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H.P. LOVECRAFT AND THE MODERNIST GROTESQUE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and  
Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Sean Elliot Martin

December 2008

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Sean Elliot Martin

2008

H.P. LOVECRAFT AND THE MODERNIST GROTESQUE

By

Sean Elliot Martin

Approved November 21, 2008

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# ABSTRACT

## H.P. LOVECRAFT AND THE MODERNIST GROTESQUE

By

Sean Elliot Martin

December, 2008

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Anne Brannen

This study serves to bring Lovecraft into a new and more significant literary context, and to highlight the relationships between modernist and grotesque literature. Various authors are mentioned with reference to both modernist and grotesque literary tendencies, and Lovecraft's "modernist grotesque" characteristics are analyzed in their connection to the three concepts that are prominent in both modernism and the grotesque: alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity. Biographical information about Lovecraft is used minimally in this study, which focuses on textual analysis of many elements of Lovecraft's writing that seem to have been previously overlooked, including religious satire, scrutiny of scientific practices, and the modernist concept of "literary difficulty." This dissertation serves to establish a new place for Lovecraft in the larger context of English literature, and to establish a new way of thinking about modernism with

reference to its possible roots in the experimental and “diagnostic” impulses of the literary grotesque.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my parents, Jeanie and John Martin, who always challenged me to challenge myself. I would also like to dedicate this project to the Great H.P. Lovecraft, without whom this (and countless other creations) would not have been possible. Finally, I would like to dedicate this project to Elizabeth Pallack, multi-talented artist, co-creator, inspiration, and life companion. Her influence on my life is so great that it defies the invention of an appropriate title.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is only appropriate to acknowledge a few individuals among the legions of Lovecraft enthusiasts and dear friends who inspired me to figure out just what kind of writer could have such a hold over his readership. Among them, Timothy Juka, Jon Richard, Mike Monaco, the late Christopher Strom, and world-renowned sword-swallower Dai Andrews distinguished themselves by providing friendship, energy, and hours of late night conversation that invigorated my ideas and their communication.

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# H.P. Lovecraft and the Modernist Grotesque:

## An Introduction

The works of H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) have had a considerable influence upon what is now commonly called “speculative fiction.”<sup>1</sup> However, Lovecraft’s work seems to be misunderstood, misrepresented, and underestimated by many of his readers and critics. Lovecraft’s “weird fiction” (the label he preferred) has spawned over 20 major films, many collections of spin-off stories and fan fiction, seven editions of a world-famous role-playing game, sculpture and artwork that cannot be easily cataloged, ongoing publications devoted exclusively to his life and work, publishing companies devoted to the publishing of work by and about Lovecraft (Arkham House and Necronomicon Press), volumes of biographical and critical writing, and an industry of novelty items (including degrees available from his fictional Miskatonic University). Perhaps the most unusual result of Lovecraft’s work can be found in the cults and solitary practitioners of sub-religions based upon his writing. Throughout the United States, individuals and groups who have come to believe that Lovecraft’s god-like monsters actually exist open their novelty copies of the *Necronomicon* to attempt to invoke Cthulhu, the most well-known of Lovecraft’s “Great Old Ones.” No other fiction of the last several hundred years can boast such a profound accidental result.<sup>2</sup> Hundreds of

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of “speculative fiction” may vary slightly from one theorist to the next, but it typically includes science fiction, horror, fantasy, swords and sorcery, magical realism, Utopian, and Dystopian literature. Generally speaking, speculative fiction reflects the author’s speculation as to certain alternative ways that reality might play out if certain elements of time, space, science, or culture were altered from what the author perceives as his or her societal norm.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard’s *Dianetics* (1950) is presented as a non-fiction psycho-spiritual guide for the purpose of establishing the institution of Scientology. It is not a work

Lovecraft-based web sites have developed, and groups gather annually in his home town of Providence, Rhode Island, to celebrate the creator of the “Cthulhu Mythos.”

Depending on one’s attitude toward such popularity, these facts may be used to support the idea of Lovecraft’s genius or they may be used to support the idea of “genre fiction” as second-rate entertainment for unsophisticated readers. In either case, it is difficult to ignore the impact of Lovecraft upon his readership.

## Lovecraft and “Weird Fiction”

Lovecraft typically referred to his stories simply as “weird fiction,” which *Weird Tales* editor Otis Adelbert Kline defines in his 1924 article “Why Weird Tales?” as fiction that appeals to “readers who appreciate the weird, the bizarre, the unusual—who recognize true art” (569). Indeed, the majority of Lovecraft’s works published in his own lifetime appeared in *Weird Tales*. Lovecraft’s contributions to *Weird Tales* were so valued that he was offered the editorship of this long-lived periodical of imaginative fiction, which revolved around subject matter that one could loosely categorize as being outside of the realm of “normal” human experience. Various examples of Lovecraft’s writing could be described as “weird fiction,” “modern grotesque,” “modernist,” “surrealist,” “Gothic,” “horror,” science fiction,” “expressionistic,” “impressionistic,” “fantasy,” and probably a number of other literary labels as well. However, “weird

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of fiction that the fans turned into a religion. The isolated vampire cults created by certain fans of Anne Rice may be somewhat comparable to the Lovecraft-based cults. However, the vampire groups seem to be less prevalent, less organized, and less cosmically focused than the Lovecraftian groups. According to my research and personal interviews, the vampire cults tend to be more socially based than religiously based, revolving primarily around personal relationships and occult practices for personal gain rather than communication with and knowledge of higher beings.

fiction” is the most inclusive and generally accurate description if one were to select a single, already-existing, label to apply to all of Lovecraft’s work. Although “weird fiction” seems to be the most suitable overall term for the majority of Lovecraft’s work, he did move through experimental phases in his writing, like many artists who begin at a young age by imitating their influences and then continue on to experiment until they find their own voices. His more traditional horror stories with a Gothic flavor are largely influenced by Poe and were written in his early years. The surreal stories that have come to be known as “Dream Cycles,” largely influenced by the fantasies of Lord Dunsany and written throughout his life, depict the world of dreams as a dimension that can be explored by the open-minded traveler, like his recurring character Randolph Carter. The tales that readers label the “Cthulhu Mythos,” written throughout his later life, make up the bulk of his work. The “Cthulhu Mythos” consists of a group of loosely connected stories in which narrators are made aware of ancient, powerful creatures who represent realities beyond the scope of human understanding. “In the Walls of Eryx” (a collaboration with Kenneth Sterling, 1935), one of Lovecraft’s last stories, may represent his only purely “science fiction” story in that it presents traditional science fiction elements (including the exploration of another planet) in the absence of the philosophical and stylistically experimental elements present in most of his other works.

Of the various groupings of Lovecraft’s work, the “Cthulhu Mythos” tales are probably the most popular. In these stories, characters gain partial knowledge of the beings who are generally categorized as the “Old Ones,” various types of intelligent beings who ruled planet Earth before the rise of human civilization. The “Old Ones” include sub-categories of the “Deep Ones,” the “Outer Ones,” the “Great Race,” and the

“Elder Gods.” Information about these various types of creatures comes to the reader through characters whose experiences force them to face paradigm shifts that challenge everything they thought they knew of reality. Although some Lovecraft readers mark “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926) as the beginning of the “Cthulhu Mythos,” it is reasonable to identify earlier works, including “From Beyond” (1920), “The Nameless City” (1921), and “The Festival” (1923) as preludes to his fiction of extra-dimensional creatures and cosmic relativism, and are discussed extensively in this study. The designations created by fans and critics are worth noting, but Lovecraft’s core themes appear throughout the majority of his fiction, crossing over the designations of “Dream Cycles” and “Cthulhu Mythos” tales.

### The Curse of “Horror” — Guilt by Association

Unfortunately, the term “weird fiction” is no longer used in contemporary labeling, leaving Lovecraft to be almost invariably placed into the limited and less accurate category of “horror.” There is nothing fundamentally incorrect in this identification, for elements of fear or anxiety are prominent in the majority of Lovecraft’s works. The problem comes with the implication of low quality and convention that has developed with the “horror” label. As Magistrale and Morrison state in the introduction to *A Dark Night’s Dreaming: Contemporary American Horror* (1996), horror traditions have influenced American literature since the eighteenth century, as can be seen in the works of Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner, Nathaniel West, and Flannery O’Connor, all of whom

have received some level of critical respect. Magistrale and Morrison add that, “While it is possible to trace the presence the Gothic in contemporary mainstream American writers as different as Toni Morrison and Norman Mailer, horror fiction as a genre has been relegated largely to the margins of traditional academic scholarship” (2). Although it is “possible” to trace the presence of Gothic and horror elements in a large variety of academically respected works, few scholars seem to take the time to do it. Furthermore, Magistrale and Morrison seem to fall into the common trap of representing “Gothic” and “horror” as synonymous, rather than representing the “Gothic Romance” as only one specific incarnation of the “horror” impulse.

### The Insufficiency of Certain Literary Labels

The labeling of a work as “horror,” “Gothic,” “science fiction,” or “fantasy” has, moreover, come to imply a lack of quality and originality. However, this designation often seems rather inconsistent in its application. If a work is labeled as “horror” fiction due to the presence of disturbing or fear-based subject matter, then it would be reasonable to categorize Dante’s *Inferno*, the Faustus works of Marlowe and Goethe, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Grey*, and countless other canonical classics throughout the centuries as “horror” fiction on the basis of their inclusion of supernatural, violent, or horrific elements. These works deal with demons, savagery, violence, madness, and all types of terrors, as do the works of the American writers mentioned by Magistrale and Morrison. As for “horror” proper, even Stoker’s *Dracula* and Stevenson’s *Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde* have managed to find homes

in academia. Poe stands out as the most obvious example of a writer of tales of fear and madness who is revered by many literary critics. Yet other writers who deal with similar subject matter (especially more recent writers) are often assumed to write low-quality material because it is placed in the “horror” genre. This apparent inconsistency brings up an important point about the label of “horror” fiction. The label of “horror” fiction has come to imply that the given work is two-dimensional, formulaic, and sensational. However, the fact that something is often done badly does not mean that it cannot be done well. In other words, just as one might say that Jane Austen’s works are not mere romance novels, Lovecraft’s works are not mere horror stories. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*, for instance, confronts the integrity of scientific institutions by providing a complex and thorough account of a scientific expedition that uncovers well-supported evidence that the majority of human science is incorrect. The narrator’s account of the resistance of his new data by the traditional scientific community pushes the tale into the realms of scholarly debate, challenging academic institutions to place the revelation of supportable data above the preservation of the status quo. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* is as much a “horror story” as Melville’s *Moby Dick* is a “sea tale.” Such designations are entirely insufficient in both cases. While these statements are true on the most simplistic of levels, they do not come close to providing a complete understanding of these complex works. Many writers, from Dante to Clive Barker, choose disturbing or even horrific subject matter as the vehicle for ideas that range far beyond mere shock or disgust.

## Lovecraft Studies: Identifying the Challenges

Lovecraft's work attracts a rabid fan following, as well as critical attention from a few academics who are not put off by the various labels of "genre fiction." Analyzing Lovecraft's work can be a daunting task, for the enormous quantity of his writing<sup>3</sup> makes it very difficult to list, categorize, and examine his life's work. Furthermore, study of Lovecraft is complicated by his frequent ghost writing, "revisions," and collaborations, which provided much of his income.<sup>4</sup> Due to his many collaborations and to the volumes of spin-off fiction based upon his ideas, it is sometimes challenging to distinguish which stories are Lovecraft's, which are co-written works, and which stories (bound in volumes labeled as "Lovecraftian" or "Cthulhu" related) are written by others entirely. While the collaborations and spin-off stories certainly bring their own points of interest and their own critical potential, it is important for the scholar to be aware enough to note which are collaborations and which are Lovecraft's alone.<sup>5</sup> For reasons of simplicity, clarity, and accuracy, only Lovecraft's solo projects are addressed in this study.

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<sup>3</sup> His works include tens of thousands of letters (some scholars estimate one hundred thousand), critical and philosophical essays, dozens of short stories, scores of poems, and a few novellas.

<sup>4</sup> His most famous ghost writing client was Harry Houdini, who commissioned Lovecraft to write "Imprisoned With the Pharaohs" (1924) to be published under Houdini's name (Houdini always loved a good trick).

<sup>5</sup> Among Lovecraft's collaborators, August Derleth is the most noteworthy. Derleth co-wrote several stories with his friend and mentor, as well as a novella (*The Lurker at the Threshold*, 1945). Derleth is also the most prominent among several writers who continued to write stories based on Lovecraft's work long after his death, and to take steps to ensure publication of the late author's creations. The most monumental step in this effort was Derleth's creation of Arkham House, a publishing company specifically designed for the publishing of literature by and about Lovecraft. Some critics have suggested that, ironically, Derleth's zealous, posthumous publicity served to increase his friend's popular fan base while seriously harming his critical reputation.

## Lovecraft and Academia

While Lovecraft's influence upon the world of "weird fiction" is considerable, his reception in academic circles varies greatly among different cultures. Appreciation of Lovecraft's influence upon literature is not widespread within America and Britain, where "weird tales" have largely been relegated to the realms of pulp fiction, but he has found receptive critical audiences in other countries. According to St. Armand's "Facts in the Case of H.P. Lovecraft," leading critics from Europe have evaluated Lovecraft as being superior to Poe. In fact, the famous Spanish essayist Jose Luis Garcia included Lovecraft in a list of the 10 greatest writers in the world (St.Armand 166). Despite his honored place in the academy of certain European countries, Lovecraft scholarship is developing more slowly in the United States, often taking place "away from the academic arena," according to S.T. Joshi, one of the most influential scholars to have taken up the crusade to bring Lovecraft into academia (Joshi, "Materialism" 164). As Joshi and others have observed, many of the books and articles about Lovecraft have been produced by "independent scholars or enthusiasts, most of whom have emerged from the realm of science fiction and fantasy fandom" (164). The problem as Joshi sees it is that "many such scholars do not appear as thoroughly versed in critical method as one would like" (Joshi, "Materialism" 164). Among the critical essays that do exist, the majority deal primarily with Lovecraft's life and personal viewpoints as represented through his correspondence. This becomes particularly problematic when the article or book degenerates into a kind of sensationalized criticism of Lovecraft's upbringing and personality. The many deaths, psychological traumas, periods of illness, and failed relationships in Lovecraft's life are apparently too tempting for most writers to pass up,

often leading to essays that do little more than exploit his eccentricities to sate the morbid curiosity of the reader. Textually based scholarship of any kind of critical quality is far less common,<sup>6</sup> due in part to the unusual and sometimes tragic nature of Lovecraft's short life.<sup>7</sup>

There appear to be a number of reasons for the scarcity of quality textual scholarship of Lovecraft's work. Among the various theorists who have made compelling arguments as to why Lovecraft has been undervalued by critics, James Campbell provides a particularly concise and effective summary:

During his lifetime [Lovecraft] failed to gain access to the usual channels of publication because he did not write book-length mainstream fiction and because his writings appeared in pulp magazines. Moreover, the withering contempt of a few mainstream critics, like Edmond Wilson in the 1940's, further impeded serious consideration of his fiction for nearly a generation. And he was greatly harmed by those who sought to preserve his writings and to advance his reputation. Certainly, no one did more to sidetrack his reputation than his friend and posthumous publisher, August Derleth, whose attempts to explain Lovecraft philosophy in his so-called "Cthulhu Mythos" articles and prefaces trivialized his friend's literary views, greatly undervaluing the informing philosophy behind Lovecraft's fiction. Equally damaging was the harm done Lovecraft by his many pulp-magazine fans; their extravagant claims and uncritical praise caused some critics to dismiss Lovecraft unread as merely the object of a cult of overzealous amateurs. (167)

Considering these factors, it is not at all surprising that it has taken decades for certain scholars to put aside assumptions and preconceived notions, attempting to examine Lovecraft's writings from an unbiased perspective. To approach Lovecraft fairly requires the reader to ignore the original publication sources and the sensationalism of "over-

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<sup>6</sup> Although the journal *Lovecraft Studies* provides scores of articles about the writer, they tend to be mixed in nature, ranging from thoughtful textual analysis to interesting observations of popular culture.

<sup>7</sup> It is common for articles about Lovecraft to ignore any serious attention to his work and to scrutinize his dysfunctional upbringing, his psychological issues, the many deaths of his family members, and various other problems that were beyond his control. Lovecraft's neurosis and social anxieties have probably received more attention than those of Edgar Allen Poe and Emily Dickinson combined. Perhaps Flaubert was correct in his assertion that an interesting life tends to overshadow an artist's work.

zealous amateurs,” evaluating his work on the basis of conceptual content and technical merit.

## Establishing Criteria for Evaluating Lovecraft

Theories and arguments regarding the criteria for literary quality emerge and evolve, revealing a few core ideas that arise consistently, influencing the status of a work and its creator. One of these ideas is that of originality leading to significant influence upon a given field of study. As Todorov<sup>8</sup> explains in his discussion of the place of fantastic literature within the scholarly context,

we grant a text the right to figure into the history of literature or of science only insofar as it produces a change in our previous notion of the one activity or the other. Texts that do not fulfill this condition automatically pass into another category: that of so-called “popular” or “mass” literature in the one case; in the other, that of the academic exercise or unoriginal experiment. (6)

Though other factors may be introduced, Todorov’s summary is concise and well-founded. The emphasis on originality is a significant and valid one, a useful assessment of the basic logic behind choices for the canon. This emphasis on originality brings to mind the modernists’ cry, “Make it new!”<sup>9</sup> Although such originality is probably the primary premise for selecting academically worthy texts, there are cases in which a truly original and influential writer may be dismissed too hastily. The correction of such an

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<sup>8</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre*, 1973. Todorov provides a particularly efficient explanation of this common assessment of the major criterion for critical acceptance.

<sup>9</sup> Pound was forthcoming about the fact that he got the slogan “Make it new!” from an inscription on the bathtub of an ancient Chinese emperor. Some may consider this to be ironic, and the irony was not lost on Pound himself.

error is the motivating force behind many a recent challenge to the established canon, to varying degrees of success. In recent years, some challenges have been made to the dismissal of works on the basis of their being labeled (perhaps hastily) as popular fiction, pulp, or as “women’s literature.” For instance, Gertrude Stein stands out as an example of an author who has been resurrected to attain a respected status in the world of literary criticism, now appearing on many lists of canonical literary modernists.<sup>10</sup> However, Stein is not the only writer who deserves a new evaluation.

## Lovecraft’s Originality and Contributions

Lovecraft criticism is deserving of a period of re-examination similar to that of Stein, based upon his contributions and innovations. If originality is the mark of good literature, then Lovecraft absolutely cannot be ignored as a pioneer, philosophically, thematically, and stylistically. As Fritz Leiber, Jr. explains in “A Literary Copernicus” (1949), Lovecraft’s story frameworks and techniques revolutionized the weird tale and brought it into the modern age: “Howard Philips Lovecraft was the Copernicus of the horror story. He shifted the focus of supernatural dread from man and his little world and his gods, to the stars and the black and unplumbed gulfs of intergalactic space. To do this effectively, he created a new kind of horror story and new methods for telling it” (50). If Todorov is correct in the assertion that literary originality and influence are the primary criteria for critical respect, and if Leiber is correct in declaring Lovecraft to be a “Literary Copernicus,” then why is Lovecraft not widely respected and read in mainstream literary

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<sup>10</sup> Ellen E. Berry’s *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering: Gertrude Stein’s Postmodernism* (1992) is a good example of a study that represents Stein’s writing as being truly ahead of its time.

academia? Although Leiber grants Lovecraft the highest form of praise by pairing him with the great Copernicus, it is probably the consistent labeling of Lovecraft's writing as "horror stories" that has harmed his reputation more than anything. The labels of "horror," "science fiction," "weird fiction" or "pulp" in Anglo-American literature are often enough to bar a work or author from the possibility of serious consideration, which may be the case with Lovecraft. Lovecraft's placement in these undervalued categories is problematic, but it is useful to examine the categories to which he has been assigned by casual readers and critics since, in addition to the aforementioned specific circumstances that probably contributed to Lovecraft's academic anonymity, there is the more general issue of the critical rejection of certain genres in toto.

### Development of Lovecraft's "Fundamental Premise" of "Cosmic Disinterestism"

The best examples of fear-oriented literature present fear not as an end unto itself but as a strategy for the conveyance of profound ideas. As Lovecraft himself observes in his literary analysis *Supernatural Horror in Literature*,<sup>11</sup> "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest fear is fear of the unknown" (1). If this often-quoted statement is true (psychology and anthropology tend to corroborate this assertion),<sup>12</sup> then weird fiction, fiction of the unknown, is one of the most logical and

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<sup>11</sup> Please note that Lovecraft was asked by a friend to write an essay on the history and development of horror fiction. This title does not indicate that Lovecraft limited his own work to the realms of "supernatural horror."

<sup>12</sup> "Fight or flight" response research, superstitions, nightmares, and many other topics of interest in the behavioral sciences demonstrate that the study of the fear response is absolutely crucial to understanding the mind of any intelligent creature.

most profound expressions of the human condition. To understand a culture's monsters is to understand its fears. To understand its fears, rational or irrational, is to understand its beliefs, its customs, and its actions. As Magistrale and Morrison declare, "the art of horror, as distinguished from its mere exploitation, transcends physical descriptions of blood and guts, and cheap shock tricks. At its best, horror art is visionary and not reductive" (7). Lovecraft's visions, which are quite identifiable when sought out, address some of the most complex and challenging questions of the intellectual world.

Although interest in Lovecraft's unusual personal life seems to have distracted many from what I believe is the more crucial task of analyzing his primary works, I must admit that there is one aspect of biographical research in particular that greatly assists the development of an understanding of Lovecraft's writing. A brief study of Lovecraft's intellectual development provides some insight into the philosophy behind his fiction. It is common knowledge among readers of Lovecraft that he began reading at the age of three, reciting long passages of poetry shortly thereafter, and composing poetry (including a 44 line poem of internally rhyming iambic heptameter) by the age of seven. At the age of eight, his studies of mythology impacted him thoroughly enough that he declared to his Christian family that he was a "Roman Pagan." Although he was too ill to attend school much of the time, Lovecraft mastered organic chemistry with only text books and a chemistry lab purchased for him by his grandfather. He read through his grandfather's extensive library by his teens and demonstrated a knowledge of science, history, mythology, and literature that would have humbled many professors.<sup>13</sup> His first writings were self-produced scientific journals, including "two impressively titled

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<sup>13</sup> These facts are well-known by Lovecraft scholars. S.T. Joshi and Peter Cannon are particularly thorough in their descriptions of the writer's early and diverse signs of genius.

periodicals, the *Scientific Gazette* and the *Rhode Island Journal of Astronomy*.... In 1906, soon after his first published piece—a brief critique of astrology—appeared in the *Providence Sunday Journal*, he commenced a monthly astronomy column in the *Providence Tribune*” (Cannon 4). In 1906 *Scientific American* printed a letter from Lovecraft postulating the existence of an astronomical body beyond Neptune, which Lovecraft called Yuggoth in his stories. His calculations were eventually confirmed and the body came to be known as Pluto.<sup>14</sup> He continued to closely follow scientific developments throughout his lifetime.

With such diverse talents and interests, Lovecraft developed a very unusual and very insightful approach to the world around him. His vast knowledge of science, history, mythology, and literature spurred him to examine the place of humans in a modern age of new knowledge and new values. Although he had always been fascinated with literature and the arts, Lovecraft’s scientific knowledge made him acutely, almost painfully, aware of the scope of the universe, the limitations of human knowledge, and the relative insignificance of the species to which he belonged. Traditional human concerns began to appear far too limiting, even petty, to a mind with such understanding of time and space. Rather than the typical terrestrial issues of the human condition, he addressed

[a] universe consisting of light-years and light-millenia of black emptiness. A universe containing billions of suns, many of them presumably attended by planets housing forms of life shockingly alien to man and, likely enough in some instances, infinitely more powerful. A universe shot through with invisible forces, hitherto unsuspected by man, such as the ultraviolet ray, the X-ray – and who can say how many more? In short, a universe in which the unknown had vastly greater scope than in the little crystal-sphered globe of Aristotle and

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<sup>14</sup> Please note that in the year 1906 Lovecraft was only 16 years old.

Ptolemy. And yet a real universe, attested by scientifically weighted facts, no mere nightmare of mystics. (Leiber 51)

The kind of literature that Leiber describes goes far beyond any conventional Gothic horror yarn. Based upon Leiber's description, a reader may be tempted to think that Lovecraft's work must fall into the category of science fiction, but that too would be inaccurate or inadequate for a number of reasons to be explained in the following chapters. Lovecraft's knowledge of a number of disciplines appears to have led him to develop philosophies and strategies of artistic expression that are difficult to place into traditional categories of literature. He combines many impulses, concepts, and techniques into his writing in order to create a new kind of literature that addresses his core ideas – human insignificance and mental limitations – through several angles simultaneously (as in “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” *At the Mountains of Madness*, and many others). Literature that aims to address the presence of these “invisible forces” and their philosophical implications transcends the world of mere spook tales or space stories. It approaches the realm of the most sophisticated artistic expression, exploring aspects of existence and consciousness that no conventional form of writing could communicate.

Lovecraft's eclectic studies and influences eventually led him to develop a central idea that amounts to a manifesto of his cosmic view and his literary aim. Lovecraft declared his artistic intentions and philosophy in the letter that accompanied his second submission of “The Call of Cthulhu” in 1927,<sup>15</sup> stating:

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<sup>15</sup> The story was originally rejected because the editor of *Weird Tales* believed that the stylistic and narrative innovations of the tale were too difficult for the readers to grasp. The importance of the concept of difficulty in modernist writing addressed at length in Chapter 4 is one of the most prominent modernist elements in Lovecraft's fiction. Lovecraft shows that he shares some of the literary elitism for which some

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large.... To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. (Selected Letters 2.150)

This statement should not be taken lightly, for it is the “fundamental premise” of human limitations and cosmic insignificance, which Joshi, Cannon, Airaksinen, and others call “cosmic disinterestism,” that Lovecraft claims to be the basis of “all [his] tales.”

Lovecraft goes on to support and reiterate this premise explicitly throughout much of his correspondence and intrinsically throughout virtually all of his fiction. Lovecraft’s statement of his premise makes no mention of the impulse of “horror” whatsoever. The premise of cosmic disinterestism is stated as a neutral observation, a clinical assessment of the human condition that is simple in its fundamental meaning but difficult enough to truly comprehend that a new kind of writing must be invented for the purpose of its telling.

Lovecraft’s work reflects his “fundamental premise” through a variety of plot elements and characterizations, including the theme of characters discovering new and disturbing information about the world that they struggle (and usually fail) to handle rationally. Lovecraft’s characters are forced to catch glimpses of realities that range far beyond human understanding, making them acutely, agonizingly aware of human insignificance by juxtaposing men with various populations of intelligent beings who dwarf humanity in all aspects: intelligence, longevity, physical prowess, technology, sensory perception, and understanding of the mechanisms and expanses of the universe.

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canonical modernists are so well known when he uses the phrase “zippy morons” to describe the members of his readership who cannot handle the difficult elements of his stories.

These beings, the “Old Ones,” collectively represent all of the possibilities beyond the scope of humanity, the worlds, forces, and perspectives that may exist entirely outside of any human context. The Old Ones are barely aware of, and entirely unconcerned with, the petty plights of the short-lived and powerless species that we call humanity. The Old Ones come from other planets (like the Mi-Go of “The Whisperer in the Darkness” or “The Fungi From Yuggoth”), from other times (like the Great Race from “The Shadow Out of Time”), or from entirely different dimensions and realities (like Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, or Azathoth, god-like entities who are referenced in a variety of Lovecraft’s works). The Old Ones represent the infinite variety of possibilities that lie beyond the scope of humankind, forcing those who glimpse evidence of their existence to face the startling realization of their own helplessness, ignorance, and insignificance when compared to these giants who symbolize the true vastness and complexity of the cosmos.

Those who criticize Lovecraft’s personal views often refer to his “fundamental premise” of the cosmic insignificance of humankind as being “nihilistic.” However, this label is far too limiting to reflect the complexity of his thoughts. For those who wish to understand Lovecraft’s personal opinion of humanity’s place in the cosmos, it may be necessary to turn to his autobiographical writings. In “Landscapes, Selves, and Others in Lovecraft” (1991), Robert Waugh examines Lovecraft’s correspondence in an effort to reconcile Lovecraft’s ideas of cosmic disinterestism with his ideas about art, beauty, and culture. Waugh points out Lovecraft’s statement that “although meaning nothing *in the cosmos as a whole*, mankind obviously means a good deal *to itself*” (Selected Letters 5.241). Therefore, art and literature should focus on “the joy of discovering untapped wells in ourselves” (Selected Letters 2.300). Lovecraft’s journals and correspondence

reveal that his attitude toward the lack of intrinsic meaning or value in human perceptions and constructs actually strengthened his sense of humanity and his appreciation for the importance of art and cultural unity. Rather than taking an attitude of ultimate nihilism or misanthropy in light of what he considered to be a cosmically meaningless existence, he appears to have concluded that the notion of a mechanistic cosmos, indifferent to the existence of humans, added significance to human life.

## The Modernist Grotesque

Works of great complexity and innovation often defy conventional labels, which is why I would propose that many works by Lovecraft and other writers (Conrad, Joyce, Eliot, Kafka, Woolf) may be better understood if they are examined with relation to what I call “the modernist grotesque.” The modernist grotesque, as I will discuss at length throughout this work (and particularly in Chapter One), is a synthesis of the modern (post-Romantic) grotesque and modernism in terms of themes, imagery, and techniques, the most important commonalities between the modern grotesque and modernism being the concepts of alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity. The category of the modernist grotesque provides a new context for the analysis of many works of literature that have either been mislabeled or subjected to reductive labeling.<sup>16</sup> Categorizing Lovecraft’s works as belonging to the modernist grotesque allows a reader to analyze themes and patterns among stories that may have been previously overlooked due to adherence to the expectations of other categories. For instance, even educated readers who read “The Call

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<sup>16</sup> “Reductive labeling” is used here to mean labeling that is limiting in that it does not do justice to the complexity of the work.

of Cthulhu” as a traditional horror tale might well miss the modernist use of collage, allusion, and language play, if they are not looking for such experimental elements. The idea of grotesque modernism may also lead to a better understanding of Lovecraft’s means of communicating his idea of “cosmic disinterestism.”<sup>17</sup>

Although a few critics address Lovecraft in his philosophical relation to the modernists of his day, there seems at this point to be a lack of close examination of his primary texts with relation to modernist experimentation. It is difficult to find examinations of Lovecraft’s modernist ideas and stylistic experimentation in his fiction. If his stories are indeed based upon a premise of “cosmic disinterestism,” then this should be readily identifiable in patterns of plot, imagery, and narrative technique. The works that would come to be known as the “Cthulhu Mythos” are chief among those in which Lovecraft communicates his ideas about cosmic “disinterestism” (aligned with modernist subjectivity) through experimental narrative techniques including collage formats, multiple and invented languages, vernacular transcription, fragmented narrative perspective, and heavy meta-fiction (techniques commonly identified with modernism). Therefore, one may better identify Lovecraft’s true contribution to literature on the whole by setting aside all but the most fundamental concepts from his correspondence and by looking at the way in which he delivers his “fundamental premise” through his fiction. By examining his plots, representative characters, and stylistic experimentation with reference to the modernist grotesque, one can better understand how Lovecraft created a new type of fiction for the communication of his complex and unconventional views of

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<sup>17</sup> This notion is taken as a given by Lovecraft scholars due to Lovecraft’s overt statements of his ideas in his correspondence. It is less common to find scholarly work that examines the specifics of exactly how Lovecraft communicates the idea through his fiction.

human limitations. Lovecraft synthesizes grotesque imagery with modernist experimental narratives, his problematizing of the concepts of alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity affording him the ability to expand the limitations of traditional notions of human perception, knowledge, and scholarly institutions.

## The Discussion to Come

It is not surprising that those critics who bother to examine Lovecraft at all do not seem to know exactly where to place him. Artists of his uniqueness tend to defy easy placement into a traditional category, often switching their proclaimed artistic labels (like Pound moving from Imagist to Vorticist) or deliberately avoiding categorization altogether. I intend, in developing a new category in which to place Lovecraft, to evaluate his largely overlooked contributions and to place him among his peers in a way that will nurture a deeper understanding of both Lovecraft and those who share certain traits with him. Lovecraft's fiction manifests profound observations and a consistent philosophy through a combination of strategies and techniques that have been principally ascribed to modernist literature and literature of the grotesque. The method by which I intend to explore the specifics of Lovecraft's observations, strategies, and techniques is four-fold. Chapter One discusses the ways in which modernism and the grotesque have been defined by theorists. This chapter uses a range of theoretical works to provide general background information about scholarship of the grotesque and modernism, and to support the notion that, although the grotesque and modernism have been conceptualized in various ways by various theorists, alienation, subjectivity, and

absurdity appear to be central concepts to both creative modalities. Furthermore, this chapter discusses my idea of the modernist grotesque, literature that reflects alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity by combining modernist and grotesque elements. Chapter Two looks at the concept of alienation in several of Lovecraft's tales, categorized by alienating documentation, objects, places, and creatures. Elements of both modernist and grotesque representations of alienation are identified in Lovecraft's work through critical analysis as well as comparison to certain primary texts by writers of modernism and the grotesque. Chapter Three addresses the element of subjectivity in Lovecraft's modernist grotesque fiction. As in Chapter Two, critical works and primary texts from other writers are compared to Lovecraft in the process of examining his portrayal of universal subjectivity with relation to the treatment of subjectivity by canonical modernists and writers of the grotesque. Chapter Four addresses absurdity in Lovecraft's modernist grotesque fiction. The chapter also includes a discussion of the ways in which modernist and grotesque approaches to absurdity are brought into these concepts, and how Lovecraft uses his own ideas to participate in conversations about the absurd nature of human institutions. The following pages are designed to open new vistas in the study of weird fiction in general and "Lovecraftian" fiction in particular. Therefore, they are likely to raise more questions than they answer. I hope that this is indeed true, should their questions stimulate further inquiry and inspire a few readers to approach Lovecraft and other writers of "weird," "horror," or "science fiction" designations with an open mind.

