunwich Horror and Others, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1963). All references are identified in the text with page numbers.

late at nights, and the chain of imaginings resulting from it".³ This tale is the longest work that Lovecraft produced up to 1923.⁴ "The Rats in the Walls" was published in Weird Tales in 1924, following a rejection by R.H. Davis of Munsey Co., who claimed that although the tale has some merit, it was "too horrible" for the tender sensibilities of delicately nurtured publick".⁵

This Lovecraft story created a sensation upon its publication "causing the editor of Weird Tales to single it out as the best story yet published in that magazine".⁶ Darrell Schweitzer in his short review states:

The story is classical Lovecraft in both form and subject. The various motifs come together: a certified Ancestral Curse, an endless vista of the unknown and unknowable revealed underground, a climax of madness and depravity, and a steadily building sense of dread. This time it all works.⁷

Schweitzer continues by stating that, "The story vividly conveys the texture of being there".⁸ Unfortunately, Schweitzer's very short study of the complete Lovecraft canon does not provide any in-depth analysis of any tale, and "The Rats in the Walls" is no exception.

³Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. V, p. 181.

⁴Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 250.

⁵Lovecraft, Vol. I, p. 259.

⁶Darrell Schweitzer, The Dream-Quest of H.P. Lovecraft, p. 25.

⁷Schweitzer, p. 25.

⁸Schweitzer, p. 26.

While Donald Burleson's longer critical study of the complete canon does afford more critical scope, the criticism is still rather superficial. Burleson concludes his section on "The Rats in the Walls" by stating that the tale is "yet another Lovecraftian quest through the labyrinth of the deep psyche, a quest tragically unfulfilling for the protagonist".⁹ Burleson concentrates on the quest motif in Lovecraft's works; however, he does state that although "The Rats in the Walls" is melodrama, the story is powerful, but he does not explain how it is powerful. Burleson suggests that though Lovecraft reflects Poe, the story demonstrates that Lovecraft is developing "into an artist with highly individual narrative powers".¹⁰ Barton St. Armand, who has written the only book-length study of any Lovecraft work (The Roots of Horror in the Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft),¹¹ takes a basically Jungian position and produces some interesting insights about Lovecraft and "The Rats in the Walls". For example, he describes Lovecraft's "Great Dread of the Viscous": what horrifies us is not a skeleton because a skeleton is basically hard and essentially clean, it is rather corruption and the viscous, "the steady dissolution of that which was once alive and has now become undead and alien".¹² After discussing the various

⁹Donald Burleson, H.P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 64.

¹⁰Burleson, p. 64.

¹¹Barton Levi St. Armand, The Roots of Horror in the Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983).

¹²St. Armand, p. 68.

aspects of Lovecraft's writing which are related to the ideas of Jung, Kierkegaard, Poe, and Kafka, St. Armand contends that the roots of Lovecraft's horror lie within Lovecraft himself:

Lovecraft's dream-quest took him most deeply into the void of self, shattering the limits of his pseudo-eighteenth-century pose and challenging the immutable laws of time and space he professed to worship - the Newtonian universe of perfect but unyielding design. While he pledged an oath of allegiance to King George III, his darker self had already embarked on a romantic revolution of seeing feeling, and believing. All too often, however, the cry of his revolt is made ludicrous by its high pitch.¹³

He argues that Lovecraft, "In spite of his protest to the contrary...was a modern man par excellence because he was also the most extreme example of what contemporary psychologists call 'the divided self'."¹⁴ Moreover, although Lovecraft may have failed in his final synthesis, dark nightmare and dazzling daydream,¹⁵ "The Rats in the Walls", St. Armand concludes, is Lovecraft's most "Gothick" work, "the most horrible story written in America in the present century".¹⁶

My own experience on first reading of "The Rats in the Walls" (I lay in bed shivering under the blankets in a state of frigid listening) forces me to agree that the tale is "Gothick" and that Lovecraft does convey the texture of a powerful experience. On

¹³St. Armand, p. 89.

¹⁴St. Armand, p. 87.

¹⁵St. Armand, p. 89.

¹⁶St. Armand, p. 11.

analysis, it can also be said that it is a quest for the self as well as an example of the divided self; however, there is a further interpretation that comes when one takes account of Lovecraft's belief that commonly-held reality is illusion and his idea that tradition provides 'the safest harbour' even though it too is illusory. Although he does not explicitly state that there is security in the illusion of tradition, he does state that:

'Tis indeed uncommon senseless to tear down with a rusty dungfork a mirage...I think it best becomes a man of sense to chuse whatever sort of fancies best amuse him...sensible that they are not real, but equally aware that since reality does not exist, he can gain nothing and lose much by brushing them away. No one set of fancies, moreover, is better than any other; for the only measure of their worth is their degree of adaptation to the mind that holds them.¹⁷

[underlining mine]

The implication of the last statement is that there is security provided by the "degree of adaptation". When reading Lovecraft's letters it is almost as if he views tradition as a straight line devoid of any thickness. By showing the details implicit in tradition, "The Rats in the Walls" delineates the shattering of Lovecraft's bedrock of stability and demonstrates that heritage and ancestry are hollow illusions even when one keeps faith with them.

The tale concerns the experiences of an American businessman, Delapoer, who is the last scion of an English noble family. He returns to England to restore his ancestral seat Exham Priory.

¹⁷Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 262.

Ignorant of his family's heinous history he rebuilds the Priory in spite of being ostracized by the locals. He gathers information about his family indirectly through Edward Norrys, the former owner of Exham Priory, who had been his dead son's friend. Five days after he moves into the Priory his cats start behaving in a strange fashion, running around and scratching at the new panels. Delapoer thinks he sees the arras in his bedroom moving but he knows he hears the faint sound of rats or mice scurrying behind the tapestry. He starts having bizarre dreams of a twilight grotto and a swineherd herding unmentionable fungous beasts. Each succeeding night the dreams increase in detail while the noise of the rats gets louder, a noise that only Delapoer can hear. Traps are sprung but are empty and poison is of no value when dealing with a spectral army of rats. The source of this noise is found to be beneath a great stone altar in the sub-cellar. Delapoer, Norrys, and five scientists remove the altar to find steps which have been "chiseled from beneath" and which are littered with skeletons in attitudes of panic and covered with marks of rodent gnawing. The men descend into the twilight grotto of Delapoer's dream and discover many architectural remains from monoliths, to Roman and Saxon buildings, to a seventeenth-century butcher shop. The area is a labyrinth of pens and pits. The pits are located on the edge of light and dark; some are empty but too deep for light to penetrate to the bottom; others are full of picked bones and opened skulls. During the expedition, Delapoer slips on the edge of one of these pits, recovers his physical balance and

notices his cat racing into the blackness. He follows, his mind racing with images of death and terror when something bumps into him, "something soft and plump". Delapoer is found, "crouching in the blackness over the plump, half-eaten body of Capt. Norrys with my own cat leaping and tearing at my throat". The last direct descendent of the de la Poer's is placed in the barred room of a madhouse, Exham Priory is destroyed, and Delapoer is haunted by:

the slithering scurrying rats whose scampering
will never let me sleep; the daemon rats that race
behind the padding in this room and beckon me down
to greater horrors than I have ever known; the rats
they can never hear; the rats in the walls (p. 52).

Lovecraft's narrative technique follows a similar pattern to a greater or lesser degree in all of his tales.¹⁸ Schweitzer states that this pattern is one of foreshadowing, exposition, synoptic narration, full narration, climax and anti-climax.¹⁹ Unfortunately, he does not explain what he means by foreshadowing. In Lovecraft, foreshadowing is not a plot device such as the portents of evil in Shakespeare, but is a device which allows the reader to be pulled from the apparent familiarity and security of the known and common-place world into a strange environment where the unities of

¹⁸Fritz Leiber has suggested that Lovecraft used a technique of confirmation rather than revelation, where the story's end is no surprise but is the final, long-anticipated "convincer". ("A Literary Copernicus", Four Decades of Criticism, p. 56.) This technique of confirmation, where the high point of the tale and the last sentence coincide, may account for Lovecraft's frequent use of italics in the last sentence of many of his tales.

¹⁹Schweitzer, p. 26.

time, space, and character are distorted and the rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects are destroyed.²⁰ The suspension of disbelief occurs because the reader is disarmed by the rational, controlled first person narration which, due to the matter-of-fact exposition, seems at odds with the 'mad' narrator. This sets up a tension within the reader. The 'mad' narrator provides a rational out; the tale could be imaginings of a sick mind, a perverse justification for the murder of Norrys, Norrys lived "but my boy died!...Shall a Norrys hold the lands of a de la Poer?" or simply the recounting of an actual event. Due to the deft insertion of the 'return-to-equilibrium' the tension mounts during the tale until the final horror is revealed.²¹

Leiber states that Lovecraft reinforced this technique "by what may be called orchestrated prose - sentences that are repeated with a constant addition of more potent adjectives, adverbs, and phrases, just as in a symphony a melody introduced by a single woodwind is at last thundered by the whole orchestra".²² One central example from "The Rats in the Walls" is the accumulated image of Edward Norrys. Norrys is first described as "a plump, amiable young man". This is reinforced by the adjective "stout". The reader moves into Delapoer's consciousness as the explorers move downward

²⁰Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 1.

²¹Burleson, p. 62.

²²Leiber, p. 56-57.

into the grotto where Norrys becomes, through the process of metonymy, a face which is not only plump but also "utterly white and flabby". The final reference to a living Norrys is, "for I could not see any of the party but the plump Capt. Norrys". Repetition of the word plump draws the reader's attention to something other than Norrys's physical stature. Norrys has ceased to be human. The swineherd's flock is described as "fungous, flabby beasts". In another dream Delapoer sees "the flabby features of one of them" which he forgets upon awakening. The juxtaposition of the beast's flabby features and Norrys's white, flabby face draws an equation between Norrys and the beast. The climax draws the images together to the horror of the reader and the terror of Delapoer, "No, No, I tell you, it was not Edward Norrys' fat face on the flabby fungous thing!".

When the cause of a sound in the night, like a dripping faucet, is found, the noise can be rationalized, hence robbed of its power to engage the imagination. When, however, a cause cannot be found, the sound invades the imagination and takes on an added dimension. The juxtaposition of the actions of the hunting and/or angry cats and the sound without any cause effectively detaches Delapoer's reason because he cannot collate apparently disparate information. The sound acquires added significance through Delapoer's helpless imagination where wild images race phantasmagorically. Delapoer is rationally immobile in a kind of

"phobic paralysis".²³

Through orchestrated prose Lovecraft allows the reader to follow Delapoer's movement of terror/horror/terror. When the rats are first heard, the sound is a "low, distinct scurrying". As the sound gets louder, Delapoer concludes that mere physical rats could not be the cause of the noise because there was nothing visible behind the arras, traps were sprung yet empty, and the wall panelling was new. Yet, the rats scampered and milled, and burrowed and slid through solid limestone blocks. This spectral noise can only be caused by the "verminous slithering of ravenous, gigantic rats". Terror turns to horror when the searchers enter the twilit grotto. Everyone in the party, except Delapoer, reacts in horror, and he admits to being shaken. But he must remain objective, and he keeps this pose until he notices his cat "monstrously perched atop a mountain of bones" which starts another train of wild images racing. Musing, he almost falls into one of the pits; recovering his balance, the only thing he sees is plump Capt. Norrys. Everything else has faded into blackness. A sound in the inky distance, followed by his black cat racing past Delapoer like "a winged Egyptian god", explodes into a crescendo of terror where everything becomes blackness and only sound exists. The equation of sound and the rats crystallize when Delapoer is bumped by "something soft and

²³Hazel Heald, "The Horror in the Museum", The Horror in the Museum, revised by H.P. Lovecraft, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1970), p. 126.

plump". He reacts by killing the something because it is "the viscous, gelatinous, ravenous army [rat] that feasts on the dead and the living". His nightmare of the daemon swineherd has become concrete, "Then, as the swineherd paused and nodded over his task, a mighty swarm of rats rained down on the stinking abyss and fell to devouring beasts and man alike."²⁴ Since Delapoer no longer has any means of discriminating between realities, his motives appear confused. He kills Norrys either because he believes the something that bumped into him was a rat and he must fight for his life, or because he has become a rat, one of the devouring army of rats. Whatever the motive, Delapoer eats his kill because Norrys and the fungous beast have already become the same creature in his mind. The conclusion finds him still unable to discriminate between realities. His reason has become completely detached and all he is left with are the phantasmagorical images racing through his mind, in a state of terror.

By repeating words, sentences and sometimes whole sections, Lovecraft shapes a particular atmosphere of impending doom which the growing detail crystallizes. The technique of orchestrated prose tends to counteract the conventional process of rational thought. Often, as more detail is added the more objective the picture becomes, unless of course one gets trapped in detail. In Lovecraft's

²⁴Burleson suggests that Lovecraft's use of the imagery of "nodding" makes this description truly dreamlike (p. 59). The image, however, has a more horrifying effect. When a herdsman "nods" over his flock, he is showing pleasure, knowledge, and a sense of joy in possession.

hands the reverse happens; the more detail that is added, the more nebulous and indeterminate the objective world becomes. Through this process objective reality completely disappears, and the only judge of reality is found in the subjective mind of a madman. The building of words and phrases creates an atmosphere of stasis because the accumulating images give the sense of vertical movement, while the linear form of word following word provides the sensation of horizontal movement as the phrases get longer on the page. Thus, the reader is held static because there is really no movement either through time or space. Through his technique, Lovecraft creates a powerful tale of reversion to the primitive which engages "a strong impression of the suspension of natural laws or the presence of unseen worlds or forces close at hand".²⁵

Unlike the majority of Lovecraft's works, which are set in his beloved New England, "The Rats in the Walls" is set in England. Lovecraft reinforces the isolation of the practical American in a land of ancient, mythic tradition, thus creating a fantasy-horror equivalent of Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. Delapoeer willingly isolates himself from familiar surroundings; hence, there is no safety in mere familiarity. His son is dead; thus, he has no hope for the future. He is an American in a land haunted by legend which his "Yankee businessman" mentality forces him to disregard. This sets up a polarity of Yankee

²⁵Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 69.

skepticism against a background full of legends and ancient rituals. In St. Armand's words, "Delapoer becomes one of the most extreme examples of the dangers of American individualism - the folly of the "new man" who tries to live with no past at his back".²⁶ Lovecraft demonstrates that individualism and reason are not effective barriers against a purposeful attack from an alien reality. As the details of his family's tradition bubble to the surface, Delapoer's isolation becomes apparent. At the end of the tale he is no longer an individual but has been subsumed by the tradition. He has lost his name (Delapoer, his name in the USA, has been changed to de la Poer), his home (Exham Priory has been destroyed), and his reason. Everything that identified Delapoer as a modern man of the twentieth century has no meaning; all that is left is the past attempting to renew itself through him. The commonly-held view that the past is secure because it is finished and gone is shattered. Tradition does not provide safety; one cannot shelter from a living past inhabiting a specific site anymore than one can shelter from the cosmic forces invading from the stars.

