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***Subjectivity and Cosmic
Ambiguity in H.P. Lovecraft's
"The Nameless City"***



INTRODUCTION

"That is not dead which can eternal lie, and with strange aeons, even death may die."

-*The Necronimicon*, H.P. Lovecraft

In 1971, Monty Python produced the sketch "The Funniest Joke in the World" as part of the television show *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. The sketch is centered around a joke of such tremendous hilarity that everybody who reads or hears it immediately succumbs to laughter-induced death. Ernest Scribbler, a British joke manufacturer portrayed by Michael Palin, writes a joke on a sheet of paper and then dies from uncontrollable laughter. Upon reading it, Eric Idle's mother succumbs to immediate laughter, followed by the first officers present at the incident. Ultimately, the humor is harnessed, transformed into a weapon, and utilized against Germany during World War II. To an extent, that joke becomes something that is 'ineffable' which can serve as a potent instrument in art, as the absence of a precise explanation can result in a more profound and individualized connection with the audience. Because of this, the ineffable can transcend straightforward explication and can only be apprehended by delineating its influence or the absence it creates in comprehension. This concept is exemplified in works of H.P. Lovecraft's, specifically "The Nameless City." The short story, written in January 1921 and initially published in the November 1921 edition of *The Wolverine*, captures the essence of the ineffable, much like Monty Python's sketch, by leaving much to the imagination and evoking a sense of the unknown.





The plot of the story is set in the arid regions of the Middle East. Enthusiasts of Lovecraft's works have proposed Yemen as a possible setting, but the atmosphere and setup of the narrative seem to align more closely with a reference to Egypt's ancient context. Lovecraft states "[t]his great-grandmother of the eldest pyramid; and a viewless aura repelled me and bade me retreat from antique and sinister secrets that no man should see, and no man else had ever dared to see" (Lovecraft, "The Nameless City", 92) The story's nameless protagonist journeys through the desert in pursuit of a location that is incredibly old, to the extent that its name has been lost to history and is not even mentioned in mythology. Upon noticing a resounding clang emanating from the depths of the earth, the narrator proceeds to examine enigmatic engravings and remnants until the arrival of darkness. On the following day, the narrator comes upon a cliff that is filled with buildings that have low ceilings and are unsuitable for human habitation. As the narrator responds to his anxious camel, he stumbles onto a comparatively larger temple adorned with altars, painted murals, and a little staircase leading downwards. Upon his descent, his torch extinguishes, and he proceeds by crawling on all fours until he reaches a corridor adorned with diminutive wooden coffins housing peculiar reptiles, which are arranged along the walls.

The narrator observes a substantial influx of illumination emanating from an unidentified origin. Upon crawling to it in a bent state, this person observes a huge brass door leading to a downward passage into a hazy gateway. Subsequently, he perceives audible wailing emanating from the coffin passage, accompanied by a forceful gust of wind that exerts a downward pressure on him. Despite the unfavorable





circumstances, he manages to resist and observes the presence of reptiles that possess a body like a combination of a crocodile and a seal: "To convey any idea of these monstrosities is impossible." (Lovecraft, "The Nameless City," 95) These beings he sees have a peculiar head that does not resemble any of the species he knows of as this species is characterized by a prominent forehead, horns, the absence of a nose, and a jaw like that of an alligator. These creatures are seen crawling behind the illuminated gateway. The wind subsides as the last gusts gradually diminish, until finally the door abruptly shuts behind the narrator, plunging him into darkness where he will forever stay.