# Chapter One: The Modernist Grotesque

Modernism and the grotesque are both multi-dimensional concepts that scholars examine in a number of ways. These artistic themes are as important as they are problematic, providing a number of insights into works that may otherwise have been misunderstood or undervalued. The mode of expression that is now described as “grotesque” dates at least as far back as Emperor Nero of Rome, evolving with changing times and various cultures. Theorists who examine the grotesque impulses in art and literature<sup>18</sup> tend to represent the grotesque as a powerful but often overlooked or misunderstood influence in the worlds of creative expression, making a good case for further discussion of the topic. Conversely, modernism stands out as the most widely discussed, anthologized, and critically analyzed category of twentieth century literature in the United States and Britain. The variety of approaches to the field of modernist studies has led many contemporary theorists of modernism to address it as a plurality, as in Peter Nicholls’ landmark work *Modernisms, a Literary Guide* (1995).<sup>19</sup> However, in spite of the different kinds of critical attention that they have received, modernism and the grotesque share a number of identifiable elements that deserve further study. This chapter serves to review some of the basic theories about the grotesque and modernism, acknowledging the debates, identifying the most prominent concepts, and illustrating the many commonalities between the grotesque and modernism. Finally, the chapter will

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<sup>18</sup> Ruskin, Kayser, Bakhtin, Thomson, Clayborough, and Harpham, for instance, are featured in this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> In *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, Peter Nicholls provides a particularly thorough and multi-faceted discussion of the developments of various approaches to modernism, covering a range cultures, times, disciplines, and perspectives.

support the existence of literature that functions simultaneously as modernist and grotesque, the modernist grotesque.

Writers, visual artists, and theorists from across the world produced work that has been labeled as “modernist,” indicating that a thorough exploration of modernism necessitates an international scope of study. However, British and American scholars tend to give far more attention to modernist writers (particularly Anglo-American ones) than their peers from other cultures. Modernism has received more critical attention than any other concept in literary studies of the twentieth century. In fact, it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that modernism has become not just a label but a title of prestige against which all twentieth century literature (especially pre-WWII literature) has been judged. For some, debate over modernist canonicity has become not so much a debate of kind but of degree of quality, as Michael Mell addresses in “D.H. Lawrence and the Meaning of Modernism” (2003):

The more serious problem perhaps for “modernism” is its ambiguous status as descriptive or honorific. Just as “Enlightenment” may present eighteenth-century texts in a new light, so modernism encourages not only the presumption of a common project, but a habit of regarding the authors in question as part of an elite club. The iconoclasm of its progenitors lives on and to be “outside modernism” is to be presumptively second league. For this reason, perhaps, revisionary views have often sought to demonstrate the modernist qualifications of apparent outsiders or of neglected writers, particularly women. (132)

Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986) is one of the earlier theoretical studies to take a critical look at the potential elitism behind the concept of modernism. Huyssen contributes to the field of modernist studies an in-depth examination of the relationship of modernism to mass culture and socio-economic class issues in America and throughout Europe, arguing that: “Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination

by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture. Both the strengths and weaknesses of modernism as an adversary culture derive from that fact” (vii). The distinction between modernism and “mass culture” is further highlighted by the perception of strata within modernism, as in the title of “High Modernism,” referring to the works a few writers who are considered to represent the pinnacle of modernism (Eliot, Joyce, and Pound being the only three who are consistently included without exception). The struggle to win a place for a certain author among acknowledged modernists has become a struggle for the judgment of that artist as a “serious” and “respected.”<sup>20</sup> However, in spite of the complications involved with the concept of modernism, a survey of modernist theory reveals sufficient consistencies to allow for a reasonable discussion of modernism as an approachable concept.

The grotesque has received a very different kind of attention. In its most common use, the word “grotesque” has been connected with themes and images of violence, gore, monstrosity, and disgust. It is often lumped in with or confused with “horror” and with the Gothic. However, discussion of the grotesque as a concept related to creative philosophy brings a deeper level of significance to the word. Although works of the grotesque in literature were published long before a contemporary notion of modernist literature developed, the grotesque as a literary form did not receive much critical attention until long after the modernist literary movement had made its initial splashes

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<sup>20</sup> Gertrude Stein stands as an example of an author who was added to the modernist canon after receiving later critical attention. Norman Weinstein’s *Gertrude Stein and the Literature of the Modern Consciousness* (1970) and Lynn M. Weiss’s *Gertrude Stein and Richard Wright: The Poetics and Politics of Modernism* (1998) address this process.

and ripples.<sup>21</sup> By the time certain theorists in America and Britain began to look closely at the nature and function of the grotesque in literature, modernism had already secured its position as the dominant force in twentieth century literature. However, modernism and the grotesque (especially the later, post-Romantic grotesque) share very important influences, concepts, and techniques. These commonalities become apparent after examining the designations, connotations, histories, and applications of the grotesque and modernism. This chapter will serve to analyze what I believe are three of the most important concepts common to the grotesque and modernism: alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity. These three ideas are perhaps the most useful concepts in the process of understanding largely ignored connections between the modern grotesque and modernism, and in identifying the body of existing literature that shares aspects of both, which I define as the new literary category of “the modernist grotesque.” Many writers (including Conrad, Kafka, Eliot, Joyce, Loy, Woolf, Beckett, and Lovecraft) may be better understood in the context of a discussion of the modernist grotesque. This chapter will establish a general background for grotesque and modernist studies, touching on the importance of alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity in those artistic modalities. The following chapters will examine the elements of alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity in Lovecraft’s modernist grotesque works as a way to understand how he synthesizes grotesque and modernist strategies to develop his own unique style. The examination of

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<sup>21</sup> A few texts, like John Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* (1853), examined grotesque elements in architecture or visual art before what is commonly thought of as the height of modernism. However, scholarship of grotesque elements in literature like Wolfgang Kayser’s *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (1957) and Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (1968) arrived on the scene long after the height of modernism (and these were written in Germany and France respectively, not in Britain or the Americas). One can only speculate, but I am imagining that the presence of a dialogue about the literary grotesque in the time of the modernists may have led some modernists to identify their ideas and strategies with those of the grotesque.

various theoretical texts, as well as primary texts by Lovecraft and other writers who have been assigned the label of “grotesque” or “modernist,” provides a beginning for a new dialogue about the relationship between these two literary designations.

## A Brief Overview of the Study of the Grotesque

Although the terms “grotesque” and “modernist” emerge in a variety of discussions and descriptions in a number of disciplines, certain theorists manage to acknowledge the complexities of these ideas while going on to create a structured, coherent framework for examining the histories and applications of the concepts. A particularly thorough etymological history of the grotesque appears in Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s *On The Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982). Harpham explains that the word “grotesque” dates back to the 1480's when antiquarians discovered the ruins of Nero’s palace in Rome, which had been buried and built upon. Among the features of this labyrinthine structure are elaborate frescoes by the artist Fabullus dating to the 60's C.E. that depict “graceful fantasies, symmetrical anatomical impossibilities, small beasts, human heads, and delicate, indeterminate vegetables, all presented as ornament with a faintly mythological character imparted by representations of fauns, nymphs, satyrs, and centaurs” (Harpham 26). Harpham further explains that “Fabullus’s frescoes were among the first sights [from the excavation] to be made available [to the public]. More because of the setting than because of any qualities inherent in the designs themselves, a consensus soon emerged according to which the designs were called *grottesche*—of or pertaining to underground caves,” or “grottos” (27).

Similar paintings were found in other Roman ruins, leading observers to use the term “grotto-esque” to describe any frescoes reminiscent of the ones in Nero’s palace.

Harpham observes that “although the designs were never intended to be underground, nor Nero’s palace a grotto, the word is perfect” in that it reflects the nature of the grotesque.

The cave is the home of early humans and their first paintings, and a symbol of “the underground, of burial, and of secrecy” (27), as well as being a symbol of the primordial womb, a site of perpetual creation and transformation.

Application of grotesque impulses in literature and painting predates the use of the term, however, dating at least as far back as Dante’s *Inferno* (1308).<sup>22</sup> Hieronymous Bosch’s painting “The Garden of Earthly Delights” (1514-1416) is the most famous example of the early grotesque in the visual arts. In terms of a literary grotesque, most theorists look back to Dante as the most influential, if not the first, to spawn a literary incarnation of the grotesque, his images of demons and monstrous transformations in the *Inferno* bringing the grotesque impulse to life with disturbing vividness. Dante and Bosch applied Christian morality to the grotesque, depicting inner transformations of the soul in outward representations of physical action, metamorphosis, and deformity, moving grotesque expression from mere fancy to cultural and spiritual commentary.

Much of post-Medieval grotesque art and literature retained Dante and Bosch’s use of the grotesque as an overt physical representation of internal or intangible human qualities. However, the Renaissance saw an addition to the repertoire of the grotesque that was more subtle, as addressed by Willard Farnham in *The Shakespearean Grotesque* (1971), a study that reviews briefly many of the changes in the aesthetics of the grotesque

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<sup>22</sup> *The Inferno*, especially, is a work often cited as a crucial influence on certain “High Modernists,” particularly Eliot and Pound.

as it evolved in representation and meaning from primarily visual creations in the Classical Age into the art and literature of the Medieval Period and into the Renaissance. Among other changes, the aesthetic of the grotesque evolved from a focus on physically non-human or semi-humanoid monsters to include more subtle portrayals of the grotesque nature of the madness and misdeeds of “conventional” human beings, like the villains of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Webster. This important shift in the grotesque from the portrayal of fantastical monsters to human monsters marks a crucial expansion of representation that served as a catalyst in the modernity of the conceptual literary grotesque. Had the grotesque not developed in such a way, it may have stagnated and even faded away as an artistic form. However, the grotesque is adaptable and modern in its nature, using shock, fear, disgust, or dark humor to force its audience to confront subjects that are commonly ignored, denied, or “sugar coated.” In the Renaissance, as human understanding continued to progress steadily (and even exponentially in some ways), human anxiety turned away from the unknown outer world and toward the unknown complexities of the inner world of the human mind. This shift in intellectual attention from a sensational grotesque of surface-level shock and fascination to a conceptual grotesque as a tool for more direct cultural diagnosis is a pivotal step in the development of this creative mode, allowing for greater variety of subject matter and representation.

The “grotto-esque” images depicted on the excavated frescoes of Roman ruins seem to have made quite an impression, because the term was retained and developed over the centuries, used as a concept in painting, illustration, sculpture, architecture, and literature. Contemporarily, the word “grotesque” is often loosely associated with

elements that are disturbing, disgusting, horrific, shocking, unnatural, absurd, and even strangely comical. When these associations are applied in vernacular usage, “grotesque” may describe anything from a violent scene on the television news to a badly misshapen cake, or any idea, noise, smell, or notion that is upsetting or unpleasant. In some applications, the term has been generalized and watered down so much as to be nearly devoid of any depth of meaning. However, a body of scholarship does exist that examines true grotesque art and literature with seriousness and enthusiasm. The literary grotesque has been traditionally connected with such authors as Charles Robert Maturin, Mary Shelley, Edgar Allen Poe, Franz Kafka, Joseph Conrad, and Flannery O’Connor, all of whom have made significant contributions to the development of fiction. However, the works of many other influential writers (Eliot, Woolf, Pound, Loy, Joyce, Hemingway, Faulkner, Beckett, Ionesco) include grotesque elements that are not commonly included in critical discussions, the examination of which may assist scholars in better understanding those writers in particular and literature in general.

The first theorist of the grotesque to differentiate grotesque art of conceptual insight from mere strangeness or shock value was John Ruskin, who distinguishes in *The Stones of Venice* (1853) the marked difference between the “false grotesque” and the “true grotesque.” According to Ruskin, the “false grotesque” invokes disturbing or disgustingly comical imagery without any attempt at philosophical meaning or message. “True grotesque” art uses the elements of alienation, transformation, subjectivity, distortion, absurdity, and shock in order to relate profound observations about the human condition. Ruskin was one of the only theorists to examine the conceptual nature of the grotesque until interest picked up a bit in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Ruskin's discussion of the grotesque introduces a Victorian moralistic perspective on pre-Victorian grotesque art and literature, moving away from mere description of grotesque trappings and toward an understanding of the grotesque as cultural commentary.

However, it was not until Wolfgang Kayser joined the discussion in 1957 that the grotesque gained widespread critical attention as a long-standing, ever-enduring, multi-dimensional mode of philosophical representation in art and literature. Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* revolutionized the ways in which scholars examined grotesque literature by establishing a pattern of three major themes throughout grotesque creations. After reviewing an array of historical and stylistic information and ideas, Kayser concludes that the grotesque is "THE ESTRANGED WORLD," and "A PLAY WITH THE ABSURD," leading to "AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD" (187-188, Kayser's capitalization)<sup>23</sup>.

Kayser's observation may appear to some readers as an oversimplification of the grotesque, but it may be more appropriate to address his argument as an attempt at efficiency and clarity. By narrowing down the thematic elements of the grotesque into what may be paraphrased as the concepts of "alienation," "absurdity," and "exorcism," Kayser allows the reader to focus on what he believes are the central ideals that make the "true grotesque" what it is. The variations on imagery and style are then put into perspective as different modes of addressing the three themes. Kayser's role in the study of the grotesque is like that of Freud's role in the study of psychoanalysis. It is almost impossible for theorists after Kayser to discuss the grotesque without building from his

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<sup>23</sup> Although Kayser's capitalization is somewhat distracting, I have chosen to keep it when quoting him, primarily for the sake of accuracy of representation of the original text.

work, often starting with his principles and applying them to new works of art and literature.

Kayser's *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* is matched only by Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1968) in its value as an historical account of the development of the grotesque. Bakhtin's work focuses on pre-Romantic forms of the grotesque, especially the Renaissance grotesque, which retained much of the ancient and Medieval focus on carnival and festival elements. The presence of grotesque imagery in the celebrations of the common folk of Medieval and Renaissance Europe is an aspect of the grotesque that had not been previously examined, one that Bakhtin found to be very important. In these "carnavalesque" celebrations, the fears of the masses were symbolized through comically grotesque masked figures and effigies, and then were ritualistically driven out or destroyed by a cheering crowd, effectively flipping certain hierarchies of power. This expression of the grotesque served as a unifying coping mechanism, a communal exercise that reinforced the idea of community triumphing over evil or adversity. These elements of the grotesque, Bakhtin insists, were a celebration of the grotesque as liberation, free play, and laughter. Bakhtin draws a clear distinction between this older "carnival-grotesque" and the "Romantic grotesque," which influenced the modern grotesque. The "Romantic" and modern grotesque, he asserts, lose the element of carnival and laughter and transform the grotesque impulse into "the expression of subjective, individualistic world outlook very different from the carnival folk concept of previous ages" (36). Hence, the grotesque laughter that served to fortify human cultures against their fears by reducing them to comical monstrosities gave way to a laughter that was "cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be joyful and

triumphant hilarity” (38). Bakhtin criticizes Kayser for examining more modern grotesque works and concepts without treating its oldest incarnations and themes, particularly the celebratory aspects of laughter and carnival in its pre-Romantic incarnations.

Bakhtin’s criticism is valid for someone whose goal is to give a comprehensive historical overview of the various phases of the grotesque. However, Bakhtin himself, after acknowledging that the grotesque did change and develop over time, gives only a cursory glance at the modern grotesque and comes back to his own focus, Rabelais as a Renaissance writer of the grotesque. Thus, Kayser and Bakhtin both ignore certain aspects of the grotesque and focus on others. In light of Bakhtin’s work with the Medieval and Renaissance carnival-grotesque, Kayser’s analysis of the grotesque does seem to fall short of a thorough history of grotesque evolution. However, Kayser’s principles of alienation, absurdity, and exorcism function well as a starting point toward a greater understanding of modern grotesque works. As Bakhtin points out, the modern grotesques tend to fall away from the more communal, revitalizing themes and to move toward alienation and harsh criticism of humanity and its cultures. In effect, Bakhtin agrees with Kayser’s analysis of the modern grotesque, especially with relation to the development of alienation as a central concept, which was a major shift from the older carnival aspect.<sup>24</sup> Although they focus on two different periods of grotesque development, each theorist is essentially right about his chosen focus.

To consider the ideas of Ruskin, Kayser, and Bakhtin on the subject of the grotesque is to acknowledge that the difference between what has come to be labeled as

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<sup>24</sup> If Kayser had presented his work as an analysis of the modern grotesque specifically, Bakhtin may not have had any complaints.

“pulp horror” and what Ruskin calls the “true grotesque” is great indeed. The grotesque does not merely approach the horrible for the sake of creating a mood and a fear response. It approaches the strange or horrible as a means of addressing some of the most profound concerns of the human condition: good and evil, sin and redemption, sanity and madness, alienation and community, objectivity and subjectivity, logic and absurdity. The grotesque, whether it is the older “carnival-grotesque” of communal laughter or the modern grotesque of alienation, depicts human problems and fears in such a way as to make them approachable and comprehensible for the sake of coping with them.

Although each theorist of the grotesque makes his or her own unique contributions, the principles of Ruskin, Kayser, and Bakhtin are staples of most studies. Among the more contemporary theorists, Philip Thomson and Geoffrey Galt Harpham do a particularly efficient job of explaining and building upon their predecessors, bringing a certain amount of clarity and consistency to this complex discussion. Similar or even identical terms and concepts come up repeatedly in various examinations of the visual and literary grotesque. For instance, in the introduction to *Human Concern / Personal Torment: The Grotesque in American Art*, Robert Doty, Curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art, explains:

To those artists who are engaged not only in wresting signs and symbols from the chaos of action, but also in mocking the complacency, coarseness and banality of the environment, the contamination of life is the core of existence. For artists of this conviction, the world is estranged, life is absurd, the grotesque is the measure of all things, spiritual or material. (Doty 4)

Doty's description of grotesque visual art is compatible with the ideas put forward by Kayser and others, including an emphasis on alienation and the absurd. According to Doty, the grotesque includes:

the rejection of reason, its benefits, protection and institutions... immersion in the subconscious and its offspring, such as fear, passion and perversity... a clash of elements, an obsession with opposites which force the co-existence of the beautiful with the repulsive, the sublime with the gross, humor with horror, the organic with the mechanical... emphasis on ridicule, surprise and virulence, through caricature, the deformation and distortion of salient characteristics. The grotesque threatens the foundations of existence through the subversion of order and the treacherous reversal of familiar and hostile. (Doty 4)

Doty focuses on the paradoxical nature of this artistic mode and on the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible subjects or images to comment upon what Kayser calls the "DEMONIC ELEMENTS" of the world. The "clash" of elements depicts a connection between traditionally incompatible ideas and aesthetics, resulting in a statement about the true subjectivity that lies beneath the human illusion of objective perception. Doty's observations, though focused on visual art, serve as a concise description of the grotesque impulse in literature as well.

## A Brief Overview of Modernist Studies

The overwhelming popularity of the field of modernism makes it even more complex and problematic than the study of the grotesque in terms of definitions and characterization. Those who choose to study modernism may find that Marianne Thormahlen's *Rethinking Modernism* (2003) is a valuable, comprehensible introduction to the subject. She begins by addressing some of the challenges of writing about

modernism, mentioning John Harwood's *Eliot to Derrida: The Poverty of Interpretation* (1995) in which Harwood accuses academe of having "invented" modernism in order to create a new realm of inquiry to secure the careers of scholars and provide material for articles, books, and conferences. Thormahlen declares that "no classifying concept has played a greater part in academic research on English poetry and fiction in the twentieth century," yet she agrees with John Harwood when she states that "virtually all authors on modernism start in a cautious and dutiful manner by saying something about the protean nature of the term and about there being more than one modernism, only to proceed, a few pages later, to employing the concept as if it were unambiguous and self-evident" (1). While Thormahlen agrees with Harwood that the approach of the above-categorized theorists is unhelpful, she asserts that "Acknowledging the complexity of the term 'modernism' while going on to use it with patent ease does not, per se, invalidate the term itself" (1-2). Perhaps the most effective and reasonable strategy for a theorist working with modernism is to address the problematic nature of the concept and then to outline the most useful approach to be taken for the specific study at hand.

A theorist is called upon, then, to acknowledge the many complexities and pitfalls in the field of modernism, defining his or her own focus with precision. Thormahlen brings a bit of order to the chaos when she describes the academic field that developed around "modernism" as breaking down into three basic categories: "periodizing, characterizing, and valorizing" (3). Periodizing involves placing *when* modernism began, peaked, or changed, addressing modernism in terms of chronology, noting that, traditionally, the "outside limits tend to be 1890 and 1940" (3). Scholars from the mid 1980's through to the present day have tended to look at this time frame as a good starting

place for the discussion, while others have chosen to trace the influences that contributed to the modernist impulse. For instance, Audress Huyssen's *After the Great Divide: Modernisms, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* and Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1987) complicate the notion of periodizing modernism:

As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane explain in *Modernism 1890-1930* (1976):

we can find nearly all the significant manifestations at dates much earlier than those points in the 1920's which some of our critics have seen as the heyday of it all. The significance of de-creating the given surface of reality... the belief in perception as plural, life as multiple, reality as insubstantial; these crucial notions form into a creative compound long before the First World War and are there in the last century, as symbolism and naturalism cross and interfuse. (Calinescu 51)

Bradbury, McFarlane, Calinescu, and Huyssen show innumerable examples of early modernist experimentation and philosophies that give a contemporary reader glimpses of its gradual development from older Avant-Garde forms into the twentieth century. It is clear that the proverbial "seeds" of modernism were sown in previous eras, but it is not unreasonable to focus on modernism as a primarily twentieth-century force: "what is clear is that there is in nearly all of these versions a sense of modernism as an historical evolution coupled with a notion of crisis and a notion of a point of culmination. And, for most Anglo-Americans critics, that culmination falls in the first part of the Twentieth century" (Bradbury and McFarlane 29). The process of periodizing modernism is complex, due in part to the very nature of modernism as a label that was assigned by critics of later decades.

Although the term modernism caught on quickly in the later twentieth century, and some general notion of a broad time period was established (at least in terms of "high

modernism”), characterizing modernism is more complex. The characterization of modernism, the establishing of criteria for what constitutes modernism, seems to be the most crucial element of the discussion, for it informs the ideas of “periodizing” and “valorizing” by attempting to define what exactly constitutes a modernist work. David Ayers addresses the complexities of modernist characterization with a combination of realism and optimism in *Modernism: A Short Introduction* (2004) when he states that,

Modernism - especially if we include other languages and arts - presents a bewildering plurality of material, so much so that some have preferred to speak of modernisms in the plural. While such an emphasis on plurality is entirely warranted, I nevertheless believe that it is possible to develop an overarching narrative of the apparently fragmented arts of modernism. Broad themes about the nature of selfhood and consciousness, the autonomy of language, the role of art and the artist, the nature of the industrial world, and the alienation of gendered existence form a set of concerns which manifest themselves across a range of works and authors. (x)

The process that Thormahlen calls “characterizing” has probably gotten the most attention in modernist studies, being also the primary vehicle through which many canonical complications are presented. The comparison of various theorists’ characterizations of modernism reveals that, although many aspects of modernism are debated, notions of modernism’s primary concepts appear with consistency, forming a more clear impression of what constitutes modernism.

Patterns do tend to emerge among the various discussions of modernist characteristics, like the tendency to address the impulse of modernist experimentation as a “disaster” or “crisis” of culture:

Modernism might mean not only a new mode or mannerism in the arts, but a certain magnificent disaster for them. In short, experimentalism does not simply suggest the presence of sophistication, difficulty and novelty in art; it also suggests bleakness, darkness, alienation, disintegration. Indeed, Modernism would seem to be the point at which the idea of the radical and innovating arts, the experimental, technical aesthetic ideal that had been growing forward from

Romanticism, reaches the formal crisis – in which myth, structure and organization in a traditional sense collapse, and not only for formal reasons. The crisis is a crisis of culture; it often involves an unhappy view of history – so that the Modernist writer is not simply the artist set free, but the artist under specific, apparently historical strain. (Bradbury and McFarlane 26)

Bradbury and McFarlane's *Modernism 1890-1930*, which Thormahlen calls a "pioneering guide," depicts chaos and the subjective reality of fragmented perceptions as the force behind the modernist crisis:

[Modernism] is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos... of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity.... It is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions. (Bradbury and McFarlane 27)

Some of the more important thematic and stylistic traits of modernism include fragmented narratives, stream-of-consciousness, literary impressionism, vernacular, various literary and historical allusions, and language play, all of which communicate the idea of subjectivity.

The "crisis of culture" described by Bradbury and McFarlane is expressed in a number of ways in modernist literature. For instance, Thormahlen addresses the characteristics of modernism as,

a powerful attraction to formal experimentation and innovation; a preoccupation with disorder, crisis, randomness, and fragmentation; tautness and irony in the chosen modes of expression; an extreme valorization of art; a rejection of history as a chronological process; cultural pessimism; moral relativism and ambivalence towards philosophical idealism; rootedness in urban, even metropolitan, settings, including the anonymity of crowds and the consequences of technological developments; an interest in representations of sexuality; and explorations of different concepts of reality and the self. (3)

Perhaps the most important principle of literary modernism addressed by the theorists noted above comes down to the concept of subjectivity, as reflected in phrases like

“doubt with respect to the possibility of representing and explaining reality,” “moral relativism,” and “explorations of different concepts of reality and the self.” In modernism, the consistent, linear narratives of traditional literature gave rise to forms that reflected the chaos of a fractured culture. Fragmented realities, failed communications, limited perspectives, and complicated histories are common in modernist texts, representing alienating subjectivity as a crucial subject of literary inquiry.

The conceptual implications of modernism find early articulation in the works of Jose Ortega y Gasset, who stands as a giant in the study of modernism in Spain.<sup>25</sup> In *Mapping Literary Modernism, Time and Development* (1985) Ricardo J. Quinones discusses the contributions of Ortega y Gasset to the literary movement that came to be known as modernism, highlighting the role that physics played in Ortega y Gasset’s “The Dehumanization of Art” (1916). As Quinones observes,

Ortega y Gasset saw quite early its significance when he allied it [modernist literature] with Einsteinian physics as being repudiations of the Newtonian world-view of an absolute space and time. In this association of literature and philosophy with the physical theories of relativity we are provided another common ground of relationships in Modernism. The network is extensive and seems to be supported by two major cables: (1) the denial of an absolute reality and (2) the need to uphold the sense of individual truth in a complex of multiple truths. (Quinones 115)

Moving outside of the Anglo-American realms of scholarship and examining the ideas of Ortega y Gasset and others helps discern some consistency among the various ideas of modernist concepts. Ortega y Gasset’s “major cables” further support my own observation of alienation (“the need to uphold the sense of individual truth”), subjectivity (the concept of “multiple truths”), and absurdity (“the denial of an absolute reality”) as

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<sup>25</sup> Ortega y Gasset holds a place in Spanish modernism that is comparable to Pound’s place in Anglo-American modernism.

premiere themes in modernist literature. While the specific means of expression vary, these concepts emerge repeatedly among theorists from all over the world. The focus on the “need” for a “sense” of individual truth emphasizes a psychological aspect of alienation – the innate individual desire for autonomy and identity that leads individuals to isolate themselves mentally in an effort to resist assimilation and the negation of the self. “Multiple truths” come from multiple perspectives, rendering truth itself as subjective, depending entirely upon perspective. The concept of “denial of an absolute reality” indicates absurdity because logic depends upon a stable sense of reality. When reality is destabilized, logic is destabilized, and absurdity prevails.

But modernism has become more than a descriptive category. It has become a title of prestige. As Thormahlen explains, there are “two unfortunate consequences” that can result from attempts to “valorize” authors by insistence upon their inclusion in the modernist canon: “works on which the label has not seemed to fit have been unfairly neglected, and the area of applicability has been stretched to (and sometimes beyond) the limit of meaningfulness” (6). While these unfortunate consequences are certainly possible, it is also still possible to make a case for writers who have supportable cause for being studied with relation to modernism. Not surprisingly, debates over the characteristics of modernist literature lead to debates over who meets certain criteria. Thus, arguments over the modernist canon come down to a question of criteria or characterization of the literature itself, for a canon cannot be well-founded if the criteria for inclusion are unclear. Gregory S. Jay addresses the relationship between characterization and canonization in “Postmodernism in *The Waste Land*: Women, Mass Culture, and Others” (1992):

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* has always been an essential text in any account of the advent of something called Modernism in Western literature and culture. It usually appears in lists along with Joyce's *Ulysses* and Pound's *Cantos*, or in a more general company including the works of Proust, Woolf, Lawrence, Mann, Gide, Kafka, Faulkner, Beckett, and Stevens. While it has been notoriously difficult for critics to unite these and other disparate figures under a single heading, this has not stopped us from speaking of Modernism as a coherent event. Its distinguishing characteristics usually include artistic experimentalism of a self-conscious kind, an indirect but powerful representation of social chaos, a sense of rupture from the past (though this is alternately a cause for celebration or mourning, and often both within the covers of a single book), and an expression of the artist's failure to find a satisfactory place within the economic, social, political, or cultural order of the time. (221)

Looking at the list of writers provided above, the diversity of the work represented by the label of modernism becomes apparent, and the uniting of "these and other disparate figures" under a single heading becomes more problematic.

Re-evaluation of the canon is a necessary part of the ongoing dialogue about the nature of this thing that has come to be called modernism, or more accurately, about writers who may be included as representing one of the facets of what Nicholls calls "Modernisms." Re-evaluating the canon is important because it facilitates an evolving discussion about the very nature of modernist scholarship, serving as a process of continuing assessment and refining of a better understanding of the concepts of modernisms in their various incarnations. Elliot and Wallace state in *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (im)positioning* (1994) that

Within the last decade, there has emerged a second generation of "modernist" critics which has been far less interested in sketching in the broad outlines of a modernist movement; instead, they want to expose the diversity *within* "modernism" and to explore "modernism's" institutional alliances and strategies. That is, to what degree was "modernism" self-consciously constructed by its practitioners and by its critics, and how did various social and market forces help shape the practices of "modernism"? (Elliot and Wallace 6)

As Elliot and Wallace explain, re-evaluation of the modernist canon can lead to a greater understanding of the forces behind and within modernism. Such a process guides modernist scholarship away from reductive perspectives that may miss important aspects of influence and diversity within modernism. Thus, the study of “diversity *within* ‘modernism’” may lead to a more accurate and fair examination of marginalized writers who may have been excluded from the canon (due to purposeful strategy<sup>26</sup> or misunderstanding), and a better understanding of the artistic and critical influences that helped to create and define this thing that has come to be known as modernism.

## Connections Between the Grotesque and Modernism

Even a brief overview of critical ideas about modernism and the grotesque reveals commonalities between the two in terms of themes, influences,<sup>27</sup> and artistic experimentation, although this comparison has received very little consideration, except for isolated discussions of individual writers. Kayser briefly mentions Beckett, Kafka, and Joyce as examples of writers of the grotesque, although he does not address these writers in terms a modernist movement. Sheryl Stevenson’s “Writing the Grotesque Body: Djuna Barnes’ Carnival Parody” (1991) is one of the few works to thoroughly examine a modernist writer in terms of elements of the grotesque. In this article,

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<sup>26</sup> For instance, Timothy Materer’s “Make It Sell! Ezra Pound Advertises Modernism” (1996) addresses theories of alleged propaganda and manipulation in the creation of a readership and a privileged place for Pound and other modernist writers.

<sup>27</sup> When tracing roots and influences in literary movements, certain authors figure prominently in both grotesque and modernist literature. For instance, Dante (one of the earliest and most important influences of the grotesque) is known to have influenced Eliot, Pound, and Yeats. Poe has also been established as a major influence on Eliot.

