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H.P. Lovecraft and Peering Beyond the Bounds of Infinity

Introduction

Weird Fiction emerges from the shadows of literary tradition, twisting the familiar into the unexpected, drawing readers into worlds where dread and wonder clash. China Miéville captures its essence in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, describing it as "usually, roughly, conceived of as a rather breathless and generically slippery macabre fiction, a dark fantastic ('horror' plus 'fantasy') often featuring nontraditional alien monsters (thus plus 'science fiction')" (Miéville 510). To clarify, it pertains to the genre of literature that accentuates the peculiar, the nonsensical, and the unrecognizable. Howard Philips Lovecraft's contributions to the literary world are noteworthy as he was a pioneer in the creation of the "Weird Fiction" genre. His works are renowned for their unique characteristics that have become synonymous with the genre in contemporary times. Miéville draws focus toward the differentiation between the conventional Gothic narrative and the "Weird" narrative. He says, "[t]he awe that Weird Fiction attempts to invoke is a function of lack of recognition, rather than any uncanny resurgence, guilt-function, the return of a repressed. It is thus as much a break from as an heir to traditional Gothic" (Miéville 512). A recurrent motif in Lovecraft's literature is the realization of the characters' minuscule stature in the immense scale of the universe, thereby instigating a state of frenzied madness.

Ann and Jeff VanderMeer elaborate in their compendium *The Weird* that the principle that guides "Weird Fiction" is that of sensation:

> Because The Weird often exists in the interstices, because it can occupy different territories simultaneously, an impulse exists among the more rigid taxonomists to find The Weird suspect, to argue it should not, cannot be, separated out from other traditions. Because The Weird is as much a sensation as it is a mode of writing, the most keenly attuned amongst us will say 'I know it when I see it,' by which they mean 'I know it when I feel it' – and this, too, the more rigorous of categorizing taxidermists will take to mean The Weird does not exist when, in fact, this is one of the more compelling arguments for its existence. (VanderMeer and VanderMeer 19)

The aforementioned experience is quite intriguing in that it capitalizes on the naivety and obscurity of its subjects, ultimately instilling within those who witness it a frightening sensation akin to inhabiting a realm where the force of gravity may be abruptly suspended. The essence of "Weird" literature resides in the examination of the unfamiliar, the charting of that which defies description, and the encounter of mankind with something so dreadfully incredible that it surpasses their boundaries and leaves them in a state of apprehensive uncertainty.

The present research aims to investigate the extent of human vulnerability in the face of immensely potent and unfathomable creatures within the following texts: "The Unnamable", *The Shadow Over Innsmouth, At the Mountain of Madness,* and *The Call of Cthulhu*. The paper proposes that Lovecraft's subversion of the sublime encounter results in the entrapment of human inferiority in infinity, thereby confining its subjects within the boundaries of their corporeal existence, unlike Immanuel Kant's and Edmund Burke's conceptualization of the sublime, where its subjects are prompted to acknowledge their own limitations, thereby paving the way for the attainment of human magnificence.

The Terror in the Sublime

Lovecraft's mythos emphasizes an overpowering feeling of cosmic naturalism, where mankind is insignificant compared to incomprehensible powers: in this situation, the sublime transitions from a natural to a cosmic dimension. Lovecraft's characters, akin to those in Naturalist fiction, grapple with uncontrollable and incomprehensible forces. Richard Lehan characterizes this conflict in Naturalism as a "romantic dilemma", when characters are enticed by an elusive ideal yet constrained by tangible circumstances (Lehan 229). In Lovecraft's texts, this conflict transitions from the natural to the supernatural; nonetheless, the fundamental tension persists—the characters are impotent against immense, indifferent powers. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, the protagonists contend with the unfathomable supernatural, facing the ancient Shoggoths and the enigmas of an extraterrestrial city. In "The Unnamable," the omnipresent sense of dread and gloom, coupled with the supposed presence of an unidentified being, engulfs the characters as they navigate a decaying graveyard. *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* intensifies this fear as the protagonist discovers his cursed ancestry linked to the terrifying Deep Ones. *The Call of Cthulhu* exemplifies cosmic fear, as the titular deity exposes humanity's triviality against an ancient, unfathomable force. Lovecraft's inversion of the sublime reflects Lehan's concept of romanticism, wherein humanity is displaced from the center of existence. His protagonists confront not only natural forces but also cosmic and supernatural ones, underscoring their powerlessness within the vast expanse of the

universe. The sensation of cosmic dread, exclusive to Lovecraft texts here, extends Naturalism's emphasis on humanity's impotence to a supernatural dimension, rendering individuals ensnared in an inescapable and uncontrollable reality.