Lovecraft writes in the introduction to his seminal work "Supernatural Horror in Literature" that "[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." (Lovecraft, "Supernatural in Horror," 5) Lovecraft's recognition of the unknown as the most powerful origin of fear is especially captivating. It is consistent with ideas concerning the dread of uncertainty and the unknown, which propose that people experience profound unease in situations where the absence of predictability jeopardizes their feeling of control and security. Lovecraft's focus on the unknown as a cause of fear has significant ramifications for the examination of aesthetics in horror literature. It implies that the success of horror relies on its capacity to manipulate the boundaries of human understanding and perception, to generate a feeling of intense fear that is both old and inherent to human nature. Building on this, Graham Harman offers a philosophical framework to explore how Lovecraft's literature expresses this tension between





human perception and the inaccessibility of reality. Harman explains that “[n]o reality can be immediately translated into representations of any sort. Reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it [...] When it comes to grasping reality, illusion and innuendo are the best we can do” (Harman 46). This insight reinforces the idea that Lovecraft’s horror does not just depict the unknown—it emphasizes the *inability* to fully represent it. By presenting the limits of language and perception, Lovecraft forces readers to confront the fact that much of reality remains elusive, further heightening the horror. This concept has been thoroughly examined and elaborated on by several researchers and critics like Noel Carroll who writes in *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, despite our awareness that these monsters do not exist

Our responses are supposed to converge (but not exactly duplicate) those of the characters; like the characters we assess the monster as a horrifying sort of being (though unlike the characters, we do not believe in its existence). This mirroring-effect, moreover, is a key feature of the horror genre. (16)

Horror becomes both captivating and repellent in Lovecraft’s works. The experience of dread is deeply personal, influenced by an individual’s psychological state, history, and existential outlook. The fears that one individual harbors, whether it is darkness, the expanse of space, or the depths of the ocean, might serve as a subject of intrigue for someone else. Carroll further elaborates “[t]hreat is compounded with revulsion, nausea, and disgust. And this corresponds as well with the tendency in horror novels and stories to describe monsters in terms of and to associate them with filth, decay, deterioration, slime and so on.” (Carroll, 22) This variation in responses to the unknown highlights the complexity of human emotions and the subjective nature of fear.





Lovecraft masterfully leverages this, as seen in "The Nameless City," where the protagonist's shifting psychological states reflect the interplay between subjective reality and objective truth. Through such an analysis, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Lovecraft's narrative techniques and their impact on readers' interpretations of cosmic horror.

THE ANCIENT ABYSS

Sean Elliot Martin writes in "Lovecraft, Absurdity, and the Modernist Grotesque" on Absurdity in Lovecraftian literature. He defines that that lies at the very center of Lovecraft's universe. "Absurdity is consistently defined in terms of that which is counter to reason, a definition that takes on new significance when applied to modernist grotesque literature." (Martin, 83) The exploration of subjective reality and psychological states in "The Nameless City" aligns with Martin's recognition of absurdity in Lovecraft's literature. The absurdity in Lovecraft's plots, especially in stories such as "The Nameless City," frequently revolves around the protagonist's mental disintegration when they confront the unfathomable or the grotesquely nonsensical. This strategy not only confronts the protagonist's perception of what is real, but also immerses the reader in an intensely personal encounter with dread. The personal encounter happens when the narrator sees the hybrid nature of the beings who lived in the ancient city, "[w]ith body lines suggesting sometimes the crocodile, sometimes the seal, but more often nothing of which either the naturalist or the paleontologist ever heard." (Lovecraft, "The Nameless City," 95) Lovecraft's description in this instance evokes an existential dread that arises from the incapacity





to incorporate the experience into any established scientific or rational structure. The creatures epitomize a manifestation of hideous absurdity, underscoring the notion that reality may encompass elements that surpass human understanding. The hybrid nature of these beings connects with Carroll's idea of horror monsters: "Within the context of the horror narrative, the monsters are identified as impure and unclean. They are putrid or moldering things, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh" (Carroll, 23) Harman also adds to this notion posited by Carroll:

What we are left with at the end of this process is not the adumbrations, which are merely accidental qualities of sensual objects. Instead, what we end up with are the truly pivotal qualities of the thing. But these qualities are not themselves sensual, since no specific appearance of the flag at any moment can ever fully live up to them. (Harman, 30)

Harman's, Carroll's, and Lovecraft's descriptions of the monsters all aim to question the limits of human comprehension and perception. Lovecraft's creatures possess not just physical repulsiveness but also cognitive dissonance, as they defy established biological and evolutionary paradigms. Carroll's portrayal of monsters as manifestations of decay and depravity highlights their opposition to human norms and sensibilities, intensifying the narrative's exploration of the mysterious and incomprehensible through the usage of partial descriptions.