Stevenson examines Barnes's use of the carnivalesque grotesque elements described by Bakhtin. The grotesque elements used by Barnes are those of the comedic festival and "carnavalesque degradation" that Bakhtin saw as portrayals of an embracing of the natural world and a kind of equalizing of individuals on the basis of biological commonalities. Although Stevenson's discussion is specific to Barnes and does not relate the theoretical concepts of the grotesque to theories of the nature of modernism in a broader sense, her analysis of Barnes and the carnival tradition does set a precedent for discussion of some grotesque elements in modernist literature.<sup>28</sup>

## Experimentation in Modernism and the Grotesque

Theorists who write about the various incarnations of the grotesque highlight the experimental nature of this artistic form, which is one of its most important commonalities with modernism. One of the topics discussed by Nicholls, Calinescu, Huysen, Bradbury, McFarlane, and Thormahlen is that of the early origins of what is now loosely defined as a "modernist" impulse, indicating that the stylistic experimentation so strongly associated with modernism has its beginnings in Avant-Garde works that pre-date the period most commonly associated with the modernist movement. While experimentation has always been central to the concept of modernism from its earliest incarnations, stylistic exploration is not the exclusive province of modernism. Many overlook the modern experimental impulse that is at the core of

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<sup>28</sup> Virginia E. Swain's *Grotesque Figures: Baudelaire, Rousseau, and the Aesthetics of Modernity* (2004) presents a concise review of grotesque theory and insightful examination of the use of grotesque elements by certain writers. Her discussion of "modernity" relates to what might also be called "contemporary," "modern," or even "industrial" representations of the grotesque, not to "modernist" literature, however.

grotesque works. The tendency to conceptualize the grotesque as an outdated mode may stem from its incarnation in early novels and its frequent connection with antiquated Gothic forms.<sup>29</sup> However, the grotesque is modern and experimental in its nature, always focusing on the new. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque serves,

to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (34)

Bakhtin approaches the changes from the laughter-based carnivalesque grotesque to an alienated modern grotesque as a degeneration, leading to a form that has “almost entirely lost its past memories” (47). Philip Thomson’s *The Grotesque* (1972), on the other hand, portrays this development of alienation in the grotesque not as a loss but as an evolution, reflecting the modern cultural mentality.

Thomson approaches the grotesque as reflection of the contemporary world, implying that its more recent alienating trends are a sign of their modernity and their relevance to the times in which they are created, not stagnant or fixated on the past, but ever-evolving as a modality of contemporary expression. This idea of the ever-evolving

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<sup>29</sup> This analysis of culture and reality distinguishes the grotesque from the Gothic, which focuses on the use of specific devices to create a certain atmosphere. As Gilbert H. Muller explains in *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O’Connor and the Catholic Grotesque* (1972), “Gothic romance does not project a valid world vision as does the grotesque: it merely assaults the nerves by making us believe in the horror of the supernatural, whereas the grotesque forces metaphysical problems upon the intellect” (Muller 12). David Punter’s *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (1980), one of the most commonly cited and examined texts on the subject of Gothic literature, includes a detailed discussion of many specific conventions of the Gothic. It is possible that these conventions, which sometimes border on the cliché, contributed to the frequent critical dismissal of the Gothic, and of the “horror” genre in general. Eve Sedgwick’s *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1976) explores important “phenomenological,” “psychoanalytic,” and “structuralist” (6) aspects of the Gothic, but even her enlightening analysis does not link the Gothic to the cosmic level of observation at the core of the grotesque.

modernity of the grotesque is one of Thomson's greatest contributions to the discussion, for the grotesque is not an outdated artistic modality that has come and gone. Rather, grotesque art continues to evolve and adapt to its contemporary time and culture, incorporating various conceptual and stylistic experimentations to communicate observations about the artist's culture:

It is likely that the play-urge, the desire to invent and experiment for its own sake, is a factor in all artistic creation, but we can expect this factor to be more than usually strong in grotesque art and literature, where the breaking down and restructuring of familiar reality plays such a large part. In addition, highly inventive and imaginative, as well as strongly experimental, literature seems to gravitate toward the grotesque. The names of Rabelais and Sterne should once again be mentioned here as representative cases, and modern experimental literature is full of the grotesque. The brothel scene from Joyce's *Ulysses* is a prime example. In connection with experimental literature the question arises as to what extent modern experimental techniques – stream of consciousness, point of view, the use of film techniques, proliferation of disparate styles and so on – themselves are related to the creation of the grotesque. Not only the work of Joyce poses this question, but also the modern American novel from Faulkner to John Barth. (Thomson 64)

In this passage, Thomson uses the term “modern” rather than “modernist,” but his phrase “modern experimental literature” indicates that this reference to “modern” literature does not merely mean “historically contemporary.” Thomson's inclusion of the techniques of “stream of consciousness, point of view, the use of film techniques, proliferation of disparate styles and so on” indicates that his use of the term “modern” may be reasonably translated as “modernist,” and his inclusion of Joyce makes his brief but important mention of a connection between the grotesque and modernism compelling. Thomson touches on a crucial concept in this passage, but scholarship about the presence of both modernist and grotesque concepts and techniques together in works of weird fiction seems to be all but non-existent.

## Grotesque Content in Modernist Literature

Elements of the grotesque are often overlooked in modernist works, as in certain writings of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Franz Kafka, Mina Loy. Depictions of violence or the paranormal are commonly associated with the grotesque, but these are no strangers to modernism. Modernist literature is full of violent, horrifying, disgusting, morbid, and disturbing actions and images that may be labeled as “grotesque,”<sup>30</sup> as seen in modernist literature from all over the world. The subject of WWI, such a tremendous influence on modernist literature, lends itself to depictions of grotesque images of violence, as in the poems of Wilfred Owen. Non-Anglo-American modernism provides many examples of modernist writing that include grotesque imagery and concepts. For instance, Japanese author Akutagawa Ryunosuke’s “Within a Grove” (1921), probably the most well-known example of Asian modernist literature, stands as an excellent example of multiple fragmented narratives and unreliable characters relating their versions and partial perceptions of two horrible crimes in Feudal Japan. Depending upon the interests of the scholar, certain works by the writers mentioned above could be labeled as modernist, grotesque, or a combination of the two, the modernist grotesque. The examination of modernism and the grotesque as international phenomena is crucial to the development of an understanding of their commonalities, for certain authors and theorists from non-Anglo-American cultures expand these fields of study into a much wider spectrum.

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<sup>30</sup> For example, Hemingway’s bull fights, Faulkner’s corpse-transporting family in *As I Lay Dying*, Conrad’s violent Congo dwellers in *Heart of Darkness*, Kafka’s human-turned-insect in *Metamorphosis*, or Woolf’s shell-shocked and suicidal Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway* all represent grotesque elements in literature that has been labeled as “modernist” at some point.

## Shared Concepts of Modernism and the Grotesque

Stylistically, both grotesque and modernist literature reflect what Thormahlen calls a “powerful attraction to formal experimentation and innovation” (3). However, modernism is not simply a matter of experimental form: it has a point beyond mere word play, just as the “true” grotesque has a point beyond mere shock value. Conceptually modern grotesque and modernist literature share a focus on what may be concisely labeled alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity. In fact, it is difficult to study a given theoretical work on either subject without these words (or close synonyms) coming up repeatedly and prominently. Modernism reflects impulses toward de-centralizing notions of reality, understanding, and representation, reflected through new forms that communicate this impulse both explicitly (through image, action, and dialogue) and implicitly (through structure, language, and visual devices). The grotesque shares these impulses.

The primary differences include their historical origins and certain tendencies in subject matter. Both modernism and the modern grotesque focus on the concepts of alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity, but the grotesque tends to focus on explicit representations of these ideas through disturbing imagery and actions, while modernism tends to focus on more implicit representations of these themes. Through techniques like fragmented narratives, stream-of-consciousness, collage, and literary impressionism, modernist works are able to communicate the ideas of alienation, subjectivity and absurdity in more mundane settings and events, rather than relying on explicit, shocking images and actions, as seen in works of the grotesque. In modernist works, a walk through a city of strangers can be as alienating as entrapment in a distant castle. It could

even be said that modernism reflects a grotesque perspective, a lens of the grotesque through which any scene or situation is seen as alienating, subjective, and absurd. While the grotesque leans toward more unusual subject matter, and modernism leans toward unusual perspectives on mundane subject matter, there is an area in the middle where the two realms overlap and meld into grotesque modernism.

### **Alienation in the Grotesque and Modernism**

Alienation is a central element of both modernism and modern grotesque fiction (although not a major factor in the older “carnival grotesque” arts as described by Bakhtin); the point at which the character or reader’s current perceived reality deviates from his or her formerly accepted and assumed reality due to a radical change in circumstance or perception, a paradigm shift. It is the shift from community to isolation, the transformation of the normal world to the abnormal world and accepted reality to an unacceptable reality. Grotesque works tend to represent some kind of tangible alienation such as entrapment (Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”), displacement (Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*), exposure to violence (O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find”), or physical transformation (Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*) that separate characters from their familiar worlds. Grotesque alienation is usually a result of external, physical change or action, communicated through imagery that may include violent acts, self-destructive behaviors, deformity, transformation, monstrous creatures, and any number of other strange or disturbing scenes. However, the physically-based alienation depicted in such works is merely a catalyst or metaphor for the psychological alienation of one or more

characters. Modernist alienation typically focuses on a type of isolation that is entirely a matter of individual perception, often at least partially self-imposed (as in Joyce's "The Dead" or Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock") due to the characters' intellectual dispositions and ways of interpreting reality. It is common for modernist characters and speakers to focus on their own difference from others, and on their inability to know or be known by others on any significant level. Even their own minds, motives, and identities become unfathomable to those alienated characters as they explore the limitations of their relationships, cultures, institutions, and thought processes.

Various theorists address the importance of alienation in modernism, providing a platform for the comparison of modernism to the grotesque in terms of their respective portrayals of alienation. Huyssen describes canonical modernism as the "ascetic and tortured modernism of a Kafka, a modernism of negativity and alienation, ambiguity and abstraction" (209), and Kalaidjian refers to a "sense of dislocation and alienation" as being "quintessentially modern" (49). In *The End of the American Avant Garde* (1997), Hobbs states that alienation is central to experimental, avant-garde art in general: "Three themes explain the relationship of avant-gardists to their culture: alienation, innovation, and the future" (9). According to Hobbs, the concept of alienation in modernism and avant-garde literature became a subject that artists especially related to themselves: "Alienation was the beginning.... of self-definition... Alienation – and the problems of self-definition – fueled avante-garde creativity" (9). Part of the discussion of modernist alienation addresses the idea that certain modernists used alienation as a conscious strategy in constructing their artistic identities. Russel Berman's essay "Joyce's Face" (1996) discusses the self-alienating strategies of Joyce and other modernists, saying that

the “modernist artist is defined by his alienation; he allows himself to be presented to the public sphere as a modernist, ‘obscure’ author who can be recontained within popularly accepted categories around the ideologeme of exile” (145). Alienation, Berman indicates, is more than a common theme in modernist literature. It is a common theme in the identities of the writers themselves.

With a focus on alienation from internal versus external sources, modernist works point to knowledge and insight as the most prevalent and powerful of alienating forces: “Artistic self-conception is sheltered inside the modernist mind as a mode of alienation...For the modernist artist...alienation is the most prominent level of self-consciousness, a principle feature of a personality surcharged with talent (or the supposition of talent) but politically powerless” (Berman 240). In modernist works, the grotesque tendency toward unusual and extreme events is often replaced by everyday, even mundane physical circumstances that are perceived from an alienated point of view. Eliot’s *Prufrock* is an excellent example of a character who perceives mundane reality through a disturbed, alienated perspective. Other modernist works also involve some kind of paranormal factor or violence to others or to self (*Heart of Darkness*, *Metamorphosis*, or even *Mrs. Dalloway*<sup>31</sup>, for instance).

In effect, it could be argued that modernism is, among other things, the grotesque made permanent and inescapable, for it is an internal grotesque alienation that follows the perceiver, a state of mind that causes everything observed to seem strange and

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<sup>31</sup> In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus stands out as a character who experiences alienation due to his horrific experiences in the Great War. His inability to cope with his memories or to share his experiences leads to his alienation and eventual suicide. However, Clarissa Dalloway represents a more subtle and more common type of alienation that stems from her unique point of view, an awareness of the seemingly unsurmountable isolation and sadness that pervade all levels of human society.

threatening. The world itself has not changed on any tangible level, but the character in question has effectively been cursed to perceive everything through the veil of the grotesque. Modernist alienation is the new evolution of the grotesque, for the modernist protagonist often comes to perceive the familiar world as estranged (or even hostile) not because of any external event but because of a new awareness of the truly fragmented nature of reality, human relationships, and intellectual inquiry. The modernist protagonist, and perhaps the modernist artist, is trapped by knowledge in a mental framework by which the world is permanently rendered grotesque, as opposed to the non-modernist grotesque in which the alienating effect is temporary and usually comes to some kind of resolution. Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, for instance, represent Kayser's concepts of "THE ESTRANGED WORLD," "A GAME WITH THE ABSURD," and (literally) banishing of "DEMONIC ELEMENTS" (187-188). However, in these classic cases of pre-modernist grotesques, the estrangement of the world is represented as a temporary, even anomalous effect. The externally tangible, extreme events that typify pre-modernist grotesque works (paranormal events, violence) are portrayed as anomalous. The familiar world changes in some physical way. Then, once the "exorcism" takes place, the trauma ends, and the world goes back to a state of order (or at least "normality"). In modernist grotesque alienation, there is no going back. The world is not alienated due to malignant influences that can be purged, as in the older grotesque.

In modernist grotesque alienation, the protagonist realizes that the world itself has always been alienating, and it is the illusion of stability that must be exposed, for the sake of intellectual integrity, if nothing else. The physical reality need not change at all, for

the grotesque transformation is a transformation of the mind and perception, as David Galloway observes in *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction* (1966):

alienation is not the result of the confrontation of a unique human spirit with a particular set of essentially external conditions... it is the fate of any and all men who think and feel with any intensity about their relationship to the world which surrounds them. Therefore man does not *become* alienated (the word itself ceases to have connotations of “progress”): alienation is his birthright, the modern, psychologically colored equivalent of original sin. Thus, if contemporary alienation is not different in kind from that of previous ages, it is a least different in degree and, because its frequency presupposes the irrelevance of conventional value systems, significantly different in results which it presupposes. (14)

Although man may not “*become* alienated,” the average person may not be aware of his or her “birthright” without some kind of catalyst to bring about the necessary change in perspective. Modernist grotesque works provide the necessary catalysts by causing characters to face unusual events that force them to re-evaluate their beliefs and perspectives, discovering their own alienation as a result of direct experience.

The alienated psychological perspective discussed by Galloway typically makes its appearance in modernist fiction through intrinsic narrative techniques or through the words and actions of characters who may or may not have a particular stated reason to feel such intense levels of alienation. In fact, a modernist character is usually surrounded by “normalcy” and everyday civilization. However, he or she experiences a sense of isolation as a result of an awareness of the fundamental lack of communication and understanding among all people. Joyce’s Stephan Daedalus, Eliot’s Prufrock, and Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway serve as examples of characters who experience an agonizing awareness of their own alienation within their cultures, due to nothing more than a certain point of view for which there is no thorough account. Like many of Poe’s characters, these individuals display a high level of sensitivity and introspection that may be

interpreted by readers as resulting from especially insightful and sophisticated thought processes or from neuroses. The character construction of the self-made exile is a kind of cliché in itself. Therefore, the absence of a tangible cause for a character's feeling of alienation may trivialize the character's experience in the mind of the reader. However, the modernist grotesque includes specific events as catalysts for alienation, providing the characters with solid reasons for their sense of isolation. They experience alienation due to a paradigm shift that is externally imposed (not merely imagined), while being internally processed. Lovecraft, for instance, portrays characters who are exposed to a variety of sources of new information (documents, objects, places, creatures) that estrange them from the world they thought they knew: "What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of man" ("The Call of Cthulhu," *Bloodcurdling Tales* 99). Once the institutions upon which they have based their world views are proven to be wrong about the origins, nature, and history of the world and its inhabitants, these characters find themselves stripped of any real sense of purpose, identity, or connection to others. In this way, a character's questioning of traditional notions of reality is not mere pontification but a reasonable reaction to tangible stimuli. The "birthright" of alienation is not merely inherited. It is claimed through a trial by fire.

## Subjectivity in the Grotesque and Modernism

The establishment of a pervasive, persistent state of alienation leads to a world view in which reality is fragmented and subjective. Subjectivity, the idea of the

possibility of multiple legitimate perspectives or realities, saw a particularly strong development in the early twentieth century, as seen in debates about Darwinian theory, Einstein's Relativity, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, Boas's Cultural Relativism, and many artistic ideas and movements, including Surrealism, Vorticism, Absurdism, Dadaism, the modern grotesque, and of course, the broad label of modernism. The influence of scientific developments cannot be over-emphasized in a discussion of the importance of subjectivity to the intellectual world, for the discoveries of waves, rays, forces and spectra beyond the physical perceptions of the human senses brought thinkers in all fields to reconsider just how much a human being could directly observe about the surrounding universe. While some scholars approached the scientific discoveries of the twentieth century as indications that objective science would one day unravel every possible mystery, others saw some of those discoveries as emblematic of the subjective nature of reality as a whole.<sup>32</sup>

The grotesque, long before the dawn of modern science, reflected the subjective nature of the conventional paradigms of evil versus good, immoral versus moral, unnatural versus natural, demonic versus angelic, ugliness versus beauty, and divinity versus monstrosity. Through these alienating, disorienting exercises in subjectivity, the concept of a stable reality is challenged, vanquished, and rendered absurd. The modern grotesque uses explicit juxtaposition and conflicting ideas and images to address the concepts of alienation and subjectivity, usually representing these overtly and dramatically through outward dialogue, actions, physical properties, and unusual events that are shocking, disturbing, distorted, disgusting, or even strangely comical to the

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<sup>32</sup> Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle" and Einstein's "Theory of General Relativity" dramatically changed the way that many scientists came to look at the reliability of "empirical evidence."

reader. Grotesque subjectivity is often portrayed through extreme or even paranormal circumstances in which characters commit heinous acts, monstrous-looking characters take on the role of victims or heroes, hallucinations are confused for physical reality, or other external events are portrayed in ways that complicate traditional notions of human perception, understanding, and representation: “the world depicted by the grotesque artist is our own world turned upside down; our standards, conventions, convictions are upset” (Clayborough 71). Grotesque works disrupt traditionally accepted paradigms and value systems, rendering traditional moral, aesthetic, and even scientific notions as matters of perspective or circumstance.

Part of the modernist impulse toward subjectivity appears to arise from its reaction against the Victorian age, which includes modernism’s rebellion against the “Realism” of the Victorians. Walter Kalaidjian addresses the relationship between the modernists and the Victorians in *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism* (2005):

heterodox modernism, in all its iterations, takes as its points of departure reaction against the limitations of Victorian epistemology and responses to late nineteenth-century modernization. The centrality of God, fixed natural laws, humanity’s inability to discern immutable truths, and dichotomous reasoning (human / animal, civilized / uncivilized, free / slave, male / female) largely defined an epistemology ill-equipped for the twentieth century. (130)

The twentieth century outlook that modernists sought to create was prepared to tackle the uncertainty of a subjective reality, tearing down what the modernists saw as mere illusions as a stable reality that the Victorians had created to comfort themselves.

An emphasis on relativity and subjectivity developed in the behavioral sciences as well as in the physical sciences, as pointed out by Kalaidjian: “Pragmatism, Boasian anthropology, cultural pluralism, and the nativist project of cultural identification began

to define a distinctly American form of modernism” (130). Kalaidjian focuses on American Modernism, but the modernist focus on subjectivity and the questioning of monolithic views of reality is global. For instance, W.B. Yeats was one of the figures of British modernism who directly addressed the subjective nature of perception and knowledge in terms of behavioral psychology, as George Mills Harper explains in *Yeats and the Occult* (1975):

[k]nowledge, for any society, is, after all, no more than an agreed area of experience from which other areas of experience are excluded as irrelevant or worse; as alchemy and other primitive scientific studies were excluded from scholasticism, and as now scholasticism, indeed theology as such, is excluded from the positivist scientific definition of knowledge. (80)

Modernist questioning of intellectual paradigms extended into literary representations of knowledge, reflected in a rejection of “Realistic” attempts at a narrative objectivity that were typically approached through the transparency of an omniscient narration that presented to the reader a complete and objective perspective on the events of the plot. Modernist writers often rebelled against the Realist’s illusion of the possibility of a privileged perspective: to many modernists, the omniscient narrator was the most unrealistic narrator imaginable, for no all-knowing, omni-present story teller actually exists. To this way of thinking, real narrators are limited narrators, for real people have limitations of perspective. Therefore, all narrations should draw attention to the subjective nature of any perspective, the limitations of any one point of view. Dorothy Ross explains the modernist idea of subjective narration in “Modernism Reconsidered” (1994): “The subjectivity of modernist art is neither emotion nor necessarily expressivity, however, but rather the inward path of aesthetic consciousness... The decisive context that modernist interpretation locates for aesthetic subjectivity is the artist’s radical sense of alienation from modern society”(6). The “inward path of aesthetic consciousness”

winds through wild and tangled woods, so depictions of that path often include attention to the obstacles along the way: issues of time, memory, perception, and communication.

## Subjectivity and the Occult

Subjectivity is addressed through a variety of strategies in the modernist grotesque, including symbolic transformation through occult or paranormal imagery and concepts. Occult, magical, and paranormal events and themes are common elements in grotesque literature, often the driving forces behind the plots and character motivations of such works. Characters like Shakespeare's Prospero, Marlowe and Goethe's Dr. Faustus, Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer, and Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein are examples of literary figures who dabble in "dark secrets," and who figure prominently in the history of the grotesque's development. Lovecraft's Tillinghast, Curwen, Carter, and others symbolize the expansion and evolution of occult traditions in the grotesque. The occult arts of transformation are particularly prominent in the grotesque world, for they serve to facilitate the transformation of the mundane or normal into the grotesque. Occult transformations serve as a vehicle for both alienating effects and ideas of subjectivity in many works of the grotesque.

A few literary theorists examine the profound influence of occult concepts and images in modernist works, especially with regard to alchemy, the ancient art of transformation of matter. Among the various alchemical rumors, the most famous is that of the legendary "philosopher's stone," which was said to be a secret catalyst that could turn lead into gold. However, those who have studied alchemy with any seriousness are

aware that the creation of gold is not the purpose. This is only symbolic, the focus being on the spiritual and intellectual transformation of the alchemist himself or herself. Some modernists found the concept of alchemy to be an appropriate parallel to their own artistic process, the creation of something divine and elevated from something base or even disgusting. As Timothy Materer observes in *Modernist Alchemy* (1995), “It is significant that Paracelsus, the most enlightened of Pound’s magi, is an alchemist. Pound shared with Yeats, not to mention Goethe and Rimbaud, a fascination with alchemy as an analogue of poetic art” (56). This parallel of alchemy to art is also present in the works of James Joyce, especially in the character of “Shem the Alchemist” (alchemist) in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Among the modernists who were influenced by the occult traditions, the representation of the mundane and the base through respected artistic forms mirrored the ancient alchemist’s quest to turn common materials, even waste materials, into precious metals. To both the alchemist and the poet, the resulting product was not so important as the transformation of the mind and spirit inherent in the process of creation.

When considering the modernist principle of art as the magic through which mundane or even disgusting (subject) matter can be transformed into something divine, the connection between grotesque and modernist creative philosophies takes on yet another dimension. This alchemical principle of art as a merging of high and low is prevalent in modernist and grotesque works. As Harpham explains, “Most grotesques are marked by such an affinity / antagonism, by the co-presence of the normative, fully formed, ‘high’ or ideal, and the abnormal, unformed, degenerate, ‘low’ or material” (9). Like modernism’s alchemical transmutation of the base into the divine, the grotesque

uses changes in perspective to make accepted aesthetics appear monstrous and the monstrous appear beautiful: “A shift in vision, often from literal to symbolic, and suddenly the deformed is revealed as the sublime” (Harpham 20). This unusual emphasis on transformation through the artistic process is crucial in examining the relationship between grotesque and modernism, also serving as a basis for understanding explicit versus implicit strategies in the respective forms. While grotesque “alchemy” tends to manifest itself through physical metamorphosis and overt action, including lycanthropy, self-mutilation, violence, or hallucinations and madness, modernist “alchemy” tends to be less obvious and less literal, most commonly maintaining everyday subject matter but depicting that subject matter through transformative representations. In either case, the portrayal of transformation reflects a changing, unstable reality in which one thing may move into another through a shift in perception and representation. This notion of transforming reality challenges the very cultural constructs that reinforce rigid notions of truth, challenging the institutions behind those constructs. Once the validity of those constructs is compromised and their authority is questioned, the institutions that reinforce traditional notions of religion, natural sciences, behavioral sciences, and humanities are rendered as absurd.

## Absurdity in the Grotesque and Modernism

Absurdity, that which is ridiculous because it is counter to reason (however “reason” is defined in the given context), takes many forms in literature. Although absurdity has always been central to the grotesque, absurdity in older grotesque works

tended to portray the absurd as anomaly, focusing primarily upon the absurdity of human thoughts and behaviors within a tradition of a “humanocentric” universe of conventional religious construction. The absurdities of hypocrisy, self-destruction, gullibility, blinding arrogance, closed-mindedness, senseless violence, and short-sightedness are addressed in the works of Dante, Chaucer, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Goethe, Wordsworth, and Maturin, to name only a very few, but these works portray the absurd as the aberrant malfunction of reason, the exception rather than the norm. The lunatic and the fool (sometimes an educated fool) were the only absurd types, not the average thinker. As the grotesque developed in the twentieth century, literature of the grotesque began to move toward the portrayal of absurdity on a universal level, as did modernist literature. For some writers and artists, absurdity became the norm rather than the exception, part of the human condition. In their estimation, the subjective nature of truth made any assumption of meaning absurd in nature. Exposure to violence, madness, or paranormal transformation serves may serve in literature to aid in the depiction of the thoughts and behaviors of “normal” characters as being counter to reason in a given situation.

The impact of the concept of absurdity upon literature has been tremendous, especially in the grotesque and in modernism. There is always an element of absurdity in grotesque works, which can range from the strange and disturbing to the fully comical and ridiculous (and often, a blending of the two). From the early Medieval and Renaissance carnivalesque grotesque celebrations described by Bakhtin to Kayser’s perspectives on the “modern” grotesque of the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, various types of absurdity figure prominently. As Thomson indicates, the absurd elements in certain modernist works bring them into the realm of the grotesque:

we may note for our purposes that the modern use of “the absurd” in the context of literature (especially of the drama) brings it very close to the grotesque, so much that the theatre of the absurd could almost as well be called the “theatre of the grotesque.” We should probably be hard put to decide between “grotesque” and “absurd” to describe such characters as Lucky and Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot*, the Orator in Ionesco’s *The Chairs*.... (Thomson 30)

Thomson’s study of the grotesque deserves credit for being one of the few theoretical works to point toward a direct connection between modernism and the grotesque on the basis of the importance of absurdity in works that have been associated with both with modernism and the grotesque. Thomson further adds to the discussion of absurdity’s role in modernism and the grotesque by defining the role of absurdity in grotesque literature as “an appropriate expression of the problematic nature of existence” (Thomson 11), a job typically assigned to modernism, Deconstruction, Absurdist Theatre, or postmodernism, with reference to the frailty of human logical constructs and limitations of human perceptions and representations of existence. By explaining the grotesque with reference to this modernist philosophical concept, Thomson supports my argument that absurdity is a common focus that further links the grotesque with modernist literature.

It was not until the intellectual community expanded its understanding of physical science and the conceptual possibilities of reality that absurdity expanded to a more cosmic scope. As astronomy and biology were explored more thoroughly, thinkers were forced to face paradigm shifts that rendered certain fundamental human beliefs absurd. Scientific inquiry eventually disturbed the illusion of the cosmic centrality of earth and demonstrated that the world of humans is only one of billions.<sup>33</sup> As astronomy de-centralized the earth’s physical position at the center of the universe and evolutionary

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<sup>33</sup> From early astronomers like Copernicus and Galileo to modern astronomers like Carl Sagan and Stephen Hawking, the study of the cosmos moves steadily toward greater and greater awareness of the vastness of the universe, and the insignificance of planet Earth in this ever-widening context.

theory de-centralized humanity's position as the very image of god, philosophical impulses began to develop to question the conceptual significance of these new levels of understanding. In the wake of a new wave of questioning of old beliefs and assumptions, certain artistic and philosophical movements evolved the acknowledged subjective perspectives and representations of reality (including but not limited to modernism, the modernist grotesque, Existentialism, Deconstruction, Cultural Relativism, and Surrealism), representing certain assumptions about reality to be absurd in nature. As Lyman explains, a perspective of cosmic absurdity can be broken down into two fundamental concepts: "(1) the world makes no ultimate ontological sense and yet is (almost) everywhere and always regarded as having meaning; and (2) the self and society are social constructions," and, of course, "The two theses are ultimately related" (13). Lyman's description provides a useful starting point for a discussion of modern depictions of universal absurdity.

### Absurdity, Diagnosis, and Ugliness

Portrayals of absurdity, especially when communicated through satire, are favored means of cultural diagnosis in the modernist grotesque, as addressed by the most influential theorists of both modernism and the grotesque, including Ezra Pound and Wolfgang Kayser. Pound's philosophy of art parallels that of Kayser's exorcism or purging quality of the grotesque: "As there are in medicine the art of diagnosis and the art of cure, so in the arts, so in the particular arts of poetry and of literature, there is the art of diagnosis and there is the art of cure. They call one the cult of ugliness and the other the

cult of beauty....” (Pound 45). According to Pound, modernist art is on the diagnosis side of this dichotomy. By extension, so is the grotesque, which serves to reveal and scrutinize “something hidden and unpleasant by dragging it into the light” (Clayborough 67). Although Pound invokes the language of medicine and Kayser and Clayborough invoke the language of religion, they all function to reveal the malignancies of the artist’s contemporary culture.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that certain dedicated “diagnosticians” (Conrad, Joyce, Kafka, Beckett, Lovecraft) use every resource available to fulfill their self-assigned responsibilities in the healing process. They utilize, in various ratios, a combination of grotesque and modernist techniques in order to represent their findings regarding the afflictions of the human condition.

The process of tracing a precedent for the identification of ties between the grotesque and modernism is aided most directly by Ezra Pound via an especially insightful analysis by Lesley Higgins. Pound’s aligning of what we now call modernist literature with the cultural diagnosis that he calls the “cult of ugliness” seems to point to connections between modernism and the grotesque. Higgins briefly connects Pound’s idea of the “cult of ugliness” to the grotesque in *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness:*

*Aesthetics and Gender Politics* (2002):

one can also ascertain that the grotesque, especially, becomes the critic’s strategic means of deflecting interest away from beauty and toward an alternative “true ideal.” Sanitized of any association with the ludic, the bestial, or the satanic, this new (and not false) grotesque is offered to readers as a visual embodiment of exceptional truths. The grotesque, one might say, performs the truth in arresting new ways... As well, the emphasis on the grotesque brings a new gesture to aesthetic writing in English: what one can call, to borrow Proust’s term for Baudelaire, the *grimacant*. The distance between a favored *grimacant* and a cult of ugliness is comparatively small indeed. (42)

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<sup>34</sup> One could just as easily discuss the grotesque impulse in terms of medicine and the modernist impulse in terms of religion.

Although Thomson discusses elements of the stylistic grotesque as they appear in some experimental twentieth century texts, Higgins's connection between the grotesque impulse and Pound's idea of the modernist "cult of ugliness" may be the most direct link to date between the modern grotesque and literary modernism. To continue with Pound's metaphor, grotesque modernism is an "art of diagnosis," and the underlying malady afflicting humanity is absurdity, that which is counter to logic.<sup>35</sup>

The line between grotesque and modernist literature blurs as the similarities between the two become more apparent. An emphasis on alienation, subjectivity, absurdity, experimentation, transformation, and cultural diagnosis is shared by both modes of expression. While it would be a gross-oversimplification to imply that modernism and the grotesque are the same, it seems reasonable to suggest that much of modernism may have sprung from roots grounded in the grotesque. At the very least, I would postulate that there exists a realm of literature in which modernism and the grotesque overlap. There certainly are modernist works that contain no identifiable grotesque elements, like the more whimsical experimental poems of e.e. cummings or Marianne Moore. Likewise, there exist works of the grotesque that do not feature the more prominent stylistic innovations of "High Modernism." However, a vast and largely unexplored territory lies in the mist between the worlds of modernism's intellectualism and the visceral experience of the grotesque; a territory where the two modalities merge and transform into visions of new realities: the modernist grotesque.

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<sup>35</sup> If the grotesque and modernism are together on the side of "art of diagnosis," the Gothic can be seen as representing the "art of cure." The Gothic, although it deals with terror and even perversity, is closer to the "cult of beauty," for it serves to provide a "cure" for a variety of general ailments - boredom, tedium, creative restlessness. It represents Kayser's "DEMONIC ELEMENTS" in romanticized ways, focusing on the horrific and the perverse as flights of fancy and escapism rather than serious cultural criticism or purging of negative influences.