Exham Priory, the focus of ancient tradition, has the flavour of the mansion in William Hope Hodgson's The House on the Borderland²⁷ in that it conveys "feelings of the spectral and the

²⁶St. Armand, p. 20.

²⁷William Hope Hodgson, The House on the Borderland, 1908; rpt., (Connecticut: Hyperion Press, Inc., 1976).

abnormal in connection with regions or buildings".²⁸ The Priory was abhorrent to the surrounding natives but much studied by architects and antiquarians:

because of its peculiarly composite architecture; an architecture involving Gothic towers resting on a Saxon or Romanesque substructure, whose foundation in turn was of a still earlier order or blend of orders - Roman, and even Druidic or native Cymric.... (p. 33)

To the natives, the Priory represented the embodiment of a despised tradition, while scientists merely regarded it as a "strange relic of forgotten centuries". The roots of the Priory, hence the tradition, were merged "with the solid limestone of the precipice from whose brink the priory overlooked a desolate valley...". This relic of forgotten centuries is "perched perilously upon a precipice" which suggests that it stands alone above the landscape, dominating the surrounding area. When Delapoer first sees it, he views the priory "without emotion", but because he "gradually recovered the image of the edifice as it had been when my ancestors left it three centuries before...", there is an implication that there is some kind of symbiotic relationship between Delapoer and the Priory, as between the brother and sister and the house in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher". This relationship is demonstrated by Delapoer recovering the image of a place he has not only never seen, but has no knowledge of. A letter explaining the family history was burnt during the

²⁸Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature", p. 396.

Civil War in America, and Delapoer grew up completely ignorant of his family. Symbiosis is reinforced by the cessation of the sound of the rats when Delapoer decides to explore beneath the altar-stone. As Thorton, a psychic, suggests, Delapoer had "been shown the thing which certain forces had wished to show him". Exham Priory rebuilds itself in every detail through the actions of Delapoer, and is restored to its mediaeval glory. The inside is fitted with wholly new interiors "free from old vermin and old ghosts alike", and all the modern conveniences are cleverly concealed in counterfeited fixtures. The question implied here is, where is actual reality? Is reality found in modern conveniences, counterfeited fixtures, or in the ancient stone? The word counterfeit suggests that there is no reality in either the fixtures or in the modern conveniences, which must be concealed. These things have the shimmering authenticity of a mirage. The interior of the Priory is as artificial as the veneer of civilization itself. The only authenticity is the ancient stone foundation born of limestone, old vermin, and old ghosts. There is a sense that the Priory is a plastic entity moulding itself to whatever the current civilization wishes until the time is right and it can reassert its rightful form.

The Priory embodies the closing of Delapoer's physical boundaries. He pushes "the restoration to completion with an elderly obstinacy". He becomes obsessed with the legends of his family to the exclusion of everything else. Delapoer has left the breadth of America for the narrowness of an English priory, the wide experiences

of a businessman for the closed world of legend. The boundaries of his world become even smaller when he starts to dream and first hears the rats. Gaston Bachelard in The Poetics of Space suggests that a house (a physical place) constitutes a body of images that provide mankind with proofs or illusions of stability,²⁹ and that a home (an emotional space) provides a comfort which itself is the illusion of protection.³⁰ The Priory becomes a perversion of both house and home as a place of refuge. The entire past which dwells in the new house³¹ destroys the sense of rooted place resident in the physical structure and introduces a sense of unbounded space which becomes a tunnel of horror. Paradoxically as Delapoer's sense of physical place diminishes, his sense of unbounded space increases. As the tale progresses, first the countryside fades into fog and Delapoer's world centres on brightly lit rooms. The rooms fade into the sub-cellar and finally into the twilight grotto which is not a place but an unbounded space, "the antechambre of hell", "that apparently boundless depth of midnight cavern", and the "Stygian world yawns beyond the little distance we went". At the end of the tale Delapoer is enclosed in a cell which the padding makes even smaller. His perception of space is limited to the images which flicker through his mind. Everything external to his mind is non-existent or at the

²⁹Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, Trans. Maria Jolas, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). p. 17.

³⁰Bachelard, p. 5.

³¹Bachelard, p. 5.

very least is viewed through a haze. Finally, the padded cell disappears and Delapoer is one with the rats inhabiting the minute places between the padding and the wall. He is in a straight-jacket of terror with no space for movement nor any conception of space outside of his imagination.

This solid Yankee businessman who believes in nothing he cannot see or measure has been driven mad by the most subjective of all experiences - dreams and things that go bump in the night. Lovecraft plays games with the commonly accepted idea that all knowledge is gained through the 'eye' or to put it another way the 'I'. The relation of the 'I' or the ego to the world is determined by vision or the 'eye'. When the 'eye' cannot function for some reason such as darkness, reason becomes disorientated because it can no longer determine how the world is to be viewed, and a sense of dislocation occurs. This dislocation allows for the incursion of terror; once vision has been restored, reason can regain its equilibrium, can re-establish a relationship with the world and can discriminate, hence horror results. At the beginning of the tale the 'eye' views only counterfeits through which Delapoer orients and authenticates himself. As the tale progresses the 'I' is closed through sleep where dreams are viewed through the 'eye' of the imagination rather than through the 'eye' of reason, and since reason is closed to anything external to it, there is no way Delapoer can reorient himself in external reality. The darkness which closes the 'eye' in sleep also opens the 'ear'. Delapoer hears the rats when he

is awake, but only when it is dark, and the sounds disappear when the lights are turned on. As well as having the effect of further isolating Delapoer from the people around him, the sound of the rats has the effect of substituting the 'ear' for the 'eye' as a primary information recording tool, and puts Delapoer in the position of relying on some faculty other than ice-cold reason to orient himself in the outside world. In a culture where blindness is perceived as a more serious handicap than deafness, vision is regarded as the only objective and accurate recorder of information. Delapoer, who has neither knowledge of his family history nor any interest in anything but the mundane, relies on his vision to gather information and orient himself. His pleasure in counterfeit fixtures is an example. If it looks right, then it is right. By closing his eyes, Lovecraft fragments Delapoer's mind. His reason becomes isolated from the rest of his being, leaving him at odds, thus vulnerable and open to the influences which surround him.

Whether the rats are an extension of the curse, if it can be called a curse,³² or a symbol of a primitive devouring force is not as important as the fact that they are the cause of Delapoer's reoriented reality, which explains why they are still with him in the madhouse. They are the outside influence which initiates the search for the twilit grotto. Based on Todorov's identification of basic

³²A curse implies an originator, something or someone consigning the family to destruction. Lovecraft neither mentions nor implies such an originator which is why I question the concept of curse.

fantastic themes as the 'I' and the 'not-I', Rosemary Jackson states that there are two sources of metamorphosis in fantastic literature:

In the first, the source of otherness, of threat, is in the self. Danger is seen to originate from the subject, through excessive knowledge, or rationality, or the mis-application of the human will. The second source of fear originates in a source external to the subject: the self suffers an attack of some sort which makes it part of the other...it is a sequence of invasion, metamorphosis and fusion, in which an external force enters the subject, changes it irreversibly and usually gives it the power to initiate similar transformations.³³

Although at first glance the first definition appears to fit "The Rats in the Walls", following Jackson's examples of threat originating in the self (Frankenstein, Wells's The Island of Dr. Moreau, and Poe's Ligeia), there is no extreme application of human will or thought which creates the destructive situation. Unless the restoration of the Priory can be considered as an extreme application of human will, Delapoe really does not build or create something that "creates dangers, fears, terrors which can be countered only by correcting the original 'sin' of overreaching, or the misapplication of human knowledge or scientific procedure".³⁴ There are Lovecraft tales which fit this pattern, "Arthur Jermyn", "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward", "The Dreams in the Witch House", "The Haunter of the Dark", "Herbert West - Reanimator", "The Hound", and "From Beyond" to name a few; however, "The Rats in the Walls" fits the second pattern.

³³Jackson, p. 58-59.

³⁴Jackson, p. 58.

The attack comes from outside of Delapoer, the mythic heritage of the Priory. The sound of the rats effectively closes his reason, allowing for invasion, metamorphosis and fusion. That something is happening is signalled by his name change from Delapoer, his American name, to the ancient family name of de la Poer. The dream sequences of the daemon swineherd and his flabby flock foreshadows the ultimate fusion. The metamorphosis speeds up as Delapoer moves into the twilight grotto, but he attempts to maintain some control, "I must be very deliberate now, and choose my words". The narration takes on the tone of a more distant, objective recording of events with no personal interpretation. Delapoer loses control when he almost slips into one of the pits; he has a moment of "ecstatic fear". The narration becomes a stream-of-consciousness, thus his surroundings fade into blackness. No objective recording is possible because his vision has been blocked, but his hearing is acute, "voices, and yowls, and echoes, but above all there gently rose that impious, insidious scurrying..." His reason is distorted by the dominating sound of:

...the eldritch scurrying of those fiend-born rats, always questing for new horror, and determined to lead me on even unto those grinning caverns of earth's center where Nyarlathotep, the mad faceless god, howls blindly in the darkness to the piping of two amorphous idiot flute-players. (p. 51)³⁵

³⁵Nyarlathotep later becomes a sort of messenger for the Elder Gods in The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath and this description comes to be applied to Azathoth, the blind idiot god who sits at the centre of chaos. Lovecraft did not intentionally create a pantheon of gods and thus his mythos contains many inconsistencies.

Nyarlatotep in this case represents the centre of whatever is transforming Delapoer. Since there is no reference as to exactly who or what Nyarlathotep is, the figure becomes part of an "absent paradigm" which is a non-empirical, hypothetical reality named in the text.³⁶

Fusion is completed with Delapoer's denial, "I am not that daemon swineherd", because that is exactly what he has become, but his reason does not know it. His reversion to something other than human occurs rapidly. Lovecraft uses language, something heard, to signal Delapoer's return to pre-history:

Curse you, Thornton, I'll teach you to faint at what my family do!...'Sblood, thou stinkard, I'll learn ye how to gust..wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? Magna Mater! Magna Mater! Atys...Dia ad aghaidh's ad aodaun...agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas's d'holas ort, agus leat-sa!...Ungl... ungl...rrlh...chchch...(p. 52)

This language encapsulates not only the history of the de la Poers but also the linguistic history of man:

That bit of gibberish which immediately followed that atavistic Latin was not pithecanthropoid. The first actual ape-cry was the "ungl". What the intermediate jargon is, is perfectly good Celtic ...which...instead of consulting a professor to get a Celtic phrase, found a ready-made one so apt that I lifted it bodily from The Sin Eater, by Fiona McLeod....Anyhow, the only objection to the phrase is that its Gaelic instead of Cymric as the south-of-England demands.³⁷

³⁶Patrick Parrinder, Science Fiction, (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 112-113.

³⁷Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 258.

Be it Gaelic or Cymric, the language has the required barbaric look and sound of something foreign. Delapoer has fused with a pre-human past.

In many horror tales the 'other' is destroyed in order to protect the whole of society. Dracula, for instance, is held at bay with the crucifix and holy water until sunrise when he disintegrates.³⁸ The new de la Poer is not destroyed; he is isolated in a madhouse, the modern solution for the protection of society from those who hold views contrary to commonly-held reality or who practise socially unacceptable habits. The Priory is destroyed by workmen who are also "obliterating the traces of its foundation" because it is the focus of the horror, the place of transformation and fusion. Thus, the tale has apparent closure. The peace and harmony of common social order has been restored. But, the closure is not complete, because de la Poer, 'the other', still exists locked in the barred room, one with the rats in the walls.

The most hideous aspect of this 'other' reality is its practise of cannibalism because the indiscriminate eating of other people is a universal taboo. Although cannibalism is practised ritualistically by many primitive peoples, it is never indiscriminate. The stone altars with suspicious brown stains, the references to Magna Mater and Atys, and the fact that the site has

³⁸It is interesting to note that the name of de la Poer's Virginia plantation is called Carfax, the same name as Dracula's English estate.

been associated with some form of worship suggests that at one time religious ritual was the purpose and reason for the cannibalism. The modern Delapoer, however, has been severed from this aspect of his tradition and all that remains is the abhorrent practise of cannibalism. Eating appears to have two symbolic aspects, creating and destroying. In its creative aspect, food from an old dead order and enters the body and is transformed into something new. In other words, the old continuously perished in order to give substance to the new. Devouring is primarily an act of destruction and absorption with no intention of giving substance. Delapoer devours Norrrys as war and fire devour, "The war ate my boy...the Yanks ate Carfax with flames". By devouring Norrrys, Delapoer is absorbing a new order of civilization in order to re-enter a far older, more primitive order. Denied ritual, the cannibalism becomes a corruption of the creative aspect of eating. Delapoer consumes Norrrys with the same fury as the army of rats "devoured fowl, cats, dogs, hogs, sheep, and even two hapless human beings before its fury was spent" (p. 38). When the act of eating is denied its creative aspect and becomes the act of devouring, the act itself is corrupted. Cannibalism when denied its religious significance becomes mere appetite. The juxtaposition of corruption and appetite is original to Lovecraft, which, according to St. Armand, springs from Lovecraft's essential horror of life as an infection, a disease, and his dread of its "unlimited contagious propagation through the ingestion of other life or by a process of

either sexual fusion of fission".³⁹ This juxtaposition could also spring from Lovecraft's fear of mongrelization and of foreigners who he considered were devouring and corrupting his treasured New England tradition. Since Lovecraft could foresee nothing positive coming from the union of different cultures, it is possible he envisaged the only result of such union as corruption, retrogression and perversion of the original tradition.

