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Ascending the Mountains of Madness: the Language and Psychology of H.P. Lovecraft

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Abstract

Title: *Ascending the Mountains of Madness: the Language and Psychology of H.P. Lovecraft*

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Abstract: The horror of Howard Philips Lovecraft's writing lies within the mentality and psychology of his characters. Since he first became prominent, the main criticism against Howard Philips Lovecraft has been that his writing uses too many adjectives, and that his creatures and monsters are vague. This essay aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion of Lovecraft's horror whilst countering the valid criticisms against his writing. By focusing on Lovecraft's use of first-person narration and applying the theory of Weird Realism and the idea of the sublime, this essay details the reason of psychological horror in Lovecraft's narratives. The focus of the argument is that the horror of Lovecraft is not in the creatures and monsters, but in the mental reactions of his characters and in the traumatized aftermath of the characters that survive in the three tales, *Dagon*, *At the Mountains of Madness*, and *The Call of Cthulhu*.

Keywords: H.P. Lovecraft, *Dagon*, *Cthulhu*, The Great Ones, Romanticism, Gothic writing, Weird Realism, sublime, first-person narration

Contents

1. Introduction	4
Methodology & Secondary Sources.....	5
2.0 <i>Dagon</i> : Psychological Horror in Short Stories	7
<i>Dagon</i> & Weird Realism.....	9
3. <i>At the Mountains of Madness</i> : Psychological Horror in Novels.....	12
How the Psychological Horror & Characters Benefit from the Length	14
4. <i>The Call of Cthulu</i> : Psychological Horror & Third-Person Limited.....	19
The Sublime in <i>The Call of Cthulhu</i>	21
5. Conclusion.....	Fel! Bokmärket är inte definierat.
References	Fel! Bokmärket är inte definierat.

1. Introduction

Howard Philips Lovecraft was a prominent writer of horror fiction during the early 20th century. He was born in Providence, Rhode Island on the 20th of August, 1890. Lovecraft's childhood was haunted by tragedy and dread. His father had multiple mental breakdowns and eventually passed away in 1898, due to paresis. As his father before him, Lovecraft suffered mental illness as a young man. This eventually led to him staying at home during most of his first years at school. Because of this, Lovecraft began reading at an impressive pace. He gained skills quite impressive for his age and was already an experienced writer by the age of six. Along with his writing skills, Lovecraft also developed an interest in science. As an adult, he would combine his writing with his love for science; a decision which made him the icon he is today.

However, despite his success, he suffered backlash. Howard Philips Lovecraft—who is now synonymous with pop culture—was criticized in the article “Tales of the Marvellous and the Ridiculous” by Edmund Wilson for his use of adjectives. “One of Lovecraft's worst faults is his incessant effort to work up the expectations of the reader by sprinkling his stories with such adjectives as ‘horrible,’ ‘terrible,’ ‘frightful,’ ‘awesome,’ ‘eerie,’ ‘weird,’ ‘forbidden,’ ‘unhallowed,’ ‘unholy,’ ‘blasphemous,’ ‘hellish,’ and ‘infernal.’” (Wilson 48).

What Wilson fails to realize upon reading Lovecraft, however, is that the art of Lovecraft is embedded within the mentality of his characters, and not within the physical descriptions of terrifying monsters. I argue that this is where most of the horror stems from. The horror stems from the trauma of a disturbed and fragile mind. The stories are not so much about the monster itself but rather the characters' reactions to the monster. H.P. Lovecraft focuses on the psychology of the macabre, and he details the impact that horror has on a character's mind rather than on a character's body (in the form of blood and guts, per se). Whereas others would write in detail about how a monster might tear one to pieces, Lovecraft instead explains how one would go insane at the mere sight of a monster. Many of his stories focus on this aspect, and revealingly follow the bizarre journey from sanity to insanity, step by step—how a character can go from reminiscing about a happy past to dancing on the edge of insanity only to eventually fall into that dark, eternal place. These deep psychological themes are the very bones in the tales I have chosen to focus on: *At the Mountains of Madness*, *Dagon*, and *The Call of Cthulu*.

The focus of these tales is entirely psychological, hence the reason why Lovecraft's physical descriptions of his monster may be lacking. He does not reveal everything to his readers. Like many Gothic writers, one of Lovecraft's recurring themes is mystery. What set

him apart from other Gothic writers of his time, however, was an emphasis on other themes such as the influence of science on Earth and its risks, insanity, knowledge of the forbidden, and the threats of a supernatural force upon the human mind.

Accordingly, the focus of this thesis involves the psychological aspects of the narratives of H.P. Lovecraft and how they apply to the mentality of his characters, often in the aftermath of a tragedy. These psychological aspects, which lie in the mental reactions of his characters, are what make his tales horrifying.

In Lovecraft's tales, where most of the plot surrounds the characters, it is easy for the reader to relate to their psychological state. As humans, we have the ability to connect to fictional characters, and when a character breaks down mentally, we also relate to that. "The audience's psychological state, therefore, diverges from the psychological state of characters in respect of belief, but converges on that of characters with respect to the way in which the properties of said monsters are emotively assessed" (Carroll 53). Lovecraft takes advantage of emotions and plays on universal fears. It is specifically targeted to evoke a psychological reaction in his readers, hence why the genre is called psychological horror. Therefore, I argue that the horror is within the characters when they eventually do break down.