## Lovecraft and the Modernist Grotesque

Lovecraft works with the genre of the modernist grotesque in his use of the concepts and devices of alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity to better communicate his idea of “cosmic disinterestism.” By recognizing the existence of the modernist grotesque as a literary category for literature that is simultaneously modernist and grotesque, we find a better approach for studying Lovecraft and other writers who work with this type of writing. Eventually, identification and understanding of Lovecraft as a writer of the modernist grotesque may foster the development of dialogue about the relationships between grotesque and modernist literature in general. Although Lovecraft’s reputation has suffered in part due to his association with the label of “Gothic horror,” it would be an error to deny the fact that he did write a bit of “Gothic horror,” especially in the earlier years of his career (though even those early stories lacked many of the cliché traits that theorists ascribe to the Gothic). However, the majority of his fiction falls much more comfortably into the category of the modernist grotesque, for it combines the world vision, cultural diagnosis, modernity, and experimentation that are found in modernism and the grotesque, and that are absent in Gothic horror (“From Beyond,” “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Shadow Out of Time,” *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kaddath*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, *At the Mountains of Madness*, indeed the bulk of his work appears to qualify as the modernist grotesque). To a reader who expects only a tale of horror, the metaphysical problems addressed in Lovecraft’s works are easily missed. The metaphysical problem behind the majority of his fiction is related most clearly in his letter to *Weird Tales* that explains his “fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in

the vast cosmos-at-large” (*Selected Letters* 2.150). Lovecraft’s fiction reflects his ideas about humankind’s insignificance in the universe, and the insufficiency of human knowledge and perception. Such a philosophy, inherently modernist, born of his interest in the sciences in general and in astronomy in particular, transcends the more traditional, human-centered philosophical concerns of other writers of the grotesque. On one hand, Lovecraft was an antiquarian with intellectual ties to past ages and ideas. However, his knowledge of science and modern theories forced him to break with traditional notions of morality and the place of humans in an infinite universe. In the works in question, he creates an artistic impulse that is uniquely modernist, informed by new theories in science, philosophy, and literature, and he uses the imagery of the grotesque to convey that impulse.

In Lovecraft’s lifetime, the study of the grotesque and modernism as artistic concepts had not yet developed in a way that would have been likely to have attracted his attention. Lovecraft did not describe his tales as grotesque or modernist, which is reasonable considering that these terms were not even used in their contemporary contexts until approximately two decades after his death. However, it is fitting and useful to examine grotesque and modernist elements utilized by Lovecraft and other writers, and to consider changing or expanding dialogues about their works in order to understand these writers with relation to the modernist grotesque, and to each other. As for whether he himself would have appreciated my categorization of him as working in the genre of the modernist grotesque, I must admit that he showed a dissatisfaction with many of the experimental writers of his time, including Eliot, as Peter Cannon, indicates in *H.P. Lovecraft* (1989): “In 1922-23, having no sympathy for the modernist poetry of the day,

he wrote a 134-line parody of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* entitled *Waste Paper: A Poem of Profound Insignificance*. As St. Armand and John H. Stanley have pointed out, this satirical exercise happens to share some affinities with *The Waste Land* before Eliot made the cuts recommended by Ezra Pound" (12). However, Lovecraft's criticism of certain modernist writers does not preclude him from consideration as a modernist, as supported by Michael Mell's observation in "D.H. Lawrence and the Meaning of Modernism" (2003) when he explains that "The authors thought of as modernist had not only very varied, but mutually opposed, conceptions and practices" (132-133). If the practice of using weird subject matter were to become one of the acknowledged variations of modernism, it is likely that Lovecraft would come to be seen as a giant of the modernist canon.

A few Lovecraft scholars have examined his idea of "cosmic disinterestism," the idea of an anti-humanocentrist universe that addresses the limitations and insignificance of humans in a cosmic scope, in its relationship to the modernist movement, and to Lovecraft's own opinion of the noted literature of his day. These studies include close analysis of Lovecraft's comments on modernist writers and their influences, providing a starting point for further discussions of modernist elements in Lovecraft's works. For instance, Norman R. Gayford's "The Artist as Antaeus: Lovecraft and Modernism" (1991) offers illuminating biographical details about Lovecraft's relationship to the literary movement that came to be known as modernism. Gayford's examination of Lovecraft's correspondence establishes the author as a person with knowledge of the scientific, philosophical, and literary developments of his time, asserting that Lovecraft's "letters and fiction destabilize humanocentrist philosophy and sciences.... Lovecraft was

a philosophical modernist, if not an entirely artistic one. Probing the limits of art and the use of geometric images, Lovecraft enters the prose versus poetry conversation of his time. He also enters the ongoing debate regarding tradition and orthodoxy<sup>36</sup> (273-4). Although Gayford's points about Lovecraft's modern-mindedness are well made, one question arises immediately: who was "entirely" artistically modernist? It could be argued that every one of the canonical modernists, Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Cummings, Loy, and H.D., for instance, created artistically traditional, mainstream works at some point in his or her life, either before or after a period of work that may be characterized as modernist. It would be unfair to exclude Joyce from the modernist lineup because his early stories are not as experimental as *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*. Likewise, it would not do to expel Eliot for writing *Murder in the Cathedral* instead of another "Wasteland." Likewise, Lovecraft's works include a few Gothic horror stories that are not representative of his most complex and most intellectually stimulating work. It is more reasonable to characterize Lovecraft by his most prevalent and most developed type of work, which I define here as the modernist grotesque.

When experimenting with the idea of Lovecraft as a modernist, T.S. Eliot appears to be the best reference point. Surprisingly, much of Gayford's essay addresses similarities between the thoughts and philosophies of Lovecraft and T.S. Eliot, a compelling comparison. The two writers reflected similar attitudes toward science, culture, and history, occasionally even using identical phrases in expressing their ideas. Although Lovecraft spoke highly of Eliot as a thinker, he found Eliot's apparent nihilism

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<sup>36</sup> Part of his contribution to these debates comes through in his fiction. For instance, "Pickman's Model" appears to be a critique of the Imagist movement and a statement about mimetic art that is technically sound but devoid of imagination. "The Unnameable" revolves around the debate over whether or not anything can exist that is beyond description.

in “The Wasteland” to be problematic. According to Lovecraft, one must acknowledge chaos, subjectivity, and “cosmic disinterestism” in poetry, then develop a new cultural unity in order to face the uncaring universe with a healthy epicurean outlook (and even humor). True, Lovecraft criticized various aspects of the modernist movement, including its elitism and its nihilism, which he thought was an artistic dead-end. However, this does not preclude him from the category.

Like many great thinkers, Lovecraft was a victim of his own scientific genius. Lovecraft’s focus on the scientific realms beyond the human senses, be they huge and distant as in astronomy or microscopic and terrestrial as in chemistry, inspired him to think beyond the scope of conventional experience and beyond the boundaries of established modernism. The “weird tale” had developed a reputation of convention and antiquity, but Lovecraft’s work was so unusual that he could find no better designation. Nothing like Lovecraft’s work had ever been seen, and no one (perhaps not even the writer himself) knew quite how to categorize it. However, *Weird Tales* usually accepted his work even when the stories tended to be too difficult for some readers. It is ironic that Lovecraft’s vast expertise in so many subjects effectively led him to be less respected than those who knew far less than he. Once he began to look at the unplumbed mysteries of modern science, the mundane matters detailed by less scientifically brilliant writers seemed provincial in comparison. In this and other ways, he was far more “modern” than any “modernist.” Lovecraft did not choose “weird” subject matter because he was behind the times. He chose his subject matter because he was ahead of his time. By examining several of his related works with reference to the modernist grotesque, the reader may gain a better understanding of his place in the world of literature.

## Chapter Two: Alienation

Lovecraft brings together the explicit alienation of the modern grotesque (through the presence of non-human intelligences, cults, and strange artifacts and cities) and the implicit alienation of modernism (through altered perspectives, language play, and collage) to create a new kind of “weird tale” for the age of science, his own type of modernist grotesque tale. As mentioned previously, the controlling events of most pre-twentieth century grotesque works are presented as isolated incidents and freak occurrences, involving monsters, occult transformations, deformity, and madness. They are brief glimpses of the negative and dysfunctional potential of humans, situations that are typically resolved and effectively corrected or “subdued.” Maturin’s Melmoth, Conrad’s Kurtz, Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus, and other grotesque literary icons are anomalous characters who either die or lose their control, representing “DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD” (Kayser 188) that are unusual or latent, manifesting through extreme circumstances.

### Alienation in and the Paradigm Crisis

Portrayals of the past or of distant worlds are common in fantasy, Gothic, or science fiction, but the use of contemporary and terrestrial settings is an important commonality between modernism and the grotesque. While modernism implies contemporary settings by its very title, the long history of the grotesque has the potential to influence a reader to think of the genre as an antiquated form. However, grotesque

fiction is, by nature, a literature of contemporary cultural criticism.<sup>37</sup> Works of the grotesque that may seem antiquated to contemporary readers, like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, are set in the writer's own time and world, as opposed to being set in a previous century or in another plane of existence. As William Van O'Connor explains in *The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays* (1962), the grotesque (like modernism) reflects and comments on the writer's contemporary culture, reacting against the trends and traditions that may be irrational or harmful. Similarly, Harpham characterizes the grotesque as an art of radical change and rebellion against outdated paradigms: "It is one characteristic of revolutions, whether literary, political, or scientific" (Harpham 20). The grotesque's focus on modern social commentary necessitates a grounding in modern, familiar settings rather than antiquated or fantastical ones.

The importance of contemporary, terrestrial settings in grotesque literature is made clear when those settings are considered with relation to alienation. It is important to understand that the estranged or alienated world is not the same as an "alien" world, as Clayborough explains in *The Grotesque in English Literature*:

in genuinely grotesque art the everyday world is suddenly changed into a strange and unpleasant place, into a world in which we do not wish to live. The grotesque arouses in us not fear of death but anxiety about life. A merely alien world, one which is completely strange to us from the outset, as in the fairy-tales, is not grotesque. (Clayborough 64)<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The idea of the grotesque as a fundamentally modern form, as explained in Chapter One, deserves review with reference to the discussion of contemporary settings in the portrayal of alienation.

<sup>38</sup> Schneider echoes Clayborough's ideas about the necessity of contemporary settings for conceptually insightful "weird tales" in *Horror and the Holy* (1993):

If the setting is unfathomable from the outset, as are most fairy tales and some works of science fiction, then the story is not likely to generate much horror. If, on the other hand, the setting is credible at its inception and unexpectedly becomes otherworldly, the story's shock-value mounts significantly. We are reminded once again of the role played by deviation: the more an experience

On the subject of the estranged world in the grotesque, Thomson adds that “if a literary text ‘takes place’ in a fantasy-world created by the author, with no pretensions to a connection with reality, the grotesque is almost out of the question” (23). The idea of the “alienated” as opposed to the “alien” world is important to the understanding of the grotesque because it serves to distinguish the grotesque weird tale from stories in which the settings are antiquated (as in most Gothic tales), futuristic or extra-terrestrial (as in much of science fiction), or entirely otherworldly (as in fantasy or “swords-and-sorcery” fiction). An understanding of the importance of contemporary settings also develops a better understanding of the connection of the modern grotesque to modernism, and their shared aim of “diagnosing” maladies of the writer’s own time and culture.<sup>39</sup>

Modernism tends to depict alienation as an ever-present, if largely unrecognized, universal state. As mentioned in Chapter One, Galloway’s explanation of the idea of alienation as a persistent condition that “man does not *become* alienated (the word itself ceases to have connotations of ‘progress’): alienation is his birthright, the modern, psychologically colored equivalent of original sin” (14) is important to the discussion of alienation in grotesque modernism. Kayser addresses the idea of alienation as modern birthright when he notes that in the works of Kafka “there are no ‘encounters’ and no sudden eruptions or actual estrangements, simply because the world is strange from the beginning. We do not lose our foothold on the world, because we have never had it, although we did not realize the fact” (148). The persistent alienation discussed by

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deviates from and ultimately contradicts our accustomed outlook, the more intimidating it becomes. (Schneider 8)

<sup>39</sup> Chapter One reviewed Pound’s idea of the experimental writers of his time (who are now called modernists) representing the “art of diagnosis” as part of their “cult of ugliness.”

Galloway and Kayser is applicable to much of modernism, for the modernist paradigm crisis, the radical and disturbing shift in perspective, is the realization of one's "birthright" of alienation.<sup>40</sup>

The development of a perception of inherent alienation is a paradigm shift, which can instill a fear associated not with a physical threat but with the threat of an intellectual abyss. The "crisis of reality" that defines the modernist impulse is a cataclysmic, widespread, and multi-faceted "paradigm crisis" on a universal level that also surfaces in the grotesque:

...confusion lies at the heart of all scientific discoveries of a revolutionary character.... This pregnant moment is a 'paradigm crisis,' when enough anomalies have emerged to discredit an old explanatory paradigm or model, and to make it impossible to continue adhering to it, but before the general acceptance of a new paradigm. The paradigm crisis is the interval of the grotesque writ large. (Harpham 17)

One might also say that the "paradigm crisis" is the "interval" of modernism "writ large." For the intellectual, the paradigm crisis can be the greatest alienating, even terrifying experience. In the light of disquieting but irrefutable evidence, the "rational" mind is forced to change its entire mental framework, thereby estranging the individual from the intellectual community and culture, and even from his or her own sense of identity and sanity.<sup>41</sup> In effect, the acquisition of revolutionary knowledge can be the ultimate alienating experience.

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<sup>40</sup> Galloway's description applies to a number of noteworthy modernist characters, including Eliot's Prufrock, Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, Beckett's Murphy, and Lewis's Tarr.

<sup>41</sup> One need only look at Galileo or Darwin to see the alienating effect of unaccepted knowledge and its tangible alienating consequences.

## Alienation and Lovecraft

In Lovecraft's works, the physical elements causing alienation are not singular or temporary in nature, for the narrator's sense of alienation does not result from a unique or isolated event. The mental isolation of the narrator results from the realization that undiscovered forces have existed since before the first early humans began to use tools. As with the modernist alienation resulting from a realization that human concepts of reality are based on constructs, the narrators' exposure to the explicit grotesque stimuli (facing evidence of ancient, powerful, non-human forces in the case of Lovecraft) leads to a permanent re-evaluation of everything they thought was real. Unlike other "weird" or grotesque tales, Lovecraft's characters' greatest trauma results from knowledge itself, not from change of physical circumstances. The grotesque elements to which they are subjected cause a forced paradigm shift that results in a modernist crisis from which they will never recover. Once faced with the evidence that their own world was, is, and always will be inhabited and dominated by non-human beings of vastly superior power and intelligence, the shift in understanding of their own history causes Lovecraft's characters to feel completely alienated from their own world and their own existence; if humans have gone for thousands of years without knowing of the existence of such beings and their vast cities, all other claims at human understanding are automatically suspect.<sup>42</sup>

Lovecraft's work applies to the guidelines of contemporary and realistic settings outlined by Clayborough and Thomson. In keeping with the modes of modernism and

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<sup>42</sup> Philip A. Shreffler's "H.P. Lovecraft and an American Literary Tradition" (1981) describes Lovecraft's portrayal of universal alienation as being "strikingly modern"(Shreffler 158).

the modern grotesque, all but one of Lovecraft's stories,<sup>43</sup> and all of those to be examined in this project, take place on the familiar planet earth in the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup>

However, the familiar, mundane places, scenery, and creatures that surround the narrators seem to transform and mutate as characters' perspectives change with the introduction of forbidden knowledge. The well-traveled streets of New England cities are found to stretch out above miles of subterranean tunnels housing long-forgotten civilizations ("The Festival"). The serene oceans hide sunken cities of non-Euclidian geometry where god-like monsters lie in wait for their return to world domination ("The Call of Cthulhu"). Established American history and local folklore merge in a disturbing glimpse of a reality beyond human comprehension ("The Whisperer in the Darkness"). An attic room in a New England house transforms into a surreal world as a machine reveals the unseen creatures that co-exist at all times in a dimension parallel to our own ("From Beyond"). Scholars discover ancient ruins of non-human creation in the earth's forgotten regions ("The Shadow out of Time," *At the Mountains of Madness*, "The Nameless City"). In all of these stories, knowledge leads characters to experience a sense of profound alienation from their environments and cultures.

As discussed earlier, one of the primary differences between traditional notions of the grotesque and modernism is that the grotesque is often identified with the horror genre, a genre that is marginalized in much of Western literary study. Although modernism is not typically aligned with the classic tale of horror, new subjects of fear were central to much of modernist literature, especially when linked to the concept of

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<sup>43</sup> "In the Walls of Eryx" (1935), one of his last three stories, is the only story to take place in the future and on another planet.

<sup>44</sup> At least their primary plot line is in the twentieth century. Some collage documents from previous ages.

alienation.<sup>45</sup> For instance, Judith Wilt's "The Ghost and the Omnibus: the Gothic Virginia Woolf"<sup>46</sup> (2001) explains that Woolf made a point of analyzing the changing psychology of the modern fear impulse, observing that post-WWI readers were impervious to the horror tales of previous generations. Wilt claims that "Virginia Woolf had offered her variants of the modernist ghost in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *The Waves* (1931)," these works addressing "our modern fear of the death of our most cherished illusion - ego, the self" (62). Wilt's discussion of Woolf's attitudes toward literary fear is useful in that it reveals Woolf's own emphasis on the emotion of terror and the need for modern writers like herself to invent a new strategy for addressing the fears of her contemporary culture. Woolf's application of the fear impulse is important, for it further illuminates the discussion of the modernist grotesque by describing the fear that Woolf and other modernists sought to "specify," as a fear of alienation from identity, the death of the "ego, the self." The death of the self is the ultimate alienation, creating a perspective through which the individual is estranged from his or her own identity, history, and culture. This is the fate suffered by Lovecraft's characters.

Woolf's declaration of the intent to explore new methods of terror, like Pound's discussions of the "cult of ugliness," supports the idea of a relationship between modernism and grotesque weird tales, which is valuable in itself. Woolf's focus on the

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<sup>45</sup> As discussed previously, modernist literature includes numerous disturbing or macabre elements, including entrapment (Eliot's "A Game of Chess" section in *The Wasteland*), influences of the dead (Daedalus's mother's ghost in Joyce's *Ulysses*), transformation (Kafka's *Metamorphosis*), insanity (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), and meaningless cruelty (Artaud's *A Jet of Blood*). The fear and suffering caused by alienation is at the heart of many of the disturbing aspects of these works.

<sup>46</sup> Once again, I would caution scholars not to use this term quite so loosely. Not all fear-related literature is Gothic. It may be better choose terms like "grotesque literature," "weird fiction," or whatever is appropriate to the particular work.

fear of the death of the self adds another dimension to this relationship, echoing Clayborough's statement that the "grotesque arouses in us not fear of death but anxiety about life" (64). The topic of alienation as related to Lovecraft and modernism benefits especially from Woolf's idea of "the encounter with our modern fear of the death of our most cherished illusion - ego, the self" (62). Woolf's concept of modernist fear threatening the death of the ego or self contrasts with the traditional tale of horror in which physical death is the most common threat. A paradigm crisis that instills the threat of the extermination of the ego introduces the modernist brand of terror that Lovecraft sought to capture for the communication of his "fundamental premise" of human insignificance, the ultimate death of the ego. It appears that Lovecraft and Woolf had similar ideas of the importance of the death of identity to the representation of the modern mind. Timo Airaksinen's assessment of Lovecraft's representation of alienated characters supports this connection of Lovecraft's ideas to those of Woolf: "The Lovecraftian fictional world is cruel, amorphous, fluid, magical, unpredictable, unknown, impersonal, large, deep, and void. What happens when an ordinary human being is placed in it? Lovecraft's own answer is that we get horror, because this being cannot stay as he is but loses his identity. He can no longer recognize himself...." (Airaksinen 74). This modernist concept of the loss of identity, the most intensive level of alienation, arises consistently in Lovecraft's works through a variety of stimuli, inducing paradigm crises that rip characters from their senses of self.

An author may portray alienation in a number of ways in a work of literature while still maintaining a world view that is consistent with traditional notions of reality. In those cases, reality at large continues to appear stable. It is only the situation of the

individual character that changes. In fact, the alienating factors in some stories may even heighten a character's awareness of normality and stability as the character contrasts his or her own situations with those of others (Frankenstein's creature serving as an example). However, the works of Lovecraft's modernist grotesque represent an alienation that completely changes the world view of the narrator while leaving him largely unchanged on any physical level. In keeping with Clayborough's idea of grotesque alienation, having roots in the familiar world, Airaksinen explains that,

[in] these stories, the background is always realistic, then something inexplicable happens. The familiar world is not what it was taken to be. The new anomaly shows that our experiential world is part of something else, and the dominating otherness of our own place in the universe becomes enigmatic in the sense that we cannot trust science, its theories, or observations. The result is a crisis, because, after science has collapsed, the Lovecraftian person has nothing left. (75)

In Lovecraft's tales, alienating influences assault the narrator from multiple angles, leaving no mental refuge from alienating documentation, objects, places, and creatures. Alienating documents (books, journals, letters, transcribed audio recordings) show that others have experienced related phenomena: the experience is shared, not isolated but others who know are hostile, dead, or otherwise inaccessible. Alienating objects (art objects, fossils, devices, geological specimens) provide convincing physical evidence that can be examined under controlled, even clinical conditions. Alienating places (hidden cities, altered landscapes, forgotten catacombs) present physical evidence that is almost impossible to explain as mere anomaly or hoax, giving a context to the documents and objects while indicating their origins and representing the realities from which they came. Some of Lovecraft's characters also have first-hand experiences with alienating creatures that present undeniable evidence of layers of reality far beyond those currently explained by human institutions. All of Lovecraft's grotesque modernist works include at least

three of the four alienating factors mentioned, leading up to a catastrophic paradigm crisis that forces characters to question everything that they have come to believe about their world and themselves.

Lovecraft's stories represent the pinnacle of modernist grotesque alienation, as indicated by Dziemianowicz when he describes Lovecraft's work as being "characterized as almost pathological in its use of characters alienated from normal human society" (160). In most cases, these characters do not begin their journeys in a state of isolation.<sup>47</sup> They claim to have lived "normal" lives, typically as professional intellectuals, until a particular project or event entices their curiosity. The alienation of these characters is not an inherited ailment like that of Poe's Roderick Usher. It is a process resulting from the character's exposure to information, an agonizing process of alienation as characters begin to uncover truths that separate them from the unaware masses. In effect, the horror of death is minor when compared to the horror of knowledge that alienates the character from the rest of humanity, knowledge that cannot be communicated for fear of shaking the foundation of civilization itself. The bliss of ignorance is stripped from the characters through exposure to forbidden knowledge that comes to them through alienating documents, objects, places, or creatures, leading to an intellectual burden that they must bear alone.

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<sup>47</sup> In certain earlier tales, Lovecraft's narrators appear to be overly emotional and fanciful from the beginning. These narrators, part of his experimentation with Poe's idioms, were replaced with more rational, scholarly narrators.

## Alienating Documentation

Like other experimental writers, Lovecraft uses a variety of strategies to communicate his abstract ideas from a number of angles. Perhaps the most noteworthy of the methods by which Lovecraft addresses alienation involves documentation, including libraries, letters, essays, journals, verbal reports, descriptions of photographs, drawings, transcriptions from audio recordings, and tomes of various types. Narrators often encounter some kind of documentation that relates disturbing and unbelievable information, which may include reports of paranormal events, mysterious locations, or bizarre creatures. In some cases (as in “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” and *At the Mountains of Madness*), the narrator functions to collage several fragmented documents - newspaper articles, journals, scholarly reports, transcribed interviews, transcribed recordings, and even diagrams<sup>48</sup> - into a semi-coherent picture of a larger, unnerving, alternate world view. Lovecraft uses secondary sources for several purposes. The discovery of strange documents by his narrators functions in some stories as the initial stimuli that interest the narrator to pursue an investigation of the unknown.<sup>49</sup> In other stories, some other factor leads the narrator to find the documents, photos, recordings, or verbal accounts in his quest to understand the unknown.<sup>50</sup> The important consistency in Lovecraft’s use of alienating secondary sources is that they provide the characters with information that has been deliberately set down by some other

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<sup>48</sup> *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* actually includes drawings as documentation in the text.

<sup>49</sup> As, for instance, in “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” “The Shadow Out of Time.”

<sup>50</sup> “The Nameless City,” *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, *At the Mountains of Madness*, and “The Haunter of the Dark” are among those that fall into this category.

intelligence that is either dead, inaccessible, or hostile.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the narrator has the knowledge that others have shared the information that traumatizes him (implying either that he is not insane or that he shares his delusions with others), yet he is isolated from any solace that may be found in communicating his knowledge with someone who will believe him.

Lovecraft uses a variety of real and fictional documents within his stories, as exemplified by his long lists of titles in libraries found by characters. These libraries, through their content or through the significance of their mere presence in a certain place, (for occult libraries are sometimes discovered in unexpected places) give the characters insights into the interests, ideas, and beliefs of those who represent humankind's contact with the unknown. The libraries of Lovecraft's occult scholars usually include real book titles (including works by Hermes Trismogistus [sic.] and Roger Bacon, Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and Murray's *Witch-Cults in Western Europe*) mixed with titles created by the author and his friends: *The Book of Eibon* (Clark Ashton Smith), *Unausprechlichen Kulten* and the "mad poet Justin Geoffrey's" *The People of the Monolith* (Robert E. Howard), *De Vermis Mysteriis* and the *Cultes des Goules* (Robert Bloch), the *R'Lyeh Text*, the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, and the "mad Arab Abdul Alhazred's"<sup>52</sup> *Necronomicon* (Lovecraft). The narrators write about these fictionalized books, found on shelves beside actual ones, as though they are authenticated tomes of ancient wisdom. Knowledge gained from perusing these occult works frequently informs the experiences of the

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<sup>51</sup> These secondary sources are often recorded by humans who have had brief and sometimes tragic encounters with the old ones or their servants, humans who have chosen to worship the Old Ones, or humans who have had visions inspired by the powerful minds of the Old Ones.

<sup>52</sup> It is frequently noted by Lovecraft's biographers that "the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" was Lovecraft's childhood alter-ego, which he created at the age of about seven after reading *1001 Arabian Nights*.

characters, providing significance or context to some unexplained experience. By comparing information from these books to various other secondary sources and primary observations, the narrators piece together some details (names, dates, familial connections, related events) that contribute to their uncovering of new realities.

Among the various fictionalized texts, the *Necronomicon* of the “Mad Arab” Abdul Alhazred (first appearing in “The Hound,” 1922<sup>53</sup>) stands as the most commonly included in Lovecraft’s work, and the most famous among his fans. The *Necronomicon* is present in “The Hound,” “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Shadow out of Time,” “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” “The Dunwich Horror,” *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, “The Descendant,” “The Haunter of the Dark,” and several other of Lovecraft’s works, sometimes functioning as a major plot device and sometimes only mentioned as one of several occult texts that tell of ancient secrets. The effect of the *Necronomicon* upon humans is always great, for exposure to its contents causes curiosity, terror, madness, paranoia, and obsession, depending upon the disposition of the character reading it.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to his libraries, Lovecraft applies his own version of a modernist collage to accentuate his fiction’s statements about the fragmented nature of perception and representation of reality. Literary collage is one of the techniques most closely associated with “high modernism,” as indicated in Walter Kalaidjian’s *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism* (2005), which states that “As a vehicle of poetic

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<sup>53</sup> Although The *Necronomicon* first appears in “The Hound” (1922), the character of the Mad Arab Abdul Alhazred is first mentioned in “The Nameless City” (1921).

<sup>54</sup> The phenomenon of the belief in the *Necronomicon* among Lovecraft’s fans is discussed in Chapter Four.

innovation, modern collage... encompasses a remarkable presentational range of forms and techniques in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Mina Loy” (6). As Christine Stansell explains in *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (2000), collage is

something of a verbal equivalent to the experiments in painting and affixing that Braque and Picasso were conducting in Paris in 1913-14. Indeed, the collagist juxtaposition, heterogeneous elements assembled without connectives, can be seen as a governing principle of this way of modernism, asserting itself in stream-of-consciousness narrative, unconventional typography, and jarring instrumentation as well as painting. (14-15)

Literary collage is most commonly associated with modernist poetry rather than fiction, which adds to the uniqueness of Lovecraft’s relationship to modernist literature.<sup>55</sup>

Although certain pre-modernist works like *Dracula* or *Melmoth the Wanderer* are presented as a compilation of letters and journal entries, those compilations are presented as cohesive, consistent, and corroborating narratives, while the modernist collage focuses on fragmented, widely varied, and even conflicting sources in poetry. One of Lovecraft’s most important contributions to literature is his creation of a modernist collage strategy for weird fiction, which is represented in “The Call of Cthulhu,” *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” and *At the Mountains of Madness* as a kind of puzzle-in-progress that the narrator attempts to piece together and make sense of, never entirely successfully. Lovecraft’s method of collage is somewhere between the compiled and cohesive documents of nineteenth century weird fiction and the entirely non-connective collage of modernist poetry, for Lovecraft depicts the process of the narrator’s struggle to assemble, organize, and understand a variety of documents, a

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<sup>55</sup> Joyce’s *Ulysses* may be one of the only other examples of a style approaching collage in modernist fiction. Collage in the short story (a form not as popular among most modernists) is even more rare.

process leading to more questions, more problems, and less confidence that any human is capable of comprehending the full picture of reality, even if such a picture were to exist. By creating narrators who fail in their attempts to make ultimate sense of various scraps of loosely related journals, letters, newspaper articles, scholarly texts, occult texts, poems, scientific data, audio recordings transcriptions, and even “unconventional typography” like script or drawings depicted in the very text of the stories themselves, Lovecraft addresses the alienating influence of misplaced or misunderstood documents and the human struggle to impose order on a generally chaotic omniverse (a struggle that is likely doomed).

### Alienating Documentation in “The Call of Cthulhu”

In addition to the arcane books that characters find, documents of all kinds play an important part in the atmosphere and the plot of Lovecraft’s writings, developing the narrators’ knowledge and growing sense of alienation.<sup>56</sup> In some stories, written texts serve as the narrator’s introduction to the paradigm crisis that awaits. Other documents are gathered and analyzed by the narrators as they explore the unknown realms of existence. Although different texts address different related creatures and histories, they have consistencies that reflect common themes including those of ancient alien civilizations and the continued presence of monstrous entities and their human followers. “The Call of Cthulhu,” the first of what readers now call the “Cthulhu Mythos” tales, revolves entirely around collaged documentation, being a framed collection of documents

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<sup>56</sup> Some of the documents found by the characters are reproduced in the stories while others are only described.

put together by the narrator, Francis Wayland Thurston, in an effort to understand the last scholarly project of his late grand-uncle, Professor George Gammell Angell. Thurston finds a locked box while settling his granduncle's affairs, and he becomes fascinated by the seemingly unrelated documents within. As he analyzes various semi-related accounts, theories, and reports, he puts together a few puzzle pieces that lead him to believe in the existence of ancient cults that have spread and caused chaos in various parts of the world.

In this story, Lovecraft's first experiment with modernist collage in fiction, Thurston begins his account with a statement about the potentially devastating power of a global paradigm crisis such as the one that he has come to face:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas on infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 76)

In speaking of the "most merciful thing in the world" as the "inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents," Thurston implies that he has correlated just enough of his own mind's contents to wish that he had not. He has encountered a glimpse of those "terrifying vistas of reality" after attempting to complete his granduncle's work.

Thurston's interest in the study of these reports develops and he eventually begins his own active investigation, partly to determine if his uncle may have been murdered by the cults in question (which he comes to believe is the case). Although Thurston actively investigates the unsolved mysteries that his granduncle documents, he has no first-hand experience to lead him to believe in the validity of the cult's claim of the existence of

their god or his lost city. However, as Stefan Dziemianowicz explains in “Outsiders and Aliens: The Use of Isolation in Lovecraft’s Fiction” (1991), Thurston’s study of documentation is sufficient to cause him to experience ultimate alienation:

Probably the most important aspect of “The Call of Cthulhu” is the means by which Thurston pieces together the clues and extrapolates what they imply. He is never an active participant in any of the story’s three episodes.... His is basically a job of armchair deduction, from newspaper clippings that were no doubt read by others but that no one recognized as fitting a pattern.... Something he has discovered has given him a burden of knowledge not shared by other men, and so he stands apart from the rest of mankind.... (Dziemianowicz 175)

Lovecraft’s type of alienated scholar struggling to comprehend potentially world-changing documentation appears to be unique in “weird fiction.” Other scholarly characters in “weird fiction,” like Frankenstein, or Van Helsing, struggle to contain a specific threat. In these cases, the scholars have great knowledge of their adversaries (Van Helsing has studied vampires for years, and Frankenstein created his foe). In Dracula and Frankenstein, the scholars have some hope of defeating their respective aberrations of nature (and both Dracula and Frankenstein’s creature do perish).

Lovecraft’s characters struggle to piece together fragments of information about forces that they cannot even comprehend, much less track down and destroy. The Old Ones are not merely anomalies in the natural order, like human corpses that have been reanimated through evil or science. They represent natural orders entirely beyond the human scope, older and more prevalent than the races of humankind. Many of Lovecraft’s narrators must struggle to understand new information through secondary sources alone, drawing attention toward the alienating influence of recorded information itself, removed from the first-hand shock of personal experience. The reader is challenged to scrutinize his or her own perceptions of reality, to face the fact that most ideas of reality are in fact based

upon secondary sources. One does not have to be present at a scientific discovery to be affected by the news of it. The alienating paradigm crisis may use a variety of vehicles to find its victims, a number of sources.