Lovecraft appears to be a derivative writer, but no writer works in a vacuum. Although his sources are sometimes obvious, particularly since he described many of them in "Supernatural Horror in Literature", he effects alterations which create something new and very Lovecraftian. Reversion to the primitive is not new to Lovecraft nor to weird tales. What is new is Lovecraft's emphasis. Helen Vaughan's reversion in Machen's "The Great God Pan" is an example. Machen uses visual images when indicating retrogression to the primordial slime:

Here too was all the work by which man had been made repeated before my eyes. I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beast whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organisms, always remained, while the outward form changed.⁴⁰

³⁹St. Armand, p. 69.

⁴⁰Arthur Machen, "The Great God Pan", Tales of Horror and the Supernatural, (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1983), p. 47.

Lovecraft uses a more subtle and at the same time more horrifying method. Delapoer's reversion is indicated by auditory images. The three stops at the end of the ape-cry "chchch..." can only suggest that Delapoer has regressed back to a time before vertebrate evolution, perhaps even to the "abyss of all being", the primordial soup. Both Machen and Lovecraft share the view that there are places behind mundane reality where ancient forces lurk ready to break out and destroy. Machen's "The Children of the Pool" is an example, and Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" is another. Exham Priory is one of these locales, but unlike for Machen and as for Blackwood there is no full closure. No explanation is supplied; the reader is left to wonder whether the rats are the ancient tradition or merely representative of it. Rats (long associated with pestilence and decay) scamper through many horror tales such as Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" and Stoker's Dracula, but in most horror tales the rats are living vermin, not just sound. Even though Lovecraft makes many topical references such as trains, planes, World War One, electricity, and the death of President Warren G. Harding, the reader tends to forget or ignore these references and has the impression the tale is set somewhere out of time. This sensation of timelessness comes from the atmosphere of the tale which suggest that the past co-exists with the present and is never completely gone. Timelessness is reinforced by the twilit grotto which is reminiscent of the crypt, as the grotto is in actuality a graveyard full of the skeletons of both creatures and civilizations. The enclosing of

Delapoer in smaller and smaller physical places is almost overlooked by the reader because as the physical places close, Delapoer starts inhabiting increasingly larger spaces which all exist simultaneously. What is very Lovecraftian is the idea that the past has a life of its own which can overpower the present, trapping a person in a multi-layered reality where all time, cultures and space co-exist.

Lovecraft's style has been called baroque, old-fashioned, boring, and distracting, but "The Rats in the Walls" is almost devoid of the "adjectivitis" of his early works, such as "The Statement of Randolph Carter".⁴¹ Although perceived by many critics as a fault, the accumulation of adjectives is consistent with terror. Through metonymy the imagination substitutes an object for the complete experience. Thus rocks can be blasphemous and Delapoer can fuse with the rats. There are no colours in the tale, only the contrast of black and white. Lovecraft's use of white to convey the expression of horror follows his literary forebearers, such as Melville who plays on the "Whiteness of the Whale" in Moby Dick.⁴² This lack of colour produces "relatively bleak, empty indeterminate landscapes, as white, grey, or shady blanknesses".⁴³ The flickering shadows

⁴¹Although unpopular in the twentieth century which prefers the crisp conciseness of Hemingway, Lovecraft's style is representative of an older stream of American writing. As a recluse who experienced life vicariously through books rather than social contacts, it follows that his writing style would be formed by writers whom he admired, for example Poe and Hawthorne.

⁴²Burleson, p. 58.

⁴³Jackson, p. 42.

increase the dream-like atmosphere of physical stasis. The reader is captured as the moth is held by the candle flame. Although white carries the horror, the white fungous flock, the white face of Norrys, the "stiff bloated corpse gently rises above the oily river that flows under endless onyx bridges to a black putrid sea", black carries the terror. In complete darkness the orienting comfort of vision is denied, leaving the culturally perceived weaker senses in control. And, there are few things which can trigger reason-numbing terror faster or more effectively than a sound magnified by night.⁴⁴

Man traditionally relies on vision as the primary source of perceiving reality. Delapoer becomes estranged from commonly-held reality when his eyes are closed through dreams and blackness. By drawing attention to the limits of vision as a way of apprehending reality, Lovecraft dismantles the 'real' by exposing Delapoer to a reality that is perceived only through sound, which precipitates a crisis of perception. Delapoer is never allowed time to accustom himself to the new way of perceiving, thus, he never resolves the crisis. He completely transfers his reliance on vision to a reliance on hearing, and his reason becomes confused. As a result, he is trapped in a world with the rats with no means of authenticating any reality.

⁴⁴This statement is primarily a personal reflection based on experience and the accounts of others. Alfred Whitehead deals with this phenomenon in Process and Reality. Alfred N. Whitehead, Process and Reality, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 321-325.

FOUR

Cosmic Incomprehensibility: "The Colour Out of Space"

Although "The Rats in the Walls" and "The Colour Out of Space" represent the same fascination with invasion from the outside, in each story the invasion of the 'other' comes from a different direction. In "The Rats in the Walls" an unidentifiable force comes from the past and drags Delapoe into madness by destroying his sense of security in the illusion known as tradition. In "The Colour Out of Space" an unknown and perhaps unknowable force falls from the stars shattering the illusions of place, knowledge and visual perception.

Lovecraft stated in his letters that "The Colour Out of Space",¹ although it has flashes of the "quasi-poetic" in a "homely country setting 'west of Arkham'",² is actually the beginning of his "quasi-realistic period".³ By quasi-realistic Lovecraft appears to mean that the settings, events, and commonly-held reality,

¹Lovecraft, "The Colour Out of Space", Dunwich Horror and Others, p. 60.

²Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 120. ♦

³Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. IV, p. 170.

are portrayed accurately with an "objective sobriety" so that the "marvel itself stands out by contrast".⁴ In many letters Lovecraft states that "The Colour Out of Space" is his best tale.⁵ Even in 1936 when he was in a depression about his writing, Lovecraft wrote that "...nothing but the Colour Out of Space really satisfies me as a whole".⁶ Written in March 1927, the tale was published in the same year in Amazing Stories, "despite its full possession of the non-terrestrial qualities so characteristic of my [Lovecraft's] recent work".⁷ Selected by Edward J. O'Brien for an anthology, The Best Short Stories of 1927, the tale unfortunately was not published in the volume, although Lovecraft was mentioned in the list of that year's writers.⁸

Critical opinion has remained uniformly favourable. Dirk Mosig categorically states the "The Colour Out of Space" is Lovecraft's masterpiece.⁹ While Burleson states that the tale is "stylistically and conceptually" one of Lovecraft's finest short stories.¹⁰ Even Edmund Wilson, a hostile critic, felt the need to remark that "'The Colour Out of Space' more or less predicts the

⁴Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 212.

⁵Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 379.

⁶Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. V, p. 348.

⁷Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 151.

⁸Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 223.

⁹Mosig, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 111.

¹⁰Burleson, p. 135.

effects of the atomic bomb".¹¹ De Camp places the tale within the Cthulhu group and states that it is the best of that group.¹² Schweitzer states that the tale is a milestone of science-fiction. Taken in the context of its decade, the story is conceptually advanced in the depiction of an alien life form for which there is no earthly prototype.¹³ Joshi does not question the consensus regarding the tale's quality, but he does question the tendency to place Lovecraft's work into categories based on pseudo-mythological beings, common plot themes, and settings, or to place Lovecraft's work into the genre of science-fiction "since none can agree as to what 'science-fiction' is".¹⁴ Joshi further states that categories aside "The Colour Out of Space" has, as have all of Lovecraft's works, a fundamental philosophical unity,¹⁵ "that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large".¹⁶ Mosig takes this philosophical unity one step farther and writes that Lovecraft was questioning man's confrontation with reality.¹⁷

¹¹Wilson, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 49.

¹²de Camp, Biography, p. 280.

¹³Schweitzer, p. 35.

¹⁴Joshi, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 9.

¹⁵Joshi, p. 9.

¹⁶Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 150.

¹⁷Dirk Mosig, "The Four Faces of the Outsider", Essays Lovecraftian, Ed. Darrell Schweitzer, (Baltimore: T-K. Graphics, 1976), p. 31.

In my opinion, "The Colour Out of Space" is Lovecraft's best cosmically-oriented short story. It delineates that nothing, even the security of the earth itself, is safe from an invasion from the stars. As in "The Rats in the Walls" where Lovecraft isolates hearing in order to redefine reality, in this tale Lovecraft isolates vision by demonstrating that even though one can see, measure, weigh and feel something, the something can still elude both definition and identification.

The tale is recounted by an unnamed surveyor who walks into the hills west of Arkham to survey for a new reservoir. The locals insisted that the area he was going to survey was evil and whispered that the centre of the evil was a place called the "blasted heath". During his walk he comes across a five acre site of grey desolation "that sprawled open to the sky like a great spot eaten by acid" which he knows immediately is the "blasted heath". In order to find out what caused this strange area, he visits Ammi Pierce whom the town folk regard as slightly crazy.

The blasted heath was all that was left after the "strange days". It all began in June 1882 when a meteorite fell from the sky and bedded itself in the front yard of Nahum Gardner's farmhouse. Tested by professors from Miskatonic University, the meteorite is found to present "no identifying features whatsoever" and the "college scientists were forced to own that they could not place it". The meteorite disappears following a lightning storm and everyone loses interest in both the meteorite and the Gardner.

The cycle of farm life continues normally with no interruption until harvest. Then the fruit which promised a great harvest was found to be inedible. The entire crop was lost. Winter brings strange, subtle changes in the family and the surrounding wild life. The Gardners changed from friendly out-going people to a family under siege. As the winter progressed, they became increasingly more reserved and melancholy, never leaving their farm. Their general health deteriorated as a feeling of vague disquiet grew. Dogs on the farm refused to bark and horses refused to pass the farmhouse. The wild creatures such as foxes, rabbits, and woodchucks acted strangely and their anatomy had been altered.

Spring burst prematurely on the Gardner's farm. The snow melted faster and this period of rebirth became a nightmare. Everything grew to an abnormal size, was oddly shaped, and blossomed in hues reminiscent of the colour of a brittle globule found imbedded in the meteorite. As spring progressed insects added an element of madness to the bizarre vegetation. Everything growing was larger, altered of appearance and habit, and strangely hued, including the Gardners. As June 1883 approached, the family members became obviously affected. Mrs Gardner went mad and had to be locked in the attic. Neighbours no longer went near the farm, and when school closed the family was completely isolated. As summer progressed all the vegetation started turning grey and brittle. All the insects died, while the dogs and cats disappeared. The trees moved at night when there was no wind, and all the vegetation became luminous in the

dark.

Harvest rolled around again, but there was nothing to harvest. The vegetation had crumbled into a grey powder and the livestock started to die. Chickens, pigs, and cows grew inordinately fat then became grey and brittle and started falling to pieces before they were dead. One by one the three Gardner children died or disappeared. One crumbled to death in the attic while two jumped into the well. Nahum was completely alone downstairs while his wife screamed upstairs in her attic room.

November brought the end of the strange days and the end of the Gardners, their house and farm. Ammi Pierce went to visit and found not only the house and vegetation falling to pieces, but also the remaining Gardners. Nahum's mind had snapped "proof against more sorrow". Mrs Gardner was still alive in the attic room crumbling to bits as she moved. When Ammi left the attic, there was no longer anything moving. As he moved down the stairs, the woodwork was luminous and he heard "a most detestable sticky noise as of some fiendish and unclean species of suction". When he arrived on the ground floor Ammi found what was left of Nahum crumbling as it spoke.

When the authorities followed Ammi back to the farm, they were shaken by what they found but would not accept that "anything contrary to natural law had occurred". As darkness fell they noticed that everything organic started to glow. As the intensity of the luminosity increased, they noticed a phosphorescence pouring out of the well in a shapeless stream of unplaceable colour. They fled for

their lives out the back door in a direction away from the well where the colour was growing in intensity and speed. As they reached the summit of a hill behind the farm, they looked back to see the colour shoot rocket-like into the sky causing a "wooden ripping and crackling" which left nothing but the blasted heath. Unfortunately, Ammi took a second look and saw something the others did not: a colour, not like any colour on earth, feebly rise only to sink back down again into the well.

The story is an "atmospheric study"¹⁸ of progressive decay brought about by something that came from beyond "whar things ain't like they be here".¹⁹ Lovecraft first explored the subject of something from the stars destroying New England rustics in "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" (1919). But, other than the central theme, the two tales are not related in either scope or execution. Schweitzer explains:

"Beyond the Wall of Sleep" is synoptic, with few developed scenes. "The Colour Out of Space" is genuine, more visual, frequently vivid. The characters in "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" are hostile stereotypes of the crudest sort, drooling degenerates. The farmers in "Colour" are much more convincing, with generally human emotions and perceptions.²⁰

"The Colour Out of Space" is based on a vampire motif. Like

¹⁸Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 114.

¹⁹Lovecraft, "The Colour Out of Space", p. 81.

²⁰Schweitzer, p. 34.