Lovecraft's technique of focalization through his characters brings the reader closer to the horror. After all, the reader has a connection with the characters, not the horror itself. Therefore, our care lies in the character. Lovecraft's technique adds another layer to the sense of horror; it is not only the monsters that are terrifying but also what will happen to the characters that experience them, the characters one has learned to care about.

Methodology & Secondary Sources

The method I use is to study aspects of narratology within Lovecraft, i.e. how the first-person narration makes the focalizer's tale of psychological horror seem more realistic. I then connect the realism to the theory of Weird Realism, which states that Lovecraft uses several aspects of realism in his tales to gain a better understanding of why and how the characters' mental reactions seem so relatable and frightening. These aspects of realism include both psychology and philosophy, two studies from the real world which Lovecraft incorporates into his tales to make them more realistic. To better understand the science behind *The Call of Cthulhu*, which has aspects of third-person narration unlike the other tales I have chosen, focus was put on the idea of the sublime, which is described as an experience in which man transcends his consciousness beyond the human limit.

The secondary sources chosen for this research include *The Lovecraftian Poe* by Sean Moreland, a book in which Moreland explores both Lovecraft and Poe and goes into detail about what makes their work both different and similar. In order to define the sublime and relate it to the psychological, I use *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* by Thomas Weiskel. To further discuss the theory of Weird Realism, I read *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* by Graham Harman. To detail the psychological within Lovecraft, I chose several critics and authors: Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*; Richard J. Gerrig, David N. Rapp, *Psychological Processes Underlying Literary Impact*; D. Simmons, *New Critical Essays on H.P. Lovecraft*; George T. Wetzel, *Collected Essays on H.P. Lovecraft and Others*; and *A Dreamer and A Visionary: H.P. Lovecraft in His Time* by S.T. Joshi.

In the first part of the essay, I will analyze and explain how psychological horror works in Lovecraft's fiction. Of the three tales I have chosen, I will begin with *Dagon* and explain how the psychological works within a short story and a first-person narrative, as well as introduce and connect it to the theory of Weird Realism.

In the second part of the essay, I will analyze *At the Mountains of Madness* and detail how Lovecraft's psychological horror works within a novel and how it affects the plot when it concerns multiple characters, not just one.

Finally, in the third part of the essay, I will look at how Lovecraft uses psychological horror in *The Call of Cthulhu*, which he wrote with aspects of third-person. In this section, I will also introduce and discuss the idea of the sublime.

Although the critics chosen discuss psychological horror within Lovecraft, none of them are bold enough to make the claim that the focus of his tales is psychological horror. They acknowledge the presence of psychological horror, but that is all. This essay differs in that I am confident and bold enough to state that the focus of these tales is psychological horror, and I will detail why. More specifically, I intend to detail the psychological horror aimed at the minds and mentalities of the characters. It is my goal that by the end of this essay, the reader will agree—or at least understand—my claim.

2. *Dagon*: Psychological Horror in Short Stories

The horror in the tales *At the Mountains of Madness*, *Dagon*, and *The Call of Cthulhu* stems from the mental reactions of the characters when they witness beings from another world. Besides the initial reaction the characters experience, there is the aftermath for those who survive. It is a concept that a lot of horror fiction tends to ignore: what happens to the characters after the horror takes place. More often than not, horror fiction takes place in the present, and the story ends with a group or a person surviving the event, and that is the last the audience sees of them. However, from a realistic standpoint, the horror is not over. The characters will be traumatized, possibly even mentally unstable. There will be many sleepless nights, many panic attacks, and thoughts of suicide. The aftermath of a traumatizing event can be worse than the event itself. This is an area of horror that Lovecraft explores. His characters have often gone through something traumatizing. In *Dagon*, a man comes across a vision so terrifying that it drives him to commit suicide. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, a group of scientists explore forbidden grounds and unveil an ancient secret which drives one of them insane, never to be heard of again. Finally, *The Call of Cthulhu* details the events in which a group of people discover the Great One, Cthulhu himself, as the narrator stumbles across old journals. In the following section, I will look at *Dagon*, *At the Mountains of Madness*, and *The Call of Cthulhu* to look at their separate aspects of psychological horror. The horror affects a different character in every tale. Furthermore, the reaction is different across the tales. In *Dagon*, for example, the horror consumes a now suicidal local loner. However, in *At the Mountains of Madness*, the horror affects a group of scientists of intelligent stature, and the reaction here is nausea and anxiety, unlike the suicidal nature of *Dagon*. *The Call of Cthulhu* is different in the narration since it has aspects of third-person, and because of this, the psychological horror changes.

Dagon was written in July, 1917. It is one of the first stories he wrote as an adult, and its mature themes showcase that. It was first published in November, 1919. The aim of this analysis will be to detail the psychological horror within the tale and explain why the first-person narration aids the tale tremendously, how the buildup manages to be so effective in the mere span of a few pages, and why the horror itself lies within the broken mentality of the narrator and his eventual demise. I will show that Lovecraft's most effective horror is the mental one within his characters. The psychological expressed in *Dagon* surrounds the narrator, who is haunted by flashbacks and nightmares. He is anxious, paranoid, and has turned to drugs to be able to cope with his thoughts. When related to psychology, the symptoms are similar to that of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Another interesting

thing to note is that the fisherman mentions that he is a war veteran, and PTSD is extremely common with war veterans. The war was not enough to damage him mentally, but the sight of whatever he saw was.