Thurston moves through a progression of alienating documents, the first batch recounting the similarly bizarre dreams of individuals across the globe, all reported in a concentrated period of time. This compelling introduction to the unexplained leads him to read a related document that introduces a new interpretation to the rash of strange dreams, the belief that the dreams are a result of contact from a powerful, god-like being imprisoned in the sea. The account of Inspector Legrasse, a Louisiana policeman, captures a band of members of an unknown cult who relate their belief about the nature and history of the world. Legrasse states that the cult members he arrests,

worshiped, so they said, the Great Old Ones who lived ages before there were any men, and who came to the young world out of the sky. Those Old Ones were gone now, inside the earth and under the sea; but their dead bodies had told their secrets in dreams to the first men, who formed a cult which had never died. This was that cult, and the prisoners said it had always existed and would always exist, hidden in wastes and dark places all over the world until the time when the great priest Cthulhu, from his dark house in the mighty city of R'lyeh under the waters, should rise and bring the earth again beneath his sway. Some day he would call, when the stars were ready, and the secret cult would always be waiting to liberate him. (Bloodcurdling Tales 87)

Although Thurston is not convinced at this point that the beliefs of the cultists are based in truth, he must acknowledge that the cultists themselves exist among common men, and that they are willing to do anything that they believe to be necessary to fulfill their goal of reviving their god. The mere presence of these extremists disturbs Thurston, their way of thinking being entirely foreign to him. However, his continued research provides just enough pieces to the puzzle for him to tell that he cannot and should not perceive the whole picture. He cannot be certain that the cultists's interpretation of the data is

ultimately correct, but various scraps of “dissociated knowledge” support, at the very least, their fundamental assertion that something ancient, powerful, and unknown awaits beneath the waves. The collage process of Lovecraft’s fiction varies from that of modernist poetry, in which there is no connectivity between fragments. Nevertheless, the narrators who provide the apparent connectivity of the fragments in stories like “The Call of Cthulhu” develop more questions than answers, gaining only enough insight to be aware of their boundless ignorance. Unlike the coherent and complete documents that sometimes make up the texts of certain Gothic novels, Lovecraft’s grotesque modernist collages only intensify the confusion and isolation of the narrators who create them.

The narrator of “The Call of Cthulhu” does not actually experience any paranormal or violent events first-hand. However, he does gain access to first-hand accounts of bizarre and terrifying events that contribute to his evolving paradigm crisis. The most direct contact with the Old Ones in “The Call of Cthulhu” comes to the narrator as a written account from the only surviving discoverer of the ancient, sunken city of R’lyeh, home and prison of Cthulhu, which rises to the surface for the first time in unknown eons due to an undersea earthquake. At this point, Great Cthulhu himself is encountered directly for the first and only time in Lovecraft’s stories:

Poor Johansen’s handwriting almost gave out when he wrote of this. Of the six men who never reached the ship, he thinks two perished of pure fright in that accursed instant. The Thing that can not 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...The Thing of the idols, the green, sticky spawn of the stars, had awaked to claim his own. The stars were right again, and what an age-old cult had failed to do by design, a band of innocent sailors had done by accident. After vigintillions of years great Cthulhu was loose again, and ravening for delight. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 97)

This creature, the most famous of the Old Ones, comes to life in this story, awakened from his slumber of eons. Those who are not killed by Cthulhu or his followers lose their minds, leaving Thurston, the isolated scholar, to suffer alone with his hard-won, albeit incomplete, knowledge. By the time Thurston reads this unbelievable account, Johansen himself has died, leaving only his story behind, written in English to protect his Norwegian wife from knowledge of the horrors he has faced.

As in many of Lovecraft's tales, intellectual insight bears the curse of alienation, for Thurston feels that he must act responsibly by trying to hide his findings from an unprepared world: "Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye" (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 99). Thurston's plight opens a discussion of enormous implications, that of the ethics of alienating knowledge – when (if ever) must a scholar's responsibility to the goal of discovery be sacrificed to preserve a society's illusions? Is it the duty of the scholar to foresee sociological consequences of new discoveries, or merely to report his or her findings? Perhaps Thurston's alienation is self-imposed and unnecessary, or perhaps his choice is a noble effort to prevent the rest of the world from facing the crisis of self that he has suffered. Frankenstein and Van Helsing face similar ethical challenges, but they face isolated and manageable threats. Frankenstein faces the creature he created and abandoned. Van Helsing faces Dracula with great knowledge of the weaknesses of vampires, and a team of valuable allies. Thurston's exposure to the unknown is simultaneously less direct and more disturbing than these classic literary scientists, for he (like all humankind) is entirely helpless against the ancient, mysterious, and nearly omnipotent, Old Ones. Frankenstein has the ability to reason with his creation (although

he makes unwise decisions in doing so), and Van Helsing knows how to kill Dracula. Furthermore, the narratives of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* relate situations that have been resolved. The threat has passed, and order has been restored, so the tales may be told. Thurston has no victory to report to those who would listen and believe his story. The forces he becomes aware of are cosmic, ubiquitous, and unstoppable. He is truly alienated, without any foreseeable remedy. It is important to note that Thurston claims to have no intention of allowing his writings be seen by anyone. It is up to the reader to imagine how the manuscript was loosed upon the world.

### Alienating Documentation in “The Whisperer in the Darkness”

The “Whisperer in the Darkness,” an account by Albert N. Wilmarth, an “instructor of literature at Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts, and an enthusiastic amateur student of New England folklore,” is another modernist grotesque exploration of the concepts of scholarly integrity, narrative reliability, and perceptive fallibility. Like Thurston, Wilmarth attempts to investigate claims of mysterious goings-on by examining widely varying sources of information. However, “The Whisperer in the Darkness” is especially noteworthy in the discussion of alienating documentation because it has a few characteristics that are uncommon even among Lovecraft’s stories, including prominent scholarly debates that are supposedly published, accounts of non-literary secondary sources like photographs and phonographs, and intentional forgery of documents by non-human creatures. In this story, Wilmarth responds to reports of strange happenings in the hills of Vermont with the utmost of skepticism, relating

supposed eye witness accounts of strange creatures to various folklore patterns common to rural areas. He records excerpts from published letters in which he and other scholars debate the origins of certain legends of rural New England. However, over a long period of correspondence with a scholar who actually lives in the area in question, Wilmarth begins to consider the possibility that something indeed is amiss, although he still believes that a scientific explanation or hoax will be found. Much of the story is made up of letters between Wilmarth and Vermont land owner Henry W. Akely, “the last representative on his home soil of a long, locally distinguished line of jurists, administrators, and gentlemen-agriculturalists” as well as “a notable student of mathematics, astronomy, biology, anthropology, and folklore at the University of Vermont.” Through these letters, or, in some cases, the narrator’s recreations of the letters from memory,<sup>57</sup> most of the information about the “Outer Ones” and their actions is revealed.

The subject of documentation is especially problematized in “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” for the physical documentation described by Wilmarth (letters, photographs, and audio recordings depicting unusual phenomena) is reportedly tampered with, forged, or stolen by the “Outer Ones,” who seek to hide their own existence on this planet (for the sake of convenience, not fear). After several letters back and forth between Wilmarth and Akely, beginning with a formal intellectual exchange and escalating in strangeness as events at Akely’s property grow more unnerving, letters from

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<sup>57</sup> Lovecraft frequently drew attention to the fallibility of memory and representation by highlighting the idea that the narrator is recording events from memory with some difficulty. The focus on the fallibility contrasted with an obvious obsession of scholarly narrators to record data with absolute accuracy raises crucial questions about intention versus ability and intentionally unreliable narrators versus unintentionally unreliable narrators. The prevalence of this strategy prohibits listing all of the examples here.

both Wilmarth and Akely fail to reach their intended recipients. In addition to the apparently intercepted letters, a strange man is said by railroad personnel to have attempted to intercept a package from Wilmarth to Akely. Eventually, after receiving a few ominous letters from an apparently shaken Akely, Wilmarth receives a long correspondence that seems to reflect a favorable attitude toward the intelligent non-human residents of the Vermont hills. This document gives a detailed account of the nature of the “Outer Ones” (also called the Mi-Go), their origin, their abilities, and their goodwill. It even claims that Akely has formed an alliance with the Mi-Go, who want to take him to explore other regions of the universe. However, Wilmarth’s sense of confusion only deepens as he (being an English instructor) puts his professional talents to the task of analyzing the letter’s composition: “Word-choice, spelling—all were subtly different. And with my academic sensitiveness to prose style, I could trace profound divergences in his commonest reactions and rhythm-responses” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 162). He compares the letter to previous ones based on various criteria, finding that it is stylistically changed, while conveying the “same old passion for infinity—the same old scholarly inquisitiveness” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 162). Thus, Wilmarth’s relationship with Akely begins to transform, as his one reliable source of information in this investigation begins to show signs of instability, even transformation. Lovecraft engages the concept of the unreliability of a narrator intertextually as Wilmarth attempts to decipher clues that will help him to decide what to believe, an exercise undertaken by all trained readers of text.

The idea of non-human intelligences contacting and bargaining with members of the human scientific community adds a new dimension to the evolving relationship

between the Mi-Go and the narrator. Their claim that they occasionally select humans of exceptional intelligence, like Akely, to study other parts of the universe with them serves at least two purposes in this story. The first purpose of the letter is that it motivates Wilmarth to go to Akely's home:

“To shake off the maddening and wearying limitations of time and space and natural law—to be linked with the vast *outside*—to come close to the nighted and abysmal secrets of the infinite and ultimate—surely such a thing was worth the risk of one's life, soul, and sanity! And Akely had said there was no longer any peril—he had invited me to visit him instead of warning me away as before.”  
(*Bloodcurdling Tales* 162)

Wilmarth's suspicions about the letter are later confirmed as he realizes that it is a forgery created to lure him to visit Akely in the hills of Vermont. However, the Mi-Go's forged letter serves as more than a mere plot device to drive the narrator to travel to the center of the action. The second purpose of the letter is far more significant: the indication that the Mi-Go understand certain nuances of human psychology. The letter seems to be crafted by the “Outer Ones” with insight into the motivations, and even the intellectual and emotional weaknesses, of humans. The Mi-Go understand how to manipulate human thoughts through human language, while humans know nothing of the Mi-Go or the vast reaches of the universe that they represent. They even appeal to Wilmarth's intellectual vanity (abundantly evident throughout the story) by emphasizing that only humans of remarkable brilliance are invited to join them. By simultaneously stimulating Wilmarth's vanity and curiosity, his two greatest motivations, the Mi-Go demonstrate that, by reading the correspondence between the two men, they have come to gain total insight into their (comparatively simple) inner mental workings. This manipulation by a higher species threatens the narrator's notion of identity by showing

that he lacks awareness and control of his own thoughts and actions. Such easy exploitation of personality flaws reflects a lack of self-awareness.

Wilmarth never faces a direct threat from the Mi-Go, but his realization that he has been communicating with an imposter of superior intellect leads him to admit that his “scientific zeal had vanished amidst fear and loathing, and I felt nothing now but a wish to escape from this net of morbidity and unnatural revelation. I knew enough now. It must indeed be true that strange cosmic linkages do exist– but such things are surely not meant for human beings to meddle with” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 177). This story is not the only Lovecraft tale to incorporate complications of secondary documentation as the primary catalyst for investigation, but “The Whisperer of the Darkness” is unique in its focus on ongoing correspondence. Unlike other stories in which the alienating documents are the writings of the dead, this tale brings a kind of immediacy to the discussion of narrator reliability by providing the main character with access to a living and cooperative correspondent, Akely, who is displaced and impersonated by the Mi-Go. Wilmarth’s attitude toward the reliability of Akely’s information goes through different phases of skepticism, consideration, belief, and utter confusion, for the long process of the establishment of credibility ends with Wilmarth’s realization that he has communicated for part of the time with an inhuman imposter. He cannot trust any document from any source in an alienated world where folklore is based in reality and where creatures from Yuggoth write letters as men.

## Alienating Documentation in The Case of Charles Dexter Ward

Lovecraft's representation of documentation in his fiction often goes beyond the scope of many canonical modernist works in terms of the variety and extent of his experimentation. For instance, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* stands out in a discussion of Lovecraft's alienating documents because its collage elements include especially experimental typography. The unnamed narrator of this story presents the pertinent information in a dispassionate, objective tone, creating an air of a psychiatrist's case study (as implied by the title). This narrator presents a variety of documents in an effort to examine certain bizarre events, including direct observation of drastic physical and behavioral changes in the title character, who becomes a patient in a sanitarium. Among the various documents that the narrator brings together to record Ward's case are reproduced writings and diagrams, representing unknown languages and cultures, a strategy of experimental typography that is unusual even in modernist or avant-garde writing, and one that communicates the depth of alienation experienced by those who attempt to decipher the strange symbols and linguistic characters.

In addition to the unusual typography and the Lovecraftian texts presented in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (including, of course, *The Necronomicon*), this story is significant in that it explores the direct consequences that may occur when humans attempt to use forbidden documents to invoke the powers of which they report. The narrator, after reviewing the documents available, develops a theory of events in which Ward finds the journal of his brilliant and ruthless ancestor, Joseph Curwen. Ward's curiosity leads him to reproduce Curwen's experiments (inspired by *The Necronomicon*

and other occult texts) in order to develop a method to gain immortality<sup>58</sup>. As a result of these experiments, Ward resurrects Curwen, who kills Ward and takes over his identity (a process that is made easy due to their close family resemblance). The narrator theorizes that Curwen had found the path to immortality, and that part of his journey involved carefully creating documents to lure a person of a future generation into duplicating certain chemical processes with the remains of the deceased in order to bring the dead person back to life. The narrator's explanation for the strange behaviors and apparent physical changes in Ward, including differences not only in speech patterns but in such tangible characteristics as birthmarks, is that the long-dead Curwen, not Charles Dexter Ward, has been placed into the asylum.

In this tale, even a brief and partial glimpse into the mysteries of the Old Ones is sufficient to grant a scholar the key to physical immortality. The search for this key leads to a number of alienating phenomena, from exposure to indecipherable languages and symbols to the knowledge that the planet earth has a history of control by the Old Ones. Perhaps the most significant alienating concept in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* comes down to the human body and identity, for the idea that a document can cause an unknown power to displace an individual and take over his or her life is disturbing on a level that may be more personal and immediate to the reader. The fate of Ward, whose life is not only taken but usurped by his ancestor Curwen, introduces another level of alienation, for it suggests that the limitations of human perception extend to personal relationships with others. The Old Ones and their servants may not only be "out there," but among the human populations, posing as family members and associates of common

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<sup>58</sup> The quest for immortality is one of Lovecraft's most prominent themes, which often connects to the quest for forbidden knowledge of the Old Ones.

folk. Such an element of paranoia brings the concept of alienation to the reader by challenging the relationship between the individual and the community, a relationship that can be twisted by the desire for unnaturally long life.

### Alienating Documentation in “The Shadow Out of Time”

The concept of alienating documents problematizing the notion of identity finds its most powerful and unusual incarnation in “The Shadow Out of Time.” The narrator, Professor Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, not only faces paradigm crisis-inducing information about the world and universe around him; he is forced to realize that his own mind and body are susceptible to the control of forces beyond his imagining. “The Shadow Out of Time” is unusual in its narrative framework because the narrator experiences a long gap in his memory, leaving him with no knowledge of his own experiences or actions save the second-hand accounts of others with whom he interacted. Peaslee, a Professor of Economics from Miskatonic University, believes that he has been made to switch bodies with a scholarly but wholly alien creature, and that this creature used his body for acquiring knowledge of twentieth-century Earth while Peaslee occupied its body in its society. This extraordinary tale records his attempt to sort out his own experiences during his long “spell” from 1908 to 1913 in which he seemed to be taken over by a superior intelligence. Although Peaslee has no memory of his actions in his own society, accounts of his behavior from family and friends eventually trigger foggy flashbacks and dreams of occupying another form in a place that is safe but wholly alien to him. The reports that others provide of his own strange behavior during his mental

absence effectively alienate him not only from his family and fellows in the academic community but even from his own physical body, which he comes to believe has not always been under his own control.

Perhaps most strangely, Peaslee encounters documents that he has written, annotated, or corrected himself, but that he does not recall ever seeing. He discovers that he had studied a number of seemingly unrelated subjects, and that he had gained access to a number of rare occult tomes, some of which he had marked in during his “secondary state.” Other characters confirm that he was the only one who could have written “certain marginal notations and ostensible corrections of the hideous text in a script and idiom which somehow seemed oddly unhuman.” He discovers that he spent a good deal of time during his “secondary state” writing information he did not know in languages he had not studied. He begins to believe that he had been displaced from his own mind:

The markings were mostly in the respective languages of the various books, all of which the writer seemed to know with equal, though obviously, academic facility. One note appended to von Junzt’s *Unausprechlichen Kulturen*, however, was alarmingly otherwise. It consisted of certain curvilinear hieroglyphs in the same ink as that of the German corrections, but following no recognized human pattern. And these hieroglyphs were closely and unmistakably akin to the characters constantly met with in my dreams—characters whose meaning I would sometimes momentarily fancy I knew, or was just on the brink of recalling. To complete my black confusion, many librarians assured me that, in view of previous examinations and records of consultation of the volumes in question, all of these notations must have been made by myself in my secondary state. This despite the fact that I was and still am ignorant of three of the languages involved.  
(*Bloodcurdling Tales* 337)

Due to his mental absence, his own writings amount to secondary documentation of his own actions and interests while in his “secondary state,” bringing new meaning to the concept of alienating documentation. His “secondary state,” or “spell,” amounts to a kind of benign possession, leaving him to play detective, solving the mysteries of his own

experience by tracking the paper trail of an academic journey of which he has no memory. Each document that he finds adds to his sense of confusion, powerlessness, and separation from his sense of self.

Lovecraft's play with the idea of alienating documentation takes on a unique aspect through a shift in perspective on the act of reading and writing, giving Peaslee direct access to the documents of another intelligent species. Once Peaslee begins to regain some memories of his mental absence, he recalls recording his own knowledge in the body of one of the Great Race for their use, and of reading their records while living amongst them. The analogy may seem simultaneously provincial and melodramatic, but Peaslee's experience could be compared to that of a victim of demonic possession who, after a successful exorcism, recalls being in Hell while displaced from his body. By creating this bizarre sort of "exchange student" program, Lovecraft invents a situation in which a human gains inside information beyond that which could be normally communicated. Peaslee's exposure to the documents of the Great Race provides him some of the most shocking and alienating information that he gains in the story, first-hand accounts of the vast expanses beyond Planet Earth, illustrating the insignificance and isolation of humans in the cosmos:

Snatches of what I read and wrote would linger in my memory. There were horrible annals of other worlds and other universes, and of stirrings of formless life outside of all universes. There were records of strange orders of beings which had peopled the world in forgotten pasts, and frightful chronicles of grotesque-bodied intelligences which would people it millions of years after the death of the last human being. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 345)

Documentation plays a central role in this story, alienating the traditional scholar who

"At no time had ... the least interest in either occultism or abnormal psychology"

(*Bloodcurdling Tales* 326). The peculiar type of amnesia that he faces leaves him at first

only with the reports of others and with the clues that he left in written form in his “secondary state,” but once he begins to experience fragmented memories (or hallucinations) of his displaced physical existence during his “spell,” it is the process of documentation that he most clearly remembers. Eventually, he recalls that he was a visiting scholar of sorts, an honored guest whose knowledge was valued by his hosts. Like Lovecraft’s other Old Ones, The Great Race predate humans on Earth by millions of years, but they set themselves apart from other Old Ones by projecting themselves through time to learn about the past and future through the bodies of other species. Although Peaslee is not mistreated per se, the unexpected transplanting of his consciousness is perceived by him as the most alienating of experiences, especially when his strange memories are validated by a visit to an ancient ruin in the Australian desert that he discovers through his careful study of his own paper trail:

No eye had seen, no hand had touched that book since the advent of man to this planet. And yet, when I flashed my torch upon it in that frightful abyss, I saw that the queerly pigmented letters on the brittle, aeon-browned cellulose pages were not indeed any nameless hieroglyphs of earth’s youth. They were, instead, the letters of our familiar alphabet, spelling out the words of the English language in my own handwriting. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 375)

The book discovered by Peaslee in Australia may be Lovecraft’s most alienating document, for it provides undeniable proof to the narrator that his experiences are not the products of hoax, misunderstanding, or hallucination. There is no conventional explanation for the existence of this document, so he is forced to confirm his dreaded suspicion that the idea of self, so closely tied to the physical body in traditional thinking, is an amorphous illusion beyond the ultimate control of humankind.

## Alienating Documentation - Closing Comments

By piecing together information from various written accounts and verbal testimonies, Lovecraft's narrators manage to create a partial picture of a world view that they could never have foreseen, and that they never will be able to set aside. In some cases ("The Call of Cthulhu," "The Whisperer in the Darkness," "The Shadow Out of Time"), these secondary accounts are the inspiration for further investigation, often for the specific purpose of disproving any theories that lie outside of the boundaries of established science. In other cases ("The Festival," "The Haunter of the Dark," *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*), the texts serve to supplement a character's understanding of an already alienating environment that he has experienced first-hand. In true modernist form, these documents reflect a fragmented world and a fragmented reality that cannot be entirely understood or recognized. The characters suffer from an agonizing cosmic isolation that they seek to alleviate by recording their experiences, either with the hope that someone will believe them or that the exercise of recording and analyzing the experiences will prove their own insanity.

## Alienating Objects

In addition to the many written and spoken reports that serve as data in the characters' quests for knowledge, many physical objects appear in the tales of Lovecraft that baffle observers and change their perception of their world. While documents or other secondary sources may be explained as fiction, hoax, or products of delusion, Lovecraft's alienating objects provide observers with tangible, convincing evidence of

realities beyond human understanding. Furthermore, alienating documents represent attempts to communicate forbidden information, while alienating objects represent purposes and origins that are meant only for their creators to know. These objects are especially important to the building paradigm crisis, for characters are able to examine the objects outside of their full context. These objects are displaced fragments of other worlds and civilizations that provide only brief flashes of other realities, even though they are examined thoroughly, and even scientifically. They provide physical evidence that corroborates the secondary sources that the characters find, tangible but anomalous specimens that can be handled, examined, and tested. In several cases, as in the non-human jewelry in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” the statues in “The Call of Cthulhu,” the devices in “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” the orb in “The Haunter of the Dark,” or the fossils in *At the Mountains of Madness*, the examination of these objects adds fire to the narrators’ investigative passions, and spurs them on in their quests to uncover hidden truths, or to debunk the unconventional claims of others. In other cases, like that of the meteorite in “The Colour Out of Space,” the baffling nature of the alienating objects causes scientists to give up, frustrated when they find the knowledge and research methods of their chosen disciplines to be insufficient. Whatever forms they might take, Lovecraft’s alienating objects stand as tangible pieces of an intangible puzzle of reality, intensifying the character’s alienation from their peers, their institutions, and their traditional notions of reality.

## Alienating Objects in “The Colour Out of Space”

Although most of Lovecraft’s stories include alienating objects, a few tales stand out due to the originality of their application of objects to Lovecraft’s “fundamental premise” of cosmic disinterestism. “The Colour out of Space,” for instance, is important in the discussion of Lovecraft’s alienating objects because it is the only story in which a natural fragment from another part of the universe, rather than an intelligently made artifact, serves as the primary focus of curiosity and eventual alienation. “The Colour out of Space” is also unusual among Lovecraft’s works in that the alienating influence in this story does not pre-date humanity and it is not directly linked to the Old Ones. In this story, a curious surveyor relates the stories of locals who speak of a meteorite that transforms a plot of land they come to call the “blasted heath.” Among the alienating objects of Lovecraft’s stories, this meteorite stands out as a particularly problematic one for those who study it. When scientists examine part of it in their laboratories, it violates practically everything they have come to know about matter, energy, and light:

The professors had trooped out again in a great excitement. As they passed Ammi’s they told him what queer things the specimen had done, and how it had faded wholly away when they put it in a glass beaker. The beaker had gone, too, and the wise men talked of the strange stone’s affinity for silicon. It had acted quite unbelievably in that well-ordered laboratory... On an anvil it appeared highly maleable, and in the dark its luminosity was very marked. Stubbornly refusing to grow cool, it soon had the college in a state of real excitement, and when upon heating before the spectroscope it displayed shining bands unlike any known colours of the normal spectrum there was much breathless talk of new elements, bizarre optical properties, and other things which puzzled men of science are wont to say when faced by the unknown. (*Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* 66)

However, the initial excitement of the “wise men” turns to frustration as they find they can gain no ground in understanding the object. The meteorite appears to contaminate

the surrounding land, creating an alien-like landscape among the New England hills, creating unease, confusion, and even horror among those who visit the “blasted heath,” even though it is incapable of violence or sinister intent: the mere strangeness of the object profoundly affects those who observe it, for its fundamental nature violates many of the most basic principles of rational thought. It eventually begins to transform and even disintegrate the life forms, plant and animal, that come into contact with it, representing the fear of contamination by otherness. The otherness of the meteorite and the strange substance within it represents the unplumbed gulfs of reality beyond the scope of human understanding. Therefore, knowledge of this tiny fragment from another world alienates observers, especially scientists, from their self-concepts as “rational thinkers,” and from the intellectual communities to which they feel responsible to give answers that they cannot provide.

### Alienating Objects in “The Call of Cthulhu”

The concept of an entirely alien substance serves well as a symbol of human alienation in a mechanistic universe. On the other hand, objects that are intentionally crafted or inspired by non-human intelligences have the potential to create an even deeper sense of alienation. Lovecraft’s alienating art objects range beyond mere representations of unknown science, into the realms of unknown perspectives and levels of understanding. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” a few different art objects are available to the primary and secondary narrators, supplementing the documentation that is so crucial to the story. Some of the objects of investigation are newer creations inspired psychically

by the Old Ones, including a bas-relief created by Henry Anthony Wilcox, one of the many artists who receives troubling dreams of huge, ancient cities, strange beings, and unearthly writings. This is the first of Lovecraft's stories to include objects that actually depict the physical appearance of one of the Old Ones, "Great Cthulhu":

The bas-relief was... obviously of modern origin. Its designs, however, were far from modern in atmosphere and suggestion; for, although the vagaries of cubism and futurism are many and wild, they do not often reproduce that cryptic regularity which lurks in prehistoric writing.... Above these apparent hieroglyphics was a figure of evidently pictorial intent, though its impressionistic execution forbade a very clear idea of its nature. It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful. Behind the figure was a vague suggestion of a Cyclopean architectural background. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 77)

Wilcox's bas relief, the first depiction of Cthulhu in Lovecraft's stories, is created by a human whose mind is temporarily controlled by other intelligences. This clay tablet, sculpted with his own hands in a trance that he cannot recall, is evidence of Wilcox's alienation from his own mind and body.<sup>59</sup> The description of the clay tablet reveals that the primary narrator, Thurston, is aware of various artistic styles of his time, aware enough of them to know the difference between modern attempts to imitate an ancient style versus an authentic representation of prehistoric art. This object seems to represent the latter, indicating that the young Wilcox was probably not capable of producing such a piece without some unknown force guiding his hand. Even more strange is the creature depicted in the clay, which bears no resemblance to any known beast or god from any culture or time.

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<sup>59</sup> Lovecraft explores a similar situation in "The Shadow Out of Time," as previously discussed.

Perhaps the most famous object described in the works of Lovecraft would be the stone statue of Cthulhu featured in “The Call of Cthulhu.” This statue<sup>60</sup> is of unknown substance, origin, and design. According to the tale, the statue exists in duplicate among the aberrant tribes of the Arctic as well as with the barbaric “Cthulhu cultists” of Louisiana, several thousand miles away, indicating a consistency that hints at ancient and widespread influence. Part of the story includes a fictionalized report of an academic conference where one of these statues is examined by established scientist of various backgrounds. According to Professor Angell’s report, the 1908 American Archaeological Society meeting is attended by its regular members and by an unexpected but welcomed guest, Police Inspector John Raymond Legrasse, who seeks the expert opinion of the collective group on the matter of a statue that he confiscated from the previously mentioned Louisiana cult. After crowding around the enigmatic object, they immediately draw the conclusion that “No recognised [sic] school of sculpture had animated this terrible object, yet centuries and even thousands of years seemed recorded in its dim and greenish surface of unplaceable stone” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 82). The figure is of the same design as the bas-relief created by Wilcox, a “vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hand and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 83). As mysterious as its design is its substance, “for the soapy, greenish-black stone with its golden or iridescent flecks and striations resembled nothing familiar to geology or mineralogy” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 83). The statue confounds the assembly of scholars on every level, artistically, geologically, and linguistically:

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<sup>60</sup> This statue has been replicated in different versions as a collector’s item for Lovecraft fans.

The characters along the base were equally baffling; and no member present, despite a representation of half the world's expert learning in this field, could form the least notion of even the remotest linguistic kinship. They, like the subject and material, belonged to something horribly remote and distinct from mankind as we know it; something frightfully suggestive of old and unhallowed cycles of life in which our world and our conceptions have no part.  
(*Bloodcurdling Tales* 83)

As in "The Colour out of Space," the assembled group of scholars in "The Call of Cthulhu" fail to comprehend the nature of the object they observe, for the statue is of an unknown substance, design, and manufacture. Even more compelling is the fact that this item is one of at least two of its kind, found in different parts of the world, ranging from the swamps of Louisiana to the frozen wastes of the Arctic. The presence of more than one of these statues of the same substance, design, and linguistic markings implies that it is not anomalous. In fact, worship of Cthulhu appears to be as widespread as it is secretive, leading Thurston to realize that the world he calls home is far more strange and dangerous than he had ever imagined. The documents, combined with these statues, provide sufficient evidence to force Thurston into a cataclysmic paradigm crisis.

### Alienating Objects - Closing Comments

Lovecraft's unusual objects serve as useful plot devices for the telling of "weird tales," but they further function as a catalyst in the process of the alienating paradigm crisis. These objects serve a special purpose in the representation of the alienated world, for they pose a substantial obstacle to scientific rationale. In many cases, these objects baffle the scientific community by their very nature, going beyond the status of mere secondary sources and presenting tangible, quantifiable evidence that does not fit into any

known framework of scholarly understanding. Other stories include objects that are examined closely but outside of a clinical environment, like the machines in “From Beyond” and “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” the mysterious orb in “The Haunter of the Dark,” or the jewelry of unknown design (and shaped for non-human bodies) in “The Shadow over Innsmouth.” Most of the scholars who study these objects, like those in “The Call of Cthulhu” or “The Colour Out of Space,” quickly give up their interest when their efforts fail. The narrators continue their quests for knowledge, adding interdisciplinary sources and perspectives that lead to glimpses of new realities (and the alienation that results from these glimpses). Even in the tales where controlled scientific studies cannot be applied, the narrators eventually receive enough corroborating information (seeing the machine function, seeing the creatures for whom the jewelry was made) to be convinced that the items represent aspects of the world unknown to the average person. In the most extreme of cases, exposure to alienating objects forces the observers to face the inadequacies of their intellectual paradigms, the feeble constructs of an under-developed and overconfident species. The alienating object, be it alienating in its physical makeup and origins (“The Colour Out of Space,” “The Haunter of the Dark,” “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Shadow over Innsmouth”) or in its function (“From Beyond,” “The Whisperer in the Darkness”), serves not as an isolated specimen but as a symbol of a greater reality that separates the observer from what was once the familiar world.

## Alienating Places

The transformation of the familiar world into a strange and hostile place is a prominent theme in modern grotesque and modernist literature. Although it may be an over-simplification, it could be generalized that the modern grotesque tends to represent changes in the physical nature of the world, while modernism tends to depict a change in individual perspective that gives the appearance of transformation of place. In the modernist grotesque, including Lovecraft's work, the sense of place is problematized by a potent combination of the two strategies. The main characters enter places that have been forgotten or hidden, and that reflect the existence of "things that man was not meant to know." This provides a modern grotesque sense of alienation on the most fundamental of levels; what the character had considered to be the familiar world transforms into a place of fear and confusion. However, unlike some grotesque works, these stories do not allow for a comfortable resolution. The world does not return to its former order, or the illusion thereof. The "DEMONIC ELEMENTS" that are "INVOKE[D]" and "SUBDUE[D]" (Kayser 187-188) still leave permanent scars, for alienating places have a way of following their visitors home.

The documents and objects that force characters to acknowledge the possibility that their perceptions of reality are fundamentally flawed take on new significance when they are found in (or linked to) strange cities or alien landscapes. Readers of Lovecraft often make the observation that his works make the rationally-minded twentieth-century United States seem very ancient and mysterious<sup>61</sup>, and this statement holds more

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<sup>61</sup> Hawthorne is one of the only other American writers to succeed in creating such an atmosphere.

significance than one might imagine when considered with relation to alienation in the modernist grotesque. In the stories in question, perception of the world changes as knowledge is gained, and the discovery of mysterious places accentuates characters' realizations of their ignorance of the true nature of their own planet. In keeping with the grotesque as defined by Kayser, Thomson, Clayborough, and Harpham, the vast majority of Lovecraft's stories take place in the familiar world of terrestrial earth.<sup>62</sup> In some cases, the estrangement of the familiar world is accomplished through fictionalized New England towns, specifically Kingsport, Arkham (home of Miskatonic University), Dunwich, and Innsmouth. Although these places are Lovecraft's own creations, they are described as existing within New England, not far from Providence or Boston. Some other locations used by Lovecraft include the hills of Vermont ("The Whisperer in the Darkness"), Antarctica (*At the Mountains of Madness*), the Pacific Ocean ("The Call of Cthulhu"), the swamps of Louisiana ("The Call of Cthulhu"), and the North African desert ("The Nameless City"), and the Australian wilderness ("The Shadow Out of Time"). Other stories, like "The Haunter of the Dark," take place in real cities (Providence in this case). By setting his weird tales in the familiar world, the world that is assumed to be known and tamed, Lovecraft intensifies the alienation of his characters.