Dracula who holds his victims with one bite, the Chromatic Entity "draws ye" so you cannot "git away", but unlike Dracula, it appears to have no will to power. Central to the vampire theme in other horror tales is the acquisition of power. Dracula drinks blood not only to sustain his life, but also to create new vampires which will offer allegiance to the Lord of the Undead. The thing from the stars apparently does not desire to take over the earth or it would not have gone back to the cosmos. Other than the primal needs to feed and reproduce (I suggest this because something is left in the well, something smaller and more feeble), the Chromatic Entity's motivations appear to be too idiosyncratic to be anthropomorphized.

Unlike "The Rats in the Walls" where the Priory and surrounding landscape fade into a space rather than a place, a sense of time and place are required for "The Colour Out of Space" to create its impact. There is never any question in the reader's mind that the events take place on a specific farm, or that there is a framework of time. The time in the tale is measured in the way farmers have always measured time, by the passage of seasons. Winter is a quiescent period when the vegetation lies dormant waiting for spring. Spring is a bursting forth of all growth. During the summer everything gains strength and attains maturity. Fall brings the harvest of the mature crops. The Entity arrives in late spring and settles into the well affecting little until fall when the expectation of a good crop is found to be groundless. During the winter the thing manifests its presence through subtle changes, as

the earth is dormant so is the Entity. Spring arrives, It bursts forth with the riot of rebirth. Summer sees It growing in strength sucking the life out of increasingly more complex organisms. When fall arrives It completes the harvest of Its crops and goes home. While mirroring the seasonal calendar Lovecraft, at the same time, perverts it. Time measured in this manner is supposed to be cyclical, but Lovecraft stops time on the blasted heath because the earth cannot renew itself: nothing grows. Time and the earth cannot heal all wounds. Whether this lack of growth is due to the presence of something in the well or whether the earth is permanently sterile is not answered. But, there is the suggestion implicit in the tale that even time as measured by earthly cycles is a meaningless illusion.

Lovecraft could not think of an individual existing outside of a pattern, a pattern of immediate environment, soil and culture-stream, and "the milieu of ideas, impressions, traditions, landscapes, and architecture through which he must necessarily peer in order to reach the 'outside'".²¹ In this tale, Lovecraft uses the pattern of the farmer through which to view the incursion from the outside. Farmers must be, because of the contingencies of their profession - uncertain weather, attacks of disease and insects, poor markets - the most tenacious and "unimaginative" of individuals. The Gardners withstand and rationalize their predicament for eighteen

²¹Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 114.

months. They live with the idea that the meteorite has poisoned the soil; next year the poison will be gone and all will be well. They react to the progression of decay as they would to any natural disaster and carry on with courage. They become dulled to their surroundings and experience in a way that is foreign to urban dwellers.

The location of the Gardner farm as west of Arkham adds depth to the estrangement of the incursion because Arkham is known to be a "very old town full of witch legends". Had the meteorite landed in the centre of Arkham it could not have been ignored and dismissed as the wild gossip of superstitious rustics. By rooting the incursion in the country, rational men such as scientists can maintain their sense of security in the illusions that the earth is safe and everything follows natural law because they are not faced with any information to the contrary. They do not have to experience the decay nor the resultant blasted heath. In fact, these men avoid the Gardner farm during the "strange days" even though they are invited to explore the phenomenon.

The tale is framed by the direct first person narration of the surveyor. He sets the scene and records Ammi's account of the events. The mood of sombre strangeness and alienness is established in the first paragraph:

West of Arkham the hills rise wild, and there are valleys with dark woods that no axe has ever cut. There are dark narrow glens where the trees slope fantastically and where thin brooklets trickle without ever having caught the glint of sunlight. (p. 60.)

Burleson suggests this passage is imagistically parallel to lines 132-141 of Milton's "Il Penseroso", but Milton makes his woodland a desirable haunt, while Lovecraft uses the same imagery to make the region a place of brooding horror.²² In Lovecraft's hands this landscape estranges the surveyor from the surroundings and prepares the reader for Ammi's narration. The subjectivity of the surveyor's reaction to the hills contrasts with the objective recounting of Ammi's story. The actual account of the "strange days" is told in the third person, but not by an omniscient narrator. The account has the flavour of hearsay testimony which has been filtered through two recorders. The result does not convey the texture of experience, but provides a facade of objectivity until near the end where the Entity is gathering itself for takeoff. Here the narration narrows into subjective reaction which is signalled by Lovecraft's language, "boughs were all straining skyward, tipped with tongues of foul flame, and lambent tricklings of the same monstrous fire", or "shining orchard trees with their gnarled, fiendish contours" or "the watchers saw wriggling at that tree top height a thousand tiny points of faint and unhallowed radiance". The end of the tale switches back to the obviously subjective recording of the surveyor, but there is no closure. Although the harmony of the order preceding the events in the tale is apparently reinstated because the Entity goes back to the star, there is no dissolution of the enigma because a part of It

²²Burleson, p. 136.

is left in the well and it remains unexplained. Lovecraft remarked that the work "lacks compactness & climax, perhaps, but must be taken as an atmospheric study rather than a tale".²³ Actually, "The Colour Out of Space" is both. As an atmospheric study, Lovecraft's orchestrated prose develops a mood of neverending decay and doom where the Gardners and their neat, trim farmstead are transformed into five acres of sterile, grey dust. As a tale, it is the recounting of a process where something from the stars systematically destroys many of the illusions which provide mankind with security: a process which does not end because "just enough of the Outside influence remains in the well to provide a slow creeping blight".²⁴

Lovecraft encourages the reader to suspend disbelief by the careful juxtaposition of commonly-known reality and cosmic otherness. Farmers act and speak like farmers, scientists and newspaper men act as they are expected to, and the seasons bring what is expected. Interwoven through this 'realistic' tapestry is the effect of the abnormal colour. By the time the Colour goes back to the stars, the reader, despite all knowledge to the contrary, accepts that a colour can be not only abnormal but also a separate entity.

When discussing his cosmic monsters, Lovecraft wrote, "Most of my monsters fail altogether to satisfy my sense of the cosmic - the abnormally chromatic entity in The Colour Out of Space being the only

²³Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 127.

²⁴Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 213.

one of the lot which I take pride in."²⁵ This pride is based on the notion that the cosmic entity is something that "breaks away from terrestrial analogy".²⁶ By making the 'other' a colour, Lovecraft is isolating vision as the primary interpreter of the phenomenon. Rosemary Jackson writes that in a culture which gives the eye dominance over the other sense organs, the 'real' is equated with the 'visible' and the un-real with the in-visible. Thus, that which is not seen can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes 'I see' synonymous with 'I understand'.²⁷ Lovecraft is subverting the reality of his culture which accepts the equation of 'I see' and 'I understand' by demonstrating that a colour which, although it can be seen, cannot be understood. (A modern equivalent might be flying saucers. They have been seen by many, but are neither understood nor recognized by the majority of people as 'real' phenomena.)

Colour is not an object independent of perception. Colour is produced by rays of light striking the eye which in turn excites something in the brain's coding system. To suggest that red or green can become an entity which can suck the life out of organic material is ludicrous, but this is what Lovecraft does and it works. The tale states that the meteorite when placed before a spectroscope

²⁵Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 316.

²⁶Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 136.

²⁷Jackson, p. 45.

"displayed shining bands unlike any colours of the normal spectrum". This reaction is possible because the spectroscope registers light-waves beyond the visible spectrum. But, when a large coloured globule is found embedded in the substance of the meteorite, its colour is said to resemble "some of the bands in the meteor's strange spectrum almost impossible to describe", and "it was only by analogy that they call it colour at all" which suggests that the 'colour' of the globule must be part of the visible spectrum. Ambiguity arises when Lovecraft implies that the 'colour' is something other, a 'colour' which eats and reproduces, and this is an impossibility. Red does not eat, but something red can. Lovecraft does not suggest that something of this abnormal colour affects organic matter; he states that this abnormal colour is the something. The transformation of a 'colour' into an entity is skillfully achieved by the repetitive and cumulative accounts of the 'colour's' actions. The entity invades a creature and causes a metamorphosis which changes the organism irreversibly. Fusion, if it can be called such, has occurred when the invaded creature starts turning grey and crumbling. The description of this process first on the vegetation and finally on the Gardners convinces the reader that this abnormally chromatic entity is something alien to natural law, hence the reader can accept the colour as some kind of independent live form capable of pouring out of a well rather than shining. The colour is variously described as a "detached piece of phosphorescence", "a kind of smoke", and a "hateful current of vapour" which suggests it is

like a gas or steam, but to say it 'pours' suggests it has some liquid-like qualities. The thing also has weight because Ammi hears "a sort of liquid splash" when it moves into the well. There is no suggestion that the colour makes any sound, but it can cause noise, for example the splash when it enters the well and the sound of it feeding. The description of the farm just before the colour rockets into the sky is a mass of silent movement, all fuelled by this chromatic entity:

All the farm was shining with the hideous unknown blend of colour; trees, buildings, and even such grass and herbage as had not been wholly changed to lethal grey brittleness. The boughs were all straining skyward, tipped with tongues of foul flame, and lambent tricklings of the same monstrous fire were creeping about the ridgepoles of the house, barn and sheds. It was a scene from a vision of Fuseli, and over all the rest reigned that riot of luminous amorphousness, that alien and undimensioned rainbow of cryptic poison from the well - seething, feeling, lapping, reaching, scintillating, straining, and malignly bubbling in its cosmic and unrecognizable chromaticism. (p. 84-85)

The fact it can be seen, measured, weighed and heard suggests that objective knowledge can be acquired about this object, yet scientists do not investigate. To explore this abnormal colour, scientists would be forced to accept that their treasured laws of physical behaviour have no application and are illusions (scientists also have a well-known aversion to investigating flying saucers). Scientists, being human, find security in these so-called immutable laws and tend to be alienated by anything that threatens this security (in Lovecraft's view). The Gardner's neighbours avoid the

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farm, and gossip. Folklore and tradition hold that rural people are friendly and standby those who are in difficulty which may be true if a barn burns, but in this case, the legendary solidarity of the rural community is shown to be an illusion. The avoidance of the Gardners by their neighbours is the effect of the alien happenings on the farm which suggests that experience with the outside not only isolates the individual but alienates the mass of common humanity.

Since "The Colour Out of Space" is a tale within a tale, a Chinese box, it is necessary to isolate the surveyor and Ammi Pierce in order to delineate the movement of terror/horror/terror. The terror for Ammi is personal. He watches his friends slowly deteriorate into "grey, twisted, brittle monstrosities". When he goes into the attic he makes physical contact with the "hateful current of vapour", but the true horror is the "blasphemous monstrosity" that "perceptibly moved as it continued to crumble". The horror continues until Ammi turns to look back at the blasted heath and sees "something feebly rise, only to sink down again" into the well; this terrorizing vision makes him "never quite right" again. He is tied to the area, unable to move, watching the blight move closer and closer. Hoping, yet somehow knowing that the reservoir will not really contain the Colour out of space.

On the other hand the surveyor is in a different situation. He has had no actual contact with the Colour, but his first experience with the area around the blasted heath and the stagnant vapours from the abandoned well have invaded his imagination. The

terror that the vampiric colour cannot distinguish between the dead organic matter of buildings, insects, birds, cows and men preys on his mind, and the possibility that the thing still exists waiting in the well evokes the probability that there are things from space which are not only unknown but are essentially unknowable.

Answers from science, the friendship of neighbours, and the security residing in the belief that man is the master of the earth are shown to be illusions. The terror is cosmic. Man has no security in a cosmos which spawns creatures which invade, destroy, and then leave.

The belief that knowledge is gained through vision is shown to be meaningless. The 'colour' can be seen and felt, but when it leaves the earth nothing is really known about it. Vision proves to be as inadequate a sense through which to interpret reality as hearing. Ammi who has seen the thing first-hand does not or perhaps cannot leave the area. The surveyor can and does leave, but is isolated from the rest of mankind. He has an insight into a different reality and as a result is alienated from society. He quits his job and is haunted by dreams of grey, crumbling creatures that used to be men. Lovecraft in "The Colour Out of Space" has shown that a reality based on vision is tenuous by demonstrating that to see is not necessarily the same as to understand.

FIVE

Localism and the Inverted Hero Myth: "The Dunwich Horror"

Any study of Lovecraft's work would be incomplete without some discussion of his monsters. In some tales such as "The Rats in the Walls", "The Tomb", "Pickman's Model" and "The Terrible Old Man", the rupture of objective reality is centred on a few individuals and there is no cosmic influence explicit. In other tales, such as "The Colour Out of Space", "The Music of Erich Zann", "The Silver Key", and "Through the Gates of the Silver Key", objective reality is shattered by an incursion of some kind of cosmic influence, but the entire community of man is not threatened. In the tales which have been variously labelled as representative of the "Cthulhu Mythos" (Derleth), the "Lovecraft Mythos" (Joshi), the "Yog-Sothoth Cycle of Myth" (Mosig), and the "Arkham Cycle"¹ (Lovecraft), the influences which disrupt commonly held reality are embodied in creatures which would destroy not only man's illusion of reality, but man himself, and would drag "the earth off to some nameless place for some nameless purpose".² These stories include "The Call of Cthulhu", "The Whisperer in Darkness", "The Haunter of the Dark", "The Dunwich Horror", and Lovecraft's magnum opus, At the Mountains of Madness. I have chosen to limit my discussion to "The Dunwich Horror" and "The

¹Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 246.

²Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror", The Dunwich Horror and Others, (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1963) p. 202.

"Shadow Out of Time" because both these tales are better known than the others and present some interesting questions concerning content and form. "The Dunwich Horror" appears to be a standard good-versus-evil tale in which the forces of good defeat the forces of evil and save the world. In the light of Lovecraft's philosophy, this interpretation presents some problems. In "The Shadow Out of Time" Lovecraft dramatizes his cosmic vision and sharply focuses the alienated protagonist.