The plot is a personal recollection of memories from the tenebrous, morphine-addicted fisherman. In *Dagon*, this local fisherman is writing his suicide note. The fisherman is extremely paranoid and terrified, as he is haunted by his own mind. It is written in first-person, a style typical of Lovecraft since it makes the tale feel more real and personal. In the first line of the short story, the reader is already made aware of the urgency and the mental horror in which the fisherman is suffering from. “I am writing this under an appreciable mental strain, since by tonight I shall be no more” (Lovecraft 23).

The first-person is an important tool in psychological horror. In *The Fantastic*, Todorov states: “The first-person narrator most readily permits the reader to identify with the character” (Todorov 84). To add to Todorov’s statement, this is also why the first-person benefits the short length of this story. With the first-person narration, the reader is able to connect more quickly to the focalizer. The narrator continues to mention that he has run out of his supply of morphine, which was used to numb the horrors of his mind. Upon realizing that his supply of drugs was no more and that the flashbacks of what he saw will now haunt him with more power, he decides to end his life by jumping out the window of the room he has barricaded himself inside. The fisherman mentions that on one of his travels in a boat, he came across something terrible. Beneath the ocean floor, he saw something great and massive.

Then suddenly I saw it. With only a slight churning to mark its rise to the surface, the thing slid into view above the dark waters. Vast, Polyphemus-like, and loathsome, it darted like a stupendous monster of nightmares to the monolith, about which it flung its gigantic scaly arms, the while it bowed its hideous head and gave vent to certain measured sounds. I think I went mad then. (Lovecraft 26)

As Wilson himself criticized, in this short paragraph there are many adjectives. Lovecraft describes the monster in *Dagon* as “vast”, “Polyphemus-like”, and “loathsome”. Furthermore, Lovecraft goes on to describe the monster’s “gigantic scaly arms” and describes its head as “hideous”. However, the overuse of all these adjectives is valid because in psychological horror, description and imagery are extremely important. A book or a story is not a visual medium; hence it cannot scare the reader visually. It relies on one’s imagination and makes the reader paint the horrors for themselves. It is important to note that as far as any physical description of the monster goes, this is all the reader gets. Some readers may find this

description lacking and disappointing, especially after the build-up. After all, perhaps the most important question on everyone's mind as they read *Dagon* is exactly what terrible thing the fisherman actually saw before he went insane. However, this is a tale of psychological horror; therefore, it is safe to assume that the build-up is not centred on the revelation of the monster, but rather around the character's eventual demise and suicide. Too much description of the monster would have a negative effect in terms of scaring the readers. Additionally, as mentioned in the introduction, Lovecraft is a Gothic writer and a frequent theme in that genre is mystery. With little description, it is up to the readers to fill in the gaps. Lovecraft simply lays the foundation of the image, and his readers then build upon it.

***Dagon* & Weird Realism**

Already within the first paragraph in *Dagon*, Lovecraft presents a deep horror—something very common in psychological horror. Instead of spoiling his reader with blood and guts, he plants a seed in the back of their mind, which grows and grows the more his readers lend thought to it, like water to a plant. This will continue to develop, as psychological horror aims to do. In research by psychologists David N Rapp and Richard J. Gerrig one can see how the brain transforms fictional information into the real world. In the experiments by Rapp and Gerrig, participants read a literary text. It was previously hypothesised by the psychologists that this particular text would invoke a particular emotion.

Within their set of experiments, Green and Brock also told some participants that the story was factual and others that the story was fictional. This labeling had virtually no impact on transportation or changes in belief. Readers were as likely or, in some cases, more likely to be persuaded by fictional narratives as factual narratives. This research suggests quite strongly that literary narratives' capacity to engage readers increases the probability that those narratives will wield an impact on life. (Rapp and Gerrig 270)

There are, of course, various emotions one can feel when reading different genres of literature. However, when reading Lovecraft, the consistent emotion should be fright or horror. Therefore, when one reads about the horrifying nature of the paranoid man in *Dagon*, one should immediately relate to his feelings. One's version of those feelings may be to a lesser degree than what the fisherman is feeling, but one's imagination makes up for that. Humans have the foundation of what those feelings feel like, and that is all one needs to be able to stretch them and imagine a greater, more frightening version of them. This is why *Dagon* works so well; it is easy for the reader to put themselves in the shoes of the fisherman

based on what he is feeling, especially with the first-person narration. However, these things vary from reader to reader. Some may be changed or impacted by the tale, some more so than others, others not at all. This issue is again covered by Rapp and Gerrig.

We suggest that the extent to which the traveler will be changed by the journey will depend in part on the types of activities in which the traveler engages while on the journey. In this case, we mean cognitive psychological activities: How much effort does the traveler devote to keeping the impact of the experiences of the journey isolated from his or her everyday life? (Rapp and Gerrig 267)

There are no real physical horrors present in this tale. The horror is purely mental, and it reflects how madness can utterly possess an individual. Therefore, the effect of the psychological horror will greatly vary from reader to reader, based on mental differences. In other words, Lovecraft has combined realism and fiction, brilliantly displaying the unique horrors which are exclusive to both sides so that readers can blend the fiction with reality. This technique is now referred to as Weirid Realism.

