ŚWIAT I SŁOWO WORLD AND WORD
42 | 1 | 2024 ISSN 1731-3317
http://doi.org/10.53052/17313317.2024.04

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Pushing Boundaries – Monstrosity Depicted by H.P. Lovecraft

Howard Philips Lovecraft is as influential as he is controversial. His impact on other authors and on our broadly-understood notion of popular culture is evident perhaps more now than ever before. Most notably his stories are used as an inspiration or a reference point in video games, but they are also present in TV, film, and literature. Stephen King, arguably the most successful modern horror writer, famously wrote: "[Lovecraft] opened the way for me, as he had done for others before me […] it is his shadow, so long and gaunt, and his eyes, so dark and puritanical, which overlie almost all of the important horror fiction that has come since."[1] The fact that the term Lovecraftian is widely used to describe various forms of monstrosity is a testament to the particular uniqueness of Lovecraft's creations. Bizarre monsters with marine features, consisting of claws, fangs, and a swarm of tentacles are virtually synonymous with H.P. Lovecraft, often earning the moniker of 'Lovecraftian.' However, the term itself is far more complex than simply referring to an extrinsic depiction of an unusual creature. Although Lovecraft's visual descriptions of monsters are a key feature of his distinctiveness among horror authors, the deeper, underlying symbolism of his stories (and monsters) is equally important in creating the eeriness and existential hopelessness of the world of Lovecraft's stories.

[1] Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Everest House, 1980), 63.

However, the latter, more philosophical aspect of his fiction tends to be overlooked by his followers.[2]

In this article, I will try to showcase the characteristics of the monstrosity created by Lovecraft while taking into account both its external and more pronounced attributes, such as visual descriptions, and their implied meaning. However, before the subject of monstrosity itself can be discussed, two fundamental terms must be covered first: *Lovecraftian horror* (sometimes also referred to as cosmic horror) and the *Lovecraftian world*. It is important to know the premise of the genre of Lovecraft's stories and their broader setting before examining the role of the Lovecraftian monster.

Lovecraft presents a challenge to those who seek to categorise his work, especially when we compare Lovecraft with what came before. Although his fiction has its roots in classical Gothic literature, it evolved over the years into something very different. Perhaps the most evident influence that can be observed in his early works is that of Edgar Allan Poe. Thus, Lovecraft's writing was at some points labelled as either Gothic Horror, horror, or science fiction – though this last term was only coined eight years before Lovecraft's death. Lovecraft himself categorized his prose as 'weird fiction' (a term of his own devising). However, even this category seems too broad and too intrinsically diverse to provide a satisfactory label.[3]

A more appropriate classification for Lovecraft may be *cosmic horror*. As Brian Stableford notes, the adjective 'cosmic' frequently occurs both in Lovecraft's fiction and in his essays. He makes a clear distinction between 'physical fear' and 'cosmic fear,' the latter of which is more concerned with one's attitude towards the supernatural than with the supernatural itself. Cosmic horror deals with knowledge and not morality. The terror arises from the reaction to learning about the nature of the world rather than from the actions of demons, ghosts, or curses.[4] Thus, treating Lovecraft's fiction as separate from American Gothic, science-fiction, and regular horror is arguably the safest – not to mention the wisest - approach.[5]

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[2] Duncan Norris, "Lovecraft and Arrival: The Quiet Apocalypse," *Lovecraft Annual*, no. 11 (2017): 110. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26868539 [access 5.08.2021].

[3] Philip Smith, "Re-visioning Romantic-Era Gothicism: An Introduction to Key Works and Themes in the Study of H.P. Lovecraft," *Literature Compass* 8, no. 11, 830–831.

[4] Brian Stableford, "Cosmic Horror," in *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural [2 volumes]: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares,* ed. Sunand Tryambak Joshi (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 65-66.

[5] The classification of weird fiction and cosmic horror is still a contentious subject, and one which goes beyond the scope of this article. However, Jonathan Newell discusses it at length in his recent book. See Jonathan Newell, *A*

On closer inspection, perhaps the most vital component of cosmic horror is the element of the unknown. As Lovecraft himself wrote about horror in one of his essays: "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."[6] This idea is prevalent in most of his stories and appears to be closely interconnected with the concept of the aforementioned 'cosmic fear.'

Saijamari Mannikko notices some tendencies in Lovecraft's writing that today might be termed 'postmodern.' The unknown is not only an external danger in cosmic horror but an internal one as well. It threatens the self and human identity. Although the forces in Lovecraft's stories do not stand in a strictly dichotomic good-evil relationship, they do nonetheless manifest as human or non-human.[7] Nonetheless, this terminology does not entirely apply to Lovecraft's works. Following Eugene Thacker, our real world is essentially non-human – as is manifested by natural disasters, climate change, and so on. However, it is *translated* into a human-centric doctrine which allows people to comprehend the surrounding reality.[8] However, Lovecraft's world pushes this idea to the extreme – cataclysms and disasters are intertwined with supernatural phenomena. A Lovecraftian world is not simply strange or unfamiliar, it is completely devoid of human qualities and so are the author's monsters. It is, therefore, worth noting that in this article the non-human always refers to this extreme variant of non-human that is *untranslatable* into any human point of view.