The creatures which slither through the Arkham Cycle of tales are often better known than their creator. Burleson states that the horror in Lovecraft is not ultimately some "gelatinous lurker" in dark places, but the irony that man is sufficiently well-developed to realize how insignificant and unimportant he is in the cosmos.³ Unfortunately, the irony is often lost on the reader, and the gelatinous lurkers become memorable. Names like Azathoth and Yog Sothoth, creatures like Cthulhu, the Shoggoth, Wilbur Whateley and his twin brother have a foetid odour, leave tarry-like excrescences in their wake, and slosh, ooze, or lumber through the tales and into the imagination.

The biological nightmares which Lovecraft uses to objectify his cosmic view are also corporeal representatives of different species. As such, they are not gods but organisms like man, albeit more powerful. It is important to note that none of Lovecraft's

³Burleson, p. 12.

well-educated, sensitive protagonists call these beings gods; rather, it is the 'lower' classes, the primitives and degenerates, universally "low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant types"⁴, who form the repellent cults which worship these creatures.

The cults, whose members are equated with beasts, practise abominable rites not only in religious awe, a state of mysterium tremendum⁵, but also (although rarely explicitly mentioned) from a quest for the power resident in these beings. In "The Call of Cthulhu", a cultist explains why the appropriate rites must be kept alive:

Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them [the cultists] new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom.⁶

All critics while admitting to Lovecraft's racism agree it is not an important theme in his work; I disagree. Although the racism is not obvious, the idea that only degenerates, mixed-bloods and so on are capable of renewing the chaos represented in the above passage suggests there may be implicit racism present in Lovecraft's work. In fact, Lovecraft once wrote a description of a slum:

The organic things - Italo-Semítico-Mongoloid - inhabiting that awful cesspool could not by any stretch of the imagination be call'd human. They

⁴Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", The Dunwich Horror and Others, p. 143.

⁵Otto, The Idea of the Holy, p. 12-14.

⁶Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", p. 145.

were monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal; vaguely moulded from some stinking viscous slime of earth's corruption, and slithering and oozing in and on the filthy streets or in and out of windows and doorways in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnamabilities. They - or the degenerate gelatinous fermentation of which they were composed - seem'd to ooze, seep and trickle thro' the gaping cracks in the horrible houses... and I thought of some avenue of Cyclopean and unwholesome vats, crammed to the vomiting-point with gangrenous vileness, and about to burst and inundate the world in one leprous cataclysm of semi-fluid rottenness.⁷

This long quotation is remarkably reminiscent of the description of the Shoggoth from At the Mountains of Madness:

We were on the track ahead as the nightmare, plastic column of fetid black iridescence oozed tightly onward through a fifteen-foot sinus...a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming as pustules of greenish light...⁸

The similarity of tone and images could represent Lovecraft's fear that chaos would result if tradition was destroyed by the influx of foreigners into his New England. In 1929 Lovecraft wrote:

All I care about is the civilisation - the state of development and organization which is capable of gratifying the complex-emotion-aesthetic needs of highly evolved and sensitive men. Any indignation I may feel in the whole matter is not for the woes of the down-trodden, but for the threat of social unrest to the traditional institutions of civilisation.⁹

⁷Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 333-334.

⁸Lovecraft, At the Mountains of Madness, At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels, (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1964), p. 95.

⁹Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 290.

Since Lovecraft equated himself with the "highly evolved and sensitive men" who uphold civilization, it is possible to hypothesize that Lovecraft feared these "mongrelized" people as representative of the down-trodden masses who would destroy civilization. Lovecraft transformed this fear into his biological creatures.

Although creatures like Cthulhu and the living fungi from Yuggoth (See "The Whisperer in Darkness") are more powerful than man, they are nevertheless as vulnerable. Lovecraft demonstrates this vulnerability by introducing entities even higher on the ladder of being which are feared by all creatures. Because these beings are too alien, too incomprehensible for any creature to grasp, nothing can be known about them but their names, and that is all that is required to give them some reality. Through these names Lovecraft lays stress on the impossibility of naming an unnameable presence which can only be registered as absence and shadow.¹⁰ As James Hillman states, "naming is not a nominalistic activity, but realistic indeed, because the name takes us into its reality."¹¹ Names like Yog-Sothoth, Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, and Shub-Niggurath are an attempt to visualize the unseen, or to establish a disjunction of word and meaning through a play upon "thinglessness". By creating a gap between the signifier and the signified, Lovecraft dramatizes the impossibility of arriving at definitive meaning or absolute

¹⁰Jackson, p. 39.

¹¹James Hillman, The Dream of the Underworld, (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 25.

'reality'.¹² Lovecraft increases the gap through the use of adjectives which, although suggest an object, actually increase the 'thinglessness' of the name, for example: Azathoth, "the blind idiot god" which "sprawls at the centre of ultimate chaos encircled by its flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers and lulled by the thin monotonous piping of a daemonic flute held in nameless paws"; Nyarlathotep, "the crawling Chaos"; and Yog-Sothoth, "the primal white jelly", "the wings", "the eyes in the darkness", "the original, the eternal, the undying". These attributes make no-sense because although there is no actual concreteness, these modifiers suggest a concrete object; something beyond comprehension but nonetheless felt is being represented. As well as embodying the dread contained in the numinous, Lovecraft states that the function of these names is to provide "an extension rather than a negation of reality", and:

...give the imagination a ground for limitless expansion & to satisfy aesthetically the sincere & burning curiosity & sense of awe which a sensitive minority of mankind feels toward the alluring & provocative abysses of unplumbed space and unguessed entity which press in upon the known world from unknown relationships of time, space, matter, force, dimensionality, & consciousness.¹³

By extending reality through names rather than objects, Lovecraft is exploding empirical reality which defines itself through objects.

Dreaming beneath and between the illusions which man cherishes

¹²Jackson, p. 41.

¹³Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 196.

as reality, other dimensions of reality exist because as Lovecraft writes, "we know nothing, of course, about anything, and all possible speculations are technically equal in the theoretical arena of uncertain cosmos's competitive probabilities".¹⁴ Lovecraft explores these competing probabilities through concrete creatures such as the star-headed beings from At the Mountains of Madness¹⁵ and Yog-Sothoth in "The Dunwich Horror".¹⁶ Although Yog-Sothoth appears in both tales, the presentation is quite different. In "The Dunwich Horror" there is some confusion as to exactly what Yog-Sothoth is. Even though It is treated like a god by the natives of Dunwich, there is a suggestion that It is really a species of a different nature and quality than man. Usually in Lovecraft's work, the entities just are; they do not actively interfere with earth, nor do they display any competitive impulses. But the Yog-Sothoth of "The Dunwich Horror" both actively interferes with earth and demonstrates that It is in direct competition with man for the earth. In contrast, the Yog-Sothoth from At the Mountains of Madness stays behind a mountain range in Antarctica, drives men mad, and does not interfere with either the earth or mankind. Thus, I will assume that the Yog-Sothoth from "The Dunwich Horror" is a creature, invisible, perhaps but still some kind of being, and not an entity.

¹⁴Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p.234.

¹⁵Lovecraft, At the Mountains of Madness, p.1.

¹⁶Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror", p. 160

During the summer of 1928, Lovecraft travelled fairly extensively in New England. "The Dunwich Horror", resulted from the impressions he gathered during his trips. In a 1931 letter, Lovecraft remarked:

I used considerable realism in developing the locale of that thing "The Dunwich Horror" - the prototype being the decaying agricultural region N.E. of Springfield, Mass. - especially the township of Wilbraham, where I visited for a fortnight in 1928.¹⁷

One of Lovecraft's most widely read tales,¹⁸ "The Dunwich Horror" was published in Weird Tales in April 1929.¹⁹ A film has been made of the story, and according to Schweitzer, it is almost a parody of the original with similarities not extending beyond the title.²⁰ Lovecraft did not appear to find any lasting satisfaction in the work because there are very few references to it in his later letters.

Critics tend to find the tale more satisfying than the author did. De Camp writes that "The Dunwich Horror" is one of Lovecraft's best stories, powerfully imaginative and suspenseful.²¹ Schweitzer suggests that aside from a clumsy opening, the tale is effective.²² Leiber argues that, although richly textured,

¹⁷Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 379.

¹⁸Burleson, p. 140.

¹⁹Shreffler, p. 56.

²⁰Schweitzer, p. 39.

²¹de Camp, Biography, p. 302.

²²Schweitzer, p. 39.

the story is more an extrapolation from black magic and Arthur Machen than from science.²³ Burleson's appraisal is that the story is a vivid horror tale which is flawed by certain crudities of characterization and plot.²⁴ St. Armand states of Lovecraft's longer works ("The Dunwich Horror" covers 48 pages, "so that Wright would probably classify it as a 'novelette'"²⁵) that he was attempting to achieve "a mating of Gothic horror and cosmic terror, an unholy marriage of inside and outside"²⁶ which is represented by the "cosmic sexual assault in which the gods mate with man".²⁷ August Derleth, however, has been the most influential critic. Until his death in 1971, Derleth dominated Lovecraft studies through his misrepresentation of Lovecraft's cosmic view. "The Dunwich Horror" is the cornerstone of the "Cthulhu Mythos", and to Derleth epitomizes the notion that "this world was inhabited at one time by another race, who, in practising black magic, lost their foothold and were expelled...".²⁸ "The Dunwich Horror" concerns this expelled race's attempt to regain the earth, and from this, Derleth draws the conclusion that man can win in a pitched battle for the world.

²³Leiber, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 145.

²⁴Burleson, p. 141.

²⁵Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 246.

²⁶St. Armand, p. 4.

²⁷St. Armand, p. 5.

²⁸Derleth, introduction to The Dunwich Horror and Others, p. xiii.

I concur with the critics who take issue with Derleth's view, but can understand how he could draw the conclusion he did. On the surface the tale appears to be the standard monster tale where good wins and evil is banished. But this interpretation is problematic because buried in the respective notions of good and evil is the concept that right and wrong are absolutes. Lovecraft objected to "the nonsensical notion that "right" and "wrong" involve any principles more mystical and universal than those of immediate expediency",²⁹ thus have a pragmatic aspect and are meaningless as absolutes. I suggest that this tale, far from an account of good and evil, is actually a confrontation with the dimensions of a reality based on absolutes. Based on Burleson's interpretation of the hero monomyth, I intend to demonstrate that Lovecraft inverted the absolute values of good and evil, and in so doing, suggested that the hero myth has two equally valid but opposite points-of-view. What is "right" for one side, is "wrong" for the other.

The tale, related by a limited (to human perspective) third person narrator, concerns the events of 1928 which took place in Dunwich, an isolated community in Northern Massachusetts. Dunwich appears to be near the centre of one of those regions scattered throughout the globe where a portal exists between another dimension and the earth. Old Wizard Whateley, from the decayed branch of the family, opens the gate with the intension of allowing Yog-Sothoth to

²⁹Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 288.

enter and cleanse the earth of human infection. Unfortunately for Lavinia, the unmarried, deformed, chinless, albino daughter of Old Whateley, Yog-Sothoth is invited to mate with her because It cannot pass the portal unless clothed in the form of man. The offspring of this union is born in 1913. Wilbur is a very precocious child who walks at seven months, runs at a year, talks at eleven months, and reads before he is two. His physical growth is equally rapid, by the time of his death in 1928, he is eight feet tall. His face, "remarkable for its maturity", was also remarkable for its ugliness; "there was something almost goatish or animalistic about his thick lips, large-pored, yellowish skin, coarse crinkly hair and oddly elongated ears".³⁰ Following Wilbur's birth Old Whateley starts buying cattle without any apparent increase in the size of his herd. At the same time, he starts a systematic remodelling of some farm buildings by tearing out the inside walls and boarding up the windows. As Wilbur grows older the neighbours become increasingly more uncomfortable. By the age of ten he is uniformly hated and shunned by the complete community. Dogs dislike him to such an extent that Wilbur must carry a pistol to protect himself from their frequent attacks, a solution which does not help to endear him to his neighbours. Old Wizard Whateley dies in 1924 with the last words:

More space, Willy, more space soon. Yew grows - an' that grows faster. It'll be ready to sarve ye soon, boy. Open up the gates to Yog-Sothoth with the long

³⁰Wilbur's face is very reminiscent of the Orphic Pan described by Patricia Merivale in Pan the Goat God.

chant that ye'll find on page 751 of the complete edition... (p. 171-172)

The natives are afraid of the numerous whippoorwills which cry on warm nights. They believe that the birds are psychopomps³¹ which attempt to catch the souls of the dying. Their cries are timed to the sufferer's breath; if the birds fail, they fall into silence; if they succeed, "They flutter away chittering in daemonic laughter". The birds do not get the Old Man's soul. In 1926 Lavinia disappears after a particularly noisy ceremony on Sentinel Hill accompanied by "a kind of pandaemonic cachinnation" of whippoorwills.

In the winter of 1927-28 Wilbur is over seven feet tall and is consulting Miskatonic University's complete edition of the Necronomicon. The librarian, Dr. Henry Armitage, refuses to allow Wilbur to take the book home, so Wilbur attempts to steal it. One night the town of Arkham is awakened by the fierce barking of a watchdog and "a scream from a wholly different throat...such a scream as could come from no being born of earth, or wholly of earth". The library stank as Wilbur melted into a "sticky whitish mass on the painted boards", and the whippoorwills fled in panic, "frantic at that which they had sought for prey". Wilbur resembled his father because the only human part of him had been his face and hands.

Wilbur's death is disturbing enough, but what follows is the true Dunwich horror. On a dark night in September the Whateley

³¹Lovecraft apparently acquired this whippoorwill legend during his travels in 1928 while visiting friends, although he embellished it somewhat. Burleson, p. 157 26n.

farmhouse bursts asunder and something invisible moves into the open air. The thing is immense, leaving prints the size of barrels and crushing everything in its wake. Since Wilbur is dead and the creature has not been fed for some time, it starts feeding on cattle and works its way up to people. Neither guns nor locked doors can stop it. The creature moves restlessly from Cold Spring Glen, "no healthy nor decen' place" to Sentinel Hill and back again, feeding on the way. Dr. Armitage, who has been given Wilbur's diary,³² decodes it after much work, following which he falls into a state of collapse, muttering over and over again, "But what in God's name can we do?". Armitage and two companions, Rice and Morgan, head for Dunwich armed with a magic powder and several powerful incantations. The creature becomes visible after an application of the powder, and the incantations disperse the being into its constituent parts, noisomely and noisily. Before its final end, the creature fulfills Old Whateley's prediction that a child of Lavinia's will call his father's name from Sentinel Hill, "...HELP! HELP!...ff-ff-ff FATHER! FATHER! YOG-SOTHOTH!...".