Given that Lovecraft's work aligns with the American Gothic, it is essential to comprehend how this genre integrates aspects of Gothic literature with uniquely American motifs and locales. American Gothic, typically situated in ominous and cryptic settings, explores psychological horror and mental strife, often confronting societal concerns such as enslavement and racial prejudice. In this sense, the unfamiliar typically denotes the apprehension towards 'otherness'—be it racial, cultural, or societal. Paranormal components signify underlying concerns like the dread of racial amalgamation, the perceived threat of marginalized groups to existing social hierarchies, and the guilt and unresolved pain stemming from America's legacy of slavery. These supernatural phenomena signify not just a fear of the unknown but also a fear of addressing the repressed history of oppression and the resulting destabilization of identity.

A key component of American Gothic literature is the frontier, which serves as a space where themes of solitude, fear, and the unfamiliar are explored. The frontier forces characters to confront both physical boundaries, such as remote and desolate landscapes, and psychological boundaries, including the limits of human understanding and morality. In the context of Lovecraft's works, the term 'frontier' refers not only to the physical edges

of human exploration but also the metaphysical boundaries between the known world and the incomprehensible cosmic forces that lie beyond.

The concept of the frontier has historically been essential in crafting the narrative of American development and identity. Initially envisioned as a boundary between inhabited, agricultural territories and the expansive wilderness of North America, the frontier served as both a tangible and metaphorical space. It proved essential to the colonial endeavors of European settlers, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, as they aimed to advance westward across the continent. The westward expansion escalated during the 19th century, culminating in the belief in Manifest Destiny—the conviction that the United States' expansion over North America was both legitimate and inevitable, sanctioned by divine providence. The frontier was perceived as a place of possibility, presenting the prospect of land, resources, and fresh starts for people. Nonetheless, it also bore considerable ideological and cultural ramifications. The frontier represented a fundamental antithesis between civilization and wilderness, or "savagery," with settlers portraying themselves as catalysts of progress and order. This narrative, entrenched in the colonial mentality, depicted the wilderness and its Indigenous populations as impediments to be overcome or subdued in the quest for national expansion and economic advancement. The displacement of Native American communities and the subsequent violent confrontations were frequently rationalized through the concept of a civilizing mission, portraying Indigenous peoples as the "other" that required control or eradication.

The frontier symbolized both the tangible limit of American growth and the psychological and cultural confines of human comprehension. It was a location where the familiar intersected with the unfamiliar, where interactions with alien terrains and cultures elicited significant concerns on identity, ethics, and the boundaries of human understanding. This perception of the unfamiliar frequently emerged in American Gothic literature, wherein the frontier served as a backdrop for narratives of isolation, terror, and the disintegration of social standards. Paranormal elements in these stories often symbolize underlying worries regarding the volatility of American identity and the ethical ramifications of expansion.

Kevin Corstorphine argues that the wilderness' and the frontier's original connotation was as a place where wild animals roamed, but it now denotes the untamed and otherwise untouched territory: "The 'wild things' of American Gothic have always been found in terms of a journey that is seemingly outward facing but ends up in the realm of the individual psyche" (121). This transformation reflects a shift from a physical to a psychological wilderness, highlighting the internal struggles and fears of the individual. He further states: "This raises an important distinction from the start, so that the condition of being wild subverts human reason and logic" (121). Here, Corstorphine emphasizes the idea that encountering the wilderness challenges the protagonist's sense of order and rationality, pushing them into a realm where traditional logic no longer applies.

"Bewilderment" serves as a central motif in American Gothic, encapsulating the characters' deep uncertainty and disorientation when faced with incomprehensible forces. This sentiment is intricately linked to the naturalist model, a literary method that underscores the impact of environment, heredity, and social circumstances on how people behave. In naturalism, people frequently find themselves powerless against the formidable forces of nature or fate, illustrating a deterministic perspective. In American Gothic, this feeling of powerlessness is intensified by the eerie and uncanny aspects of the supernatural, when characters confront not just the uncontrollable forces of nature but also the unknown and frightening. Bewilderment embodies the psychological and existential struggle characterizing both naturalist and Gothic settings. Corstorphine elaborates on this by stating: "If the story of the expanding frontier articulates a simple dichotomy of civilization against the wilderness, then the end of the frontier marks a more subtle Gothicism, marked by the haunting presence of the past" (Corstorphine 125). This implies that while the physical boundary of the wilderness is nearing its end, the psychological and historical elements of the wilderness become more prominent, resulting in a Gothic ambiance that is filled with the lingering vestiges of the past. The main characters in Lovecraft's texts frequently come upon entities from an ancient era, highlighting the enduring presence of historical and ancestral anxieties in the current consciousness. Corstorphine's research indicates that these encounters encompass both physical creatures and the persistent, spectral remnants of historical tragedies and unresolved conflicts. This adds complexity to the American Gothic story, compelling people

to face not only tangible dangers but also the emotional and existential burdens of inherited anxieties and unsolved recollections.

Acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the concept of the sublime, as defined by eminent philosophers such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, is essential. This is particularly relevant in light of the fact that these philosophers advocated a more humanistic approach to the sublime, predating the literary works of Lovecraft. It is noteworthy that in this study, both interpretations of the sublime shall be employed. Moreover, the main emphasis will be on fear and unknown factors, which are crucial elements of the sublime that shall be utilized in the analysis at hand. Burke claims that "[t]o make anything very terrible obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" (Burke 101). Burke underscores the significance of obscurity in amplifying anxiety, contending that when danger is ambiguous or unfamiliar, it becomes increasingly daunting. This corresponds with an anthropocentric perspective, wherein the human subject is central to the experience, and dread is heightened by our incapacity to completely grasp what exists beyond our control. The anthropocentric approach Burke mentions is further described by Corstorphine who mentions that it is rooted in humanity's need to be the center of the world:

> Proponents of deep ecology view environmentalism as inherently flawed in its goal of preserving the natural world as the 'environment' of humanity, necessary yet secondary to our subjectivity. Rather, deep ecology calls for a

> rejection of anthropocentrism and 'demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature'. (Corstorphine 127)

Burke and Corstorphine examine the influence of human-centered viewpoints on our comprehension of fear and the natural environment. Corstorphine opposes this anthropocentric perspective by emphasizing the limitations of human-centered reasoning. He cites deep ecology, which advocates for the dismissal of the notion that environment serves solely as a backdrop for human activities. Deep ecology asserts that nature must be acknowledged for its inherent value, irrespective of human perspective or perception. Collectively, these concepts indicate that both fear and our interaction with the environment are influenced by the limits of human comprehension, with Burke emphasizing how ambiguity increases fear and Corstorphine advocating for an ecocentric viewpoint that transcends anthropocentrism.

Burke defines the fear encountered in the sublime as dread, in the sense that "[t]error is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime" (Burke 99). In order to reach the sublime, one must encounter a force of great magnitude, such that the experience is marked with intense discomfort. Burke maintains that the notion of power necessitates a superior quality in the entity, object, or ambiance in question, "pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior" (112). Furthermore, he posits that any entity possessing the capacity to carry out agony is inherently equipped to actualize such a capability, rendering it all the more petrifying, as per his assertion "that the idea of pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of

pleasure; and that it preserves the same superiority through all the subordinate gradations" (Burke 111). According to Burke, "[n]o passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear" and fear is one of the primary effects of the sublime (98). Burke maintains that the sublime is something that "anticipates our thinking" and "hurries us on by an irresistible force" rather than just a concept we reflect on after the event (Burke 98). The concept of the sublime in Lovecraft's literature serves as a catalyst, eliciting a profound sensation that allows humanity to experience the intense surge of emotion that Burke effectively emphasizes. Bradley A. Will expounds upon this notion, arguing that the advent of an entity that generates such a sentiment is the trigger for the sublime to manifest: "[t]his cosmic outsideness takes the form of objects and entities which intrude on the mundane world delineated by human understanding, disrupting and violating the natural laws through which Lovecraft's characters and readers have come to know their world" (Bradley 8). When examining the concept of the sublime in relation to Lovecraft's literature, one must acknowledge a particular state marked by the cessation of rational cognition, which arises from the transgression and encroachment of the sublime upon the human psyche.

Furthermore, the style of writing that Lovecraft uses often mirrors the themes of cosmic indifference through a detached and objective tone, emphasizing the insignificance of human concerns in the vast, uncaring universe. This narrative style frequently employs meticulous and clinical descriptions, creating a sense of distance between the reader and

the emotional experiences of the characters. The use of the passive voice and a focus on external events over internal emotions further reinforces the theme of indifference. Additionally, the inclusion of archaic and complex language can evoke a sense of timelessness and alienation, enhancing the feeling that human struggles are trivial in the grand scheme of existence. Through this stylistic approach, the writing itself becomes a vehicle for conveying the overwhelming and impersonal forces of nature and the cosmos, underscoring the futility of human endeavors against the backdrop of an indifferent universe.

On the other hand, Kant's notion of the sublime is imbued with Enlightenment humanism: "It is the state of mind produced by a certain representation with which the reflective Judgement is occupied, and not the Object, that is to be called sublime" (47). Kant further elaborates on the interaction between the subject and the object in encounters with the sublime. He argues that to fully experience the impact of the sublime, we must possess a sense of the sublime, and to truly appreciate beauty, we must have a sense of beauty. He explains that minds attuned to the sublime are drawn into profound emotions, such as friendship, contempt for worldly matters, and thoughts of eternity, particularly during serene moments like a calm summer evening with stars twinkling through the night sky and the moon rising. In contrast, the bright daytime inspires activity and joy. Kant concludes that the sublime moves us deeply, while the beautiful enchants us (Observations 16). The state of sublimity, by its very nature, necessitates a subject to