The title *Weirid Realism* suggests that our plan is to work through Lovecraft towards a deeper conception of realism than is usual. Most philosophical realism is 'representational' in character. Such theories hold not only that there is a real world outside all human contact with it, but also that this reality can be mirrored adequately by the findings of the natural sciences or some other method of knowledge. (Graham 1)

Lovecraft uses philosophical ideas and theories from reality, such as what madness is and how it possesses and blends with his fiction. Since his writing does not solely deal with realism and surrounds horror fiction, we call it Weirid Realism. The aspects of realism in Lovecraft's tales give the reader something to relate to. Additionally, when relating this back to first-person narration, one can see how the realism of the tale along with the personal connection of the narrative works well. When combining these two narratological techniques—Weirid Realism and a first-person narration—the reader of the tale is able to involve themselves fully within the plot. This is why *Dagon* succeeds, despite being very short. The narrator is dealing with his own insanity, anxiety, and is extremely suicidal. These are psychological issues drawn from reality, and they are the result of an extremely traumatizing or tragic event. Another example of Weirid Realism in the tale is the philosophical question of how a human would react upon witnessing something supernatural. The Weirid Realism aids the reader for the reader is able to relate to the narrator's own

insanity, for going insane is a real thing and a real fear for many. It lends the work a feeling of horror that is not entirely fictional; a feeling that this horror is indeed possible

When combining all these elements—the first-person narration, the theory of Weird Realism, and the research done by Rapp and Gerrig—it is clear that the horror of *Dagon* lies within the broken mentality of the fisherman. *Dagon* manages to feel realistic since it draws real psychological issues experienced by sufferers from PTSD into a fictional scenario. The difference in *Dagon* as opposed to reality is that the PTSD the fisherman is suffering from was spawned out of something supernatural. *Dagon* is a tale of realism but with a fictional twist and for that reason it fits perfect into the category of Weird Realism. Additionally, the personal tone of the first-person narration makes the realism and horror all the more powerful.

The focus of the tale is on the mind of this fisherman as he recalls his thoughts regarding the event which unfolded. Only a single paragraph is dedicated to the monster. If Lovecraft wanted the monster to be the focal point of the horror then surely he would have focused more on the monster and not on the mental horrors and anxieties of the fisherman.

3. *At the Mountains of Madness: Psychological Horror in Novels*

At the Mountains of Madness is a novella written in February or March, 1931. That same year, it was rejected by *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright because of the tale's length. The tale was published in *Astounding Stories*, five years later, in 1936. Since then, it has been reproduced in various collections.

The plot concerns the events of an expedition to Antarctica gone wrong. Throughout the plot, the narrator details these events, and slowly but surely explains what went wrong. Once again, the story is told in the first-person. The narrator here is Doctor William Dyer, who recalls the events. As in *Dagon*, Lovecraft uses his narrative to underline a feeling of hopelessness, that there is no escape from the terror that lurks. If people escape the physical horror, then they will be haunted by the mental horror; images, flashbacks, and memories will haunt them till the end of days. On the context of Lovecraft's characters, Moreland states:

Lovecraft, on the contrary, harasses his literary characters with a hostile environment where everything is connected with the monstrous. There is no escape from adversity, no matter how deep you dig or how high you can fly or climb. In that sense, Lovecraft embraces the general feeling of his time, a discontent toward society, progress, and science that is rooted in the modernist movement that the writer so bitterly rejected (Moreland 104)

The theme Moreland discusses is true for *At the Mountains of Madness*, as it was in *Dagon*. However, the difference here is that Dyer and his team are trapped in Antarctica. In other words, the threat is physical as they face harsh weather conditions and the possibility of becoming lost, contrary to the threat of *Dagon* which was purely mental.

The aim of this analysis will be to underline the psychological horror and how certain aspects have an impact on a group of characters rather than the narrow view of just one character in *Dagon*. Furthermore, this analysis will detail how psychological horror has an effect on the intelligent minds in Lovecraft's tales, contrary to how it had an effect on the average mind of the lonesome fisherman in *Dagon*. This analysis will also explore how the longer narrative of *At the Mountains of Madness* benefits the plot and, ultimately, the psychological horror and the mental reactions from the characters.

Similar to *Dagon*, within the first lines of the story Lovecraft embeds suspension in the first-person narrative. Dyer, the main character and focalizer, states that the reason for his writings is to prevent anyone else from exploring Antarctica, where unimaginable horrors shook himself and his team.

I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why. It is altogether against my will that I tell my reasons for opposing this contemplated invasion of the Antarctic—with its vast fossil-hunt and its wholesale boring and melting of the ancient ice-cap—and I am the more reluctant because my warning may be in vain. Doubt of the real facts, as I must reveal them, is inevitable; yet if I suppressed what will seem extravagant and incredible there would be nothing left. The hitherto withheld photographs, both ordinary and aërial, will count in my favour; for they are damnably vivid and graphic. Still, they will be doubted because of the great lengths to which clever fakery can be carried. The ink drawings, of course, will be jeered at as obvious impostures; notwithstanding a strangeness of technique which art experts ought to remark and puzzle over. (Lovecraft 723)

From this paragraph, one can note that an immediate difference from *Dagon* is the narrator and his intelligent, far more superior writing. Based on the writing, it is obvious that Doctor William Dyer is of a greater intellect than the narrator from *Dagon*. The writing here is more academic and comes across as a professional journal rather than ramblings in a personal journal. Once again, one can see how the first-person benefits the horror; Dyer's warning comes across as much more real since it feels as if he is addressing the reader personally. Additionally, the choice of words here is more complex, with words such as: "vast", "extravagant", "hitherto", "vivid", and "jeered". Dyer's intellect is greatly beneficial to the story, in terms of psychological horror. Whereas one could state that the fisherman in *Dagon* had a weaker mind and was perhaps more prone to desperation because of his drug usage, in *At the Mountains of Madness*, no such statement can be made. The characters here are scientists, people of high intellect who have most of the answers to everything. With that said, knowing that the people who would have all the answers are subject to insanity at the mere sight of such terror adds an additional layer of fright.