Furthermore, this encounter has an enormous effect on the narrator's psychological state, which corresponds to the investigation of subjective experiences and psychological reactions to the unknown. The narrator's terror and destabilized view of reality are attributed to his inability to comprehend or analyze what he observes, a recurring topic in Lovecraft's literature. The destabilization of human





centrality within the plot is connected to the inherent flaw in the human subjective experience because it removes the understanding of the norm and the objective 'truth' per human perspective and instead presents another truth that is incomprehensible to humanity. Such destabilization is reflected in the narrator's reaction to the constant changes in the gusts of wind: "My fear again waned low, since a natural phenomenon tends to dispel broodings over the unknown." (Lovecraft, "The Nameless City," 98), but then again, his conclusions and perceptions are blown away by the sudden intense wind:

I think I screamed frantically near the last—I was almost mad—but if I did so my cries were lost in the hell-born babel of the howling wind-wraiths. I tried to crawl against the murderous invisible torrent, but I could not even hold my own as I was pushed slowly and inexorably toward the unknown world. (Lovecraft, "The Nameless City," 98)

The "howling wind-wraiths" and "hell-born babel" attribute malicious and supernatural characteristics to the natural forces. The portrayal of the environment as an adversary characterized by terror and deterioration aligns effectively with Carroll's concept of horror elements as "impure and unclean," highlighting the horror genre's utilization of location and ambience to elicit fear. Lovecraft uses first-person narration to enhance the sense of immediacy and intensity of the event. This strategy enables readers to directly experience the narrator's fear and confusion, so intensifying the emotional effect of the story. Martin highlights this disruption of human subjectivity "In effect, all human beliefs are based upon nothing more than shared delusions. Therefore, blind adherence to these constructs (religious, academic, scientific) considering the principle of subjectivity that undermines them is counter to logic. It is absurd." (Martin, 84) The detailed portrayal of battling against an imperceptible entity





brilliantly exploits the apprehension of the unmanageable and the invisible, crucial components in evoking tension and dread in horror literature.

The linguistic play in the title of the story "Nameless City" on the ineffability of the name itself that cannot be expressed by the English language is a masterful technique because it creates a linguistic black hole that is unexplainable, but seen through how its surrounding environment reacts to it, and in this case, reactions of the reader and the narrator. Such a technique can be understood as a method of description but rather of 'circumscription.' The word, according to the Cambridge dictionary means "the act of limiting something." Lovecraft used circumscription not only to delineate the boundaries of his characters' knowledge but also to provoke the reader's comprehension mirrors a key feature of what Harman describes as Lovecraft's 'Weird Realism.' Harman suggests that "This is the stylistic world of H.P. Lovecraft, a world in which (1) real objects are locked in impossible tension with the crippled descriptive powers of language, and (2) visible objects display unbearable seismic torsion with their own qualities." (Harman, 27) Harman highlights this 'impossible tension' that arises when real objects, such as Lovecraft's mysterious city, resist being fully captured by language, further heightening the narrative's sense of cosmic ambiguity.

The technique entails delineating something through negation or by elucidating its impact on the environment and characters, rather than employing direct description. This enables Lovecraft to construct a strong feeling of discomfort and inquisitiveness. The reader is compelled to actively immerse themselves in the story, striving to



complete the gaps intentionally left by the narrative. Donald R. Burluson comments on this technique, stating that “[i]t is as if one alluded to “that to which one may not, even here, allude or used ‘No-Name’ as a name.” (51) By focusing on the inexplicable, Lovecraft invites both the narrator and the reader to grapple with the unnamable forces at work in the narrative, creating an interactive and unsettling experience. The reader is further immersed in the narrative by engaging in the indescribable aspects, intensifying the intimate and profound feelings of fear and curiosity. It establishes an interactive relationship between the reader and the story, where the reader is not merely a passive recipient but an engaged participant in the quest to comprehend the unfamiliar.