apprehend it. In the absence of the human element that perceives this awe-inspiring phenomenon, there can be no corresponding object, and consequently, no sublimity. Despite the centrality of the human subject, its inherent powerlessness renders it a marginal entity. Kant's 'sublime' objects are used to provide the subject with the "courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature" (Kant 58). Consequently, the presence of a subject is a prerequisite for the apprehension of the sublime object. In Lovecraft's texts, the characters function primarily as bearers of fear, rather than fulfilling any other discernible purpose. The characters in Lovecraft's literary works seem designed to highlight the inherent fragility of the human condition. Lovecraft emphasizes his protagonists' linguistic incapacity to coherently comprehend and articulate their experiences or encounters. The protagonist struggles to fully convey their experience, leaving the reader similarly challenged in understanding the complexities of Lovecraft's mythology. The purpose of Lovecraft's peculiarly constructed names for divinities, as well as those of antiquated cities and magic, is to eschew familiarity by rendering them unpronounceable and unintelligible. The reader is directly engaged by a narrator who has since departed from this world, succumbed to madness, or perhaps even both, often presented in the form of an epistolary composition.

Such awareness of materiality is what Lovecraft's sublime inverts. The Kantian sublime, which acknowledges the inherent fragility of the human form, is subject to further examination. Kant's concept of the sublime allows individuals to confront their own

limitations, fostering a deeper understanding of their place in the world. This confrontation with the vast and overwhelming forces of nature leads to a heightened sense of self-awareness, which Kant argues is a step toward achieving moral and intellectual 'excellence'—a state where individuals transcend their physical limitations and engage with higher principles such as reason, autonomy, and moral duty. Kant notes: "The feeling inspired by morality (without profit) is beautiful or sublime; my joy at the perfected in myself (feeling of self-esteem, of one's own worth) is noble; my joy at satisfaction (feeling of goodwill) is beautiful" (265). This underscores the connection between the sublime and personal development through moral feelings. Furthermore, Kant states:

> Thus true virtue can only be grafted upon principles, and it will become the more sublime and noble the more general they are. These principles are not speculative rules, but the consciousness of a feeling that lives in every human breast and that extends much further than to the special grounds of sympathy and complaisance. (24)

This emphasizes that the pursuit of the sublime is deeply rooted in broad, universal moral principles, which elevate the individual's capacity for achieving excellence.

On the contrary, Lovecraft's notion of the sublime engenders a state of suspended human inferiority, perpetually trapped in the infinite expanse of the universe, thereby constraining individuals within the confines of their material nature. The subject's experience of the sublime is intensified by their inability to discern the object, resulting in a state of heightened chaos, weakness, and defeat. On the other hand, the

anthropocentric foundation of Kant's philosophy is evident in his analogy of the sublime to a perfected manifestation of the human species.

Lovecraft elaborates on fear in the introduction to his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature” stating that it is the most ancient emotion experienced by humanity: “The oldest and strongest emotion of humankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror” 5). This association reveals that Lovecraft’s writing addresses a fear stemming from the acknowledgment that mankind, despite its moral frameworks and imagined significance, is inconsequential in the expansive cosmos. The core of cosmic horror surpasses mere representations of monsters and violence; it is fundamentally connected to the acknowledgment of humanity's intrinsic limitations. It is the focus of Lovecraft’s literature to switch from the inherent centrality of humanity to that of the cosmos. Lovecraft's deliberate subversion of the focus of his stories’ plots are evident in his focus on the monsters or the grotesque as the central object of the narrative, rather than the subject experiencing them. Miéville expounds upon the concept of an “anti-narrative,” demonstrating its intricacies: “His stories are often little more than excuses for descriptions of Weird presences, and what narrative ‘revelations’ there are predictable. His is a surrender to the ineluctability of the Weird, again implying no eruption of strangeness into a status quo, but a Weird universe” (Miéville 512). This concept is closely related to the philosophical underpinnings of Lovecraft’s cosmic horror. The impact of destruction of the dread in Lovecraft’s cosmic

horror lies in its ability to fundamentally change the reader's perception of monsters, shifting them from figures of sheer monstrosity to beings of inscrutability.

The Infinitely Horrifying

This acknowledgment of the limits of human understanding powerfully illustrates our inherent limitations and inferiority. Vivian Ralickas advances the notion of this dread: "In Lovecraft, the subject suffers from a violation of its sense of self, but it is graced with no consolatory understanding of the human condition to mollify its fragmented psyche" (Ralickas 365). In this context, the concept of the sublime as a tool for shaping subjectivity is inverted; instead of fostering greater comprehension, it intensifies the darkness and terror of the subject's experience. Ralickas observes that Lovecraft's characters endure a disruption of their identity, devoid of any reassuring revelations about the human condition to mitigate their fragmented psyches. In the following, examples from "The Unnameable," *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, *At the Mountain of Madness* will be used to clarify how the sublime exists in each of these texts and its role in them.