In this next example, one can see the professional but yet scarred attitude of Dyer, as opposed to the desperate attitude of the fisherman. "Thenceforward the ten of us—but the student Danforth and I above all others—were to face a hideously amplified world of lurking horrors which nothing can erase from our emotions, and which we would refrain from sharing with mankind in general if we could" (Lovecraft 506). Despite Lovecraft's academic twist on the first-person narration in this paragraph, one can still note what many critics like Wilson considered to be useless adjectives. One could argue that "hideously" is unnecessary in this paragraph and that the sentence could stand on its own without it. However, the

adjectives are part of Lovecraft's style, which carries over from tale to tale. According to Graham Harman, author of *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, the paragraph uses several of Lovecraft's techniques:

Lovecraft uses several techniques to lend credence to the near-mental breakdowns hinted at in the passage above. First, he makes it a terrible experience shared by no fewer than ten people, thereby placing it beyond the possibility of individual or small-group delusion. Second, he creates a gradation of disturbance by adding "the student Danforth and I above all others," adding some internal contrast to the ten-man continuum of insanity by hinting at the special emotional challenges faced by two members of the group, he himself being one of them. Ultimately, we will hear that Danforth was pressed to even further extremes of weakened sanity by a final sight witnessed by himself alone and not by Dyer. (Graham 163)

Based on Graham's statement, one can note how the psychological horror changes when the narrative concerns a group of characters rather than just one. Although Lovecraft still writes in first-person here like he did in *Dagon*, the context within the first-person changes to a great extent. With several characters, there have to be several mental reactions and different degrees of insanity within each one.

How the Psychological Horror & Characters Benefit from the Length

Another difference from *Dagon* is the length. Whereas *Dagon* was on the shorter side, consisting of a few pages, *At the Mountains of Madness* clocks in at almost one-hundred pages. A tale of this length is rare for Lovecraft, and it is one of the reasons why this one is arguably his most famous. Moreover, what this means for the actual story is, of course, room for detail. *At the Mountains of Madness* contains a complex, detailed plot. This means that we also get more details surrounding the terror, and the reactions from the characters facing it. The mental reactions are different from *Dagon* in *At the Mountains of Madness*, as explained by Carroll. "Since horrific creatures are so physically repulsive, they often provoke nausea in the characters who discover them. In Lovecraft's 'At the Mountains of Madness,' the presence of the Shoggoths, giant, shapechanging, black, excremental worms, is heralded by an odor which is explicitly described as nauseating" (Carroll 22). When a character encounters a monster, the narrative centres around how the character responds both physically and mentally. As an example of this, in *At the Mountains of Madness*, there is a physical reaction, nausea, whereas *Dagon* mostly portrayed a mental reaction from the character. Moreover, it is the character of Danforth who experiences this unfortunate trauma

of insanity and nausea, a character whose arc has greatly benefited from the length. Throughout the tale, Danforth as a scientist seems to have everything under control, as a scientist would. However, when Danforth is overwhelmed with mental trauma at the sight of the monsters, the effective build-up of his character makes his downfall all the more tragic. When a character is built-up through a hundred pages rather than five or six, the tragedy of that character will ultimately have more of an impact. Therefore, the psychological horror will also have a more devastating impact. This is why *At the Mountains of Madness* benefits from its length. However, one might suspect that the monsters will also benefit from a tale of this length; in the case of *At the Mountains of Madness*, this is not true. The monsters are vague here, as they were in *Dagon*. Like *Dagon*, the description of the monsters is lacking in terms of physical attributes and features, as one can see from this paragraph:

And now, when Danforth and I saw the freshly glistening and reflectively iridescent black slime which clung thickly to those headless bodies and stank obscenely with that new unknown odour whose cause only a diseased fancy could envisage—clung to those bodies and sparkled less voluminously on a smooth part of the accursedly resculptured wall *in a series of grouped dots*—we understood the quality of cosmic fear to its uttermost depths. (Lovecraft 787)

The description is vague and contains no real detail as to what these monsters are or truly look like. From the paragraph, in terms of physical description, one only learns that the monsters are headless and are surrounded by black slime. However, once again, the horror does not lie in the physical description, but in the mental reaction of Danforth and Dyer, as mentioned in the previous example by Carroll; how physical reactions from the body of the characters fit within the psychological narrative.

Furthermore, one can also note the use of adjectives: “headless” and “obscenely”, for example. There are plenty of them, just as there were in *Dagon*. And, as with all of Lovecraft’s tales, their purpose is to serve psychological horror by giving the monsters a horrifying appearance without revealing too much. The difference in the adjectives used here, however, is that at this point in the novel the reader has gotten to know Dyer and his team exceptionally well. Since this is a much longer story, at this point the reader is familiar with the characters, their backgrounds, and their motives. This means that the reader now fears for them. The reader has learned to care about the characters throughout the plot, and when they are faced with this horrifying situation, the terror on the reader’s side comes from concern for the characters’ well-being. This element of deep caring, albeit present in *At the Mountains of Madness*, was very much lacking in *Dagon*. The reason for this, of course, is that *Dagon* is

too short for any essential care to be planted with regard to the character. Although the situations here are similar—men encountering monsters—there are a lot of variables which set them apart from each other. There is the physical reaction, nausea, in *At the Mountains of Madness*, as well as the greater intellect of the characters and the care one has gained for them. And it is that element of caring which ultimately makes the encounter with the monsters in *At the Mountains of Madness* more terrifying and more effective than the encounter in *Dagon*. And, also like *Dagon*, the first-person narration works extremely well within the margin of the plot in terms of scaring the reader in regards to its personal nature. In fact, one could even argue that this works better in *At the Mountains of Madness* because of the length since the reader has gotten to know these characters extremely well.