James Goho, one of the most prominent Lovecraftian scholars, analyzes Lovecraft’s usage of linguistic devices to build up the dread and the ambiguity of his ‘unnamable’ or ‘unsayable.’ Goho characterizes Lovecraft’s ‘unsayable’ into four categories,

1. The use of stated silences to evoke the proximity of the unknown.
2. Apophasis, that is, defining things in terms of what they are not, rather than what they are. This is a traditional method of reaching beyond language into ineffability. It signals the inability of language to convey an experience.
3. The use of fragmented language, excessive language, or narrative discontinuity to allude to what cannot be directly represented.
4. The creation of neologisms to stand for that which is outside our current language capacity. (Goho, 117)

These four narrative and linguistic techniques are present within “The Nameless City.” The first one, stated silence, the narrator often pauses to reflect on what cannot be fully described or understood about the ruins and their carvings: “Rich,





vivid, and daringly fantastic designs and pictures formed a continuous scheme of mural painting whose lines and colors were beyond description” (Lovecraft, 95), and “The antiquity of the spot was unwholesome, and I longed to encounter some sign or device to prove that the city was indeed fashioned by mankind” (Lovecraft, 92). The second, Apophasis, can be observed by the narrator noting that the race which had lived in city is unlike any known creatures, emphasizing their non-conformity to familiar biological or evolutionary categories: “Mental associations are curious, and I shrank from the idea that except for the poor primitive man torn to pieces in the last painting, mine was the only human form amidst the many relics and symbols of primordial life” (Lovecraft, 97). The third, Narrative Discontinuity, is characterized by sudden changes in mood and environment These encompass abrupt shifts from providing historical background to experiencing intense emotional fear, “[t]he world I knew and faced by another world of eerie light and mist, could match the lethal dread I felt at the abysmal antiquity of the scene and its soul” (97). Lastly, Neologisms, which are newly coined terms by the author. The usage of the ‘nameless city’ is one because it itself acts as a neologism in the context of its usage, indicating a depth and variety of the unknown that is beyond normal articulation, which in turn creates a linguistic paradox masterfully created by Lovecraft to describe the city.

The paradox of this linguistic device highlights the inherent destabilization of human subjectivity. However, we must first examine one of the most famous lines in the entire Cthulhu mythos and that is the Mad Poet couplet. In “The Nameless City,”





the narrator twice quotes the fictional Arabic poet Abdul AlHazred in the opening of the short story "That is not dead which can eternal lie / And with strange aeons even death may die" (Lovecraft 92, 98). Lovecraft's suggestion that "even death may die" offers a conundrum that questions the absolute nature of death and the boundaries of human comprehension. From a conventional human perspective, death is considered the ultimate cessation. However, in Lovecraft's cosmic horror, even this ultimate cessation can eventually end. This notion is a deep contemplation on the essence of being and non-being, straining the limits of philosophical terror. Burleson remarks on the destabilization of this polarity:

Clearly, then, there can be no settled configuration of privilege in any life/death bipolarity in the text. Lovecraft's Arab poet has said that "That is not dead which can eternal lie," and in lie we may read a punning hint of intrinsic self-subversion. The implied refusal of "death" to be "itself" will characterize the textual city as well. (Burleson, 53)

The remark emphasizes Lovecraft's primary motif of cosmic apathy. The universe adheres to laws and experiences events that are unconcerned with human conflicts and notions. This phrase encapsulates the unsettling realization that human rules and even our most fundamental ideas, such as death, may lack importance or permanence when considered in the context of the vastness of the universe. The vastness is also exemplified in the 'city' aspect of 'The Nameless City' from a noun that signifies something solid, established and concrete, it becomes something that is vast, uncertain and interchangeable: "Remote in the desert of Araby lies the nameless city, crumbling and inarticulate, its low walls nearly hidden by the sands of uncounted ages" (Lovecraft, 92). Burleson further contends that this is done purposely to highlight that human perception, even at the linguistic level, is destabilized and shaken:





Curiously, city, usually connoting solidity, edifice, establishment, here heralds the opposites of these notions: the city is change, uncertainty, instability...But here the city, as citedness, occasions the breaking out of confining or defining boundaries, suggests the transcending of contexts, and partakes of the dynamics of change: citation, transmuted reappearance in ever-new contexts, protraction of discourse. (Burleson, 54)

Burleson argues that Lovecraft challenges this notion by portraying the city not as a fixed structure, but as a symbol of constant change and uncertainty. This perspective is consistent with Lovecraft's overarching thematic emphasis on the cosmic and the incomprehensible, wherein human creations (such as cities) are rendered insignificant and transitory in comparison to the ancient and apathetic world. The act of surpassing restrictive limits is a fundamental element of the terror found in Lovecraft's literary works, where anxiety frequently arises from what exists outside of familiar and secure borders. This encompasses not just the geographical and tangible limitations, but also the constraints of human understanding and the norms of the story structure itself. The psychological effect of coming into a city that challenges conventional ideas of stability and permanence can also be interpreted as a test of cognitive frameworks. Humans utilize schemas or cognitive frameworks to comprehend and manage the environment; a city that represents instability violates these schemas, resulting in cognitive dissonance. Lovecraft's storytelling compels both characters and readers to encounter environments that are not just physically unfamiliar but also philosophically, and profoundly disturbing. The city serving as a representation of transformation and unpredictability can also serve as a manifestation of internal psychological conditions which can be observed by the narrator's own increasing madness at the conditions he is put through,





Only the grim brooding desert gods know what really took place—what indescribable struggles and scrambles in the dark I endured or what Abaddon guided me back to life, where I must always remember and shiver in the night-wind till oblivion—or worse—claims me. Monstrous, unnatural, colossal, was the thing—too far beyond all the ideas of man to be believed except in the silent damnable small hours when one cannot sleep. (Lovecraft, "The Nameless City" 98)

The reference to being led back by "what Abaddon" (a biblical word linked to destruction and the depths of hell) intensifies the feeling of fear and uncertain danger. Fear encompasses not only tangible dangers, but also significant obstacles that challenge the fundamental principles and comprehension of the narrator's worldview.

THE OBJECTIVE FEAR

In connection with the narrative and linguistic techniques that Lovecraft employs in his works, he also emphasizes in "Supernatural Horror in Literature" the ability of everyday phrases to evoke intense dread when said "[b]y words whose innocence we scarcely doubt till the cracked tension of the speaker's hollow voice bids us fear their nameless implications" (Lovecraft, "Supernatural in Horror", 37) This refers to the psychological phenomenon "The Uncanny," which involves encountering something that is both familiar and sufficiently different to cause unease. Sigmund Freud writes "[i]t undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense" (Freud, 219). The city is called "Nameless," a common word that has been redefined to express something inherently mysterious and unsettling. The seeming contradiction of assigning a name to something that is considered impossible to name encapsulates the fundamental nature of the





uncanny, in which the familiar is transformed into something very disturbing. Freud further adds “[f]or this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.” (241) The psychological tension stems from the contrast between the anticipated harmlessness of the words and the terror provoked by the speaker’s manner of speaking, implying concealed, more sinister realities. This induces psychological unease since it exploits the innate human inclination to pursue consistency and security in communication and social engagement.

Moreover, the escalating insanity that the unnamed narrator undergoes because of the city is intricately linked to the uncanny and unsettling. According to Freud: “The uncanny effect of epilepsy and of madness has the same origin” (Freud, 243). This correlation can be observed in several occurrences throughout the story. As an illustration, the narrator expresses his terror by stating: “Suddenly there came another burst of that acute fear which had intermittently seized me ever since I first saw the terrible valley and the nameless city under a cold moon,” (Lovecraft, 98). This intense terror is a result of the uncanny and unexpected characteristics of the city, which is causing his increasing state of craziness. In addition, the narrator’s mind becomes exceedingly alert and imaginative due to the city’s atmosphere “The malignancy of the blast awakened incredible fancies” (98). This implies that the urban surroundings actively manipulate his perspective, intensifying the feeling of the uncanny. The narrator’s impending plunge into insanity is apparent when he recalls: “I think I screamed frantically near the last—I was almost mad” (98). This