The Unnamable:

"The Unnamable" (UnName) follows two friends, Randolph Carter and Joel Manton, as they discuss the nature of supernatural horror in an old cemetery. Manton is skeptical of Carter's belief in unnamable, indescribable entities that exist beyond human understanding. Their discussion takes a terrifying turn when they encounter a monstrous,

indescribable entity, proving Carter's theories correct and leaving them both traumatized by the encounter. The following excerpt illustrates the previous point:

> After the doctors and nurses had left, I whispered an awe-struck question: "Good God, Manton, but what was it? Those scars—was it like that?" And I was too dazed to exult when he whispered back a thing I had half expected—"No—it wasn't that way at all. It was everywhere—a gelatin—a slime yet it had shapes, a thousand shapes of horror beyond all memory. There were eyes—and a blemish. It was the pit—the maelstrom—the ultimate abomination. Carter, it was the unnamable!" (Lovecraft, "UnName" 181)

In the above passage, Manton attempts to construct an understanding for both him and the reader. He acts as a stabilizing force amidst uncertainty, leading the reader to reflect on and investigate how they might understand such a mysterious entity. This language in this passage enhances introspection through an 'anti-narrative' technique that diverges from traditional storytelling strategies. Conventional tales often adhere to a linear framework, highlighting a progression of events, character evolution, and definitive conclusions. This text subverts conventional rules by emphasizing introspection and the investigation of the unknown, encouraging readers to connect with the characters' psychological intricacies instead of a linear narrative. By emphasizing the characters' internal thoughts and emotions, the narrative generates a disjointed and confused experience that mirrors the ambiguity of their existence. This method facilitates an in-depth exploration of existential concepts, prompting readers to reflect on the complexities of human experience rather than following a conventional narrative. This anti-narrative technique enhances reader involvement while emphasizing the deep detachment and

horror intrinsic to Lovecraft's universe, where comprehension is elusive and meaning frequently obscured by mystery.

Moreover, Ralickas states: “The purpose of cosmic horror is to communicate an effect” (Ralickas 367). Consequently, the narrative undergoes a shift in emphasis from the characters to the horror, encompassing the sensations of fear and apprehension. Lovecraft stated that “[a] certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present” (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror” 7). His creations aim to eradicate the anthropocentric bias of mankind, as evidenced by his narratives wherein the planet Earth is of no consequence to the stories’ creatures, who exhibit a complete lack of interest or concern towards it. The deities, primordial deities, and ancient entities exhibit a marked apathy towards the human condition and display scant regard for their corporeal manifestation. Ralickas also attests to this notion, mentioning that “Lovecraft's fiction consequently denies our planet a place of importance in the universe and revokes the human privilege of having been the first species of higher intelligence to populate it” (Ralickas 367). As such, the aforementioned displacing contributes further to the terror that Lovecraft’s works and style embodies.

In “The Unnamable,” one would struggle to formulate an image of the horror that Manton experienced. Words are used to explain its recognizable forms like “gelatin, slime, eyes” and it has a “thousand shapes of horror beyond all memory” (181). The deliberate act of morphing between various forms confounds any attempts to rationalize the nature

of this entity. The subject matter transcends tangibility and comprehension, precluding the possibility of understanding and transforming it from a corporeal entity into an abstract notion: the unnamable. James Goho, an important figure in Lovecraft studies, highlights that 'The Unnamable' specifically attempts to resolve the problem of naming and knowing what is outside of normal experience. But as language is the tool we are trapped in, it illuminates the indeterminacy in using it to represent things or spaces of an undetermined nature (Goho 10).

The Call of Cthulhu:

In Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*, the plot follows Francis Wayland Thurston, who investigates a series of mysterious and terrifying events linked to the ancient cosmic entity Cthulhu. Through various accounts like that of his great uncle George Agnell, Thurston learns about the existence of a cult worshipping Cthulhu and the awakening of this monstrous being from its slumber beneath the sea. The story culminates in the realization that Cthulhu's influence extends far beyond human understanding, leaving Thurston with a profound sense of dread about humanity's insignificance in the cosmos. The notion of being insignificant, surrounded by darkness and uncertainty is established in the beginning of the story:

> The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated

> knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (Lovecraft, *CoC* 238)

The preceding passage contributes significantly to the representation of uncharted territories. Lovecraft has effectively conveyed the notion that the shapes and entities that lie ahead are nearly inscrutable, therefore instilling a sense of anticipation that ultimately culminates in a successful evocation of the desired emotional response. Furthermore, Lovecraft employs an 'anti-narrative' technique to ensure that the monsters retain their intended abstract nature, devoid of full formation and realization. Lovecraft's monsters persist in their ability to evade comprehension from both the readership and the characters depicted therein, regarding their essence and distinctiveness.