David McWilliam raises two more characteristics of Lovecraftian horror that are worth mentioning. The first is the danger involved in progress and knowledge. This is quite a common theme in Lovecraft's works – the forbidden knowledge which is the truth about the universe that leads either to madness or death. The second characteristic is the fact that all the "evil" (although "non-human" is perhaps a better classification)

Century of Weird Fiction, 1832–1937: Disgust, Metaphysics and the Aesthetics of Cosmic Horror (Cardiff: University of Whales Press, 2020).

[6] Howard Philips Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," in *The H.P. Lovecraft Omnibus 2: Dagon and other Macabre Tales* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985), 423.

[7] Saijamari Mannikko, "H.P. Lovecraft and the Creation of Horror" (Master Thesis, University of Tampere, 2002), 24–25.

[8] Eugene Thacker, *In the dust of This Planet* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 8, 10, epub.

forces in the Lovecraftian world are pre-existing, already there. The only thing that separates humanity from all these horrors is ignorance.[9]

The last issue to consider in terms of cosmic horror is the fact that Lovecraft's stories were in no way detached from their author's experience. The grim world the writer created – although fantastical – was a pessimistic reflection of the real world. Much of the inspiration behind these stories came from Lovecraft's own fears and struggles. For instance, he suffered from nightmares which he described in great detail in his letters. Externalising and writing down his dreams was ultimately a coping mechanism[10], which simultaneously served as the basis for the horrific monstrosities he would later present on the pages of his stories.

Another interesting link between Lovecraft's personal life and his writings is his attitude towards the supernatural. Although Lovecraft's works often included such themes as magic, deities, and occultism, Lovecraft himself was a strident atheist and rationalist. He strongly believed in nineteenth-century science and despised all forms of religion and occultism. Lovecraft's writing not only reflects his interest in science but also his belief in human limitations. He was fascinated by space but simultaneously knew it to be beyond the reach of humankind.[11] Additionally, his rationalism and love for science, transferred onto the pages of his stories and surrounded by the fantastical and supernatural, are also key characteristics of cosmic horror, placing it somewhere between horror and science fiction. Lovecraft tended to mix the two together and sometimes used scientific reasoning and justification to explain the supernatural and fantastical.[12] On the other hand, the relationship between the scientific and the supernatural in Lovecraft's fiction is also often presented in terms of antagonism. As will be evident in the examples offered later in this article, Lovecraft's protagonists tend to be doctors, scientists, professors, or, broadly speaking, various intellectuals, usually representatives of the orderly human world. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are various sorcerers, occultists,

[9] David McWilliam, "Beyond the Mountains of Madness: Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror and Posthuman Creationism in Ridley Scott's 'Prometheus' (2012)," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, no. 26 (2015): 531-545,631. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26321174 [access 14.09.2021]

[10] Donald Tyson, *The Dream World of H.P. Lovecraft* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2010), 12–14.

[11] James Kneale, "From Beyond: H. P. Lovecraft and the Place of Horror," *Cultural Geographies* 13, no. 1 (2006): 109–110.

[12] Sunand Tryambak Joshi, "In Defense of Lovecraft." *Science Fiction Studies 7*, no. 1 (1980): 111–12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239320 [access 27.09.2021].

or priests from sects or primitive tribes who serve as antagonists, seeking to disrupt the human order; thus, representing *the non-human* and, by extension, the monstrous.

Lovecraft's pessimistic view of the world was by no means unique. As a part of the American Decadent Movement, he was influenced by Edgar Allan Poe and philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In his letters, Lovecraft wrote about the imminent destruction – climatic or otherwise – that awaits mankind.[13] Therefore, the dark and pre-apocalyptic vision of the world captured in his stories is not purely imaginary but based on his real feelings and concerns, as St. Armand notes: "Lovecraft's fascination with decadence expressed itself [...] in a cosmic consciousness which brooded on the progressive decay of mankind and the galaxy which he inhabits."[14]

Ultimately, Lovecraft formulated his own philosophy – cosmicism. This bears some similarities to nihilism but is inherently different. The most important fundament of cosmicism is that it is neither optimistic nor pessimistic but entirely indifferent, since "human beings are simply too insignificant to be worth bothering about."[15] Although cosmicism is primarily explained in Lovecraft's letters and essays, it also spills into his fiction.[16] However, it is fundamentally different within the scope of his fictional world, which functions in a distinct way. In his fiction, Lovecraft does not explore the possible implications of cosmic indifference but rather shows them through a horrific spectacle of cosmic terrors. Jeff Lacy connects Lovecraft's literary cosmicism to mystical experience. Assuming that mysticism implies an encounter between a person and the cosmos in a way that changes the individual's way of comprehending the world and its laws, it is basically the core of Lovecraftian horror – a character coming to a terrifying realisation about the true nature of the world and their own ultimate insignificance. However, although a mystic experience may typically lead to a sense of self-fulfilment, in Lovecraft's world the effect

[13] Barton Levi St. Armand, "H. P. Lovecraft: New England Decadent," *Caliban* no. 12. (1975): 129–130.

[14] St. Armand, "H. P. Lovecraft: New England Decadent," 132.

[15] Sunand Tryambak Joshi, *The evolution of the Weird Tale* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2016), 181, epub.