As Dziemianowicz explains,

By remaining in the realm of the familiar, Lovecraft reminds us that, "at a laughably short distance from the great industrial centers, from the most respected universities, from the tourist sites—amid smiling civilisation—[there exists] an abominable region where evils are practiced" (Levy 41). The incongruous juxtaposition of the natural and the supernatural heightens the sense of isolation in a story by creating a pocket of mystery in which characters discover that the rules

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<sup>62</sup> The purely alien landscape of "In the Walls of Eryx" (1935) and a few of his early "Dunsanyan fantasies" are set in other worlds, but even the "Dream Cycle" stories tend to begin in twentieth-century New England.

of the regular world do not obtain. In such situations, it is the normal—the traveler, the student, the visitor—who finds himself at the greatest disadvantage. (168-9)

Lovecraft's alienating places are worlds within the familiar world, older than humankind by eons. The inclusion of alienating cities, landscapes, buildings, and catacombs draws attention to the unexplored regions of the earth and provides an origin and context for various secondary sources and objects. By placing his alienating places in these settings, Lovecraft addresses the premise of cosmic insignificance: if humans have little knowledge of and significance on their own planet, how can they possibly have any significance in the vast cosmos?

### Alienating Places in "The Festival"

Wilderness and ocean settings are common in Lovecraft's stories and in "weird fiction" in general. However, urban settings provide their own benefits to the representation of alienating places. Many of Lovecraft's stories depict alienating places within America, transforming both real and fictional towns by portraying familiar and even quaint urban settings as containing forbidden buildings and forgotten catacombs. Stories like "The Shadow over Innsmouth," "Pickman's Model," "The Festival," "The Dunwich Horror," and "The Haunter of the Dark" take place in New England towns that one might expect to hold many secrets of American history for an eager tourist or scholar. Lovecraft often references events like the Witch Trials and the destruction of Native American populations to situate his stories in the context of American history. However, the secrets revealed to Lovecraft's characters in these places bring a glimpse of realities

far more disturbing and far more ancient than any study of colonial America could reveal. Among the stories that depict the towns of the United States as ancient and mysterious places, “The Festival” stands out, for this is one of the few stories in which the narrator is welcomed into the alienating place and offered unlimited access to ancient mysteries. In this case, the unnamed narrator states that he is invited by distant kin to Lovecraft’s Kingsport for “the Yuletide, that men call Christmas though they know in their hearts it is older than Bethlehem and Babylon, older than Memphis and mankind” (*Transitions* 150). The narrator arrives in “the ancient sea town where [his] people had dwelt and kept festival in the elder time when festival was forbidden; where also they had commanded their sons to keep festival once every century, that the memory of primal secrets might not be forgotten” (*Transitions* 150). After finding his way to the designated building, the traveler is admitted by a masked and silent figure and asked in writing to wait at a table that holds texts similar to those named in the previous discussion of Lovecraft’s libraries:

When I sat down to read I saw that the books were hoary and mouldy, and that they included old Morryster’s wild *Marvells of Science*, the terrible *Saducismus Triumphatus* of Joseph Glanvil, published 1681, the shocking *Daemonolatreia of Remigius*, printed in 1595 at Lyons, and worst of all, the unmentionable *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, in the Olaus Wormius’ forbidden Latin translation. (*Transitions* 150)

The presence of the books contributes to the atmosphere of the place, serving as a foreshadowing of the narrator’s discovery of even stranger regions to be explored that night. Although he finds “the room and the books and the people very disquieting,” he considers what he has been told about this festival and resolves to “expect queer things” (*Transitions* 151). The story would not progress much further if he were to flee upon glimpsing the *Necronomicon*, so his pre-knowledge of the ancient and mysterious nature

of the event, and his role as a welcomed guest, put the narrator in a position in which it is reasonable to keep his cool to this point.

Once the festival is about to begin, he descends with a “throng”( *Transitions* 151) from the house to a church and from the church to subterranean realms, moving with the others into ancient caverns below the city where he sees “the boundless vista of an inner world – a vast fungous shore litten by a belching column of sick greenish flame and washed by a wide oily river that flowed from abysses frightful and unsuspected to join the blackest gulfs of immemorial ocean” ( *Transitions* 153). Due to his privileged position as a guest, the narrator is granted access to worlds beyond the knowledge of men, alien landscapes beneath the familiar city-scape. The disquieting effect of such knowledge follows those who glimpse the urban gates to the realm of the Old Ones, preventing them from ever again looking at a city street without imagining that hidden worlds lie beneath. This paradigm crisis alienates characters from the cities they haunt and the very soil upon which they stand, the unknown places beneath the surface of the earth symbolizing the unknown places beneath the surface of reality. Like their histories, their cities are built upon long-forgotten foundations that humans would rather not discover.

### **Alienating Places in “The Haunter of the Dark”**

Not all of Lovecraft’s alienating places are found in the wilderness or in subterranean spaces below the cities of the United States. He occasionally brings the alienating influences to the surface. For instance, “The Haunter of the Dark” centers

around a readily visible portal, a dark church that the denizens of Providence avoid. Blake, the main character, soon realizes that this church is no place for seekers of sanctuary or spiritual enlightenment. The church stands as a mockery of the benevolent religions of humankind, fascinating the curious Blake as he watches from his study window: “Of all the distant objects on Federal Hill, a certain huge, dark church most fascinated Blake. It stood out with especial distinctness at certain hours of the day, and at sunset the great tower and tapering steeple loomed blackly against the flaming sky” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 209). He procures field-glasses to see more detail to find that “Even with optical aid Federal Hill seemed somehow alien, half fabulous, and linked to the unreal, intangible marvels of Blake’s own tales and pictures” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 209).<sup>63</sup> The entire area, viewed from his window, strikes Blake with “a curious sense that he was looking upon some unknown, ethereal world which might or might not vanish in a dream if ever he tried to seek it out and enter in person” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 208). This church is unique among Lovecraft’s stories in that it is clearly visible to passers by, rather than lying in a remote or hidden location like the ocean, the desert, or underground. Even the bizarre town of Innsmouth is physically isolated from the rest of the population and landscape of new England. The dark church, however, is surrounded by urban “normalcy” on all sides, symbolizing the human tendency to ignore what it is not prepared to explore or understand.

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<sup>63</sup> The majority of Lovecraft’s tales are first-person accounts, while “The Haunter of the Dark” is one of the few in which an unidentified third party tells the story of the main character as though the tale were a presentation of a case study (similar to the narration method in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*). The impersonal nature of these narratives may even imply that the character creating the case study struggles in his own alienation, attempting to maintain objective distance as a link to the intellectual community that demands such a perspective,

The narrator's investigation of the history of the dark church leads to disturbing tales of "an outlaw sect that called up awful things from some unknown gulf of night," but it lay undisturbed for years since the evil was confronted by a "good priest," although "there did be those who said that merely the light could do it" (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 211). Blake, although a writer and artist of the mysterious and terrible, is skeptical of the superstitious locals who perpetuate such rumors. Yet, he eventually cannot keep himself away from this mysterious church upon which he has gazed in curiosity on so many evenings. Within the church he finds, among other things, a private library containing "a Latin version of the abhorred *Necronomicon*, the sinister *Liber Ivonis*, the infamous *Cultes des Goules* of Comte d'Erlette, the *Unausprechlichen Kulten* of van Junzt, and old Ludvig Prinn's hellish *De Vermis Mysteriis*." The unnamed narrator adds: "But there were others he [Blake] had known merely by reputation or not at all—the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, the *Book of Dzyan*, and a crumbling volume in wholly unidentifiable characters yet with certain symbols and diagrams shudderingly recognizable to the occult student" (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 213). In addition to the expected filth, debris, and cobwebs, the curious intruder finds the previously mentioned library, human skeletal remains, and the strange stone around which much of the plot develops:

The four-inch seeming sphere turned out to be a nearly black, red-striated polyhedron with many irregular flat surfaces; either a very remarkable crystal of some sort, or an artificial object of carved and highly polished mineral matter. It did not touch the bottom of the box, but was held suspended by means of a metal band around its center, with seven queerly-designed supports extending horizontally to angles of the box's inner wall near the top. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 214)

The church featured in "The Haunter of the Dark" is noteworthy for a number of reasons, including the element of religious satire discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four. This

mysterious edifice, sanctified in the names of the Old Ones, symbolizes the unknown and possibly dangerous, forces that exist among human civilizations, including the potential of humans to invert the traditional dichotomies of good and evil, sacred and profane. While traditional institutions might attribute inversions of these moral dichotomies to human perversity, less conventional thinkers tend to focus on these dichotomies as being relative, unstable, and arbitrary in their very nature. The dark church and the religion it symbolizes indicate an alternate world view that unsettles the traditional observer by its mere presence, leading to unanswered questions about the origins, beliefs, motivations, and actions of those who dwelled within.

### **Alienating Places in “From Beyond”**

The majority of Lovecraft’s alienating places lie in remote or hidden locations. “From Beyond,” however, depicts every inch of the world as a strange and hostile place for anyone who possesses the right facilities to see beyond the illusion of accepted reality. “From Beyond” features the machine of Crawford Tillinghast, which transforms a typical attic room into an alienating scene of extra-dimensional grotesquerie. Without physical movement, the narrator experiences tangible shifts of place as his host’s machine awakens dormant senses, altering his brain functioning to see that the room in which he sits is filled with alien life:

I was now in a vortex of sound and motion, with confused pictures before my eyes. I saw the blurred outlines of the room, but from some point in space there seemed to be pouring a seething column of unrecognizable shapes or clouds penetrating the solid room at a point ahead and to the right of me... I seemed for an instant to behold a patch of strange night sky filled with shining, revolving spheres, and as it receded I saw that the glowing suns formed a constellation or

galaxy of settled shape; this shape being the distorted face of Crawford Tillinghast. At another time I felt the huge animate things brushing past me and occasionally walking or drifting through my supposedly solid body, and thought I saw Tillinghast look at them as though his better trained senses could catch them visually. (*Dreams of Terror* 49)

The narrator's senses return to their normal limitations after he panics and destroys the machine with a pistol shot. Tillinghast's dies of apoplexy, leaving the narrator as the only surviving witness of the machine's power, but the teller of the tale is not able to rationalize his experience as being mere trickery or hallucination because the bodies of Tillinghast's servants are never found, apparently devoured by extra-dimensional beings. The narrator's experience changes his perspective on the world, permanently affecting his psychology: "I never feel alone or comfortable, and a hideous sense of pursuit sometimes comes chillingly on me when I am weary" (*Dreams of Terror* 51). With Tillinghast's death, and the destruction of the strange machine, the narrator is the only one left alive who can know of the dimensions that lie parallel to the ones acknowledged by humans. He is alienated by his incommunicable awareness that he co-exists with strange and hostile worlds that no one else has ever seen.

### Alienating Places and "The Colour out of Space"

"From Beyond" introduces the idea that other worlds may lie immediately before the unreceptive eyes of humans, perceivable with the right assistance. "The Colour out of Space," on the other hand, depicts the permanent transformation of a terrestrial landscape into a bizarre and alienated world that any visitor may observe with the normal human senses. Due to the meteorite, the surrounding land is transformed into a sickly and

unnatural place in which all visitors are nervous and even fearful. Eventually, the meteorite contaminates the land all around it, making the “blasted heath” an alien landscape on earth:

All the orchard trees blossomed forth in strange colours, and through the stony soil of the yard and adjacent pasturage there sprang up a bizarre growth which only a botanist could connect to the proper flora of the region... A dim though distinct luminosity seemed to inhere in all the vegetation, grass, leaves, and blossoms alike, while at one moment a detached piece of the phosphorescence appeared to stir furtively in the yard near the barn. (*Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* 75)

In time, the contaminating affects of the meteorite affect animals and then humans, members of the family who own the “blasted heath” who transform and disintegrate as a result of direct contact with the tainted ground. “The Colour out of Space” brings a unique element to the discussion of alienating places, portraying unexpected and uncontrollable change in a place as a result of contact with a mere fragment of the unknown universe. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of “The Colour Out of Space” is its sparseness of plot. It includes no creatures, no forgotten cities, no texts by mad prophets, and no statues of unknown origin. This story reflects the fragility of the human sense of reality by introducing one non-intelligent foreign element (though it is personified by characters as being evil) that somehow transforms the landscape, and the life forms on it, through its mere presence. Lovecraft seems to declare that mere exposure to otherness can destroy human constructs of reality.

### Alienating Places and “The Call of Cthulhu”

“The Colour out of Space” stands out as Lovecraft’s only story in which humans see a place before and after it is permanently changed by alien forces. His other

alienating places exist for millions of years in their original condition before discovery by humans. “The Call of Cthulhu” includes accounts of a variety of settings, ranging from the arctic to the swamps of Louisiana to the Pacific Ocean. This story includes various alienating locations, ranging from the swamps of Louisiana to the ancient and alien city of R’lyeh, risen from the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Although the primary narrator does not personally visit certain important locations in this story, the tale is noteworthy in the discussion of Lovecraft’s alienating places due to the fact that it is the only one to provide a description of the frequently mentioned sunken city of R’lyeh. Thurston, the narrator of the framing and controlling text and collector and organizer of the collaged texts, includes a complete police report that describes the arrest of a group of cult members who have created a worship area in the deep swamp where they chant wildly and sacrifice humans around the idol of Cthulhu described in the discussion of alienating objects. Although the transformation of the swamp into a horrifying scene of monster worship serves as an alienation of terrestrial place, it is only a prelude to the truly alien landscape of the ancient city of R’lyeh, which rises briefly to the surface of the ocean. A fragment of the world of the Old Ones, a statue of Cthulhu serves as the center piece of the swamp ritual, its mere presence signifying a rite that is far different from the common wilderness voodoo practices of that region. The atmosphere created by the presence of, and reaction to, the statue of unknown origin indicates a violation of boundaries: the world of the Old Ones encroaching upon the natural landscape of familiar American.

The progression of evidence is crucial to Thurston’s development of belief in the possibility of something unexplained going on behind the various accounts of dreams and devil worship. The gradual addition of various data sources prepares Thurston for the

most unbelievable of accounts, the journal of a sailor who claims to have explored a city of the Old Ones. Thurston seeks out the most reliable source available, Johansen, the only surviving member of a sailing crew, who claims to have seen “Great Cthulhu” in the city of R’lyeh. Upon arriving in Norway, Thurston finds that the recently deceased Johansen has left an account of his traumatic encounter with Cthulhu in his home:

instead of describing any definite structure of building, he dwells only on the broad impressions of vast *angles* and stone surfaces—surfaces too great to belong to any thing right or proper for this earth, and impious with horrible images and hieroglyphs. I mention his talk about angles because it suggests something Wilcox had told me of his awful dreams. He had said that the *geometry* of the dream-place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of sphere and dimensions apart from ours. Now an unlettered seaman felt the same thing whilst gazing at the terrible reality. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 96)

Johansen’s account of his exploration of part of the sunken city of R’lyeh provides evidence that the place is not merely a shared delusion of disturbed dreamers. The similarities between the descriptions of Wilcox, other dreamers, and the sailors who explore the mysterious city are compelling, but Johansen’s account of being attacked by a creature that matches the statues and artistic renderings of Cthulhu indicates that the place he finds is indeed R’lyeh, where “dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.” This evidence of the existence of R’lyeh provides Thurston with sufficient reason to believe that he has glimpsed realities that no human should see, realities that must not be shared or explored further.

Knowledge of the existence of R’lyeh separates Thurston from every other person with whom he might wish to communicate, for he believes that he must bear the burden of his knowledge in silence. Ironically, by the end of the story, he shares more in common with the howling Cthulhu cultists than he shares with his academic peers. His quest for understanding leads him to knowledge that pushes him to the margins of

society. The important difference is that the cultists accept and relish the truths held in the sunken city, and they make no attempt to fit into mainstream society. Thurston still attempts to pass as a member of mainstream American culture, all the while living in a world that his knowledge has transformed. Once alienating knowledge is gained, sense of place and identity are lost.

### *Alienating Places and At the Mountains of Madness*

The sunken city of R'lyeh is the most fabled of Lovecraft's hidden places, for it is the home of Great Cthulhu. However, the narrator of *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931) provides a more thorough description of an even larger city of the Old Ones in the Antarctic. Like many of Lovecraft's works,<sup>64</sup> *At the Mountains of Madness* involves the discovery of huge, lost cities upon the terrestrial Earth. In terms of alienating places, the cities in this novella are important in terms of their vastness and the thoroughness of their descriptions. *At the Mountains of Madness* is represented as a scholarly account of a major scientific expedition to Antarctica, written by a man of science in an attempt to document unbelievable events in a rational and organized manner. The narrator, a geologist from Miskatonic University, relates his discovery of million-year old "Cyclopean" cities in painstaking detail, including dates, times, geographical coordinates, and transcribed journal entries and radio communications from his fellow

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<sup>64</sup> "The Call of Cthulhu," "The Nameless City," "The Shadow Out of Time" are among the most prominent.

explorers.<sup>65</sup> Of the radio communications from a second research group, the narrator states that he “had better give the messages literally as Lake sent them, and as our base operator McTighe translated them from the pencil shorthand” (*Mountains of Madness* 18). In addition to the radio broadcasts from the group that faces the most direct dangers on the expedition, the narrator claims to have “photographs, both ordinary and aerial,” which “will count in my favor, for they are damnably vivid and graphic.” He states “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” (1). The variety of documentation mentioned adds to the illusion of verisimilitude while raising questions about the authority given to various types of documents. As the narrator says, even if many types of documents were presented, it is likely that nothing could convince the public that the findings are valid.<sup>66</sup>

*At the Mountains of Madness*, Lovecraft’s most detailed descriptions of a home of the Old Ones, depicts the landscapes and city structures of an Antarctic civilization that thrived before the advent of humankind. The geologist who relates the account records his observations with meticulous scientific attention, sparing no details of his findings as he moves from one part of the vast ruins to the next. Once among the ruins,

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<sup>65</sup> Modernist collage focuses on fragmentation and limitation. Any attempt at cohesiveness is partial at best. Thus, Lovecraft’s narrators compile and analyze their sources to the extent that their ignorance is confirmed, but not much further. In contrast, older versions of compiled narratives like *Dracula* or *Melmoth the Wanderer* serve to provide a complete and coherent picture rather than partial or fragmented glimpse. This is a crucial difference between modernist collage and older forms of multiple first-person narratives.

<sup>66</sup> The earlier section in this chapter focuses on documents made by others and analyzed by the narrators. In this case, the documents are created by the narrator and his fellows to document the details of the places they explore.

he realizes that the sight that he had taken for a mirage while flying to the designated landing sight is indeed real:

Yet now the sway of reason seemed irrefutably shaken, for this Cyclopean maze of squared, curved, and angled blocks had features which cut off all comfortable refuge. It was, very clearly, the blasphemous city of the mirage in stark, objective, and ineluctable reality. That damnable portent had a material basis after all... Only the incredible, unhuman massiveness of these vast stone towers and ramparts had saved the frightful thing from utter annihilation in the hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of years it had brooded there amidst the blasts of a bleak upland... I thought again of the eldritch primal myths that had so persistently haunted me since my first sight of this dead antarctic world—of the demoniac plateau of Leng, of the Mi-Go, or abominable Snow Men of the Himalayas, of the Pnakotic Manuscripts with their prehuman implications, of the Cthulhu cult, of the *Necronomicon*.... (45-46)

The narrator's previous access to ancient myths and legends, due in part to his acquaintance with academic colleagues who are experts in those fields, helps him to develop a context for the ruins, and to assist the reader in seeing the connections of this place to other Lovecraft stories. Once the exploration of the city begins, the study of the buildings, carvings, wall art, and hieroglyphs provide the narrator with a greater knowledge of the Old Ones than any other Lovecraftian character gains. One of the important aspects of this tale lies in its relation to the others. *At the Mountains of Madness* offers an alienating place in which a scientific team has nearly unlimited time and access for exploration of the location, providing readers with sufficient intertextual references to verify that relationships exist between many of Lovecraft's stories. Furthermore, this story presents the reader with a new perspective on Lovecraft's alternate world, a perspective that offers additional information and insights while remaining ultimately unknowable. The Antarctic city discovered in *At the Mountains of Madness* provides optimal scientific conditions for study in which the assertions of characters from other stories are supported. However, the primary narrator states that his

attempts to pose his findings have been met only by ridicule from the rest of the scientific community. Danforth, the only other member of the expedition to return, suffers a breakdown that eliminates him as an academic ally. The narrator is alone in his knowledge.

In *At the Mountains of Madness*, Lovecraft highlights the alienating effects of knowledge by setting up the only case in which humans have the opportunity and ability to analyze and interpret the history of the Old Ones on planet Earth through the records of the Old Ones themselves, without the aid (or interference) of human intermediaries. The scholarly characters of *At the Mountains of Madness* conduct the most unusual archaeological expedition in history, gaining more information from the ruins and artwork of the Old Ones than those of lesser training might be able to learn. Through analysis of the stones, fossils, and artwork, the scientists date the construction of the city and learn the history of the Old Ones who built it:

The subject matter of the sculpture obviously came from the life of the vanished epoch of their creation, and contained a large proportion of evident history. It is this abnormal historic-mindedness of the primal race—a chance circumstance operating, through coincidence, miraculously in our favor—which made the carvings so awesomely informative to us, and which caused us to place their photography and transcription above all other considerations. (57-59)

The study of the place reveals a new history of the earth and the place of humans therein: the place of minor creations who were made by beings of infinitely superior intelligence and power. The pages of *At the Mountains of Madness* reveal the most complete account of a race of Old Ones, providing details of their lives, conflicts, changes, and artistic trends. Furthermore, this novella moves toward a consistent picture of Lovecraft's alternate world history by mentioning books, cities, human characters, cults, and "gods" from other stories, developing a more cohesive vision of a world in which the human

“birthright” of alienation takes on unprecedented depth. Ironically, the most scientifically supportable account to be represented in all of Lovecraft’s works leads to the most alienating paradigm crisis: the irrefutable knowledge that all life on planet Earth, including human life, was created by the Old Ones for their own purposes. The men of this research team must suffer in isolation with the knowledge that they have discovered the origin of human life, and it is far less glorious than they had imagined.

### *Alienating Places and The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*

Of all of the alienating places represented by Lovecraft, the Dream World may be his most unusual and his most noteworthy, because it is an extra-dimensional realm that certain humans may explore, and that can lead humans to insights beyond their normal scope. The Dream World, perhaps influenced in part by Poe’s poetry, contains many landscapes and populations, entire worlds within worlds, a kind of layered set of possible realities. This realm is inhabited by Old Ones, as is the waking world, but the rare human dream explorer has a better chance of surviving to gain knowledge of the Old Ones by journeying through the Dream World than by exploring their cities in the physical world. Most importantly, the nature of the Dream World indicates that insight can come through a shifting in consciousness more readily than through the collection of empirical data. The “Dream Cycle” stories (“The White Ship,” “The Silver Key,” *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, “Through the Gates of the Silver Key”) are similar to “From Beyond” in that they depict changes of place without physical motion. However, rather than using a machine to stimulate the pineal gland to re-tune sensory organs, travelers in the Dream

World explore new realms of reality through the vehicle of the unconscious mind.

Lovecraft's Randolph Carter, one of his few recurring characters and the one most closely associated with the travel in the Dream World, experiences his greatest adventure in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, one of Lovecraft's few third person narrations,<sup>67</sup> and one which is especially important in its depiction of the Dream World as a place between human reality and the realities of the Old Ones.

*The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* provides the most thorough account of Lovecraft's Dream World as it follows Randolph Carter on his quest to search out the God Azathoth at the center of the universe. In this surreal and epic tale that S.T. Joshi has compared to Homer's *Odyssey*, Carter aspires to travel the Dream World to reach the "onyx castle of the Great Ones" (107), the mysterious gods who make up the highest echelon of Lovecraft's mythos. Before he departs, he consults "the bearded priests Nasht and Kaman-Thah" (107), wise men of the dream world who warn him that: "not only had no man ever been to Kadath, but no man had ever suspected in what part of space it may lie; whether it be in the dreamlands around our own world, or in those surrounding some unguessed companion of Fomalhaut or Aldebaran" (107). They add that the very exposure of the human mind to certain alienating places can have dire consequences: "If in our dreamland, it might conceivably be reached, but only three human souls since time began had ever crossed and recrossed the black impious gulfs to other dreamlands, and of that three, two had come back quite mad" (107). The journey Carter undertakes is a mental one, a journey through realms of consciousness and perception by which he hopes

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<sup>67</sup> Like others, this narration may be read as limited third-person or as a kind of case study by an unnamed scholar. The unlimited, omniscient third-person narrator of traditional fiction is almost non-existent in Lovecraft's works.

to gain a deeper knowledge of reality through access to the Great Ones. The Dream World includes many lands and many cities, populated by fantastic creatures with whom Carter interacts. The Dream World is a distinct dimension, physically separate from the ancient cities of the Old Ones on Earth. However, the Dream World serves as the link between humans and their cosmic elders, providing the most direct glimpses of other realities. A trip to the Antarctic or the Australian desert is unnecessary to the quest to gain knowledge of the Old ones, for a human with the right mentality may travel through dream alone, transforming the surrounding environment through the workings of the unconscious mind. This concept of a fascinating but potentially dangerous Dream World breaches the barriers of any sense of safety in a given place. Lovecraft underscores the modernist grotesque concept of mental alienation by depicting parts of the human mind as potential doorways to the surreal landscapes of the Dream World. In effect, everyone has access to forbidden knowledge through their dreams, but few are able to access that knowledge, or to cope with its implications. In Lovecraft's fiction, the gateways to alienating places are many. Perhaps the most disturbing cases are those that explore the idea of the reality that appears to surround the characters at all times as being merely a veil that can be penetrated through an adjustment in the perceptions of the conscious mind (as created by the machine in "From Beyond") or the unconscious mind (as created by Randolph Carter in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* or "The Silver Key"). These representations highlight the idea that alienation is inescapable. The nature of a place is altered by the perspective of the observer. To those who are aware of their birthright of alienation, every place is an alienating place.

## Alienating Creatures

After examining secondary sources, physical objects, and even places of alien origins, the main characters encounter more direct exposure to the forces at work, sometimes through direct contact with one of the elder races of intelligent creatures who dominated the Earth millions of years ago. These various Old Ones, Deep Ones, Outer Ones, Elder Gods, and Great Races symbolize possibilities. They are living embodiments of the problematic nature of human understanding, emissaries of the “ESTRANGED WORLD” in which all assumptions about science, history, and self-identity are challenged. The Old Ones are not mere visitors to the Earth. They have always existed in the undiscovered places of the Earth, just as the limitations of perception and knowledge have always existed in the human mind. Lovecraft’s representations of alienation are not so much about changes in physical reality as they are about developing an awareness of the intrinsic alienation at the heart of the human condition.

Since all but a few of Lovecraft’s modernist grotesque tales are first-person narratives, the primary narrators must survive in these stories in order to provide a convincing account for the origin of the narrative. Therefore, any horrific events that primary narrators experience must leave them alive and functioning well enough to create a record of their ordeals. From the narrow escapes of primary narrators and the deadly encounters of secondary or tertiary characters, Lovecraft’s investigators and victims face experiences that forever change their senses of place and identity. A variety of creatures appear in a number of circumstances in Lovecraft’s “weird fiction.” For instance, brief sightings occur in “From Beyond,” “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Nameless City” and

“The Festival,” whereas scholars in *At the Mountains of Madness* and “The Whisperer in the Darkness” have the opportunity to examine the remains of a few of the members of the weaker species of Old Ones. While the creatures are usually indifferent or hostile to humans, “The Festival” and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* depict friendly and even helpful behavior toward human characters in specific situations. Whatever the interaction between humans and the Old Ones, the Old Ones always represent realities outside of human scope, leading to paradigm shifts and crises.

### Alienating Creatures in “The Shadow Out of Time”

In some of Lovecraft’s most experimental narratives, the narrator’s exposure to non-human intelligences is only the beginning of his alienation from humanity. In certain tales, the narrator has the experience of perceiving himself as a non-human entity. For instance, Professor Peaslee from “The Shadow Out of Time” not only finds secondary information to support the idea that his physical body was controlled by one of the Great Race, but also regains memories of being physically displaced and operating the body and senses of one of his hosts. He is alienated from humanity on practically every level, for his humanity is literally taken from him. While in the city of the Great Race, he occupies the body of another specie. He is one of many “immense rugose cones ten feet high, and with head and other organs attached to foot-thick distensible limbs spreading from the apexes. They spoke by the clicking or scraping of huge paws or claws attached to the end of two of their four limbs, and walked by the expansion and contraction of a viscous layer attached to their vast, ten-foot bases” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 339). These

relatively benign beings are so unlike anything of the familiar Earth that they may be perceived as almost comical in their physical appearance. They are kind to Peaslee, granting him a good deal of freedom in their lands and indulging his interests and curiosities as best they can. The narrator's sense of dread comes less from their physical appearance than from his own while inhabiting one of their bodies: the state of existence as a different creature is the primary source of his alienation, for it shows that his identity as a human being can be stripped from him at the whim of unknown forces.

### Alienating Creatures in "The Festival"

Contact with the Old Ones is usually maddening and even deadly. However, there are exceptions, as in "The Shadow Out of Time." Similarly, the narrator of "The Festival" greets the undiscovered world and its denizens as a guest and a family member. "The Festival" stands out among Lovecraft's stories because the narrator's contact with the creatures is direct and relatively non-threatening. After descending into the subterranean landscape described previously, the narrator is expected to mount and ride a domesticated type of flying beasts that

were not altogether crows, nor moles, nor buzzards, nor ants, nor vampire bats, nor decomposed human beings; but something I cannot and must not recall. They flopped limply along, half with their webbed feet and half with their membranous wings; and as they reached the throng of celebrants the cowed figures seized and mounted them, and rode of one by one along the reaches of that unlighted river.  
(*Transitions* 154)

The unnamed winged creatures serve, among other things, as a metaphor for the means by which knowledge can be gained. The narrator's refusal to continue his journey shows his fear of exploration of the unknown, even in safe and friendly circumstance. In this

plot situation, representatives of the unknown world welcome their kinsman, but he rejects their hospitality on the basis of their strangeness. By presenting this dynamic, Lovecraft points to a human tendency toward self-alienation in preference to exposure to the unfamiliar, in effect saying that most people would rather live in familiar ignorance than attempt to gain knowledge beyond their comfortable scope. A person of greater intellectual curiosity and courage, in the absence of any apparent physical danger, might not pass up an opportunity to seize and mount the strangest of beasts with the promise of a journey to new worlds of knowledge.

The missed opportunity of the narrator is not merely a lapse of courage leading to a lost chance for forbidden knowledge. The narrator's panic and flight from the caverns amounts to a rejection of his own identity, for this place and the beings within are part of his own heritage. The strange masked figures with "abnormally pulpy" (152) bodies, their flying beasts, and their underground habitat imply that the family members who surround the new celebrant are not entirely human. If he is indeed related to them, then he too is only partly human. Like Peaslee, he is alienated from his very sense of identity. Unlike Peaslee, this character cannot recover from his condition. The narrator of "From Beyond" must face the possibility that he has monstrous ancestry, leading him to end his account with an ominous quote from the *Necronomicon* that seems to address his situation: "'Great holes secretly are digged where earth's pores ought to suffice, and things have learnt to walk that ought to crawl'" (*Transitions* 155). Lovecraft exercises literary restraint by providing only the suggestion that the narrator may believe himself to be, at least in part, one of the things that "ought to crawl." Alienation, however, may sometimes involve a choice. By eliminating any element of danger, Lovecraft puts the

narrator in a position to choose to accept or reject the hospitality of his own kin, based solely on his own reactions to the unfamiliar. In this case, the narrator rejects his kin because of what they imply about his own identity, thereby choosing to live the rest of his life alienated by the awareness of his quasi-human ancestry. He escapes the cavern but cannot escape the memory of the experience. A reader can only speculate as to the outcome of an alternate plot line in which the narrator continues his participation in the festival and forms new bonds with his family. There is no textual reason to believe that any harm would result from his association with these odd relatives, but he is not emotionally prepared for this level of the unknown. The underlying implication is almost optimistic – alienation may sometimes be overcome through a shift in perspective, an acceptance and adjustment to even the most disturbing paradigm shift.

### Alienating Creatures and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”

One place represents an unusual case in which alienation from humanity is accepted and embraced by an entire population that relinquishes its ties to the outside world. “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” introduces a scenario in which an entire town adapts to a major paradigm shift, accepting a revelation that the Old Ones will reward them for their cooperation. The sea port of Innsmouth, Massachusetts, is probably the most alien of Lovecraft’s invented towns because it is inhabited by humans who choose to cooperate and cross-breed with the Deep Ones, aquatic humanoid servants of Cthulhu. It is this inter-breeding that makes “The Shadow over Innsmouth” particularly significant among Lovecraft’s depictions of unknown beings, for these Innsmouth folk are not like

the ancient, isolate tribes of that make up Cthulhu's other cults. The people of Innsmouth are, at one point, typical Christian New England fishing folk struggling through tough times in the late 1800's. A sea captain, Captain Obed Marsh, returns from abroad to introduce the people of his town to the secrets of a Pacific Island tribe, and a new cult is born. Lovecraft gives some insight into the process of a cult's formation, representing a powerful leader who offers strength and purpose to those who have lost hope. The followers gladly face alienation from society at large in exchange for unity among their ostracized group. According to the accounts that the narrator hears, the return of Captain Obed Marsh from his travels to foreign lands leads to a rapid transformation of the economically depressed town into a breeding ground for the Deep Ones, who mingle with the Innsmouth folk. The church is overtaken and used as the center for the newly introduced "Esoteric Order of Dagon" (Dagon being an emissary of Cthulhu) and the once impoverished fishing town undergoes an economic boom as gold and fish literally wash up onto the shore, gifts from the sea-dwelling Deep Ones. However, as the population inter-breeds with the Deep Ones, their offspring mutate and take to the sea, finding a new home beneath the waves at the place known as Devil Reef, a mile off shore from the town. Between the human sacrifices to Cthulhu and his servant Dagon and the migration of many denizens to the sea, the town is left almost desolate, shunned by all outsiders who know of it at all. In this tale, Lovecraft appears to explore, among other things, the psychology of desperation, and the potential of humans to accept in times of desperation ideas and influences that would otherwise seem abhorrent. In this case, the townspeople's fear of alienation from the rest of society, and even their fear of the unknown, is overridden by their fear of powerlessness.