The notion of trying to represent shapes, however, has not been completely hidden in Lovecraft's works. For example, in *The Call of Cthulhu* (CoC), the narrator attempts to depict Cthulhu itself:

> If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful. Behind the figure was a vague suggestion of a Cyclopean architectural background. (Lovecraft, *CoC* 239)

The initial representation of the "being" occurs in the introductory chapters, prior to the protagonist's actual interaction with the creature. This depiction is inadequate, as it mainly reuses well-known imagery from other horror and fantasy works. The depiction—merging

aspects of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature—exhibits a deficiency in originality and profundity, yielding a clichéd portrayal instead of one that elicits authentic terror. While the vivid depiction of a pulpy, tentacled head and monstrous body is compelling, it fails to transcend conventional representations of monsters, resulting in a need for a more original or nuanced examination of the thing. However, as the narrative progresses and the main character is confronted with the unfathomable, "Cthulhu", a descent into madness ensues, transforming him from a mere observer to a distorted participant. As T.S. Miller comments on this, "[h]is status as an uninvolved observer can no longer protect him from the cosmic horror that consumes him" (Miller 126). The inclusion of Cthulhu in the narrative serves to blend the cosmic and the proximate, a feat that Lovecraft accomplishes with great clarity by portraying Cthulhu as an otherworldly entity that is both incomprehensible and yet possesses anthropomorphic traits. The protagonist's harrowing confrontation with the cognizance of Cthulhu elicits corporeal distress: "I now felt gnawing at my vitals that dark terror which will never leave me till I, too, am at rest" (Lovecraft, *CoC* 252). The internal bodily horror connects with the external cosmic horror on an unimaginable scale, and as Miller puts it, "[i]n making a humanoid entity like Cthulhu the focal point of the narrator's visceral terror, not only has Lovecraft recentered in the human body the cosmic horror he had removed from it, but, in doing the latter, he has given a body, a face, and arms" (Miller 127). The transference of horror is observed to oscillate between the physical and the cosmic, thereby demonstrating the profound impact of cosmic dread on the human body. This serves to illustrate the perverse nature

of the unknown, which relentlessly "gnaws" at the body of the individual who ventures too close, ultimately leading to their affliction.

At The Mountain of Madness:

In *At the Mountains of Madness* (MoM), the narrator, Dr. William Dyer, recounts the story of his journey to Antarctica, where he and a student named Danforth, accompanied by other members, explored a dead city tucked away amid the tallest mountains in the world. Lovecraft begins an invocation of the sublime in the description of the mountain: “Thought of this titanic mountain rampart 700 miles away inflamed our deepest sense of adventure” (516) and in the radio transmission: “You can’t imagine anything like this. The highest peaks must go over 35,000 feet. Everest out of the running” (Lovecraft, *MoM* 516). The magnitude of the mountains is a crucial factor to contemplate due to their imposing, daunting, and somewhat menacing stature. The profound enormity of the mountains' overwhelming impact is exemplified by the frequent recurrence of the phrase “mountains of madness” throughout the text. The phrase highlighting the overwhelming impact of the mountains' sheer enormity. Lovecraft uses this to suggest that encountering such a colossal and otherworldly force could leave one's mind fractured and unsettled

Dr. Dyer’s expedition involves exploring the unknown and navigating an uncharted frontier. The text exhibits the anxieties that arise from venturing into uncharted territories, as evidenced by the explorers' unsettling discovery of an ancient metropolis erected by extraterrestrial beings predating the emergence of mankind. Here the text immediately

suspends human knowledge by making them find something beyond their understanding. Moreover, Lovecraft does this with the description of Shoggoth: "They were normally shapeless entities composed of a viscous jelly which looked like an agglutination of bubbles; and each averaged about fifteen feet in diameter when a sphere" (Lovecraft, *MoM* 548). It is simpler for something to adhere to a logical, theoretical understanding if it has a clear shape or appearance. The entity known as the 'Shoggoth' appears to defy the conventional principles of creation as perceived by these individuals, thereby endowing the creature with an aura of the sublime. The attempt to understand the vastness of what they encountered fails, as Dyer explains:

> Our exact motive in looking back again was perhaps no more than the immemorial instinct of the pursued to gauge the nature and course of its pursuer; or perhaps it was an automatic attempt to answer a subconscious question raised by one of our senses. In the midst of our flight, with all our faculties centred on the problem of escape, we were in no condition to observe and analyze details; yet even so our latent brain-cells must have wondered at the message brought them by our nostrils. (Lovecraft, *MoM* 567)

Through the previous quote, it becomes more obvious how the sublime is being achieved and experienced. As the protagonists escape, their impulse to look behind them exposes an intense desire to understand their pursuer. The protagonists are ensnared between the instinctual desire to comprehend their assailant and the dread that immobilizes their logical reasoning. This tension—between fear and curiosity—captures the spirit of the sublime, compelling both characters and readers to confront the boundaries of human comprehension in the presence of unfathomable terror. This scene exemplifies how the

cosmic backdrop of Lovecraft's novella creates a suspension of rational thought in the presence of terror, facilitating the emergence of the sublime through their encounter with the unknown. The sublime experience emerges from this tension, where the immensity and incomprehensibility of the cosmos elicit both horror and wonder, therefore underscoring the fragility of human comprehension.