All these variables ultimately aid to the detail in the plot. As we have learned, imagery is extremely valuable when it comes to psychological horror. Once the reader has conjured enough detail about Lovecraft's world and its inhabitants, only then can the horror truly pierce. It is this detail which, not surprisingly, makes *At the Mountains of Madness* one of Lovecraft's greats. With the longer narrative of *At the Mountains of Madness*, the detail in this tale exceeds Lovecraft's other tales. The psychological horror benefits greatly from more detail, as the characters' undoing and the world, as well as the monsters, become clearer and alas have more of an impact on the reader. The reason *At the Mountains of Madness* is considered one of Lovecraft's best is arguably because he manages to incorporate so much more in the narrative. On the subject of the imagery and narrative, as well as monsters which inhabit Lovecraft's world, Carroll summarizes the importance of mental imagery in Lovecraft's tales in great words.

However, the propositional content of Lovecraft's fiction constitutes the content of our thought about them, and we are horrified by the idea of them. If we can be horrified by thoughts, as earlier examples indicated we could, then we can be horrified by thoughts engendered in us by the horrifying descriptions of authors. Therefore, it does not seem to follow from the fact that we believe that fictionally the Great Ones are thus and so that our responses must necessarily be a matter of quasi-fears and pretend emotions. (Carroll 82)

As Carroll mentions, readers are horrified by the idea of these monsters and the thoughts surrounding them. This is why the criticism against an overabundance of adjectives falls short; in order for the reader's idea of a monster to be horrifying, the image of said monster needs to be clear. In the previous paragraph with Danforth, Lovecraft describes the monster's

slime as “black” and “glistening”. Without these adjectives, the image of the monster would have less of an impact.

If we look at the narrative in terms of a blank canvas, then Lovecraft merely outlines the monster, and the reader then draws their own details based on what their own perception of scary is. This is ultimately more effective in *At the Mountains of Madness* because of the length. The reader is able to draw more from a novel in contrast to the short length of *Dagon*. This also affects the climax, of course, since there is more background. Much like some readers of *Dagon*, Graham felt that the suspense and build-up throughout the plot was efficient and well-written, but it simply fell flat towards the end when the monsters were revealed.

These even worse creatures are ‘vague yet damnably suggestive’ for three reasons. First, they are associated with a semi-entity. Second, while the semi-entity is merely formless, they themselves are ‘worse’ than formless. Third, they are described bizarrely as ‘star-spawn,’ and we the readers are unsure whether to take this merely in the metaphorical sense of ‘coming from other solar systems,’ or more literally as if they were actually *generated* by stars, in much the same fashion as chemical elements (Graham 1)

When Graham mentions the creatures being vague, he is obviously referring to their lack of physical description, for there is very little of it. However, just like *Dagon*, there is a reason for their mysterious and vague presentation, and that reason serves a great purpose. And although Graham’s analysis of *At the Mountains of Madness* is excellent, it contains flaws. *At the Mountains of Madness* is psychological horror. The climax is not focused on the revelation of these creatures; it is concentrated on the characters, as Dyer reveals what finally happened to the people the reader has grown to know. One has to keep in mind that *At the Mountains of Madness* contains a plot where Dyer recalls what happened to his team as a warning to others who may be curious about exploring that particular region. Therefore, the focus is on the team—the characters, not the monsters.

All that Danforth has ever hinted is that the final horror was a mirage. It was not, he declares, anything connected with the cubes and caves of echoing, vaporous, wormily honeycombed mountains of madness which we crossed; but a single fantastic, daemonic glimpse, among the churning zenith-clouds, of what lay back of those other violet westward mountains which the Old Ones had shunned and feared. It is very probable that the thing was a sheer delusion born of the previous stresses we had passed through, and of the actual though unrecognised mirage of the dead

transmontane city experienced near Lake's camp the day before; but it was so real to Danforth that he suffers from it still (Lovecraft 806)

As stated previously, Lovecraft concentrates upon the aftermath, something horror writers rarely do. In the paragraph above, one can see how Danforth still suffers from what he saw. In other words, he is still suffering mentally and is haunted by the memories of his expedition. The horror here is purely psychological. As Dyer himself states at the start of the paragraph, the horror did not come from the cubes, the echoing caves, or the mountains of madness. Dyer is specifically saying that the horror was not the physical. The horror that mentally damaged Danforth came from a "single glimpse" which he caught of the monsters. A mere glimpse of it was enough to permanently damage his psyche.

In *At the Mountains of Madness*, the climax of the story is embedded within the aftermath, and so is the horror as one learns of what happened to the team and how they are still suffering mentally from the events in the present. In other words, the horror is concentrated on the mentality of these characters.

4. *The Call of Cthulu: Psychological Horror & Third-Person Limited*

The Call of Cthulu was written in the summer of 1926 as a short story. It was first published almost a year later in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*. The narrator here is Francis Wayland Thurston. He discovers notes left behind by his grand-uncle, a linguistics professor by the name of George Gammel Angell, who died in the winter of 1926. In the notes, Francis notes the frequent references to Cthulhu and the city of R'lyeh. When the dots are connected, he discovers something horrible, and he is ready to tell us about it.