The main character of “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” a vacationing student and architectural scholar from Toledo, Ohio, finds out most of his information about the mysterious New England town of Innsmouth through personal interviews. Several people, including a grocery worker non-native to Innsmouth, give the narrator reason to believe that something is amiss in the old town. These sources are then supplemented by the elderly drunkard Zadok Allen, who provides the most crucial information about the place in his long sub-narrative. Allen gives a verbal history of the city and the way in which Innsmouth changed when Captain Marsh returned from the sea with forbidden knowledge, strange gold objects, and new denizens of mysterious origin:

When it come to main' with them toad-lookin' fishes, the Kanakys kind o' balked, but finally they learnt something as put a new face on the matter. Seems that human folks has got a kind o' relation to sech water-beasts—that everything alive come aout o' the water onct, an only needs a little change to go back again. Them things told the Kanakys that ef they mixed bloods there's be children as ud look human at fust, but later turn more's more like the things, till finally they's take to the water an' jine the main lot o' things daown har. An' this is the important part, young feller—them as turned into fish things an' went into the water wouldn't ever die. Them things never died excep' they was kilt violent. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 267-268)

This account of the Innsmouth folk establishes their relationship to humans, as well as an explanation for the strangeness for the town and its inhabitants. Allen's account also introduces one of Lovecraft's most prominent alienating themes: the blurring of the lines between humans and monsters.

“The Shadow over Innsmouth” is one of the few Lovecraft stories to introduce the threat of direct physical danger to the narrator. After having heard the tales of the transformation of the town and population of Innsmouth, and after demonstrating enough curiosity to pose a possible threat to the secrecy of the Innsmouth denizens, the narrator is pursued:

I saw them in a limitless stream—flopping, hopping, croaking, bleating—surging inhumanly through the spectral moonlight in a grotesque, malignant saraband of fantastic nightmare...I think their predominant colour was a greyish-green, though they had white bellies. They were mostly shiny and slippery, but the ridges of their backs were scaly. Their forms vaguely suggested the anthropoid, while their heads were the heads of fish, with prodigious bulging eyes that never closed. At the sides of their necks were palpitating gills, and their long paws were webbed. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 290)

In an unusual twist, the narrator discovers after escaping Innsmouth and researching certain mysteries pertaining to his own family history that his great-grandmother “had been a Marsh of unknown source whose husband lived in Arkham.” He wonders: “did not old Zadok say that the daughter of Obed Marsh by a monstrous mother was married to an Arkham man through a trick?” Through studies of genealogy, history, photos, heirlooms, and gradual changes in his own appearance, the narrator discovers that he is descended of the very Innsmouth folk who he evaded. He realizes that he is, at least partly, one of the very creatures he fled as he escaped Innsmouth, confirmed when he begins to notice that his own face is developing the “Innsmouth look.” Like the narrator of “The Festival,” this narrator must face a type of self-knowledge that completely destabilizes his sense of identity. The very blood that flows through his veins and arteries, the very DNA structure at the core of his physical makeup alienates him from the rest of humanity in an inescapable, unalterable way.

Unlike the narrator of “The Festival,” the narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” comes to take a radical stance on his own condition, one of acceptance: “I shall plan my cousin’s escape from that Canton madhouse, and together we shall go to marvel-shadowed Innsmouth. We shall swim out to that brooding reef in the sea and dive

down through black abysses to Cyclopean<sup>68</sup> and many-columned Y'ha-nthlei, and in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 295). This may be one of the strangest endings in modern literature, for it depicts a radical shift in mind-set, an enthusiastic embracing of a non-human perspective in which the alienating transformation is eventually seen as a blessing.<sup>69</sup> The notion of accepting one's own non-human ancestry in order to join monstrous kin in a mysterious underwater city may be nearly impossible for an (assumedly human) average reader to fathom. However, it is difficult to say how one would react in a seemingly impossible situation. In this case, psychological realism is not the issue. The narrator seems remarkably rational when he asserts that he has decided not to shoot himself (as his uncle has as a result of his own discovery of their family's heritage). Rather, this narrator focuses on the potential for discovery, wonder, and immortality. In this story, Lovecraft provides an answer, a strategy for dealing with the paradigm crisis, as alluded to in "The Festival," and as touched upon in "The Outsider." Through the acceptance and enthusiasm of the narrator, we see a bizarre version of a happy ending (exceedingly rare in Lovecraft's work), which would seem to indicate that this character is doing something right. He escapes his sense of alienation and horror by intentionally updating his point of view to function harmoniously with the new knowledge that he faces.

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<sup>68</sup> Even those of us who greatly admire and respect Lovecraft tend to joke about his overuse of the word "Cyclopean."

<sup>69</sup> In "The Outsider" (1921), an early and more traditionally Gothic tale, the narrator makes a similar discovery of his own monstrous identity, resulting in a disturbing kind of self-knowledge. However, "The Outsider" is shorter, less detailed, and lacking the cosmic themes of Lovecraft's later modernist grotesque works.

## Alienating Creatures – Closing Comments

The mingling of well established and accepted geography, history, science, and bibliography with weird fiction has the potential to lead a reader to experience a sense of disorientation and a questioning of exactly what is factual and what is fictional. Lovecraft's modernist grotesque works truly represent the "ESTRANGED WORLD," a world that appears at first to be the one with which the average modern human is acquainted, heightening the disruptive effects when the transformation takes place. Long forgotten cities rise to the surface of the ocean. Strange creatures are spotted beneath the streets of New England. Ancient texts reveal that humans were once slaves to monsters of un-imagined power. People across the globe share the same vivid nightmares when Great Cthulhu awakens and calls. In short, everything that human beings have come to believe they know about themselves and their world is shattered, but no Lovecraft character ever gains more than a brief glimpse at one of an infinite number of alternate realities. That is the ultimate alienation in the world of the modernist grotesque.

Unlike other stories that include the new arrival of alien creatures (Jules Verne's *War of the Worlds*, for instance), Lovecraft's works makes a major point that the "aliens" have been here long before mammals evolved. In traditional science fiction, the recent arrival of creatures from another planet or dimension allows for the possibility that the human sense of reality on this planet has been generally legitimate, accurate, and reasonable up until the moment of visitation or invasion. However, Lovecraft's insistence upon representing intelligent non-human creatures on the earth as pre-dating the earliest humans means that practically everything humans have come to believe about

the Earth's history has always been wrong.<sup>70</sup> This is crucial. By introducing elements such as monsters, ancient cults, and alien objects and landscapes, and placing them on the newly formed terrestrial Earth, Lovecraft intensifies the impact of modernist grotesque alienation by providing evidence to support the grotesque and modernist perspectives on the falseness of cultural constructs and scientific presupposition. Within Lovecraft's stories, the narrators' discoveries take the modernist crisis of reality from the realm of mere speculation to the level of undeniable intellectual conflict. The questioning of perceptions of reality is not mere academic exercise or some kind of self-imposed neurosis.<sup>71</sup> In the modernist grotesque, alienation from the physical world, human culture, and the intellectual community is unavoidable, undeniable, and permanent, brought on by events and evidence rather than mere pontification.

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<sup>70</sup> Once again, "The Colour Out of Space" is the only story in which an alien influence comes as a new arrival. The "colour" is more of a substance or a force than an intelligent entity.

<sup>71</sup> The modernist alienated consciousness's perception of the familiar world as a disjointed and disturbing place could be viewed as an oversensitive or even melodramatic overreaction, imagining problems where none exist.

## Chapter Three: Subjectivity

Literary representations of alienation reflect humans as being isolated from knowledge, from one another, and from themselves in a variety of ways, revealing the inability of anyone to perceive or process more than a fraction of the potential facets of “reality.” The physical and mental faculties of humans are shown to be limited and easily deceived, indicating that even the most sincere attempts at an “empirical” or “objective” observations are fallible at best because the primary processing equipment, the human senses and mind, are incapable of perceiving and understanding all aspects of surrounding stimuli. The range of the human senses is minute compared to those even of commonly known animals, and human perception is further complicated by a variety of factors: personal motivations and biases, paradigm constraints, hoaxes, and even chemical or stress-induced hallucinations. In light of the fundamentally flawed limited faculties, “objectivity” becomes merely an abstract and unattainable ideal, like “perfection.” When objectivity is revealed to be a myth, it follows that all perception must be relative, subjective.

Since modernism and the grotesque both tend to reflect human perceptions, beliefs, and representations as being relative in nature, subjectivity emerges as a crucial concept. Modernism and the grotesque pose important questions about reality, complicating traditional ideas of perception and representation that other modes of thinking tend not to question, allowing for the possibility of multiple valid perspectives. Alienating paradigm shifts can be powerful vehicles for conveying concepts of subjectivity, disrupting the world views of traditional thinkers. One of the reasons that forced paradigm shifts are so disruptive is that the movement from one perspective to

another is commonly seen as an admission of error in judgment rather than a sign of progress. It is due to this implication of fallibility that institutions tend to resist the dissemination of new information that contradicts the institution's previous claims and edicts. To admit a mistake in human perspective is to explore the weaknesses and limitations of humanity. This uncomfortable line of inquiry addresses the limitations of human perceptions as being understandable and expected in any appraisal of reality.

Modernist literature includes a number of experimental strategies for the representation of subjective realities, collage being one of the most prominent. Through the presentation of diverse, even conflicting, perspectives on common events, characters, or concepts, modernists explore the ideas of reality as being plural in nature, depending entirely upon the vantage point of the observer. In modernist poems like "The Wasteland," multiple, disjointed narratives reflect subjectivity in perception, interpretation, and communication. In Lovecraft's prose collages, the collaged narratives and scraps of information are assembled by characters who only manage to find and fit together enough of the puzzle to become aware that the full picture is beyond their comprehension. In this sense, Lovecraft's alienating documents are not merely plot devices that introduces new information to the narrators. These documents form collages with their own implicit statements of subjectivity, revealing multiple limited perspectives on certain aspects of reality. A given story may include the same event or discovery from the perspectives of scientists, historians, lay people, occult scholars, philosophers, mad prophets, cult members, or police investigators, each perspective revealing its insights and its limitation. Certain perspectives may be highly unusual, but no perspectives are ultimately privileged, despite the confidence or faith that each observer may have in the

validity of his own perspective. Therefore, any concept of truth is rendered as subjective, depending upon the observer's vantage point.

Traditional rational thought acknowledges the possibility of faulty thinking, especially among the uneducated masses. The understanding that mistakes, miscalculations, and even hallucinations take place among individuals is fundamental to the modern human intellectual culture. In some cases when an individual shows evidence of faulty perceptions or beliefs due to problems in physiology, intellectual capacity, or education, it can actually support the validity of the norm: examination of the aberrant can serve to reinforce by contrast ideas of what is normal and healthy. The fallibility of the individual is depicted in much of literature as either anomalous (due to the incompetence or limitations of the individual) or at least reparable (due to a cultural glitch that can be remedied through proper training). For instance, an individual character may be depicted as perceiving reality inaccurately due to idiocy, madness, or ignorance. An individual, a group, or even a society may be shown to make numerous errors of perception and judgement due to insufficient paradigms and methods, as treated by various social satires and cultural commentaries,<sup>72</sup> and the identification and correction of these errors is central to intellectual development. In such cases, humankind is represented, in its basic nature (or at least in its ultimate potential), as being capable of objective, reliable, and ultimately truthful observations. Traditionally, the observations of fools and madmen sometimes help other characters to see errors in their own thinking, moving their perspectives back toward rational thought. In these cases objectivity itself is not overthrown, only the stereotypes of those who are capable of it.

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<sup>72</sup> Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are good examples.

Faith in objectivity is a fundamental premise of Western rational thought, the general philosophical premise behind Western science.

The modernist grotesque introduces a level of subjectivity that challenges the very possibility of achieving a stable position from which to analyze reality. In this artistic mode, objective observations and analysis of reality may be rendered as all but impossible, the idea of truth largely coming down to a matter of individual vantage point and belief system. This is a particularly prominent theme in grotesque works, as explicitly depicted through such devices as hallucinations and altered states of consciousness. Cognitive subjectivity, focusing on the biological limitations of the physical senses, is also explored in modernist works, as depicted through fragmented narratives and literary impressionism. These strategies bring attention to the aspects of reality that no one can fully perceive, focusing on the psychological process of perception through the physiological and intellectual filters of the human mind. Furthermore, even the most astute observer is only capable of perceiving objects or events from one physical vantage point at a time. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental level of subjectivity, the simple acknowledgment that no human being can observe an event from more than one physical vantage point or with absolute accuracy.

### A Brief Overview of the Concept of Subjectivity in Literature

Subjectivity in works of the grotesque functions to question many aspects of traditional dichotomies: good versus evil, beauty versus monstrosity, sanity versus madness, wisdom versus foolishness, or man versus beast: “the world depicted by the

grotesque artist is our own world turned upside down; our standards, conventions, convictions are upset” (Clayborough 71). The upset “standards, conventions, and convictions” mentioned by Clayborough represent ideas of reality that never had any solid basis. The reason that traditional notions of reality are upset through grotesque representation is that their legitimacy was only an illusion in the first place. One of the main strategies of the grotesque in its representations of subjectivity is the combination of seemingly opposed elements in physical characteristics (like Kafka’s transformation of Samsa into an insect in *Metamorphosis*), or through incongruous actions (like Faulkner’s Emily killing her fiancé and then sleeping for years beside his corpse in “A Rose for Emily,” 1931). In the early grotesque, the synthesis of clashing elements tended to reflect hidden but comprehensible truths of inner human evil, as reflected in images of human and animal hybrids that represent the savage, bestial side of humanity. However, the modern grotesque is more likely to address the ambiguities of reality; rather than depicting hidden tangible realities, they reflect the idea that reality (especially human behavior) is multi-faceted.

Grotesque literature tends to reflect concepts of subjectivity explicitly through shocking or bizarre imagery, action, and content of dialogue. The grotesque is a literature of extremes, so grotesque works often communicate ideas about subjectivity through elements that are extreme in their strangeness or severity: monsters, corpses, deformities, violence, torture, imprisonment, self-destruction, and all manner of erratic behavior. These overt grotesque elements draw the reader’s attention to the problematic nature of absolutist thinking and normative behavior by representing circumstances in which rational thought does not apply. In the world of the grotesque, hideous monsters

give eloquent speeches (*Frankenstein*), southern ladies kill and sleep with their beloved men (Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"), and unwise grandmothers get their families killed (O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find"). Oxymoronic character types like the wise fool, the beautiful monster, or the mad scientist, are mutated by the grotesque, for the grotesque shocks its readers into a new perspective, a realization that reality, in all of its variety and complexity, is difficult (perhaps impossible) to understand.

Modernism's focus on the subjective nature of reality can be traced from the earliest modernist works to the most recent modernist scholarship. This subjective world view has altered the way that contemporary thinkers approach the concept of human limitations. Jesse Matz in his essay "The Novel" (2006) explains the importance of subjectivity in modernist fiction:

Sufficient representation demands many tellings, and the full story comes out only as alternative versions present its different sides. Correlative to this interest in multiple perspectives is a belief in the relativity of truth. Modern novels deal in no absolutes - moral, perceptual, or cultural. Rather, they take truth to be a relative thing, contingent upon circumstances, changing with time and place. (219)

Matz's discussion of modernist subjectivity deals with a few very important points, including the modernist emphasis on the necessity of "multiple perspectives" or "tellings," reflecting a "belief in the relativity of truth." Also important is the concept of "no absolutes - moral, perceptual, or cultural," which links modernist subjectivity even more closely with grotesque subjectivity in that "moral, perceptual" and "cultural" absolutes in particular are dealt with so commonly in both modalities.

Matz provides a particularly effective explanation of the modernist emphasis on subjectivity as a rebellion against traditional narrative styles:

Truth became “subjective”: relative perspectives ruled out objective styles of seeing and speaking, debunking the faith that knowledge or judgment could be free of bias, motive, or error. This shift from the objective to the subjective took place most prominently in the rejection of third-person omniscient narration. Traditional narration conducted with objective impersonality as if from a comfortable and authoritative remove from the objects of narration had come to seem unrealistic, or at least ineffective in conveying the reality of limited human experience and knowledge. By contrast, the subjective narrator - speaking or overheard in the act of living, directly involved with the people, objects, and concerns of his or her narrative world, or aligned with some particular character’s point of view - became the only way to achieve narrative verisimilitude. (219)

The shift in narrative style described by Matz is a crucial element in most modernist fiction, for the first person limited narration (used in the majority of Lovecraft’s works) operates as an intrinsic stylistic representation of human limitations. Most modernists, including Lovecraft, when they do use a third person narrator, develop a somewhat depersonalized but limited narrative voice. Lovecraft’s “The Dunwich Horror,” “The Dreams in the Witch House,” and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, for instance, offer a narrator who is unnamed and not directly involved, but who could be interpreted as either a third-person narrator or a scholar who has created his or her interpretation of the events after studying various materials.

The emphasis on subjectivity is not merely an exercise in hypothetical thinking, but a fundamental perspective for the understanding of the human mind. Jarraway addresses the influence of evolving theories of psychology on modernist ideas of subjectivity when he explains that, “in Modernist discourse that is now in a position to validate and celebrate all manner of constructed things, what must surely coincide with that objectification of self-understanding is a subjectivity open to an increasing number of authentic positions” (183). In other words, the acknowledgment of the limitations of personal knowledge led many modernists to theorize that all intellectual positions share

equal validity (or lack of validity). While some saw this as a crisis of meaning, others viewed it as a liberating movement, a validation of perspectives that had been marginalized by traditional intellectual communities. Modernism, like the grotesque, tends to complicate traditional notions of reality by presenting a “number of authentic positions” that reflect ideas and events from different points of view. Fragmented narratives, like those addressed by Jarroway, depict something akin to puzzle pieces to a scene of reality that is never entirely complete. In these fragmented narratives, no one point of view is ultimately privileged, though certain perspectives may be more useful to the reader in gaining knowledge of particular ideas or events in the story. Collage is one of the most effective modernist innovations to represent subjective views of reality, especially when it presents a variety of perspectives in different textual formats.<sup>73</sup> Lovecraft is one of the few modernist writers to use the fragmented collage format in short stories, thus underscoring through the inclusion of various document sources the idea that any new insights into reality tend to come through the “piecing together of dissociated knowledge” (“The Call of Cthulhu,” *Bloodcurdling Tales* 76).

## Subjectivity and Literary Impressionism

Modernist writing includes a variety of strategies for conveying the idea of subjective reality, literary impressionism being one of the earliest and most common devices to be attributed to the modernist movement. In fact, Max Saunders claims in

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<sup>73</sup> Modernist collage may even present multiple first-person narrators relating to one specific event, as in “Within a Grove.”

“Literary Impressionism” (2006) that “...Impressionism was not just the fundamental antecedent to modernism, but the ground on which modernism is constructed” (207). Literary impressionism, like impressionism in visual art, focuses on the process of perception rather than the perceived object itself, drawing attention to the subjectivity of the senses. Levenson explains in *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (1984) that this focus on perception was viewed as a new type of realism: “Impressionism was a realism. Ford made this point early and with increasing intensity... The withholding of information, the prominence of a narrator, the abrupt juxtapositions, all were defended on such grounds” (Levenson 107). According to Levenson, literary impressionism “emphasizes attention to physical, especially visual, immediacy” (1). In painting, for instance, an impressionist may use the technique of pointalism, seen by the close-standing observer as distorted globs of color that come into focus as the observer steps back and the proper distance of perspective is attained. Literary impressionism works similarly in terms of distance of time rather than space. Events are related by the narrator in terms of how they were perceived at the time of initial experience, focusing on the “immediacy” of the event. Then, it is described how the events were misinterpreted, thus drawing attention to the fallibility of human perceptions, especially in unfamiliar circumstances under which established mental frameworks are undermined.

Literary impressionism is a staple of the modernist grotesque as well. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is frequently labeled as the first modernist novel<sup>74</sup> largely on the basis of Conrad’s use of literary impressionism, relating specifically to “attention to

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<sup>74</sup> Once again, *Heart of Darkness* is included in studies of both modernism and the grotesque as being an important representative of both modalities.

physical, especially visual, immediacy” (Levenson 107). For instance, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* (Marlow) relates an attack upon his boat in a way that focuses upon his subjective impressions of the events as they happened, only to reveal later the actual nature of the event (Conrad 60-1). This passage serves as an excellent example of literary impressionism, reflecting the disorienting process of initial perception, confusion, and eventual understanding. It does not merely report the event but relates the mental impulses as they unfold, drawing attention to the fallibility of human perception. Likewise, Joseph Sheridan LeFanu, “The Dark Prince,” a writer aligned with the grotesque, made use of literary impressionism long before the publication of *Heart of Darkness*. LeFanu’s grotesque masterpiece *Uncle Silas* (1865) contains several passages of literary impressionism, including the death scene of the young lady narrator’s (Maud’s) father. Like the attack on Marlow’s boat, the death of Maud’s father is not merely reported but described as it unfolds in the observer’s mind, creating a chaotic, disorienting scene, beginning with sounds that convince Maud that an attack is taking place. Like Marlow’s narrative, Maud’s story relates the process of her confusion rather than the mere facts of the happening. Just as Marlow mistakes an attack for a mundane occurrence, Maud mistakes a natural trauma (an aneurism that causes her father to cry out, fall heavily, and block the door with his own body) for an attack by an intruder. Scenes like these draw attention to the fallibility of initial impressions and their interpretations, a concept that is crucial in many works of the grotesque include aspects of disorientation, illusion, shock, or even hallucination as means of addressing the subjective nature of sanity, morality, and aesthetics. Lovecraft makes use of literary impressionism in many of his tales (including “From Beyond,” “The Nameless City,”

“The Call of Cthuhlu,” *At the Mountains of Madness*, and several others) in which narrators relate their experiences according to the progression of their evolving initial impressions of reality.

## Lovecraft and Subjectivity

Of the various writers who address the concept of subjectivity, perhaps none have pursued the subject with more enthusiasm and diversity of strategies than H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft’s interest in science, especially astronomy and chemistry, combined with his fascinations with history, psychology, philosophy, and (of course) literature, influenced him to develop a cosmic view that centered upon the idea of human beings and their culture as an inconsequential byproduct of a random and mechanistic universe absent of inherent meaning. In stating that his stories revolve around the “fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large” (*Selected Letters* 2.150). Lovecraft took on the challenge of communicating this idea of ultimate subjectivity to his readership through the most efficient means possible, the modernist grotesque. Lovecraft proposed that human values, paradigms, beliefs, and intellectual frameworks are all baseless constructs that have simply built upon themselves, lacking any intrinsic meaning. Those writers who address this mode of thought (including Derrida, Sartre, Ionesco, Beckett, Artaud, Yeats, Hurston) might say that the significance of language, ethics, morality, aesthetics, power dynamics, and scholarly inquiry is based upon the mutual agreement of individual human beings and nothing more. In this mode of thinking, humans assume certain privileged

positions and perspectives not because these positions and perspectives exist in any absolute sense but because humans have had no particular reason to believe otherwise. Lovecraft attacks these assumptions, using explicitly grotesque and implicitly modernist elements of alienation in his works to force characters to face the concept of indeterminate subjectivity on a very tangible level. Through the discovery of previously unknown documents, artifacts, architecture, landscapes, phenomena, and creatures, characters are forced to face a reality far beyond human understanding, effectively destroying any notion of human perception as privileged or even valid. Unlike the theorist who merely ponders the subjective nature of reality, Lovecraft's characters are forced to directly confront paradigm shifts that make them experience the limitations of human senses, power, intelligence, and history.

Lovecraft's narrators (often multiple narrators in a single collaged work) relate various combinations of alienating experiences that lead them to suffer through a paradigm crisis of catastrophic magnitude. The secondary sources, objects, places, and creatures that they perceive change their perspective and shake them loose from any previous adherence to their culturally established notions of objective reality, effectively exiling them from their worlds. Once these alienating stimuli shake them loose from their limited, narrow perspectives, they are forced to acknowledge that an endless array of other perspectives exist, each having its own claim of legitimacy for various reasons. The paradigm crisis forces characters to acknowledge the limitations of human knowledge and perception, making true objectivity impossible. Thus, reality for these characters shifts from objective to subjective. Anthony Low's *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton* (2003) is

helpful when considering the link between alienation and subjectivity in twentieth century literature:

This long-term process of internalization was causally connected to outward social pressures and to resulting inward psychological alienation. If, as Marxist sociologists and others have often argued, the modern age is a time of extraordinary – even unique – alienation, it is not surprising that it has also been a time of extraordinarily intense individualism and subjectivity... More often than not, the determining experience that forces the individual toward subjectivity has been ‘exile’ – that is, expulsion of the individual person from being or feeling himself to be part of the community in one way or another. This is so because, although more painful fates can be imagined, exile strikes at the core of a person’s sense of identity in relation to society. It cuts him off from unexamined assumptions and, through isolation, drives him into himself. (Low 3)

Many of Lovecraft’s narrators serve as useful examples of modern exiles. The results of the alienating events in Lovecraft’s tales do not typically result in the death of the primary narrator, which is in keeping with Clayborough’s observation that the grotesque “arouses in us not fear of death but anxiety about life” (64). However, under the burden of a catastrophic paradigm crisis brought on by the alienating stimuli, the narrator(s) must face the ultimate fear, not the fear of pain or death, but the fear of nothingness, of meaninglessness, of a betrayed reality transformed by undeniable relativism. Lovecraft’s narrators are forced to acknowledge their own lack of stable, reliable perspective and, perhaps even more importantly, the absence of the very possibility of a privileged observational vantage point.

Lovecraft’s knowledge of science gave him a perspective unlike that of any other writer of his age, resulting in (among other things) his heightened awareness of humankind’s physical positioning in the universe at large. Waugh observes in “Landscapes, Selves, and Others in Lovecraft” (1991) that Lovecraft “insisted upon his absolute certainty that the universe, in its widest extent, was deterministic chaos, without

origin or end, so aimless that any pattern we might impose upon it, and impose we must to live, would be artificial, arbitrary, and utterly illusive” (241).<sup>75</sup> Waugh goes on to quote a letter in which Lovecraft states that “the ultimate reality of space is clearly a complex churning of energy of which the human mind can never form any even approximate picture, and which can touch us only through the veil of local apparent manifestations which we call the visible and material universe” (Selected Letters 2.262). In an effort to communicate his concept of “cosmic disinterestism,” the idea that humans have no intrinsic significance or privileged perspective in the universe, Lovecraft wove together a number of strategies and techniques, creating stories of the modernist grotesque that portray human ideas about the cosmos and reality itself as subjective defense mechanisms used in an attempt to survive in the chaos of a mechanistic universe. The alienating influences discussed in Chapter Two do not simply shock and disorient the characters as in the common horror story. They are only small fragments that represent a much larger concept of human limitations and insufficiency. The characters who are forced to face these fragments come to realize the subjective nature of their own existence, leading Lovecraft’s characters (and readers) to reevaluate their ideas about sensory perception, power, intelligence, aesthetics, and history.

## Subjectivity of the Senses

The things that Lovecraft’s characters are forced to perceive under extreme circumstances lead them to face the limitations of the human senses, and further to face

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<sup>75</sup> This is probably the only thing about which Lovecraft indicated “absolute certainty” bordering (ironically) on faith. I am sure that the irony of this was not lost on Lovecraft himself.

the fact that there are forces that cannot be perceived with such limited organs. We now know of innumerable phenomena that cannot be detected by humans without the mediation of special tools: microscopic sight, telescopic sight, magnetism (which some fish can physically sense), sonar (sensed by bats), radar, ultraviolet rays, infrared rays, radio waves, various types of radiation, and other forces that scientists may not have begun to even imagine. The existence of these phenomena begs the question of what other realities may be outside of the relatively feeble human sense range. Lovecraft was aware of developments in the detection of these waves and spectra, scientific developments that strengthened his resolve to address the insufficiency of the human sensory organs through direct discussion, collage, and literary impressionism, combining modernist literary technique with the grotesque emphasis on the unknown.

### Subjectivity of the Senses in “From Beyond”

Lovecraft’s tales are filled with entities, forces, and phenomena that are beyond the direct physical senses of human beings and must be mediated in some way to make their presence known at all. The subjectivity of sensory perception may be most directly addressed in “From Beyond” (1920), in which the narrator visits a maddened scientist friend who has created a machine to stimulate the pineal gland in order to reveal worlds and creatures that physically co-exist with the people but are unknown to the senses of human beings. The narrator relates the rant of scientist Crawford Tillinghast who addresses the inadequacies of the human senses. This passage, written two years before Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, concisely reflects a key theme of modernism:

the idea that individuals “see things only as [they] are constructed to see them, and can gain no idea of their absolute nature” (*Transitions* 48), the idea of subjective reality, is at the very core of modernist thought. To this way of thinking, all perspectives are equally limited and incomplete. “Madmen” and “geniuses” merely see from a less common range of perspectives. Their views of reality are unusual, but no privileged.

“From Beyond” stands as Lovecraft’s first story to utilize the modernist grotesque to address the subjectivity of human experience through the presence of paranormal stimuli. The most important aspect of subjectivity in this story lies in the idea that strange creatures surround humans at all times. They are not summoned up like Marlowe’s demons in *Dr. Faustus* or invading like H.G. Wells’s aliens in *War of the Worlds*. They are not hidden or locked away on Earth like many of Lovecraft’s Old Ones. These unidentified creatures have always been there, at our elbows, in our very homes, but the limited human perception must change and expand in order to perceive them. The narrator’s senses are temporarily enhanced to allow him to see beyond his normal range, forcing him to acknowledge that any attempts at an objective assessment of reality based on direct observation, through the human faculties is doomed to be absurdly incomplete.

### Subjectivity of the Senses and “The Silver Key”

Like “From Beyond,” “The Silver Key” (1926) directly addresses the subjectivity of the senses. In this story, the unnamed narrator tells part of the story of Randolph Carter, a recurring Lovecraft character, from a limited but well-informed perspective,

explaining Carter's struggles with objective versus subjective attitudes toward reality. In this case, the narrator portrays the subjective outlook as a liberating mindset that allows for free thinking and creativity, explaining that Carter loses his creativity and perception of inner realities after he,

had read much of things as they are, and talked with too many people. Well-meaning philosophers had taught him to look into the logical relations of things, and analyse the processes which shaped his thoughts and fancies. Wonder had gone away, and he had forgotten that all life is only a set of pictures in the brain, among which there is no difference betwixt those born of real things and those born of inward dreamings, and no cause to value one above the other. Custom had dinned into his ears a superstitious reverence for that which tangibly and physically exists, and had made him secretly ashamed to dwell in visions.  
(*Dreams of Terror* 193)

The narrator's appraisal of reality as a set of artificial constructs based upon an individual's arbitrary experiences amounts to an assertion of subjective philosophy as related to the modernist grotesque. He portrays Carter's regaining of this perspective as an epic modernist grotesque quest through the inner dimensions of the Dream World, where exploration of surreal landscapes and interactions with unknown creatures brings the main character to his destination, a recovery of his empowered relativistic views.

### Subjectivity of the Senses in "The Shadow out of Time"

"The Shadow out of Time" addresses human sensory limitations through an account of the Great Race, the only race of Old Ones to master time travel. Since the narrator (Peaslee) recovers memories of his time spent as one of the Great Race he is able to give an almost ethnographic account of their species and their civilization. Occupying the body of another species gives Peaslee a very unique perspective on sensory

processing, for the members of the Great Race have “but two of the senses which we recognize—sight and hearing, the latter accomplished through the flower-like appendages on the gray stalks above their heads. Of other and incomprehensible senses—not, however, well utilizable by alien captive minds inhabiting their bodies—they possessed many” (348). In this explanation, Lovecraft creates an unusual situation: a human mind exists for a time inside an alien body where it is unable to fully access the senses of that body. This alienating experience intensifies the narrator’s understanding of the subjective nature of sensory perception, for his situation makes him personally, physically aware of biological senses that his mind cannot comprehend.

### Subjectivity of the Senses and “The Colour Out of Space”

Some Lovecraft stories leave the philosophical implications of sensory insufficiencies to the reader to decipher. “The Colour out of Space,” often identified as one of Lovecraft’s most original works (and one of his personal favorites), stands as one of his most effective portrayals of the insufficiency of the human senses. In effect, the “monster” in “The Colour out of Space” is just that – a color inside of the meteorite that falls to the “blasted heath.” The inability of the human eyes and brain to properly perceive and process this input becomes a crisis of reality on a very basic, primal level. It is not the meteorite itself but the “outside laws” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 69) it represents that bring unease to humans. Unlike other elements of the alien in literature, in terms of organisms, technology, or geometry, the very light waves that carry this disorienting sensory input are so far outside of the realm of the human nervous system that it defies all

understanding and definition: The colour... was almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all.... It was nothing of this earth, but a piece of the great outside; and as such dowered with outside properties obedient to outside laws (*Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* 69). As described in Chapter Two, this substance is so different from those of Earth that observers cannot even process certain aspects of its general appearance. The colour is not meant for the eyes of men.