Armitage ties up the loose ends and explains that the creature and Wilbur were twins, only it "had a greater share of the 'outsideness' than did Wilbur". In fact, the only resemblance it bore to humanity was, in the words of Curtis Whateley, a:

face with read eyes an' crinkly albino hair, an' no chin, like the Whateley's... . It was an octopus,

³²Lovecraft frequently used diaries and manuscripts written in cryptograph as a motif. An idea he probably owed to Poë.

centipede, spider kind o'thing, but they was a haff-shaped man's face on top of it, an' it looked like Wizard Whateley's, only it was yards an' yards acrost....(p. 201-202)

Good had triumphed; the threat to mankind removed; the earth had been saved from the Old Ones - this time.

Some critics find the dialect of the Dunwich natives annoying and distracting. Schweitzer suggests that modern readers are not accustomed to the phonetic rendering of thick dialect.³³ It is true that some attention must be given in order to understand the dialect and this can be annoying, but the dialect is necessary. The natives must be seen to be different, isolated, and degenerate. In a literary work differences can only be designated by language, hence the use of dialect. The "clumsy opening" mentioned by Schweitzer is also necessary to estrange the environs of Dunwich from the 'normal' world. Lovecraft often employs landscape to set the scene of differences, almost as if he was suggesting that the earth is tortured by the imminent presence of something 'other'. The opening imagery reverberates with decay and something foreboding. The hills which are too rounded and symmetrical to be natural are topped with circles of stone far older than the Indians;³⁴ bridges are crude

³³Schweitzer, p. 39.

³⁴Philip Shreffler provides an indepth comparison of Lovecraft's fictive Dunwich to several areas in Mass., to the extent of providing pictures of a sacrificial altar stone which he claims is the prototype of the table-like stone on top of Sentinel Hill. p. 56-62.

and of dubious safety; the Miskatonic River has "an oddly serpent-like suggestion"; the farms are few and sparse with a "uniform aspect of age, squalor and dilapidation"; and the village of Dunwich is "huddled" a "cluster of rotting gambrel roofs". The village street impresses the traveller with "a faint, malign odour as of massed mould and decay of centuries". If one visits in the evening, there is an instinctive dislike of the stretches of marshland, and one almost fears the great numbers of whippoorwills and the fireflies that "come out in abnormal profusion to dance to the raucous, creepily insistent rhythms of stridently piping bullfrogs". From this panoramic view, the description narrows to the natives. Originally settled by refugees fleeing the witch-hunt in Salem, the natives have remained steeped in the traditions of black magic which has isolated them in time and consciousness from the rest of New England and the world:

...the natives are now repellently decadent, having gone far along the path of retrogression so common in many New-England backwaters. They have come to form a race by themselves, with well-defined mental and physical stigmata of degeneracy and inbreeding. (p. 162)

These inhabitants have regressed so far that at one point Armitage says, "Show them Arthur Machen's Great God Pan and they'll think it a common Dunwich scandal!". The camera then focuses on one family, the Whatleys, who are feared by the rest of the natives because the members are more repellently decadent than the rest of the community. The notion that the body reflects the mind is reminiscent of

Renaissance drama such as Richard III.³⁵ Although Old Whateley does not say "I am determined to be a villain.", his physical characteristics and isolation can mean little else. He is described as chinless, grey and unshaven which is not unusual in an agricultural community, but what makes it unusual is that it is mentioned. He is avoided partly because of his "reputation for black magic and the unexplained death by violence of Mrs Whateley", and partly because he looks so different and acts so differently. The dialect of the natives sets them apart from the sensitive, well-educated people who maintain tradition, (Armitage is an example.). Instead the inhabitants of Dunwich are part of the down-trodden masses who would destroy tradition, hence civilization. That Old Whateley plans to destroy mankind is not unthinkable from his point of view. Lovecraft suggests it is actually acceptable because Whateley is the most repellent, decayed and degenerate of the lot.

In the standard monster tale, the "good guy" who destroys the monster is the hero. In "The Dunwich Horror" Lovecraft suggests the hero is not the supposed "good guy", but the "bad guy" who is destroyed. By ascribing hero status to Wilbur's twin brother, Lovecraft is demonstrating that the messianic myth which is the foundation of most religions is determined by one's view point. Good

³⁵In many tales Lovecraft uses a physical characteristic as an indication of an alien reality. For example, "The Terrible Old Man" has yellow eyes, and the natives from "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" have disturbingly staring, protuberant eyes.

and evil, in Lovecraft's words are "local expedients - or their lack - and not in any sense cosmic truths or laws".³⁶ Derleth and most readers give Armitage, a good man who through hard work and courage confronts the monster and kills it, the status of hero. And the tale can be read this way. But when read in the light of other Lovecraft works, Henry Armitage does not fit the picture of a Lovecraft protagonist. He is neither isolated nor passive. Armitage is a stock character in horror tales, a professional, sensitive, educated man like Van Helsing who discovers the magnitude of the problem, formulates a solution, and actively takes steps to destroy the monster. In "The Shadow Out of Time", "The Haunter of the Dark", "The Whisperer in Darkness", and many other tales, the protagonist accidentally falls into the situation and is overcome by the implications. Even though the protagonist survives, he does not defeat the monsters; instead, he comes to terms with his new knowledge which results in isolation and alienation. On the other hand, Armitage searches for knowledge of Yog-Sothoth, is never skeptical, and his belief in the other dimension gives him the strength to complete his task. Because of this belief, he knows he can do something, "But what, in God's name can we do?", and discovers what he can do. But, the most damning fact, is that unlike Lovecraft's other protagonists, Armitage does not confront the outsider alone. He goes forth armed with arcane knowledge and a

³⁶Lovecraft, "Nietzscheism and Realism", To Quebec and the Stars, p. 82.

secret powder; in other words, he turns the monster's weapons against him, shades of crosses and holy water. There is only one other Lovecraft story in which closure appears this complete, and that is "The Strange Case of Charles Dexter Ward". Evil is destroyed, harmony and natural order are restored, and man can breathe easily secure in his illusions.

The tale takes on an added dimension, however, when hero status is given to the twins. Burleson goes to great lengths to compare the Whateley twins with the eight stages of the hero monomyth.³⁷ The twins are the products of a miraculous conception, sired by what the Whateleys consider a god. They must conceal the form of their divinity, Wilbur in clothes and his brother in the boarded-up farmhouse. Wilbur is initiated in a ceremony on the top of Sentinel Hill, the place of his conception. One does not know if the brother is initiated, but one can assume it is. Wilbur develops at an inhuman rate, and by implication so does his twin, as suggested by the increasingly larger buildings which are remodelled. The 'other' twin spends his hidden childhood withdrawn and in meditation, while Wilbur studies with his Grandfather. Wilbur leaves the farm on a quest for the Necronomicon, not only is the quest beset with difficulties but also directly leads to his death. Ironically he is killed by a dog, a species Lovecraft did not particularly like. So much for the messianic vision in Lovecraft³⁸ - a dog has saved the

³⁷Burleson, p. 146-148.

³⁸Burleson, p. 148

world, because the 'other' twin is incapable of performing his mission without Wilbur, as both twins are required to open the gate. The 'other' twin is forced to go on a quest, ostensibly for food but also for help from his divine father. This invisible creature descends into the underworld symbolized by its descent into Cold Spring Glen. The resurrection and rebirth elements of the monomyth present a problem unless the twins are considered as separate parts of the same entity. Then, because of Wilbur's death, the 'other' twin is reborn from the womb of the farmhouse and ascends Sentinel Hill from where it returns to the father.

When the twins are seen as the messianic heroes of another reality, the tale becomes almost a parody of all heroes, and good and evil become a question of perspective. From mankind's point-of-view, the twins are evil, but from Yog-Sothoth's view point Armitage is evil. St. Armand states that Lovecraft was brutalized by his displacement in an inhuman world and became somewhat inhuman himself, "so that he generates a strange kind of perverse sympathy for the outsider, the alien, the creature seized by transforming forces above and beyond his own control".³⁹ This perverse sympathy is not evident in all Lovecraft's tales, but is evident in "The Terrible Old Man" where the reader feels sorry for the three thieves who misread the situation; in "The Rats in the Walls" where one can understand Delapoer eating Norrrys; in "The Colour Out of Space" where one can

³⁹St. Armand, p. 86.

sympathize with the small bit of colour rising feebly from the well, too late or too small to go home; and in "The Dunwich Horror" when the futility of the 'other' twin's quest is perceived. Armitage requires no sympathy because he represents commonly-held reality, but more importantly because he wins and loses nothing in the process.

Following the death of Old Whateley, the twins are alone in a hostile world. Their mother is of no assistance because she is completely inconsequential except as a vessel. Wilbur engenders little sympathy because he is arrogantly self-assured in the illusion of his power. He shows contempt for mankind rather than horror or terror, thus he underestimates the power of happenstance. He dies with a whimper; the result of an accident, his pistol did not fire because of a dented cartridge. It is the 'other' twin which engenders sympathy because it is alone in an alien world. Although huge and destructive, it is actually powerless in any sense other than local, it can initiate no action; all this twin can do is to react. It cannot accomplish its mission because Wilbur is dead. There is no way it can survive in this world and it cannot get back to the other dimension; there is no one to open the gate. Roaming back and forth from Cold Spring Glen to Sentinel Hill in a state of helplessness, it appears to be terrified, moving like a trapped animal. It dies with a bang calling out in "stark, utter, ultimate frenzy... FATHER? FATHER!". Lovecraft could have added "Why have you forsaken me?" to further identify this as a parody of the

crucifixion,⁴⁰ but Lovecraft can be quite subtle. The suggestion is enough. At its death, the creature's terror is visible, its voice comes from "black wells of Acherontic fear or feeling", suggesting it has enough awareness to fear death and feel pain. As it dies and disintegrates the earth reacts to its pain in much the same way the earth reacted to another crucifixion. A "great tidal wave of viewless force and indescribable stench" followed a single bolt of lightning and swept down from the hill and the "trees, grass, and underbrush were whipped into fury; and the frightened crowd at the mountain's base...were almost hurled off their feet. Dogs howled from the distance, green grass and foliage wilted to a curious, sickly yellow-grey, and over field and forest were scattered the bodies of dead whippoorwills". It dies alone surrounded by enemies.

To anthropomorphize the 'other' twin is in direct contradiction to Lovecraft's ideal that the monsters should be so alien they defy anthropomorphizing, but the twins in this tale are in a small part human. Lovecraft implied that the twins in this tale are of a different quality than the creatures in his other works when he suggested that "a magnificently powerful story" could be written "from the angle of Wilbur Whateley's utterly non-human brother".⁴¹ Although the archetypal hero pattern is implicit, it is highly possible that Lovecraft determined the elements of the hero monomyth

⁴⁰Burleson, p. 145.

⁴¹Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. V, p. 259.

from his reading and consciously applied these elements to the twin brother, thus creating a superficially "good guys versus bad guys" horror story for the "zippy morons who read Weird Tales".⁴² At the same time, it seems, he created yet another tale in which good and evil are shown to be expediencies, rather than cosmic absolutes.

There is the assumption at the end of the tale that the horror is gone; the earth is safe. But, the long passage quoted from the Necronomicon implies that all is not ended:

Nor is it to be thought that man is either the oldest or the last of earth's masters or that the common bulk of life and substance walks alone. The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be. Not in the spaces we know, but between them, They walk serene and primal, undimensioned and to us unseen. Yog-Sothoth knows the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the key and guardian of the gate. Past, present, future, all are one in Yog-Sothoth. He knows where the Old Ones broke through of old, and where They shall break through again....By Their smell can men sometimes know Them near, but Their semblance can no man know, saving only in the features of those They have begotten on mankind;... Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where man rules now. After summer is winter, and after winter is summer. They wait patient and potent, for here shall They reign again.(p. 174-175)

This parody of the Bible is the most substantial quote from that eldritch tome, The Necronomicon, in any Lovecraft work. Leiber insists the passage "suggests interpenetrating universes and makes us think with a shiver about the immense amount of empty space"

⁴²Burleson, p. 148.

in even the solidest substance",⁴³ raising the question as to what else can move through these spaces. If Wilbur's Twin Brother is "bigger'n a barn" with "dozens o'legs like hogsheads" and "ten or twenty maouths or trunks...big as stove-pipes" and resembles his father, one wonders about the size of the rest of Yog-Sothoth's species which can slip through these inter-molecular spaces. There is the terror of what else exists in the cosmos, the horror of their disregard for human beings, and the terror that they are ever-ready to renew their assault on earth; They shall return. Armitage may have sent Wilbur and his brother back to nothingness, but this is only one battle. The Old Ones shall win the war. The finality of the dissolution of the twins suggests that the time was not right. Had the correct cosmic cycle come around again, all the magical powder and incantations in the cosmos would have been as whispers in a storm and just as effective.

⁴³Leiber, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 145.

SIX

The Alienated Universe: "The Shadow Out of Time"

"The Shadow Out of Time",¹ written between November 1934 and March 1935, is Lovecraft's penultimate work. The storyline had been in Lovecraft's common-place book ("a repository of gruesome and fantastick thoughts"²) since 1930 when he mentioned the idea to Clark Ashton Smith:

to have a modern man discover, among the documents exhumed from some prehistoric buried city, a mouldering papyrus of parchment, written in English & in his own handwriting, which tells a strange tale & awakes - a general haze of amazement, horror, & half-incredulity - a faint, far-off sense of familiarity which becomes more and more beckoning & challenging as the strings of semi-memory continue to vibrate.³

Lovecraft described the tale as a "straight phenomenon story close to the borders of science fiction" - an experiment in which Lovecraft casts "about for better ways to crystallise and capture certain strong impressions (involving the elements of time, the unkown, cause

¹H.P. Lovecraft, "The Shadow Out of Time", The Dunwich Horror and Others, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1963), p. 370.

²Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 106.

³Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 217.

and effect, fear, scenic and architectural beauty, and other seemingly ill-assorted things) which persist in clamouring for expression".⁴ Even though he destroyed three drafts before completion, Lovecraft was still not completely satisfied, "I am so uncertain about its merit that I may destroy it".⁵ It was not destroyed however, and Donald Wandrei sold the tale to Astounding Stories immediately following the magazine's purchase of At the Mountains of Madness. This combined sale brought Lovecraft the largest cheque he had ever received for his literary work.⁶ Unlike the latter, "The Shadow Out of Time" was not blasted by the readers but, on the other hand, it was not particularly popular. Even so, it was included in the first hardcover science fiction anthology, The Portable Novels of Science, along with the works of Wells, Taine, and Stapledon.⁷

Although not all critics consider "The Shadow Out of Time" among Lovecraft's best, all critics agree it is a successful work. Even Edmund Wilson, usually a hostile critic, concedes that "'The Shadow Out of Time' deals not altogether ineffectively with the perspectives of geological aeons and the idea of controlling time-sequences".⁸ Burleson states that the unforgettable ending,

⁴Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. V, p. 199.

⁵Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. V, p. 120.

⁶de Camp, A Biography, p. 397.

⁷Schweitzer, p. 49.

⁸Wilson, Four Decades of Criticism, P. 9.

the richness of imagination in the tale's conception, the admirably metaphorical and stylistically well-related narration combine to create a finely wrought work of fiction.⁹ Peter Penzoldt argues that although "The Shadow Out of Time" is 'reminiscent of Wells' The Time Machine, Machen's tales, and contains many Poe-esque scenes, the story as a whole is infinitely more poignant and convincing than either Wells's or Machen's work with one of the most perfect climaxes in the history of weird fiction.¹⁰ Schweitzer writes that even though the tale harkens back to At the Mountains of Madness, it is something more than just a vestigial storyline or tour of wonders. The cosmic history presented is a great strength providing the reader with the feeling of vast stretches of what surely must be one of the great visions of science fiction.¹¹ Joshi writes that along with "The Whisperer in Darkness", and At the Mountains of Madness, the tale uses many techniques and mechanics of plot that can be classified as those of science fiction and establishes Lovecraft's importance in the development of the field.¹² Shreffler agrees that along with At the Mountains of Madness, "The Shadow Out of Time" moves from the realm of the fantastic into the realm of science fiction, "because these creatures are all extraterrestrial aliens

⁹Burleson, p. 203.

¹⁰Peter Penzoldt, "From Supernatural in Fiction", Four Decades of Criticism, p. 65-66.

¹¹Schweitzer, p. 48.

¹²Joshi, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 9.

that came to earth in prehistoric times, establish cities, and set up religions from which all of man's modern religions and myth systems proceed".¹³ Leiber collates "The Shadow Out of Time" and At the Mountains of Madness to discover an imagined history of the earth, not unlike Robert Heinlein's "future history" but set in the past, tending more in the direction of the creativity of Olaf Stapledon.¹⁴ And all critics agree that at the core of this tale are all the pseudomythological elements that make up the Lovecraft Mythos: various alien entities, cults, places and books.

The tale was written during the years of Lovecraft's depression following Wright's rejection of At the Mountains of Madness. The success of "The Shadow Out of Time" is centred in the poignancy of Peaslee's confusion between dreams and external reality, and the pathos of his final alienation. It is almost as if Lovecraft is mirroring his own feelings of confusion and alienation which were "clamouring for expression". I have chosen to conclude with this tale because "The Shadow Out of Time" appears to epitomize Lovecraft's terror/horror/terror pattern of narrative movement, his cosmic view, and brings the position of Lovecraft's alienated protagonist into sharp focus.

¹³Shreffler, p. 160.

¹⁴Leiber, Four Decades of Criticism, p. 148. Lovecraft was a great admirer of Stapledon and remarked of Last and First Men, "a volume which to my mind forms the greatest of all achievements in the field of "scientifiction". Its scope is dizzying...has the true basic quality of a myth, and some of the episodes are of matchless poignancy and dramatic intensity." (Selected Letters, Vol. V, p. 375.).

The tale unfolds the life of Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee from 1908 until 1935. Narrated in the first person, "The Shadow Out of Time" describes one man's search for truth. In 1908 Peaslee, an economics professor at Miskatonic University, suddenly collapses during a class, and when he awakes, sixteen hours later, his family is frightened by his expression and language. His body responds awkwardly and his limbs require re-education. His speech is also awkward and his diction has a "curiously stilted quality, as if I had learned English from books". Although all memory of his life was absent, he could remember things from the far-distant past and appeared to have knowledge of the future. In 1913 he appears to suddenly wake up, "Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee had come back - a spirit in whose time scale it was still Thursday morning in 1908," and he could recall nothing of the past five years.

His reabsorption into "normal" life is difficult. Not only has he lost five years, but "vague dreams and queer ideas" continually haunt him. His conception of time is disturbed in that he finds he has difficulty distinguishing between consecutiveness and simultaneousness, almost as if he were living in the present while at the same time living in both the past and the future. During World War One his dreams increase in "vividness and concreteness", disturbing his waking life, which forces him to give up his work in economics. Growing also was the idea that he had lived somewhere else, somewhere alien. Turning to psychology, history, and anthropology, he looks for answers to explain his strange dreams. In

the process he finds enough similar cases of amnesia to fuel further research, but, the social sciences also prove inadequate. Hence, Peaslee turns to folklore where he finds embedded in myth, the rationalization he requires to maintain his sanity:

Cases of amnesia no doubt created the general myth pattern - but afterward the fanciful accretions of the myths must have reacted on amnesia sufferers and colored their pseudomemories. I myself had read and heard all the early tales during my memory lapse - my quest had amply proved that. Was it not natural, then, for my subsequent dreams and emotional impressions to become colored and molded by what my memory subtly held over from my secondary state? (p. 385.)

Fortified with this rationalization, Peaslee begins extensive work in the field of psychology. The dreams continue in greater and more disturbing detail, but his studies have given him a defense "in the form of rational psychological explanations".

In 1934 Peaslee receives photographs and a letter from Australia which shatters his rational world. The pictures are tangible proof that the blocks containing hieroglyphs that haunt his dreams are concrete and actually situated there on the desert sands in Australia's Outback. He and a team from Miskatonic University immediately set forth to explore these ruins (One of the team members is William Dryer from At the Mountains of Madness. Why he would wish to experience another adventure with creatures from earth's prehistory one can only speculate.). On arrival at the site, Peaslee experiences a "persistent and perplexing illusion of memory" which causes a sleeplessness that drives him to long, lone walks in the

desert. On one such walk his dreams take on the actual tone of memory. He finds an opening between the rocks and descends into the blackness below. From this point his actions are motivated only by memory as if he were following a programmed path. He traverses familiar hallways littered with debris, until he finds the locked metal shelves of his dreams and opens the lock to find the book he had dreamed of writing.

On his way back to the "waking" world he has an encounter with a member of the species which the Great Race had sealed underground. A wind and a "frightful alien whistling" drive him in a state of panic toward the opening. He attempts to leap a chasm and is "instantly engulfed in a pandemoniac vortex of loathsome sound and utter, materially tangible blackness". He does not remember how he returns to what he "had once known as the objective, waking world", but somehow he finds himself on the Australian desert in a "blaze of sardonic moonlight".

Peaslee has lost not only his flashlight, and the book written in English in his own handwriting, that he has pried out of its place amidst the dust of a million centuries, but he realizes that the "demon" wind has covered the area leaving only "the sterile, undulant sand of the desert" - leaving him alone with new uncertainties. What and where was the truth? Had he collapsed in the desert and had a nightmare, or had the experience been a "terrible, soul-shattering actuality"?

If the thing did happen, then man must be prepared

to accept notions of the cosmos, and of his own place in the seething vortex whose merest mention is paralyzing. (p. 370.)

Although "The Shadow Out of Time" presents the foundation of the 'Lovecraft Mythos', the primary theme is Lovecraft's cosmic vision in which every creature has a little time to play in the sun before "the blind universe dispassionately pulverises us again into the primordial nothingness from whence it moulded us for a second sport".¹⁵ In this tale, Lovecraft introduces creatures which have found a means to extend their time in the sun. The Great Race developed a method whereby they could effectively detach their minds from their bodies.¹⁶ This extreme example of the mind/body split did not have the purpose of producing a creature which does not require a physical form, a creature of pure energy (such as the Rakasha in Roger Zelazny's Lord of Light),¹⁷ but had the far more practical purpose of escaping the inevitable destruction built into the cosmos. As Peaslee's dreams reveal and his research into myth affirms, the Great Race avoided being ground in the cosmic mill by exchanging minds with creatures farther and farther into the future. They came to earth from a dying planet. Their minds had been sent en masse across interstellar space to creatures best adapted to hold

¹⁵Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 209.

¹⁶This species is called the Great Race because it alone had conquered time.

¹⁷Roger Zelazny, Lord of Light, (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 31.

them, "the cone-shaped beings that peopled our earth a billion years ago". When their existence on earth is threatened, they send their minds into the "mighty beetle civilization" which follows man. Then as the earth cools, they again migrate, through time and space, into the bodies of "bulbous vegetable entities of Mercury". Hence, their existence as a species (individuals have a life-span of only four or five thousand years) appears effectively immortal; but is it? Mind-exchange into the future is possible and relatively easy for the Great Race; however, movement into the past is far more difficult and not often practised. The word 'past' becomes a semantic problem, because Lovecraft never explains what or whose past, but I assume what Lovecraft means is the past of the species. For example, once the Great Race has left the cone-shaped bodies for the beetles it appears they cannot return to the cones; they must move ever forward, thus, the concept of time has not really been disrupted. The inevitable cosmic cycles will not be denied. The Great Race avoids destruction for the 'moment', but eventually there must come a time when there are no compatible forms to inhabit; at that point, they, also, will die as a species.

The Great Race is representative of all of Lovecraft's 'other' creatures. They are primarily concerned with the survival of their species. On their mass migrations the minds of the species whose bodies they wish to inhabit are sent backward, left "to die in the horror of strange shapes" and suffer the annihilation meant for the Great Race. The implication is that intellectual might makes right.

The survival of the Great Race is of more value and importance than the survival of any other species, and in Lovecraft's cosmic vision of relative moral values, survival of the species is the only ethical and moral consideration.

Although I use the word species which often implies a specific biology, I am using the word to denote entities which share similar mental characteristics rather than similar bodies. In Darwinian terms, evolution is usually concerned with the progressive adaptability of the biological entity. In Lovecraftian terms, evolution (at least in the case of the Great Race) is concerned with mental adaptability, because he has effectively separated mind and body. The Great Race has not evolved beyond the need of physical form, but it has evolved beyond the need for a specific physical form, which suggests that in order to maintain a stable society, every individual of the Great Race must have a similar mental nature. The Great Race avoids the possibility of mental, social, and civil stagnation by choosing "from every era and life form such thought, arts, and processes as might suit its own nature and situation". It follows from Lovecraft's belief that since reason is the prime medium through which man communicates with the external world, he could envisage a race with minds that retain their integrity in spite of the physical form they inhabit. In this text what Lovecraft appears to be saying is that the mind is the predominate organ and has the ability to adopt and adapt to any supportive form without essential change.

The mind-transfer theme has mythic implications beyond Lovecraft's Mythos. In essence Lovecraft suggests that Christ, Buddha and Mohammed, were all victims of this mind-exchange because, "from the accomplishments of this race arose all legends of prophets, including those in human mythology". But Lovecraft goes further when he states that "from cases of the permanent projection of elder minds arose many of those lasting changes of personality noticed in later history", an interesting idea that appears, reversed, in the work of Olaf Stapledon. Is Lovecraft suggesting that perhaps Moses was also a victim of mind-exchange? References to Lovecraft's own mythos take place during Peaslee's attempt to recapture his lost five years. The "secondary" personality travelled widely to all the places which appear in Lovecraft's other works and which are catalogued in At the Mountains of Madness: he visits the Himalayas where the Mi-Gô, the half-fungous, half-crustacean creatures which now haunt the Vermont Hills (see "The Whisperer in Darkness"), first landed and gave birth to the abominable Snowman legends; also, the Arctic where debased Eskimos practise repulsive rites to Cthulhu, dancing as the aurora leaps high over the ice cliffs (see "The Call of Cthulhu"); he takes a camel journey into the unknown deserts of Arabia, probably to visit "The Nameless City"; and spends weeks alone in the vast limestone cavern system of western Virginia, perhaps to visit Yog-Sothoth which manifests its presence by sounds coming deep from within the earth (see "The Dunwich Horror"). The "secondary" Peaslee studies all the eldritch literature available and makes marginal notes and

corrections. These tomes are not all the invention of Lovecraft, but he started the collection with the Necronomicon¹⁸ which first appeared as a couplet in "The Nameless City" (1921), "That is not dead which can eternal lie,/And with strange aeons death may die."¹⁹ August Derleth contributed Comte d'Erlette's Cultes des Goules and Von Junzt's Unaussprechliche Kulden. Robert Block added Ludwig Primm's De Vermis Mysteriis. While the "surviving fragments" of the Book of Eibon was contributed by Clark Ashton Smith. The "Phakatic Manuscripts", which is not mentioned in "The Shadow Out of Time", was Lovecraft's invention and represents the work of the Elder Ones which preceded the human race on this planet. The other volumes were written by humans who had experienced the pre-human races through dreams and cults.