The aim of this analysis will be to frame how psychological horror works within a third-person narrative, and how this narrative has an effect on the mental reactions from the characters. Furthermore, the idea of the sublime will be introduced in this section to further explain how a third-person narrative can make up for its less personal qualities.

Unlike *Dagon* and *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Call of Cthulhu* is divided into three separate storylines. This lends a unique edge to the story and writing, for it works as a broken mind recalling haunting memories. Furthermore, Lovecraft would later tie his tales back to this one, and broaden his fictional universe, as George Wetzel claims. "From everything thus far studied and essayed about of Lovecraft's stories by myself, I have found he invariably tied a number of past, unconnected stories together and made them part of the Mythos" (Wetzel 57).

In the first part of *The Call of Cthulhu*, Thurston discovers the documents by Angell and involuntarily discovers the existence of Cthulhu. In the second storyline, inspector John Legrasse investigates a murderous cult in New Orleans: the cult of Cthulhu. Finally, in the last storyline, one follows the writing in a logbook, which documents the moment Cthulhu awakens from his slumber and rose out of the Pacific Ocean. The purpose of *The Call of Cthulhu* is to detail the insignificance of human existence in the grand scale of things and to show how small humanity really is when compared to the universe and alternate dimensions.

What separates *The Call of Cthulhu* from the other tales is that it contains aspects of a third-person narrative. "Poor Johansen's handwriting almost gave out when he wrote this. Of the six men who never reached the ship, he thinks two perished of pure fright in that accursed instant" (Lovecraft 377). The third-person makes the tale less personal since the use of personal pronouns such as "I" is now excluded from the narrative. However, the third-person narrative adds more suspense to the tale. The reason for this is because, in the other tales, one already knows that the narrator of the tales survived the events, and this is why he is able to recall it for the audience. But in *The Call of Cthulhu*, the narrator is someone who stumbles upon notes. This means the narrator was not part of the events in which the story took place,

and the characters' fates from the journal are unknown from the beginning. Furthermore, *The Call of Cthulhu* is also the first tale in which one learns about the background of the Great Ones and their place in the realm of Lovecraft. In the other tales, the background was mostly centred on the characters. But here, one learns more about Cthulhu, one of the Great Ones, and the details surrounding his existence.

A background of these monsters is rare in Lovecraft's writing, for it diminishes their sense of mystery. "Reading Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu,' we learn that, in the fiction, the primal Great Ones have cuttlefish heads, scaly wings, dragonoid bodies, an intolerable odor, a sticky texture, and green skin. Fictionally, they are also very dangerous and could exterminate humankind effortlessly" (Carroll 81). What one can gather from Carroll's brief analysis of the Great Ones is that they are, essentially, gods—or demi-gods, as Lovecraft puts it. This adds a level of power to their being, and in return makes the reader and the characters feel powerless against them.

Since part of the focus here is on the monsters, unlike the other tales, *The Call of Cthulhu* evokes less psychological horror. The third-person narrative limits psychological horror since the third-person narrative here mostly focuses on background information. There are elements of psychological horror in *The Call of Cthulhu*, but not nearly as much emphasis is put on this as in *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Dagon*. Here the horror stems more from an existential perspective. Instead of narrowing the horror down to the minds of a few characters with a first-person narrative, Lovecraft makes the horror broader with the third-person narrative. Now the horror stems from the mentality of all humans on Earth. Moreover, the horror is more extensive and philosophical. According to Simmons, it is this type of philosophical horror which makes Lovecraft so well-received. "The best of Lovecraft's tales present the reader with a brand of cosmic horror reliant on a kind of existentialist terror (which Lovecraft referred to as 'indifferentism')" (Simmons 2). Although Simmons is correct in his statement, he is missing a core feature in the cosmic horror presented in *The Call of Cthulhu*, and it is this: the fragility of the human mind. Throughout the tale, the human mind is presented as weak and ignorant. In the end, when humans encounter Cthulhu, they are powerless and ignorant in the sense that they cannot fathom what they are seeing.

Additionally, like the other tales, this is all written and recorded in the aftermath of the event, because it is the aftermath of a tragedy that is the most terrifying. Lovecraft makes it clear that the memory of Cthulhu will never dissipate in his characters. To summarize Simmons, *The Call of Cthulhu* does a wonderful job with the aspect of existentialist terror, but what it does better is record the reactions of the characters to the existentialist terror. With

Weird Realism, Lovecraft is able to make the reactions feel real. He draws the common mindset that humans are the most powerful and intelligent beings on Earth and turns it around with an anti-humanist ideal in *The Call of Cthulhu*. In that sense, he is very critical of human beliefs in this tale.

The narrator himself knows that human life is worthless, for he is aware of Cthulhu's existence. He knows what others do not, and what we all would refuse to believe: that Earth is not ruled by us, but by the hand of Cthulhu, the Great One. Furthermore, another aspect of horror comes from the description of Cthulhu, and the fear that the mere sight of him installs in the other characters. Like the other tales, the description of Cthulhu is vague and only serves to provide a mental reaction from the characters. In the tale, Cthulhu is described as a dragon, an octopus, and a large figure with tentacles and wings.