[16] The same can be said about Lovecraft's racist and xenophobic tendencies, which are present in some of his works – some expressed blatantly, some more veiled. However, they are not connected to Lovecraftian monsters. There have been some attempts to link these two subjects but they have been convincingly refuted by ST Joshi. See S. T. Joshi. "Why Michel Houellebecq Is Wrong about Lovecraft's Racism." in *Lovecraft Annual*, no. 12 (2018): 43–50. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26868554. 47–48 [access 14.09.2021].

is virtually the opposite. Thus, Lacy calls Lovecraft's narrators "negative mystics."[17] These philosophical tendencies tie in with the concept of horror in the cosmic horror genre that stems from knowledge about the world. The common element of virtually all horror stories is the monster, which often serves as the central point of the narrative. Due to the anti-anthropocentric approach in Lovecraft's writing, the position of the monster is even more significant in cosmic horror – as the stories are not about people but rather cosmic phenomena that often manifest in the form of a monster.[18] As Richard Bleiler notes, the word "monster" comes from Latin and Old French, and implies a certain level of deviation, deformation, and abnormality. Monsters may be human, animalistic, organic or non-organic, and take virtually any possible form. Bleiler also points to the fact that monsters are generally most frightening as long as they remain hidden, in the dark, barely described. Revealing the monster may result in the reader becoming familiar with it and this would consequently lessen the horrific effect of the creature.[19]

According to Mathias Clasen, monsters fill the antagonistic role in horror stories. They are often viewed as an evil antagonistic force; however, as he suggests, horror monsters are not always necessarily evil in the moral sense, but often follow their instincts or nature in a fashion similar to a wild animal.[20] Furthermore, Clasen suggests that this portrayal of monsters (as animalistic predatory beings) is strongly connected to evolutionary psychology. Even though monsters in horror stories may be bizarre and unrealistic, they still tend to evoke primal fear in the reader – such as the fear of venomous snakes, of being chased by a wild animal, and so forth.[21]

Noel Carroll adds one more important function to the monster in a horror story – which is to disgust. The feeling of revulsion often accompanies the feeling of danger in horror literature: "[T]he tendency

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[17] Jeff Lacy and Steven J. Zani, (2007). "The Negative Mystics of the Mechanistic Sublime: Walter Benjamin and Lovecraft's Cosmicism," in *Lovecraft annual no.1*, ed. S.T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2007), 70–71.

[18] Eric Wilson, *The Republic of Cthulhu* (Santa Barbara: Punctum, 2016), 16-17, https://doi.org/ 10.21983/P3.0155.1.00

[19] Richard Blailer. "The Monster," in *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural [2 volumes]: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares,* ed. Sunand Tryambak Joshi (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 341–342.

[20] Mathias Clasen, "Evil Monsters in Horror Fiction: An Evolutionary Perspective on Form and Function," in A History of Evil in Popular Culture: What Hannibal Lecter, Stephen King, and Vampires Reveal About America, ed. Sharon Packer and Jody Pennington (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 39–40.

[21] Clasen, "Evil Monsters," 47.

in horror novels and stories [is] to describe monsters in terms of, and associate them with, filth, decay, deterioration, slime, and so on."[22] This should not come as a surprise since both fear and disgust evoke the same reaction: 'I should avoid it.' Combining the two makes the monster even more non-human and antagonistic.

Finally, Carroll comments on the position of the monster within the fictional world: "In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters that they encounter as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order. The monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world."[23] This again does not entirely apply to Lovecraft's fiction. A Lovecraftian world is abnormal in and of itself and only its surface can be considered as corresponding to the real world. As mentioned before, the characters in Lovecraft's works can live normal lives as long as they are oblivious to the real nature of their world. Monsters, although they are rarely labelled as such, in Lovecraft's stories often predate humankind, which is an ephemeral phenomenon in itself; thus, it can be argued that in Lovecraftian horror it is not only that monsters are not "disturbances of the natural order" but, in fact, that it is *mankind* that is the disturbance.

In sum, it is safe to claim that Lovecraftian horror is not only distinct among other subgenres of horror but rather completely opposed to them in several regards – the place of the monster and the human is switched; fear based on the survival instinct is replaced with existential dread; the world is not an orderly place that is at some point disrupted by the monster but it is non-human and threatening in the first place. The element of disgust – especially physical disgust – is still present in the depiction of monsters – they are still slimy, non-human, and disturbing, but there is also a strange aspect of the bizarre or weird to them, evoking even a strange form of fascination – proven for instance by the abundance of art depicting Cthulhu.

To illustrate how these tendencies ultimately form the monsters of Lovecraft's works, I will discuss monstrosity depicted in three separate stories. First, it is worth re-emphasizing that the term cosmic horror applies more (but not exclusively) to the later works of Lovecraft than his early work, which were heavily influenced by Poe and other Gothic authors. His

[22] Noël Carroll, "The Nature of Horror," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 1 (1987): 53.
[23] Noël Carroll, "The Nature of Horror," 52.

most well-known and impactful creations come from those later stories, sometimes collectively known as the Cthulhu Mythos.

The Call of Cthulhu depicts an investigation into a bizarre cult worshipping a strange creature. The story is considerably more complex than Lovecraft's early short stories and includes several interesting motifs that illuminate cosmic horror as a genre (mixing outer space with occultism, for instance); however, the present analysis will focus mainly on the monster – the titular Cthulhu.