Furthermore, it is the intense emotional tension Lovecraft evokes—particularly the interplay between fear and curiosity—that heightens the sense of dread inherent in the sublime. This emotional dynamic aligns with Burke's observations on the relationship between pain and fear, illustrating how Lovecraft's portrayal of the unknown stirs both terror and fascination.

From hence I conclude that pain and fear act upon the same parts of the body, and in the same manner, though somewhat differing in degree; that pain and fear consist in an unnatural tension of the nerves; that this is sometimes accompanied with an unnatural strength, which sometimes suddenly changes into an extraordinary weakness; that these effects often come on alternately, and are sometimes mixed with each other. (Burke 231)

Burke's viewpoint underscores that Lovecraft's depiction of the sublime, in this case the encounter with the Shogotths, elicits a significant emotional and physiological reaction in the reader. The intense emotions provoked by the cosmic unknown provide a comparable tension, merging terror and awe while intensifying the sensation of dread as readers face the boundaries of their comprehension within Lovecraft's cosmos.

The many assertions made by Dyer that he is unable to accurately express the horrifying things he has witnessed are helpful in providing context for Danforth's descent into madness. Language is one of the ways in which humans might attempt to make sense of the world around them. Because Dyer does not have the language skills to describe or even recount happenings that are so far apart from the typical human experience, the events themselves must unavoidably continue to achieve the highest sense of dreading the unknown and unexplored. Such failure to comprehend the horror drove Danforth mad: "I have said that Danforth refused to tell me what final horror made him scream out so insanely—a horror which, I feel sadly sure, is mainly responsible for his present breakdown" (Lovecraft, *MoM* 570).

The Shadow Over Innsmouth:

Lovecraft elaborated on the literary work of Arthur Machen, specifically citing *The Great God Pan* as a precursor of cosmic horror. He described the story as one that "[t]ells of a singular and terrible experiment and its consequences [….] She is a daughter of hideous Pan himself, and at the last is put to death amidst horrible transmutations of form involving changes of sex and a descent to the most primal manifestations of the life-principle" (Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror" 63). One could interpret Lovecraft's perspective as a manifestation of his fears regarding the blending of his own cultural identity with those he viewed as foreign, reflecting his anxieties about miscegenation and the potential repercussions of venturing into uncharted territories. This is echoed in his admiration for

Machen's *The Great God Pan*, where the narrative explores the horrifying consequences of a singular, unnatural experiment, ultimately reflecting the dread of encountering the unknown and the primal forces that lie beyond human comprehension. Lovecraft's preoccupation with the permeability of the boundaries separating various planes of existence led him to develop a deep-seated fear regarding the consequences of the closeness and intermingling of humans with entities of he considered to be of a non-human nature, as his well-documented racism shows. Within *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (SoInn), a young man (Olmstead), who is left unnamed, travels to the decaying town of Innsmouth, discovering its disturbing secret. The townspeople have made a pact with underwater creatures called the Deep Ones, resulting in interbreeding and the transformation of residents into these hybrid beings. As Olmstead uncovers his own connection to Innsmouth, he realizes he too will transform, leaving him with a chilling sense of his inescapable fate.

The narrative explores the concepts of hybridity and miscegenation, which have the potential to sustain asymmetries of authority and cultural stratifications. The use of these themes may function as a mechanism for cultural domination, leading to the dispersion of the human inhabitants of Innsmouth due to their compelled crossbreeding and matrimonial alliances with the Deep Ones. The apprehension towards the potential annihilation of racial purity is evident in the physical characteristics of those who were compelled to interbreed with the Deep Ones:

> They were mostly shiny and slippery, but the ridges of their backs were scaly. Their forms vaguely suggested the anthropoid, while their heads were the heads of fish, with prodigious bulging eyes that never closed. At the sides of their necks were palpitating gills, and their long paws were webbed. They hopped irregularly, sometimes on two legs and sometimes on four. I was somehow glad that they had no more than four limbs. Their croaking, baying voices, clearly used for articulate speech, held all the dark shades of expression which their staring faces lacked. (Lovecraft, *SoInn* 606-607)

The depictions in question emphasize the anomalous and unappealing traits of the denizens of Innsmouth, including their disproportionate anatomies, interdigital membranes, and swollen, pale skin. Lovecraft employs descriptive language and vivid imagery to amplify the unique corporeal characteristics of these beings. Furthermore, his deliberate choice of the ocean as their source of origin is significant, as the ocean embodies a sublime encounter with the enduring fear of obscurity. The extensive uncharted terrain provides a blank slate on which to depict plausibly dreadful circumstances, making it an ideal setting for such narratives.