The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order. A mountain walked or stumbled. God! What wonder that across the earth a great architect went mad and poor Wilcox raved with fever in that telepathic instant? The Thing of the idols, the green, sticky spawn of the stars, had awaked to claim his own (Lovecraft 377)

In this paragraph, one can once again note Lovecraft's use of adjectives. He describes The Thing as a mountain and describes the madness of it as immemorial and shrieking. Additionally, he even goes as far as describing its colour—that it is green and sticky. For such a short paragraph, it contains a lot of adjectives. However, once again, the adjectives are there for the psychological aspects of the tale; they add a clearer picture in the mind of the reader. If he did not describe Cthulhu as “green” and “sticky” then the image of Cthulhu would have less of an impact. Furthermore, if Lovecraft did not describe Cthulhu's height and compare it to a mountain, the power of Cthulhu would be lessened. The size of Cthulhu is what makes him seem powerful at first glance, as is common with many other monsters in entertainment. Furthermore, right after he describes Cthulhu, he mentions a character going mad. This style of writing is very Lovecraftian. First, there is the horrifying description, and then there is the character that goes mad upon witnessing it in person.

The Sublime in *The Call of Cthulhu*

Additionally, one thing this tale does differently than the others is that it incorporates the idea of the sublime, which is correlated to the terror imposed on the subject who witnesses an object or act of great power.

According to Thomas Weiskel, the sublime describes an experience in which man claims to ‘transcend the human.’ Whether man encounters the sublime in a literary work or in a natural scene, the distinguishing feature of sublimity is its capacity to transport man beyond the limits of his humanity and the empirical world in which he lives. Such an experience, Weiskel notes, was peculiarly important to the Romantic writers, who sought to preserve the intellectual validity and moral value of sublimity in an age which increasingly confined man to spiritless notions of reality (Fischer 93)

The idea of the sublime is also related to time itself. In *The Call of Cthulhu*, Cthulhu is described as timeless. Cthulhu, as a demi-god, has been around since the dawn of time and the creation of Earth; this concept is beyond the human mind, it is incomprehensible. Additionally, when referring to the great object, in *The Call of Cthulhu* the great object is, of course, Cthulhu himself and his relation to the universe. It installs insignificance within the characters since in this tale the characters are stubborn and ignorant. They believe that Earth belongs to them and that they are the most powerful creatures inhabiting Earth. Therefore, when they become aware of the existence of the great Cthulhu, their entire perspective on life, Earth, and the universe shifts. This is also why they go mad in this tale; the sight of Cthulhu is too overwhelming for their ignorant minds. In other words, Cthulhu is beyond the human mind and the sight of him drives one crazy. When Lovecraft describes The Thing (Cthulhu), he mentions that an architect went “mad”. An architect is very much involved with Earth and uses its resources. In Lovecraft’s tale, it would make sense that such a man has the mindset that humans are all powerful since he works with Earth’s resources and builds human greatness out of them. When considering the idea of the sublime it is no wonder, then, that the architect goes mad when confronted with the sight of Cthulhu.

When it comes to the aspect of time, Lovecraft relates Cthulhu to the underwater city of R’lyeh, which has stood the test of time and is now decayed and ancient, like Cthulhu himself. One might compare the city of R’lyeh to the castle of Dracula, which is a staple in Gothic literature. With the sublime in mind, it is easier to pinpoint and detail why the characters go mad. The sight of Cthulhu, and the power and supernatural elements which surround him, transport the human mind beyond the limit of belief. Everything that man has gone through and every belief he has held tightly to his core is now proven to be wrong. One has to keep in mind that these characters’ staple their beliefs in natural sciences and none of them are religious or even spiritual.

5. Conclusion

This essay examined three of Lovecraft's tales. In these tales, the horror was psychological since it focused on the mentality of Lovecraft's characters and how their mind reacts to monsters present in the tales. In *Dagon*, I analysed the first-person narrative and explained why, for that particular tale, the first-person narrative works so well. Furthermore, *Dagon's* relation to psychological horror with the theory of Weird Realism was detailed and explained.

For *At the Mountains of Madness* I analysed how psychological horror works within a novel, contrary to a short story. I detailed how this change has an effect on the plot, the characters, and the psychological horror itself. Additionally, I explained how psychological horror works when the plot involves multiple characters, opposite to just one in *Dagon*.

For *The Call of Cthulhu*, I looked at how the horror works within a third-person narrative and how this massive change of direction differs from the other tales. With a third-person narrative, the psychological horror changes and becomes less personal. In his third-person narrative, Lovecraft used the idea of the sublime, which I discussed in relation to *The Call of Cthulhu*.

With that said, although the criticisms against Lovecraft are valid, they are concerned with a different type of horror than what Lovecraft was trying to display. Edmund Wilson criticized Lovecraft for his overwhelming use of adjectives and Graham criticized Lovecraft for his vague descriptions of his monsters. In psychological horror, a lot of adjectives are needed for they paint the picture of said horror in the minds of the readers. The vague descriptions also benefit psychological horror since it makes the monsters mysterious. A big part of their horrifying appeal is their unknown nature. To summarize, Lovecraft's horror was purely psychological, and he did not care for physical scares.

I believe that more research should be applied in the psychological areas of Lovecraft's writing. More focus should be put on the scenes where the characters encounter the psychological horror and go mad for that is the core of the horror within his tales. Furthermore, more research should be focused on the first-person narration and its correlation with psychological horror. Why does the horror feel more real with the first-person narration, and how can authors and writers alike make it even more real to benefit literature and the genre of horror as a whole? There is much more to be found there, and much more to be presented and debated.

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