Cthulhu is arguably Lovecraft's most famous creation – the monster mostly readily associated with the author and the most recognizable in the Lovecraft bestiary. In the text, Cthulhu is referred to as a monster several times – or rather, figures and drawings of Cthulhu are described as depicting a monster. However, it is explained that he is not only a monster but one of the Great Old Ones – ancient beings that once ruled over the Earth but now have been in a deep in sleep for aeons, as Lovecraft writes:

> They were not composed altogether of flesh and blood. They had shape [...] but that shape was not made of matter. When the stars were right, They could plunge from world to world through the sky; but when the stars were wrong, They could not live. But although They no longer lived, They would never really die. They all lay in stone houses in Their great city of R'lyeh, preserved by the spells of mighty Cthulhu for a glorious resurrection when the stars and the earth might once more be ready for Them.[24]

There are two aspects of Cthulhu as a monster. The first, seen in the fragment above, presents him as a non-tangible entity, not of the humans' world. He is not subject to the same laws as humans are – he can travel between worlds and, thus, is not limited by space, and cannot die – thus, he is also not limited by time. As mentioned before, Lovecraft did not believe that space was within the reach of humanity; therefore, Cthulhu – or the 'Great Old Ones' – seems to be far beyond the human level of potential. However, they are not limitless – as stated above, their existence is dependent on the position of the stars. Therefore, they are perhaps not just "better" than humans but completely different in nature – thus fulfilling the role of the non-human as discussed before.

[24] Howard Philips Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu," last modified August 20, 2009, https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cc.aspx [access 5.12.2021].

The second aspect is the visual representation. As Joshi notes, "There is never an entity in Lovecraft that is not in some fashion material."[25] And Cthulhu is one of the best examples of this trend in Lovecraft's works. He is described as "the green, sticky spawn of the stars."[26] There are two vital pieces of information in this short fragment. The first two adjectives, "green, sticky," relate back to what Carroll wrote about the function of a monster –to trigger disgust in the reader. However, "spawn of the stars" evokes a different reaction. By taking the reader somewhere beyond the Earth, to a space between the stars, a sense of awe is elicited. Cthulhu is not simply an alien. By the time *The Call of Cthulhu* was written and published, the concept of an alien had already been known in literature, for instance in *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells (1897). Cthulhu, however, is something more – he is synonymous with outer space, with the vastness of the universe, with the stars and everything that is unreachable for humans.

In the story, there are more detailed descriptions of Cthulhu's physical form: "[He] yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature [...] A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings,"[27] and also: "[A] monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind."[28]

The city where Cthulhu sleeps is at the bottom of the ocean; yet he comes from the stars. The ocean and outer space are the environments that are the most hostile to humans and the least explored; through association with these two locations, Lovecraft further connects the monster to both danger and the unknown. The depiction of Cthulhu, as mentioned before, has become iconic and synonymous with cosmic horror; however, he is still somewhat grounded in the literary tradition – although not strictly the horror tradition. Cthulhu is described as an amalgamation of different creatures – an octopus (which may also be connected to the mythological kraken), a dragon (known from various legends and myths), and a "human caricature."

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[25] Sunand Tryambak Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Cabin John: Wildside Press, 2003), 186.
[26] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu.".
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

Interestingly, contrary to what has been discussed before on the subject of literary monsters, Lovecraft chose to describe Cthulhu in great detail rather than allow him to remain in the dark and let the reader's imagination fill the gaps. Unlike more conventional horror fiction, Lovecraft's writing utilizes the aforementioned existential dread rather than tension or shock; therefore, there is no need to conceal the monster. Revealing it, however, helps to increase the distance between cosmic horror and Gothic fiction. It is a device that Lovecraft utilizes in more of his stories, as will be evident in the next examples.

Cthulhu's clear connection to the sea is also an interesting aspect of this entity. As Mike Ashley points out, the sea has always had a strong relationship with humanity. Its luring quality, known as "the call of the sea," echoes the story's title. Additionally, the sea, although enticing, remains widely unexplored; thus, it persists as a source of the unknown and, historically, is a source of mythical creatures.[29]

The last issue to consider is what Cthulhu's motivations are, or, more specifically, what his role within the story is. As discussed before, monsters in cosmic horror are not only beasts that are supposed to act on the reader's primal fears. They are a threat on an existential level, far beyond the classic vampire or witch. The threat in *The Call of Cthulhu* is the awakening of the titular entity, which results in the following events:

> [At the proper time,] the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from his tomb to revive His subjects and resume his rule of earth [...] Then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and revelling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom.[30]

There are two important notes to be taken from the two fragments: the change is instigated by humans, and Cthulhu himself does not really herald the end of humankind. Based on these two fragments, it is safe to say that *The Call of Cthulhu* is probably the story where Lovecraft's

[29] Mike Ashley, "The Sea Creature," in *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural [2 volumes]: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares,* ed. Sunand Tryambak Joshi (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 441–442.

[30] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu."

decadent influence is most evident, as the main danger in the narrative is the rapid decline and final collapse of civilisation. The danger comes from within, not from without – as the entire process must be initiated by people themselves. Cthulhu is therefore not a monster that arrives uninvited or a monster that tricks people into letting him in – he is what happens when humanity declines and rejects all morals and its own identity – eventually becoming a part of the non-human.

Donald Burleson expands on this idea by pointing to the ambiguity of the title of the story, which further solidifies this strange symbiosis between the human and the non-human represented by Cthulhu. "The Call of Cthulhu" can be interpreted in two ways: as Cthulhu calling for his worshippers to awaken him or as his worshippers calling for Cthulhu to awaken.[31] The first interpretation puts Cthulhu in the position of a more traditional monster that tricks people into freeing him. However, the second interpretation blurs the lines between the human and the antagonistic non-human.