This deliberate use of the unknown not only amplifies the horror but also reflects Lovecraft's themes of existential insignificance and the fragility of human comprehension in the face of the vast, indifferent universe. Moreover, it harbors esoteric wisdom that could potentially deconstruct their inflated sense of significance. The subject at hand concerns the deterioration of one's mental faculties, as opposed to the act of physical self-harm. However, in the case of the inhabitants of Innsmouth, there is an additional aspect of physical metamorphosis and transformation. The town is situated near the ocean, making it a community on the edge of uncharted territory. This proximity to the ocean, an

embodiment of the sublime and the unknown, amplifies the horror as the residents undergo physical changes, symbolizing the blending of human and cosmic forces. The residents' bodily transformations signify a dissolution of distinct boundaries, leading readers to examine the fundamental principles of human comprehension. In this context, Lovecraft projects his racial anxieties onto existential difficulties, demonstrating how, in his view, the amalgamation of cultures and identities undermines the coherence of human reason and exposes its vulnerability in the presence of the cosmic sublime.

The narrator's fears regarding his ancestral lineage and subsequent identity formation are demonstrated by the conspicuous absence of his name in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. Anna Klein supports this point, noting that the narrator's lack of identity, especially in a story about genealogy, reflects his state of mind: "His identity is in a state of denial from the beginning" (Klein 186). This is evident in his recounting of the tales as a "layman": "For my contact with this affair has been closer than that of any other layman" (Lovecraft, *SoInn* 572). Despite his awareness of his non-professional status, he identifies himself as a member of the Innsmouth community. The narrator appears to be experiencing a state of disorientation within a liminal space. This space is marked by a sense of discomfort, as the boundaries between the individual and the collective, as well as the interior and exterior, are ambiguous and unstable. This mental state is characterized by indeterminacy, where meaning is in a constant state of flux and the conventional becomes unfamiliar. This is evidenced by his response to his own dual persona.: "And I

have carried away impressions which are yet to drive me to drastic measures" (Lovecraft, SoInn 572). Revealing his name would entail the verification of his persona, thereby leading to a precarious predicament, as it involves the acknowledgement of his ancestral ties to Innsmouth, given that he is of hybrid Deep One lineage, which he is attempting to disavow because it would lead to the destruction of his entire self, physically and mentally.

Conclusion

The pursuit of navigating the unknown and the accompanying fear in *At the Mountains of Madness* can only result in lunacy, just as even the smallest piece of information about the unexplored broke Danforth's psyche, made Manton go insane in "The Unnamable", ruined the unnamed narrator in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* mentally and physically, and resulted in the death of Professor Angell in *The Call of Cthulhu*. The concept of the sublime serves as a perpetual reminder of the inherent fragility of the human condition. Given that human knowledge of the cosmos and the natural world is inherently restricted, human dominion over these forces will inevitably encounter some degree of negation and opposition. It is the mortal limit of comprehending the endless that initially renders the sublime feasible as evidenced by Burke: "In reality, a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort of an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever" (Burke 102). The inability to fully comprehend the sublime is what drives its dread and achieves its effect on the characters.

The Lovecraftian sublime is that of pure terror. According to Ralickas, the "subject's imagination [participating] in the rising movement of the occurrence in issue" achieves Burke's definition of the sublime and acts as a "life-affirming notion of the absolute" (364). This perspective presupposes an engagement with the sublime that is advantageous, in which any "subjective crisis would be resolved through an affirmative move towards culture, reason, an organized world, and a unified, autonomous sense of self" (386). That same "subjective dilemma" cannot be addressed in Lovecraft's atheistic, deterministic, materialistic, and apathetic cosmological reality if it is restricted to a "[u]niverse [that] erodes culture, subverts reason, glorifies chaos, and destroys the integrity of the human subject" (386). Ralickas' reasoning makes it appear incorrect to use the word sublime in its humanist connotation in regard to Lovecraft's works. However, Ralickas agrees that "cosmic horror" comes from "the same source as the sublime, nonetheless" (Ralickas 367). This phenomenon results from a complex interplay of awe, fear, intrigue, and magnificence. Nonetheless, Lovecraft's interpretation of the sublime adopts a counter-humanistic perspective, subverting the hopeful aspects generally linked to the sublime as defined by Burke and Kant.

The manifestation of madness serves as a compelling testament to the vast and formidable influence of the universe. Even a mere fraction of the cosmos possesses the capacity to pose a grave threat to the human psyche in its entirety. It is apparent that within Lovecraft's realm, the faculty of logic is incapable of withstanding the overwhelming

deluge of existential terror. This state can be deemed as a manifestation of the sublime, as is evident from the state of being immobilized. Understanding the concept of the Lovecraftian sublime is crucial as it contextualizes Lovecraft's oeuvre within the broader debate on the sublime, which typically includes awe, beauty, and the boundaries of human comprehension. Through the examination of the Lovecraftian sublime, readers can more effectively comprehend how Lovecraft subverts these motifs, converting sensations of wonder into dread and underscoring humanity's insignificance in the presence of the cosmic unknown. This understanding enhances our analysis of his narratives and underscores the philosophical ramifications of experiencing the sublime, especially concerning dread, identity, and the vulnerability of human reason. The Lovecraftian sublime has the capacity to displace, disable, and estrange the human psyche. The aforementioned negations offer alternative perspectives of self-perception that are comparatively less self-centered than the conventional human-centered outlook.

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