¹⁸Lovecraft was prevailed upon to write a history of the Necronomicon, which appeared in The Rebel Press in 1938, but he never wrote a complete book because, "I fear it would be quite a job in view of the very diverse passages and intimations which I have in the course of time attributed to it!" (Selected Letters, Vol. IV, p. 39-40). Even though Lovecraft never wrote a complete Necronomicon, at least five other people have and advertisements for the book periodically appear in various catalogues. Perhaps one of the most convincing aspects of Lovecraft's work are these fictive volumes. In this respect he anticipates the post-moderns who imagine literature as literature and not some kind of pseudo-life. Lovecraft's tomes document traditions which are only understandable within his literature and have no life outside it. It is just as well that Lovecraft never wrote a Necronomicon; the book has more impact as fiction than it ever would have had if it were a 'real' volume.

¹⁹Lovecraft, "The Nameless City", Dagon and Other Macabre Tales, (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1965), p. 99.

The society of the Great Race, which unfolds as Peaslee records his dreams, appears to reflect Lovecraft's ideal society.²⁰ Lovecraft, as he grew older, began to alter his political views; he confessed himself a follower of Norman Thomas and a New Dealer. In a 1936 letter Lovecraft writes:

As I advance in years and reflect in a more and more impersonal way, I realize that socialism of some kind is essential to any genuine, profound, and humane civilisation. I do not think that Marxian communism is the right sort, since it involves as many fresh fallacies as remedies. But certainly competitive plutocracy must be dethroned somehow. The only decent government is one which keeps economic affairs within its control; assuring a livelihood to all, and preventing the waste and duplication of competitive effort. It ought to be administered by a small board of highly trained executives with centralised power, of the same race and background as those of the nation as a whole, and chosen (after psychological and educational tests necessary for candidacy) by the vote of such citizens as can pass a certain reasonable set of mental, scholastic, and cultural examinations.²¹

The political and economic system of the Great Race is a reflection of this quotation, a sort of fascistic socialism (p. 399) with major resources rationally distributed and power held by a small governing board "elected by the votes of all able to pass certain educational and psychological tests". These tests were Lovecraft's method for excluding the unwashed masses which he felt were incapable of

²⁰The text of "The Shadow Out of Time" was so badly butchered by the editors of Astounding Stories that Lovecraft never considered the work as published. This editing was so extensive that it is impossible to discover what Lovecraft really meant to say about the society of the Great Race. Unfortunately the manuscript is missing, but the one surviving fragment suggests that the mutilation may have altered the tale's focus and meaning (Burleson, p. 211n1).

²¹Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. V, p. 284.

appreciating the needs of civilization:

Government "by popular vote" means merely the nomination of doubtfully qualified men by doubtfully authorised and seldom competent cliques of professional politicians representing hidden interests, followed by a sardonic farce of emotional persuasion in which the orators with the glibbest tongues and flashiest catchwords hard on their side a numerical majority of blindly impressionable dolts and gulls who have for the most part no idea of what the whole circus is about.²²

The society of the Great Race is not established on the rights of the individual, but is based on the survival of the species, and reflects Lovecraft's belief that euthanasia should be practised so that society will not be weakened by the presence of defective individuals:

modern civilisation...has developed a sentimental protection of the weak which ensures the survival of the inferior as well as the superior; so that unless something equally artificial [as birth control] is done to counteract the tendency, we shall be overrun with the unlimited spawn of the biologically defective and incompetent.²³

The Great Race both dispqses of defective individuals and practises a form of birth control; reproduction is accomplished by seeds and spores and the Great Race controls the number of young. Industry is highly mechanized and does not require much time on the part of the individual. The sciences are unbelievably developed, but art is the most vital part of life, again reflecting Lovecraft's views on the

²²Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. IV, p. 107.

²³Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. II, p. 121.

relationship between art and civilization. Crime is almost non-existent and is dealt with through effective policing; punishment is always preceded by a careful study of the criminal's motivation. When read in conjunction with Lovecraft's letters, the description of the Great Race's society mirrors Lovecraft's later political views, and can be considered an incomplete political tract bound in a text of horror and terror, which tends to diffuse the political didacticism.

Into this ideal society Lovecraft introduces fear. Warfare is infrequent, yet, the Great Race keeps a vast supply of weapons ever at the ready. When the mass migration of the Great Race's minds transferred into the cone-shaped creatures, they found the earth was also inhabited by a race of "utterly alien beings" whose minds were of so different a texture that the Great Race could not exchange minds with them. But, with the aid of their weapons, the Great Race found it easy to subdue these beings and seal them in the basalt ruins of their cities where deep tunnels lead to caverns deep under the earth. These beings did not take their imprisonment easily; they sporadically irrupted and destroyed the small, remote cities of the Great Race and all the inhabitants. Although the Great Race eventually avoids destruction, at the hands of these creatures, by transferring their minds into the beetles, the Great Race's psychology was permanently shaded by its experience with these alien beings, and the "shadow of nameless fear hung about the sealed

trapdoors and dark, windowless elder towers".²⁴

Lovecraft establishes Peaslee as a solid, down-to-earth, no-nonsense economist who has never been touched by the witch-haunted miasma of Arkham. He has never shown any interest in the occult or the forbidden works held under lock and key in the Miskatonic Library. The progress of this man of prosaic reality to the dream-driven alienated man at the end of the tale is delineated through his movement from terror to horror to terror. The initial terror is personal, revolving around Peaslee's immediate perception. The terror of waking and finding one's self five years older with no recollection of those five years can only be imagined, and it is no wonder that Peaslee had difficulty readjusting to 'normal' life. (Rip Van Winkle had a similar difficulty, and a recent version of Sleeping Beauty, "Thorns" by Tanith Lee, explores a similar theme.) His attempts to discover the actions of these five years only increases his sense of dislocation, because the report of his actions seems so out of character. Although the dreams that haunt his sleep and disturb his waking hours initially cause horror, he eventually

²⁴Lovecraft appears to use the ruins of the Cyclopean City as a metaphor for, as Laurence Goldstein in his book Ruins and Empire suggests, the contemplation of human creativity under the aspect of death and the "ambivalent character of historical consciousness" which wishes to both build and destroy (p. 6-7). Lovecraft, like the Eighteenth Century and the following Romantics, found a certain "sublime" beauty in ruins. In speaking of New York, Lovecraft said, "...man is like a coral insect - designed to build, vast, beautiful, mineral things for the moon to delight in after he is dead." (Selected Letters, Vol. I, p. 177.)

becomes accustomed to them. Instead of attempting to dismiss these dreams, he attempts to track down and analyze his condition; this response of a rational man was "heartily endorsed as correct according to the best psychological principles" of the phenomenal world. Through his research, Peaslee develops a rationalization to provide him with a defense against the "sharp sense of pseudomemory" the dreams excite. Peaslee remains in a state of equilibrium until the photographs arrive from Australia; then, the "vague, creeping terror" explodes anew. On the Australian desert his rationalizations crumble as the dreams invade his consciousness. During that fatal night on the desert when he does not know whether he is awake or asleep, the narration shifts and focuses on Peaslee's reactions to his surroundings and experiences.

The shift in narrative from the detached first person to a stream-of-consciousness is signalled by verb tenses which move from the narrative past to the immediate past implying continuation. Adjectives become more frequent, and inanimate objects take on life and action through metonymy: the moon becomes evil and burning; the desert broods. Peaslee feels "something fumbling and rattling at the latch of my recollection, while another unknown force sought to keep the portal barred". The key to the latch of his memory is the apparent familiarity of this portion of desert, which is impossible because he had never been there in his waking life.

As the "pseudomemories" burst through the door of his recollection, the sand becomes frozen waves of the sea, the

sand-embedded megaliths become rooms with the Great Race moving at their tasks, while at the same time his mind is registering the objective world of the desert. The impression is that of a superimposed film with the dream overlaying the desert. He is both awake and dreaming. Several times a sudden vision snaps him 'awake' and the desert becomes clearly focused driving away the dream of "fabulous aeons".

As he descends into the building, the objective world ceases to exist and he is experiencing the dream only. As in Alice in Wonderland there is a perception of growing smaller and smaller in relation to the surroundings. He is driven onward by an unknown compulsion in which "physical sensation was dead and even fear remained as a wraith-like, inactive gargoyle leering impotently". Time seems to stop as he moves in apparent slow-motion toward his goal. When he reaches the metal shelves he ~~had been~~ seeking, and finds the book in his own hand-writing, reality crashes in on him. His reason can now concentrate on concrete evidence and he realizes in horror that he had not been dreaming. The mind-transfer had actually taken place. The myths of pre-human races existing on earth as recorded in the Necronomicon are not myths, but history.

Lovecraft felt he could not write 'eckshun' (action) in the conventional sense.²⁵ His hero never turns "on his intangible nemesis & stage[s] a wholesale slaughter in the Robert E. Howard

²⁵Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. IV, p. 11.

fashion", but runs from the quarry which he cannot see or identify.²⁶ On his return, with the book, Peaslee is pursued by a "frightful alien whistling" and a wind, "not merely a cool damp draft, but a violent, purposeful blast belching savagely and frigidly"; both are the signatures of the invisible entities the Great Race feared and imprisoned in the earth. Peaslee's terror becomes increasingly overwhelming as he hears whistling from both in front and behind him. As he tries to move forward, the wind acts like a "noose or lasso" holding him back, a nightmare of trying to run and being unable to move with the unseen monster close by. Peaslee maintains his sanity by repeating, over and over, the incantation: this is a dream "from which I must soon awake".

Sanity, however, departs when he leaps the chasm and terror overwhelms his entire being; reason is gone; the memory of the experience is reduced to "phantasmagoric delirium. Dreams, madness, and memory merged wildly together in a series of fantastic, fragmentary delusions which can have no relation to anything real". Although he survives, physically, the experience has not only isolated him from his world, but from any sense of reality either prosaic or the 'other'. He has been made aware that reality is illusion, and his loss of security leads to a despair and a state of permanent terror.

Peaslee's alienation is not sudden, but progressive. During

²⁶Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. IV, p. 10.

the five years of his amnesia his wife and children leave, never to return. (Only his second son Wingate returns following his father's return to normal.) Experience with the 'other' has caused his friends to avoid the "secondary" Peaslee because it "seemed to excite vague fears and aversions...of a black hidden horror connected with incalculable gulfs of some sort of distance". The five years effectively remove Peaslee from all that is normal and healthful.

The concept of something else co-existing in the same body is not new to horror tales. Tales of demonic possession are numerous. Even mind-exchange is not new to modern fantasy works, but Lovecraft adds a "rational" twist. The exchange is affected for the purpose of gathering information for its own sake. The Great Race is particularly careful with the minds of their captives and attempts to return the minds to their original bodies with as little damage as possible. But, because their outward shape has no bearing on their self-image, the Great Race tends to underestimate the shock the captive mind experiences when it discovers it is inhabiting a very alien form. Even after his return to human form, Peaslee's self-image is subtly altered, setting him apart from other men. The basis of his shock and the resultant horror is the invasion of privacy. The privacy of one's mind is considered by man to be inviolable, but the Great Race invades the privacy of Peaslee's mind, steals and uses his body; thus, Lovecraft is playing upon the horror of rape carried to a bizarre extreme.

On his return to normal in 1913, Peaslee finds himself

alienated from his profession. Not only is his knowledge dated, but his dreams so interfere with his work that he is forced to give up the practice of economics. His change of profession to psychology is initiated rationally; this field supposedly holds the answers to all mental uncertainties. Instead, however, all Peaslee finds are new uncertainties, which link his dreams to unfathomable cosmic forces. The rationalizations he formulates are of no use in the long run. The reality he experiences is beyond day-to-day existence, defies rationalization, and is too concrete to be denied. Thus, in the end, the rational avenue is also exposed as useless; he is alienated, now, from reason itself.

Peaslee's ultimate and complete alienation comes from his experience underground. Here the 'other' reality is shown to be concrete and not a dream. During the mind-exchange he has glimpsed vistas of knowledge concerning the cosmos which force him to relinquish the man-centred universe passed down from the Middle Ages. He meets minds from other times, other planets, and other universes. He discovers that man is the least important creature and that his history rests on the lowest level of the terrestrial vertebrates. Man as an intelligent civilized being is sandwiched between intelligent vegetables (the Cones) and intelligent insects (creatures which remind me of the Crabs in Wells' Time Machine). Peaslee also gains knowledge about man's future, "the fate of mankind produced such an effect on me that I will not set it down here" (p. 396), which in effect destroys his hope in man's potential. The

end of the world pictured in "The Shadow Out of Time" is also reminiscent of Wells' vision.

Peaslee has become more fragmented than "a typical post-Renaissance questing hero; he does not return whole, balanced and integrated; instead he returns with awful confirmation and despair",²⁷ Peaslee is almost too fragmented to despair, his experience has reinforced the uncertainties of man's existence on earth and has demonstrated just how very little man means to the universe. Peaslee is suspended between the horror of insanity and the terror of cosmic reality. He is alone, alienated and isolated with no hope in anything but "momentary" continuance.

Fundamental to Lovecraft's alienated protagonists is the terror/horror/terror pattern which confuses and may ultimately destroy reason. This movement rests on the premise that the freedom the Enlightenment promised has been distorted into avaricious individualism, and science and social knowledge have been implemented to extinguish that "ethereal quality of indefinite expansion, and mobility, and of a heightened perception which shall make all forms and combinations of beauty simultaneously" visible and realizable.²⁸ Through the process of contact with repulsive, but morally neutral, creatures, the protagonist is forced to re-evaluate phenomenal reality and the possibility of knowing about it. The

²⁷Burleson, p. 201-202.

²⁸Lovecraft, Selected Letters, Vol. III, p. 243.

tales demonstrate that pedestrian reality is devoid of any foundation other than commonly-held illusion, and that cosmic reality is too vast, impersonal, and indifferent to engender a sense of rootedness; thus, the protagonist is completely alone, without any means of authentication, without dreams, and without beauty.

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