Cthulhu is essentially a religious entity – a god-like monster at the centre of a strange cult. The cult itself seems to have something of a hierarchical structure with priests and wizards. However, interestingly, Cthulhu is also referred to as "the great priest." Ultimately, it is not clear whether he is a god or one of the Old Ones (in *The Call of Cthulhu*, he is presented as one of the Great Old Ones, but in *The Dunwich Horror,* he is said to be a separate entity) or something completely different. The bleakness of his nature however seems to be essential to his being embedded in that strange, non-human and incomprehensible world. To further solidify the religious dimension of Cthulhu, the etymology of his name can also be taken into consideration. Burleson notices that "Cthulhu" is phonetically close to the Greek "katholou" meaning "in general" and relating to "catholic."[32]

These religious undertones are also present in *The Dunwich Horror*. The story opens with a description of the titular village, and the reader is almost immediately met with references to the occult and satanism: "Two centuries ago, when talk of witch-blood, Satan-worship, and strange forest presences was not laughed at, it was the custom to give reasons for avoiding

[31] Donald R. Burleson, *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 82–83.

[32] Burleson, *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe*, 83-84.

the locality."[33] On top of that, the villagers are said to be inbred and degenerate. However, even among them, one man from Dunwich stands out as an outsider – Old Whateley, who is believed to delve into black magic. At some point, his daughter Lavinia gives birth to a son – Wilbur. The child ages at an abnormal rate and Old Whateley even hints at the child's unnatural origin: "I dun't keer what folks think—ef Lavinny's boy looked like his pa, he wouldn't look like nothin' ye expeck […] some day yew folks'll hear a child o' Lavinny's a-callin' its father's name on the top o' Sentinel Hill!"[34]

The story then focuses on the life of Wilbur. He is said to be an odd individual who, besides the accelerated ageing, has a strange goatish head, is particularly hated by dogs, and always keeps his torso carefully covered. He is taught about the occult and magic by his grandfather. After Old Whateley dies, Wilbur sets out to obtain a particular book devoted to the subject of black magic – the Necronomicon. He breaks into a library and tries to steal the book only to be surprised and mauled to death by a dog. His death in the story is followed by an extremely detailed description of his body, revealed at last by the action of the dog's attack:

> Above the waist it was semi-anthropomorphic; though its chest, where the dog's rending paws still rested watchfully, had the leathery, reticulated hide of a crocodile or alligator. The back was piebald with yellow and black, and dimly suggested the squamous covering of certain snakes. Below the waist, though, it was the worst; for here all human resemblance left off and sheer phantasy began. The skin was thickly covered with coarse black fur, and from the abdomen a score of long greenish-grey tentacles with red sucking mouths protruded limply. Their arrangement was odd, and seemed to follow the symmetries of some cosmic geometry unknown to earth or the solar system. On each of the hips, deep set in a kind of pinkish, ciliated orbit, was what seemed to be a rudimentary eye; whilst in lieu of a tail there depended a kind of trunk or feeler with purple annular markings, and with many evidences of being an undeveloped mouth or throat. The limbs, save for their black fur, roughly resembled the hind legs of prehistoric earth's giant saurians; and terminated in ridgy-veined pads that were neither hooves

[33] Howard Philips Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror," last modified August 20, 2009, https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/dh.aspx [access 14.08.2021].

[34] Ibid.

> nor claws. When the thing breathed, its tail and tentacles rhythmically changed colour, as if from some circulatory cause normal to the non-human side of its ancestry. In the tentacles this was observable as a deepening of the greenish tinge, whilst in the tail it was manifest as a yellowish appearance which alternated with a sickly greyish-white in the spaces between the purple rings. Of genuine blood there was none; only the foetid greenish-yellow ichor which trickled along the painted floor beyond the radius of the stickiness, and left a curious discolouration behind it.[35]

Wilbur's appearance resembles the story's structure itself. *The Dunwich Horror* begins with an abundance of references to the occult and the demonic only to later reveal that the true intrigue in the village has a completely different nature. Similarly, the description of Wilbur's appearance also hints at a demonic origin (the goatish head) only to be later revealed to be something else entirely.

After Wilbur's death, the story follows Dr Henry Armitage – the librarian who refused to lend the book to Wilbur. He deciphers Wilbur's journal and deduces that the monstrous individual was planning to release the so-called Old Ones into the world. In the Necronomicon, the book Wilbur was after, it was written: "Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where man rules now. After summer is winter, and after winter summer. They wait patient and potent, for here shall They reign again."[36]

In the meantime, an enormous, invisible creature breaks free from the Whateleys' farm and terrorizes the people of Dunwich. Eventually, Dr Armitage and two other men travel to Dunwich in order to stop the monster. They use magic to make the monster visible and eventually defeat him. The appearance of the monster is described by people observing the confrontation from afar:

> Bigger'n a barn . . . all made o' squirmin' ropes . . . hull thing sort o' shaped like a hen's egg bigger'n anything, with dozens o' legs like hogsheads that haff shut up when they step . . . nothin' solid abaout it—all like jelly, an' made o' sep'rit wrigglin' ropes pushed clost together . . . great bulgin' eyes all over it . . . ten or twenty maouths or trunks a-stickin' aout all along the