moment highlights the severe psychological influence that the city exerts on him, driving him to the verge of madness. The narrator's incessant repetition of, "I fell to babbling over and over that unexplainable couplet of the mad Arab Alhazred, who dreamed of the nameless city" (98), underscores the disruptive impact of the city's influence on his logical thinking, compelling him to fixate on paradoxical and unfathomable scraps of knowledge. The uncanny elements in "The Nameless City" are not limited to the frightening surroundings, but also extend to the narrative's tone and the ramifications of the protagonist's discoveries. The protagonist's exploration of the city parallels a journey into the unconscious, revealing concerns that are both intimately personal and widely relatable, reflecting Freud's concept of the eerie as intrinsically linked to suppressed emotions and thoughts.

One more example of the uncanny can be observed in the multiplicity of images with which the narrator tries to convey the shape of the race that lived in the city: "To nothing can such things be well compared—in one flash I thought of comparisons as varied as the cat, the bulldog, the mythic Satyr, and the human being (Lovecraft, 95). It is purposely done to be liminal and on the edge of description as it snaps the reader's mind from image to image that would disorient them, as they are not fully meant to visualize it but just try to grasp it. Freud highlights this constant shift in images:

"This is that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes, and so on" (Freud, 244).





The inability to precisely categorize the creatures or reconcile their attributes with known beings generates a sense of apprehension. This is like Freud's concept in which the boundary between reality and imagination becomes unclear, intensifying the eerie impact. This disorientation is a clear expression of the uncanny - the experience of coming upon something that is both familiar and unfamiliar, known, and unknown. Building upon Freud's theories, the inability to completely visualize the creatures, but only to grasp at them, demonstrates a phenomenon in which symbols or incomplete images acquire more importance than the actual entity. Within the context of Lovecraft's narrative, brief analogies acquire a more emotional and cognitive resonance than a direct depiction could accomplish. This exploits the inherent human dread of the unfamiliar, where that which is invisible or not completely comprehensible frequently becomes more horrifying.

CONCLUSION

"Look away! . . . Go back! . . . Do not see! . . . Do not see! . . . The vengeance of the infinite abysses . . . That cursed, that damnable pit . . . Merciful gods of earth, *I am falling into the sky!*"

- "The Nameless City," H.P. Lovecraft

H.P. Lovecraft's "The Nameless City" is a significant piece of literature that effectively displays the deep psychological effects of the horror genre. Lovecraft achieves this by skillfully employing narrative and linguistic tactics that create a feeling of weirdness and mystery, as explained by Sigmund Freud. This essay has examined many aspects of Lovecraft's storytelling techniques, with a particular emphasis on how he skillfully manipulates language and narrative structures to explore topics related to the



enigmatic, the incomprehensible, and the indescribable. By conducting a thorough analysis, numerous significant discoveries arise, offering a more profound comprehension of Lovecraft's methodology and its wider ramifications for the investigation of horror literature. The analysis also emphasizes the correlation between Lovecraft's approaches and Freud's idea of the uncanny, namely how ordinary components can evoke intense unease and fear when they are rendered foreign or placed in new settings. The dynamic interaction between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the apparent and the hidden is fundamental to the lasting impact of Lovecraft's literature.

In essence, Lovecraft's "The Nameless City" resists any clear, definitive interpretation. The exploration of subjectivity and cosmic horror within the text leads us not to answers, but to a confrontation with the unknowable. Rather than resolving the fears or uncertainties of the narrative, Lovecraft invites us to dwell in the very space where conclusions remain elusive mirroring the protagonist's final fate. Thus, the story encapsulates the human struggle against the incomprehensible, leaving the reader with more questions than answers, which is perhaps its most potent conclusion.



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