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

> sides, big as stovepipes, an' all a-tossin' an' openin' an' shuttin' . . . all grey, with kinder blue or purple rings . . . an' Gawd in heaven—that haff face on top! . . .[37]

> Oh, oh, my Gawd, that haff face—that haff face on top of it . . . that face with the red eyes an' crinkly albino hair, an' no chin, like the Whateleys . . . It was a octopus, centipede, spider kind o' thing, but they was a haff-shaped man's face on top of it, an' it looked like Wizard Whateley's, only it was yards an' yards acrost. . . .[38]

At the end of the battle, when the monster is about to be defeated, he screams: "HELP! HELP! . . . ff—ff—ff—FATHER! FATHER! YOG-SOTHOTH! . . ."[39] in a grotesque parody of the crucifixion. Ultimately, it is revealed that the monster was a twin brother of Wilbur's, only more like their father (hinting at the monstrosity of Yog-Sothoth, who had not been physically revealed at that point).

Despite its popularity among fans, *The Dunwich Horror* may be regarded as a rather poor and "pulpish" story.[40] As Joshi writes, the plot of the story can be narrowed down to a battle between good and evil in the form of the conflict between Armitage and the Whateleys. He then points to Armitage's pompous explanation of Wilbur's plans and his moral lecture as a weak ending to the plot.[41] However, such a reading of the story seems rather superficial, since – again – the conflict occurs between the human and the non-human, and not simply between good and evil.

Even simply assigning the role of the hero to one of the characters in *The Dunwich Horror* is problematic. As Burleson points out, although Dr Armitage seems to defeat the "evil" in the end, the archetypical function of a hero – or, at least, of the protagonist - is much closer to Wilbur and his twin. It is Wilbur who embarks on the quest to find a magical item (the Necronomicon) and dies in the process to be then replaced by his brother

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Sunand Tryambak Joshi, "H.P. Lovecraft: The Fiction of Materialism," in *Lovecraft and a World in Transition: Collected Essays on H.P. Lovecraft,* ed. Sunand Tryambak Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2014), 393. Epub.

[41] Sunand Tryambak Joshi, "Time, Space, and Natural Law: Science and Pseudo-Science in Lovecraft," in *Lovecraft and a World in Transition: Collected Essays on H.P. Lovecraft,* ed. Sunand Tryambak Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2014), 464. Epub.

in pursuit of the goal.[42] Even his origin – half-human and half-divine (although in the context of Lovecraft, this may be "half-alien" or "half-nonhuman") – brings to mind the classical mythic heroes.

Joshi's second accusation regarding *The Dunwich Horror* is concerned with two points in the story where Dr Armitage provides his understanding of Wilbur's goal ("[P]lan for the extirpation of the entire human race and all animal and vegetable life from the earth by some terrible elder race of beings from another dimension."[43]) and where he gives "a moral lecture:"

> It was—well, it was mostly a kind of force that doesn't belong in our part of space; a kind of force that acts and grows and shapes itself by other laws than those of our sort of Nature. We have no business calling in such things from outside, and only very wicked people and very wicked cults ever try to.

However, these two excerpts perfectly match the character of Dr Armitage and his role in the story. It is important to remember that the librarian is a seventy-three-year-old man who has come into contact with the horror of the non-human for the first time in his life. Using Thacker's aforementioned terminology, he was simply translating (or rather trying to translate) the non-human into an understandable anthropocentric explanation of the events of the story – he was coping with the unearthed reality of his world. Moreover, his explanation was not accurate even within the scope of *The Dunwich Horror*. The fragment in the Necronomicon in the story states: "Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where man rules now. After summer is winter, and after winter summer. They wait patient and potent, for here shall They reign again."[44] It is implied that the "expiration of the human race" is an entirely natural event in the cycle of life on Earth and not some malignant plot of evil beings, and it is safe to assume that the occultic texts in Lovecraft's world are a far more reliable and objective source of knowledge about the non-human world than an explanation of an old man with very limited knowledge.

When it comes to monsters, *The Dunwich Horror* provides a very different type of adversary than *The Call of Cthulhu*. Since Cthulhu is a monstrous and extremely non-human entity, its only counterpart in *The*

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[42] Burleson, *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe*, 124.

[43] Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror."

[44] Ibid.

Dunwich Horror is Yog-Sothoth who, however, does not appear in the flesh in the story. Wilbur and his brother, although having a similarly strange physical form, are closer to humans, they are a bridge between the human and the non-human. Despite not being quasi-divine figures (as opposed to Yog-Sothoth and Cthulhu), they have a clear divine origin in the story that blurs the line between the divine and the demonic.

Similarly, the titular monster in *The Haunter of the Dark* is not as strongly emphasised as a godly being (despite being at the centre of a cult), but – contrary to Wilbur and his brother – he is entirely non-human. The story follows Robert Blake, a young writer and artist who moves to an apartment in Providence, Rhode Island. His apartment's window overlooks an old church on a hill. The building seems to have a strange allure; therefore, Blake decides to investigate the place. He finds out that the locals are afraid of the old church, and one man tells him about a sect that supposedly summoned an evil being in the temple. The church has been shut up and abandoned since then.

Robert Blake finds his way inside through a broken window. There, he discovers numerous occultic tomes and the remains of a journalist who was investigating the sect years before, as well as a strange ancient artefact – a Shining Trapezohedron. Blake stares into the object and starts seeing fantastical images of distant places. Later, he learns that the Trapezohedron had been created aeons ago on a distant planet and ended up on the Earth before mankind even came into existence. Additionally, he learns that using the artefact calls a being referenced to as the Haunter of the Dark from "the black gulfs of chaos."[45]

The creature, however, can only exist in darkness and any form of light is harmful to it. Therefore, the monster is trapped inside the old church, since the city outside is illuminated by streetlights at night. However, one night – during a storm – there is an electrical breakdown, and the lights go out. The citizens gather around the church with candles and flashlights trying to prevent the creature from breaking loose as Blake watches their efforts from the window of his apartment. At one point a gust of wind blows out most of the candles and the creature, described as darker than night, escapes the church.

[45] Howard Philips Lovecraft, "The Haunter of the Dark," last modified August 20, 2009, https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/hd.aspx [access 14.08.2021].

Robert Blake is found dead in his apartment, facing the window with a terrified expression. In the last moments of his life, he was writing in his journal about the things he had seen thanks to the Shining Trapezohedron: other worlds and other galaxies. On top of that, it is clear from his notes that he was going insane – slowly losing his sense of identity. After Blake's death, the Shining Trapezohedron is thrown into the sea.

Although the story shares some themes with the previous ones – the occult, beings from outer space, and sects – it also differs significantly, especially in the description of its principle monster. The Haunter of the Dark is described rather vaguely when compared to Cthulhu or the twins of *The Dunwich Horror.* He is said to be "a great spreading blur of denser blackness against the inky sky—something like a formless cloud of smoke,"[46] "a grotesque and hideous mass of smoke,"[47] and finally, in Blake's notes, it is said to have black wings and a "three-lobed burning eye."[48] The Haunter of the Dark, in terms of physical appearance, is definitely closer to the notion of keeping the monster in the dark and leaving much to the reader's imagination. However, there is still the element of Lovecraftian weirdness as the story ends with the "three-lobed burning eye." One more aspect of this monster that is emphasised is the smell. The Haunter of the Dark is accompanied by "an overpowering foetor" which is said to be "choking and sickening the trembling watchers."[49] This clearly evokes the monster's function to disgust.

The monster in *The Haunter of the Dark* is perhaps also more traditional in terms of his actions as he tries to manipulate and take away Blake's free will, who seems to be more susceptible to the influence of the unknown (perhaps due to being an artist). The creature was not only driving Blake insane but also using some form of hypnosis.[50] This can be read as the monster's malicious behaviour or as a form of the aforementioned negative mystic experience evoked by acquiring forbidden knowledge.

Burleson writes about the conflict between light and darkness in the story. He notices that it cannot be simply understood as good vs evil even

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Haefele, John D. "Reappraising 'The Haunter of the Dark,'" *Lovecraft Annual*, no. 7 (2013): 141–143. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26868471 [access 14.08.2021].

in the context of the mythopoetic tradition (Lucifer being associated with light, for instance).[51] Once again, the conflict seems to be more between the human and the non-human. The dark in the story is connected to the distant past, a void represented by the monster. The light, however, comes from electricity and streetlamps – the human world. The monster is trapped in an abandoned church, perhaps another remnant of the past, surrounded by the civilised world in which he cannot dwell.

Although not much is known about the origin of the monster (Blake at the end of the story identifies him as Nyarlathotep but there is some evidence that this classification may be inaccurate[52]), it can be assumed that he is of extra-terrestrial origin. The artefact used to summon him comes from another planet, the sect connected to him is called Starry Wisdom, and he himself seems to be connected to the void. Interestingly, the Shining Trapezohedron ends up in the sea, which draws a parallel between the Haunter of the Dark and Cthulhu.

There are many more monsters in Lovecraft's work; however, I believe those found in these three stories encapsulate some of the most prominent characteristics of the Lovecraftian monster and are simultaneously diverse enough to represent a wider range of the monstrosity present in Cthulhu Mythos. Based on these examples, three main traits of the Lovecraftian monster can be suggested:

1) A Lovecraftian monster can only exist in a world that is non-human by nature.
2) A Lovecraftian monster must manifest as a material and unique entity.
3) A Lovecraftian monster has an alien and godly or semi-godly nature.

The first point is perhaps the most important. A monster in a Lovecraftian world is not a disturber of order but rather a part of the world that is only seemingly ordered. Be it Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, or the Haunter of the Dark, they all predate humanity and dwarf its significance in the scale of the universe; and more human-like monsters such as Wilbur and his twin brother are closely interconnected with those non-human entities. The idea of Cthulhu's existence being closely connected to the alignment

[51] Burleson, *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe,* 151–152.
[52] Haefele, 'The Haunter of the Dark,'" 144–145.

of the stars, the natural cycle of the rule of monsters mentioned in *The Dunwich Horror,* and the Haunter's inability to exist in human settlements (and being freed by a storm – a natural phenomenon) all point to a strong connection between the world and the monster. Therefore, monsters in Lovecraft's works are phenomena or instances of the world being non-human and antagonistic, rather than being anomalous predatory creatures.

Furthermore, a Lovecraftian monster cannot exist in a "human" world since the terror in cosmic horror comes not from primal evolutionary fear but from existential dread. The monster can be defeated (Cthulhu at the end of *The Call of Cthulhu* or Wilbur and his twin in *The Dunwich Horror*) but it still leaves the characters disillusioned about their non-human and terrifying world – they survive not just the encounter with the monster but also the negative mystic experience. A Lovecraftian world is not only cosmically indifferent but is also built on nihilistic absurdity:

> He thought of the ancient legends of Ultimate Chaos, at whose centre sprawls the blind idiot god Azathoth, Lord of All Things, encircled by his flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers, and lulled by the thin monotonous piping of a daemoniac flute held in nameless paws.[53]

The Lord of All Things is a sleeping blind idiot – this is the reality the characters in Lovecraft's works are faced with – this is the horror, and the monsters are windows through which one can see the real non-human world.

The second point is concerned mainly with the visual dimension of Lovecraft's monsters. Lovecraft may employ traditional monstrous features (as with Cthulhu, for instance), but ultimately he pushes the boundaries to create something uniquely weird and, to a point, even fascinating (as with the very detailed and fantastical description of Wilbur) due to his belief that witches and ghosts have become mundane.[54] Therefore, the weird and creative visual aspect of the monster is essential in cosmic horror. Even a more traditionally vague monster such as the Haunter of the Dark has at least that one significant weird characteristic – a three-lobed eye – a short phrase whose ambiguity is still the subject of debates among enthusiasts of Lovecraft's work.

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[53] Lovecraft, "The Haunter of the Dark."

[54] Stableford. "The Cosmic Horror," 66.

The last point refers to the origin of Lovecraftian monsters, which is also a bridge between the genres of horror and science fiction. Joshi remarks that due to the rapid exploration of the planet in Lovecraft's times, fewer and fewer places remained alien and could qualify as a believable source of the unknown that may spawn monsters. Therefore, Lovecraft was somewhat pushed to move the birthplace of his creatures into the depths of outer space (although, similarly unexplored oceans were also closely connected to some of his monsters, as highlighted earlier).[55] This alien component of a Lovecraftian monster is important not only to portray its non-human nature but also to remind the reader of the vastness of the universe and the insignificance of humankind – an idea that lies at the centre of cosmicism.

The other side of the origin of Lovecraftian monsters is their divine nature. As evident in the stories discussed in this article, the monsters in Lovecraft's works are surrounded by cults, sects, religion, and the occult – they occupy the literary positions of gods, and all the supernatural elements of these stories are always connected to them. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Lovecraft's (and his successors') works are collectively known as mythos. Following Joshi, what makes the Cthulhu Mythos unique is the fact that they all come from a single writer and have no roots in folklore, which is not the case with more conventional horror stories. Furthermore, he proposes that these Mythos could only have been written in that particular timeframe. Lovecraft was raised in a conservative and religious household; however, in light of the rapid scientific progress of the twentieth century, he rejected religion and branded himself an atheist and materialist. Therefore, the Cthulhu Mythos may actually be also called an "antimythology."[56]

Bearing in mind the above and the examples from the stories discussed earlier in the article, it is clear that religion is an important element in Lovecraft's fiction and is closely connected to the non-human and the monstrous. Interestingly, there seems to be no clear division between the godly, the demonic, and the occult in Lovecraft's writings. Instead, all three fall into the category of non-human and, thus, stand in opposition to the human world.

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[55] Joshi, "H.P. Lovecraft: The Fiction of Materialism," 381–382.

[56] Sunand Tryambak Joshi. "The Cthulhu Mythos," in *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural [2 volumes]: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares,* ed. Sunand Tryambak Joshi (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 98–99.

In sum, the most important aspect of a Lovecraftian monster is its connection to the world in which it exists. It is a reciprocal relationship as the world manifests itself as the monster, and the monster is a reflection of the world. Therefore, the visual side of the monster is important because it mirrors the non-human and terrifying nature of the surrounding reality. The fear it causes comes equally from its material dimension and from people learning about the true nature of the world. Hence, pushing the boundaries and making the monster equally bizarre and unfamiliar to the reader is essential to conveying the idea that the world is just as horrific, which serves as the foundation of the existential dread in Lovecraft's works.

Kamil Pysz

Pushing Boundaries – Monstrosity Depicted by H.P. Lovecraft

Cosmic horror, closely associated with H.P. Lovecraft, has been present in popular culture since its inception in the early twentieth century. Over the years, it has influenced several genres: science fiction, fantasy, and horror. However, the word 'Lovecraftian' tends to be misused and applied to any depiction of monstrosity that is in some way unique. The aim of this article is to provide a list of characteristics that make the monsters in Lovecraft's prose truly Lovecraftian by analysing three short stories: *The Call of Cthulhu*, *The Dunwich Horror,* and *The Haunter of the Dark*. The paper is divided into three parts. The first is concerned with the literary context of Lovecraft's writing – the genre, the philosophies and movements that influenced the stories, and how they manifest within Lovecraft's works. The second part covers the three stories written by Lovecraft, with an analysis that focuses on depictions of monstrosity and their Lovecraftian aspects. The three facets of Lovecraftian monsters this article will discuss are their visual representations, their symbolic meaning, and their role within the stories. The last part will provide conclusions, including a proposed definition of the Lovecraftian monster.

Keywords: cosmic horror, monsters, non-human, H.P. Lovecraft, Lovecraftian monster

Słowa kluczowe: kosmiczny horror, potwory, nie-ludzkie, H. P. Lovecraft, potwór Lovecraftowski