Of all of the strategies Lovecraft utilizes to convey the limitation of the human senses, literary impressionism is the most prevalent. Lovecraft's narrators consistently draw attention to the processes and failures of their perceptions, as in *At the Mountains of Madness*, "The Whisperer in the Darkness," "The Call of Cthulhu," "The Nameless City," "From Beyond," "The Colour out of Space," and "The Shadow out of Time," to name a few. In these stories, narrators relate their own visual, auditory, and even tactile processes as they unfold, including admissions of mirage effects (*At the Mountains of Madness*), limited visual acuity ("The Nameless City" and "The Festival"), gaps in auditory range ("The Whisperer in the Darkness"), and difficulty with comprehending directly observed stimuli ("The Shadow Out of Time," "The Call of Cthulhu," and "The Colour out of Space"). The honesty that the narrators demonstrate in admitting their own perceptual limitations draws attention to the sensory limitations of all humans while introducing a compelling approach to narrative reliability; their honesty about their limitations strengthening their air of integrity while simultaneously deconstructing the reliability of their impressions.

## Subjectivity and the Concept of Power

The idea of subjective sensory perception lies at the very core of modernist thought and literature and at the core of Lovecraft's work. However, Lovecraft fortifies his statements of cosmic subjectivity by including weird elements that push the concept of subjectivity even further by means of the presence of unusual documents, objects, places, and the creatures that create them. Among the noteworthy traits of Lovecraft's entities, their power is especially noteworthy. Almost invariably these creatures possess powers of violent force, physical invulnerability, and longevity, giving them a perspective of the universe and their place within that varies greatly from that of humans. Practically any other creature from American or British literature seems like an insect when compared to the power of the Old Ones, and the scope of their power is necessary for Lovecraft's modernist grotesque writings. For the simple purpose of terror, much lesser creatures would do. The vampire, the werewolf, the psycho-killer and the zombie are all humanoid monsters of violent ability far beyond that of a typical person, posing sufficient dangers to drive countless horror plots. From Grendel to Dracula, literary monsters have been presented as obstacles and challenges for protagonists to meet and overcome. The countless monsters of myth, legend, and literature were meant to be vanquished, so they have susceptibilities. Traditional monsters are anomalies and aberrations, symbolizing Kayser's idea of "DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD" (188) that are to be overcome in the preservation of an orderly world. They wreak havoc and terror, take their victims, and make their marks, only to be subdued, the world returning to its normal state of order and relative safety. In Lovecraft's alternate universe, there is no solution, no defense for humans. The power of the Old Ones is too

vast for a simple military action, which means that humans who know of the Old Ones must face their own powerlessness.

Lovecraft's god-like monsters are impossible for humans to vanquish. They can only be threatened by each other, if at all.<sup>76</sup> The many tales that document wars between various populations of these ancient beings include no record of humans directly interfering with the Old Ones in any significant way. In fact, an encounter with such beings is nearly impossible for humans to survive. The best a person who encounters them can hope for is to escape to live out his or her natural life and to die before the Old Ones reclaim their former roles as the active dominators of the Earth. The Old Ones' god-like power is necessary to Lovecraft's literary philosophy of cosmic disinterestism, for the Old Ones are not adversaries to humans any more than stars or black holes are combatable enemies. The Old Ones represent insurmountable powers, factors and versions of reality that are unfathomable and unchangeable. Humans remain ignorant of them, worship them, or suffer in alienated awareness of their ultimate power. Through the Old Ones, Lovecraft is able to go beyond the normal limitations of modernist representations of fragmented and multiple human realities and venture into even wider ranges of perception, intelligent glimpses of the universe from non-human vantage points. The Old Ones are the embodiments of subjectivity, beings that symbolize the theoretically infinite number of possible perspectives well beyond anything the human mind is capable of experiencing.

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<sup>76</sup> Wars among certain factions of these beings surface in documentation in several stories, like the Elder Gods' imprisonment of the Old Ones before leaving Earth. This war and subsequent imprisonment serve to explain Cthulhu and the Old Ones' presence on Earth while allowing for the temporary domination of the planet by humans.

In creating the Old Ones, it was necessary that Lovecraft design their motivations to work within the boundaries of verisimilitude, as well as reflecting very different perspectives on the idea of power. There are various reasons why these creatures do not simply destroy or subjugate all of the creatures of the earth. On one hand, any claim that the free and active Old Ones seek to dominate the world would break the veneer of reality that Lovecraft sought to create (if they want to take over the world, then where are they?). Furthermore, the division of various motivations among the Old Ones underscores the idea that they reflect myriad perspectives beyond human thinking. The Old Ones, like humans, are not unified in their perspective. They are fragmented as well. In the case of Great Cthulhu, the lack of direct attack on humans is due to his imprisonment in the city of R'lyeh on the floor of the Pacific Ocean (imprisonment by the Elder Gods, not humans). However, "when the stars are right," he will emerge to join his human and non-human followers to ravage the world again. As several characters quote in many stories, "That is not dead which can eternal lie, / And with strange eons even death may die. / In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming" (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 84). Cthulhu is not merely some giant, indestructible monster, but a being with an unimaginably complex mind that influences lesser creatures all over the world. Similarly to Dracula, his sleeping thoughts are so powerful that they infiltrate the minds of the mad and the sensitive, causing cults to form who seek to release him so that he can once again dominate the world.

In the many stories that address the powers of the Old Ones and their kind, the most common answer to why they do not simply destroy humanity is very simple: they do not feel the need to... yet. Human beings certainly pose no serious threat to the Old

Ones, and humans are far too insignificant to elicit a major response from such a superior species. Unlike other writers who present hostile alien invasions and attempts at human genocide, Lovecraft underscores the relative insignificance of human power by presenting the Old Ones as being generally unconcerned with human affairs. Humans can be amusing, or even useful at times. Certain Old Ones find humans interesting to study, and some humans even choose to serve the purposes of their superiors.<sup>77</sup> However, as discussed in “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” it would be a relatively simple matter for even the “Mi-Go,” the least powerful of the Old Ones, to dispatch the human race if it were deemed necessary:

They will not hurt us if we let them alone, but no one can say what will happen if we get too curious about them. Of course a good army of men could wipe out their mining colony. That is what they are afraid of. But if that happened, more would come from outside—any number of them. They could easily conquer the earth, but have not tried so far because they have not needed to. They would rather leave things as they are to save bother. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 141)

Unlike other Old Ones, the Mi-Go profess an interest in humans that could be compared to zoological study, even stating that they “like to take away men of learning once in a while, to keep informed on the state of things in the human world” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 141). Each group of Old Ones has its variety of motivations and viewpoints, but they all share an invulnerability necessary for them as symbols of the eternal, impenetrable realities that could lie beyond human comprehension.

The various Old Ones are so powerful and so widespread that knowledge of their existence would cause the most prominent of human nations to take on the role of cowering victims. The power of the Old Ones brings into question the place of humans

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<sup>77</sup> Half-humans (like the Deep One cross-breeds of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”) and human cult members (like the Cthulhu Cultists of “The Call of Cthulhu”) add another dimension of absurdity to Lovecraft’s works, as discussed in Chapter 4.

as a dominant species. However, Lovecraft's creatures are not merely indestructible beasts. The Old Ones are depicted as having highly developed intellects, as reflected in their technologies, societies, and aesthetic disciplines. The Old Ones are conquerors but they are also explorers, scientists, artists, poets, and philosophers of great sophistication. The standard monster from mythology, folklore, and traditional literature (dragons, sea monsters, cyclops, harpies, undead, lycanthropes) are not only defeatable, but inferior to humans in terms of intelligence, culture, and technology. Even the rare monsters who can be highly intelligent (vampires or space aliens, for instance) tend to display only limited types of mental development. However, the Old Ones are superior to humans in every way, presenting an alternate reality in which the human race is relatively primitive and powerless. Knowledge of the Old Ones forces Lovecraft's characters to take a subjective view of human abilities and accomplishments, which appear relatively minor by comparison.

## Subjectivity and Intelligence

The concept of intelligence as a subjective concept has been explored in a number of ways, especially in the fields of psychology and education. Howard Gardner's "A Rounded Version: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences" (1983), for instance, revolutionized the concept of intelligence by supporting the theory that at least seven types of intelligence manifest separately in the human mind (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal), only two of these (linguistic and logical-mathematical) being traditionally acknowledged in

the academic community. Questions about the development and evaluation of intelligence expand exponentially with each new theory, complicating the very term “intelligence.” Lovecraft illuminates this discussion, using the modernist grotesque to address the notion of intelligence as a relative term through a number of strategies.

Technologically, the various races and species of Lovecraftian creatures are vastly superior to humans, as shown repeatedly throughout Lovecraft’s work. It is in “The Whisperer in the Darkness” that the reader has the most direct communication from ancient beings themselves, for the “Mi-Go” forge letters to the narrator in order to communicate knowledge of their accomplishments and intentions. The Mi-Go impersonate Akely in a letter (quoted by Wilmarth) in which they state,

“Do you know that Einstein is wrong, and that certain objects and forces can move with a velocity greater than that of light? With proper aid I expect to go backward and forward in time, and actually see and feel the earth of remote past and future epochs. You can’t imagine the degree to which those beings have carried science. There is nothing they can’t do with the mind and body of living organisms.” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 170)

The depiction of the Old Ones as being technologically beyond humans is not unique, for many alien creatures in literature have advanced transportation and weapons. However, by taking the technological advances of the Old Ones into the realms of surgery and mind transferal, Lovecraft develops an idea of sophisticated beings who use technology to enhance every aspect of their lives, not merely to enhance their military power. The intelligence of the Mi-Go is multi-faceted, belying a concern for the physical and mental health and development of their species and other species as well. By representing the Mi-Go, the least powerful and intelligent of the Old Ones, as surpassing humans in multiple aspects of intelligence, Lovecraft effectively addresses the subjectivity of

intellectual superiority, and the limitless theoretical mental frameworks that could lie beyond the human spectrum of possibilities.

The Old Ones are not merely soulless gadget makers. They possess social intelligence and emotional awareness that appears to surpass that of most human civilizations. In terms of their culture, for instance, the Great Race of “The Shadow out of Time” appears to manage its own population very effectively and fairly: “Crime was surprisingly scant, and was dealt with through highly efficient policing. Punishments ranged from privilege deprivation and imprisonment to death or major emotion wrenching, and were never administered without a careful studies of the criminal’s motivations” (349). This description is particularly significant because it not only mentions the emotions of the beings but it also indicates that those emotions can be manipulated, “wrench[ed]” as punishment. Likewise, their attitudes toward death and the dying reflect human-like sensitivity: “The dead were incinerated with dignified ceremonies<sup>78</sup>,” and those in terminal circumstances are “treated with the utmost kindness till the dissolution of its unfamiliar tenement” (348). The young receive “an education evidently beyond anything we can imagine” and their “prevailing intellectual and aesthetic life” are “highly evolved” and produce “a tenaciously enduring set of customs and institutions.” Unlike the typical horror story monsters, these beings have a government that is “complex and probably socialist” with “extensive commerce both local and between different cities,” implying that they are equal to or superior to humans in every conceivable aspect of their physical, intellectual, and cultural existence. By creating a version of reality in which non-human intelligent species are more advanced

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<sup>78</sup> The Old Ones in *At the Mountains of Madness* also show great reverence for their dead.

than humans technologically, socially, culturally, and economically, Lovecraft repositions humanity, moving humans away from the symbolic center of cosmic uniqueness and significance. Every criterion upon which humans might support their beliefs of their own innately privileged position in the universe is matched and superceded by the Old Ones, thus enforcing the idea of the intrinsic limitations inherent in the human condition<sup>79</sup>.

## Subjectivity and Aesthetic Intelligence

Lovecraft complicates his usurping of humanity's imaginary cosmic throne by creating the Old Ones to excel in what some may think to be the most human of endeavors – the creation of beauty for its own sake. They are artists, architects, philosophers and poets who strive to create beauty in all forms, though their own physical makeup leads them to completely non-human perceptions of biological normalcy. Lovecraft frequently emphasizes the subjectivity of standards of beauty through descriptions of artwork made by non-humans for their own species. The jewelry discussed in “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” and the depictions of adorned reptilian humanoids in the ruins of “The Nameless City” are good examples of Lovecraft's treatment of the relative nature of aesthetic normality; the art objects meet needs of form

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<sup>79</sup> It could be argued that such a position of fundamental subjectivity places Lovecraft more squarely in the category of postmodernist / anti-humanist than modernist. While this has been an idea of mine since the beginning of this project, I choose for now to avoid this overwhelming topic of distinction for a multitude of reasons. Perhaps the choice to avoid the idea of postmodernism was motivated by mere cowardice. I prefer the words “practicality” and “restraint.” For now, it is a significant enough task to attempt to bring Lovecraft into the discussion of his modernist contemporaries, and to identify the modernist grotesque. To enter the debate about the distinction between modernism and postmodernism, and to situate Lovecraft in the realm of the postmodern, is a task better saved for a later project.

and function that are highly valued by their cultures of origin while being entirely incomprehensible and even repugnant to humans. Thus, the reader is exposed to a non-human perspective on beauty as well.

Certain Lovecraft creatures show a particularly well-developed sense of beauty, like those depicted in *At the Mountains of Madness*, who place great emphasis on artistic expression. They undergo various trends and periods of art and architecture, demonstrating an awareness of the relative significance and qualities of their own artistic developments and regressions, as evidenced in their “anticipat[ing] the policy of Constantine the Great by transplanting especially fine blocks of ancient carving from their land city, just as the emperor, in a similar age of decline, stripped Greece and Asia of their finest art to give his new Byzantine capital greater splendors than its own people could create” (78). The Old Ones even make it standard practice to arrange furnishings in the center of rooms, “leaving all the wall spaces free for decorative treatment” (66). Other passages address the architecture, literature, and philosophy of this race, a significant change from the standard fictional relationship of the human to the alien in which creativity is seen as the exclusive province of humanity. The creation of beauty and cultural sophistication by creatures who are described by Lovecraft’s characters as “horrible,” “abominable,” “terrible,” or “unnamable” calls into question the very nature of aesthetics and culture. The artistic creations of these beings, revolving around their own sense of beauty, illustrates that the very notion of aesthetics is completely subjective, based on the creator and observer’s inherently biased, learned expectations of ideals, normalcy, and abnormality.

Other depictions of intelligent “monsters,” even the technologically advanced aliens, lack the creativity and artistic spirit that makes humans seem (to themselves) to be important and unique. In the face of biologically, technologically, and intellectually superior opposition, human literary characters may try to take solace in the uniqueness of their “humanity,” their feelings and expressions, their imagination and their “soulfulness.” In the case of the Old Ones, even this privileged position is stripped from the human race, for their elders developed all aspects of culture millions of years before and to a much greater degree than anything homo sapiens have conceived. “The Shadow Out of Time” provides the greatest insights into the perspective of a group of Old Ones on the importance of beauty, as the narrator has the unique fortune to live among the most advanced and most benevolent group among them, the Great Race. As his memory of his visit evolves, Peaslee recalls details of the Great Race’s culture, and the importance of art to them: “Industry, highly mechanized, demanded but little time from each citizen; and the abundant leisure was filled with intellectual and aesthetic activities of various sorts...art was a vital part of life, though at the period of my dreams it had passed its crest and meridian” (349). This story, perhaps more than any other, depicts the superiority of the Great Race in its many facets, including their sense of beauty and art, which they not only create but analyze and re-conceptualize continuously. By stripping humans of any trait that they might consider unique to their own species (like the quest to create beauty), Lovecraft develops a cosmic view in which the very idea of uniqueness and significance are relative, depending upon the observer. In effect, he states that humans tend to base their criteria for self-evaluation upon traits that they believe are unique to themselves. This convenient and comfortable way of coping with a struggle to find or create a sense

of intrinsic human meaning is complicated when it is discovered that non-humans demonstrate these same traits to equal or higher degrees.

## Subjectivity, Intelligence, and Sanity

When discussing the concept of subjectivity in Lovecraft's work, the relationship between intelligence and sanity often arises. Lovecraft's characters often transcend the intellectual world of their peers, entering new and higher realms of thought inaccessible to "sane" men and women. The idea that highly intelligent or knowledgeable individuals may appear to the average citizen to be insane is well established in discussions of certain eccentric scientists, both historical and fictional. The character type of the "mad scientist" may be one of the most important contributions that "weird fiction" and grotesque fiction have brought to the discussion of subjectivity, for the "mad scientist" blurs the lines between intelligence and insanity by accomplishing certain scientific tasks that are deemed not only controversial but impossible by the members of their communities. The classic mad scientist of the horror genre is brilliant but obsessive, placing scientific curiosity and ambition above ethics, responsibility, and foresight. While Lovecraft's fiction includes scientists of this type, Tillinghast or Curwen, for instance, he also introduces a new type of mad scientist: a scientist who is forced to accept controversial ideas because there is no logical way to dismiss them, but who attempts to act on those controversial ideas in a responsible manner. These scientists do not set out to rebel against the constraints of their institutions, to break laws, or to endanger others in order to fulfill their quests for knowledge. *At the Mountains of*

*Madness*, “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” and “The Shadow out of Time” all include scientists who try to adhere to their scientific principles in spite of being forced to face knowledge that the rest of the world is entirely unprepared to handle. Rather than delusions or compulsions, the mental trauma suffered by these scholars is brought on by apparently accurate (if partial) information that they cannot or dare not communicate for fear of being judged as untruthful or insane. Lovecraft demonstrates the subjective nature of madness versus sanity by portraying scientists who gain greater scientific insight than any of their colleagues by exploring ideas that other scholars would deny or ignore. This strategy blurs the lines between insanity and insight, madness and brilliance, by depicting the most successful scientists as those who do not operate within traditional academic constraints. These stories reflect the idea that sufficiently advanced thinking can often be mistaken for insanity.

## Subjectivity and Conscious Versus Unconscious Intelligence

Intelligence is a relative term, especially when making a hypothetical comparison of alien intelligence versus human intelligence. However, the concept of intelligence is further complicated by Lovecraft’s depictions of dream and the power of the unconscious mind, which overturns conventional notions of front-brained thinking as the highest form of intellectual action. Like other modernists, Lovecraft incorporates psychoanalytic theory in his treatment of mental capabilities and processes. While the physical senses are presented as limited, and human science and culture are trivial compared to that of the Old Ones; those humans who are able to use their minds unconventionally to tap into the

vast and unknown powers of the unconscious are able to reach understanding far beyond the abilities of their rationally-minded peers. Lovecraft's human dream travelers never attain the kind of knowledge or power that would put them on par with the Old Ones, but they experience realities far beyond those of any other mortals, and (as in the case of Randolph Carter) even communicate directly with some of the most powerful members of the elder races.

In effect, Lovecraft provides two paths that humans might take in order to gain knowledge beyond the familiar world: the path of the conscious mind and its physical senses and the path of the unconscious mind and its dreams. In Lovecraft's fiction, the unconscious mind, typically overlooked by physical science but examined with fascination by behavioral scientists like Freud and Jung, proves to be more effective than the conscious mind in accessing knowledge of the realities beyond the veil of human constructs. This conscious-versus-unconscious dynamic (possibly influenced by Freud) brings another facet to his discussion of intellectual subjectivity by overturning the standard scholarly belief that intellectual progress only develops through the application of conscious, linear thought. Lovecraft introduces the idea of gaining knowledge in the dream world as being a valuable, though traditionally ignored or rejected, type of intelligence. In "The Call of Cthulhu," Wilcox and the other dreamers receive direct contact from the Old Ones, and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* depicts Randolph Carter gaining greater access to the Old Ones and Great Ones than any scientists could hope for or endure. Furthermore, through his portrayal of the great (though perilous) effectiveness of the dreaming mind, Lovecraft calls into question the very nature of intelligence and intellectual inquiry, implying that new vistas of reality, as real as any

perceivable to the physical senses, may be accessible only through the intelligence of the unconscious mind.<sup>80</sup>

## Subjectivity and History

Challenges to traditional notions of intellectual standards lead Lovecraft's characters to question the legitimacy of constructs based upon those standards, including the constructs of human history. If human perception is fallible, and human intellect is limited, then human representations of history must be inherently flawed or incomplete, merely subjective. The study of human history has changed dramatically over the centuries, as historians examine and re-examine histories in terms of both authenticity and agenda. Yet, the study of history remains complex and problematic on a number of levels. Dorothy Ross's article "Modernism Reconsidered" in *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences 1870-1930*. (1994) explains that,

The modernists' sense of alienation from the present was linked to the reconfiguration of historical time. Rejecting the present world that history had brought into existence, modernists believed that historical continuity had been broken; they thereby challenged the optimistic versions of historicism that had dominated European culture in the nineteenth century. *Historicism* designates the understanding of history as a process of qualitative change, moved and ordered by forces that lay within itself. Grounding reason and value in temporal configurations of historical experience, historicism opened the possibility of cognitive and moral relativism and risked transforming the novelty and

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<sup>80</sup> In this strategy, Lovecraft's "Cthulhu Mythos" and "Dream Cycle" collections could be compared to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* respectively, the "Cthulhu Mythos" tales and *Ulysses* representing the workings of the conscious mind and the "Dream Cycles" and *Finnegans Wake* representing the workings of the unconscious mind. The idea of Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* representing the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind is well established among Joyce scholars. Lovecraft's groups of stories also appear to fit this dichotomy, an observation that may deserve its own study.

uncertainty of historical change into chaotic flux. To place the historian in that flux, as well, called into question the entire historiographic enterprise. (6-7)

When combined with the elements of “weird” and grotesque fiction, the subject of historical study may take on even more complexities, especially when history is no longer depicted as an exclusively human enterprise. Lovecraft accentuates the questioning of historical scholarly enterprise by providing alternate histories of Earth recorded by beings that are far older and more highly evolved.

Lovecraft raises questions of authorial intent, narrator reliability, and textual validity that challenge historical representations within a human context, not unlike the inquiries of other modernists. However, he further complicates those issues by adding the input of beings who possess greater intelligence, knowledge, and longevity than any man or woman. The accounts of histories recorded by non-human intelligences destabilizes the assumption that only humans record history, offering human and non-human perspectives that may do not agree with one another. History is a concept that becomes subjective in light of knowledge of the Old Ones and the other elder entities, who came to the Earth before human beings ever evolved. As a matter of fact, according to *At the Mountains of Madness*, the Old Ones created human beings along with various other species. Words like “antiquity,” “ancient,” and “archaic” must be redefined in light of this information. The concept of the “prehistoric” must be completely re-evaluated, for, in Lovecraft’s fiction, history was recorded on this planet millions of years before the first cave paintings, and still remains on stone walls and tablets in forgotten cities. The catch is that these records were not made by humans, which complicates notions of history and humans’ place within history. If these “aliens” were late arrivals to the planet, it would not be a complication of history but merely a new addition, the next

chapter. The new arrival of aliens to Earth still allows for the possibility that recorded human history has been largely correct and the new arrival of non-human intelligent life would not significantly effect the paradigms of the study of the past. However, Lovecraft's "aliens" are the true ancestors, having colonized the earth with vast civilizations and having recorded their histories with great detail and sophistication, forcing characters who find evidence of the Old Ones to acknowledge the presence of histories that are completely apart from, and every bit as valid as, any human histories that can be studied through archeological research.

Lovecraft further complicates the notion of history by constructing ties between academically accepted histories and his fictional histories. Traditionally validated historical events, like the Salem Witch Trials, archeologically confirmed ancient practices, or migrations of populations, are explained in relation to the actions of cults and Old Ones in numerous stories, changing the context of accepted history through a process of modernist grotesque fictional revisionism. Lovecraft's shifting of historical context implies that, if a writer can shift historical perspective to make history match a literary agenda, others might manipulate historical perspectives to match their own religious or political agendas.

The narrators' discoveries introduce a completely new dichotomy of human histories versus "alien" histories of the earth. For instance, the narrator of *At the Mountains of Madness* comes to believe that the Old Ones, who traveled to Earth and built cities in the Antarctic region and in the oceans, may have been the first life on the planet, and originators of all subsequent life:

vertebrates, as well as an infinity of other life forms— animal and vegetable, marine, terrestrial, and aerial— were the products of unguided evolution acting on

life cells made by the Old Ones, but escaping beyond their radius of attention. They had been suffered to develop unchecked because they had not come in conflict with the dominant beings. Bothersome forms, of course, were mechanically exterminated. It interested us to see in some of the very last and most decadent sculptures as shambling, primitive mammal, used sometimes for food and sometimes as an amusing buffoon by the land dwellers, whose vaguely simian and human foreshadowings were unmistakable. (67)

This would mean that all life on the earth is essentially “alien,” including human life, and that human history begins with the Old Ones. The inclusion of early humans in this account poses the possibility that all human attempts at tracing the history of the species could be incorrect. Through his alternative history, Lovecraft complicates both traditional trains of thought about the history of humans on Earth by speculating about a third possibility beyond evolution or creation by a benevolent, human-like god. This third possibility implies that the tendency toward humanocentric or humanist thinking is merely arbitrary, a byproduct of a limited perspective.

## Subjectivity - Closing Comments

Lovecraft stands out as a writer whose treatment of subjectivity moves toward a particular, unifying theme. Underlying the various subjective perspectives that Lovecraft represents with relation to humanity and its limitations is the concept of human insignificance, his “fundamental premise.” Lovecraft’s ideas about human insignificance formed early: “By my thirteenth birthday I was thoroughly impressed with man’s impermanence and insignificance, and by my seventeenth, ...I had formed in all essential particulars my present pessimistic cosmic views” (Lovecraft, “A Confession of Unfaith,” 90-91). As with many of Lovecraft’s ideas, his perspective on the place of humans in the

universe is influenced by his great knowledge of science. He was aware of the astronomical movement from a geocentric model to a model that places the earth as only one of billions of planets in an endless universe. Lovecraft represents his idea of “man’s impermanence and insignificance” through characters who are forced to come to a realization of their own limited perspectives through the alienating circumstances examined in the previous chapter. Thurston, Lovecraft’s first narrator to encounter evidence of Cthulhu, stands as a symbol of the relationship of humans to the universe. After piecing together second-hand narratives, newspaper clippings, scholarly records and personal interviews, the primary narrator of “The Call of Cthulhu” comes to the unnerving realization that everything he has been led to believe about reality has been based upon an illusion. As Dziemianowicz explains,

[b]y drawing a parallel between Thurston’s personal experience and the fate of the human race, Lovecraft makes it clear that Thurston is not merely a character in a horror story. He is a symbol for mankind itself, alone in the void, piecing together random bits of information in an effort to find greater meaning. Thus, Thurston’s internal alienation reflects humanity’s greater external alienation as a consciousness aware of its own insignificance in the cosmic scheme of things. (Dziemianowicz 175)

Contact with alienating secondary sources, objects, places, and creatures brings characters to a realization of how insignificant their own experiences and beliefs really are.

In Lovecraft’s modernist grotesque fiction, the characters’ realizations that the human senses, powers, cultures, and histories are limited or erroneous brings them to re-conceptualize the place of humans in the cosmos. In comparison to the Old Ones, humans are minuscule in significance: they are to the Old Ones as ants are to humans. This idea introduces the question of whether or not even greater forces loom above these

god-like entities. Above Great Cthulhu are Yog-Sothoth and Azathoth, both of whom are depicted more as cosmic forces or concepts than as entities in any conventional use of the term. Perhaps something lies beyond them, and it is a never-ending continuation of universes within universes. “The Colour out of Space” stands as a particularly good representative of Lovecraft’s ideas about the insignificance of humanity in relation to an infinite universe because, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the mere exposure of the terrestrial landscape to the meteorite brings about extreme changes. As Burleson explains in his discussion of the story in *H.P. Lovecraft*,

The “blasted heath” is not so much a physical phenomenon as a psychological process, a fear-response and an awe, in a mind that by the very experience discovers its own minuteness and precariousness in a cosmos far vaster, far more indifferent to human concerns than that mind has ever imagined. (178)

The absence of creatures or other conventional “weird” elements intensifies the statement of human insignificance in “The Colour out of Space,” for it indicates just how little change is necessary to disturb the human sense of place and meaning in the cosmos. The realization of the significance of the alienating evidence leads to the discovery of a subjective world in which everything is questioned and nothing is stable, effectively plummeting the main character (and to some extent, the reader) into a kind of paralyzing intellectual void.

## Chapter Four: Absurdity

There is a progression in the modernist grotesque from alienating stimuli and perceptions to observations about the subjective nature of reality, culminating in certain conclusions about the absurdity of existence. Absurdity is defined as being counter to reason, a definition that takes on new significance when applied to modernist grotesque literature. To recognize the subjectivity of human perception, knowledge, and representation is to recognize the fallibility and insignificance of human constructs. From a modernist grotesque perspective, blind adherence to constructs (religious, academic, scientific) in light of the principle of subjectivity that undermines them is counter to logic. It is absurd. Absurdity as a general idea has been addressed in a number of ways throughout literature, visual art, theatre, and film, in terms of individuals and isolated incidents in which a person is represented as buffoonish in his or her actions or statements. The ancient icon of the fool is prevalent throughout world cultures, but those representations depict absurd thoughts and behaviors as being unusual, easily identifiable, and even correctable. However, the early twentieth century brought the idea of a new level of absurdity, one of universal meaninglessness and endless questioning of the very foundations of human thought and existence.

### Absurdity and Baseless Assumptions

The theme of assumption is prominent among the various incarnations of absurdity in literature, for baseless assumptions defy reason, which is absurd. In previous centuries, these assumptions were most often portrayed as isolated, and even tragic, in

nature.<sup>81</sup> The portrayal of individual characters who make absurd assumptions continues through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in grotesque and modernist literature: Maturin's Melmoth assumes that someone else will take the same infernal bargain that he unwisely took; Shelley's Victor Frankenstein assumes that he can abandon his creation without repercussions; Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon assume that Godot will come; Eliot's Prufrock assumes that his actions may "disturb the universe" (Sound and Sense 284). The circumstances that these characters face represent common absurdities in human thought. As modernism develops and the grotesque expands, both modalities tend to depict absurdity in more universal terms; absurdity is everywhere, not just in the lives of fools and madmen.

## Absurdity and H.P. Lovecraft

Satire is one of the most useful vehicles for the communication of absurdity, for it involves the portrayal of ideas and behaviors that are illogical, often on a symbolic level that mirrors elements of the world at large, mocking ideas and behaviors through exaggeration that can be ironic, wryly humorous, or outright comical. Satire is one of the many literary strategies shared by modernism and the grotesque, as seen in the works of Swift, Poe, Kafka, Eliot, Joyce, and Beckett, to name only a few. Lovecraft fits in among the ranks of modernists and writers of the grotesque who use satire for communicating the concept of cosmic absurdity. Fear was indeed a major concept in Lovecraft's writing, but his more sophisticated works focus on the fear of the paradigm shift, not the fear of

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<sup>81</sup> Oedipus, Faustus, and Hamlet, for instance, are characters whose assumptions about their fate, their spirituality, or their actions lead to tragic results, but they are represented as highly unusual individuals.

any specific external stimulus; the “monsters” are not the objects of fear, but rather, the paradigm shift that they symbolize. In his grotesque modernist pieces, the terror that narrators face is one of human limitations of perception, knowledge, and significance. The dread of cosmic disinterestism and the absurdity of human thought processes and paradigms is fertile ground for the grotesque union of absurdity and fear, or even comedy, as seen in Lovecraft’s use of satire to depict absurd beliefs and behaviors. To portray the insufficiency of human perception, processing, and representation of reality through the absurd and even comedic failures of characters who represent the very pinnacle of rational thought is to address the fear of powerlessness and incomprehensibility in a universe that may have been better left unexplored. By addressing universal absurdity through plot elements associated with “weird fiction” and a synthesis of grotesque and modernist concepts and techniques, Lovecraft challenges assumptions of the validity and stability of human institutions: religion, physical science, behavioral science, and humanities scholarship.

Lovecraft’s modernist grotesque works address the absurdity of human existence on a number of levels, undermining traditional human institutions that often go unquestioned. Lovecraft’s non-fiction writing indicates that his rebellion against traditional religious ideas began as a child, developing into an intellectual questioning of physical science, behavioral science, and humanities. The questioning of assumptions of human significance is fairly recent in the scope of human culture. Even in the presence of their mighty gods, humans have tended to retain a belief in their significant position in the cosmic scheme. As a result, the beings that ruled ancient pantheons were generally

human in their appearance, behaviors, and motivations.<sup>82</sup> In effect, the gods of the world tend to be humans on a grand scale, even including human faults on an epic level.<sup>83</sup>

Generally speaking, cultural constructs developed around the world with humanity at the physical and conceptual center. Aside from certain Pacific Island tribes who believed the shark to be the highest form of reincarnation (probably due to its place at the top of the food chain), world cultures have typically constructed cosmic views that revolve around specifically human-based perspectives. Within the monotheistic religions, the importance of humans is accentuated through the assertion that faithful mortals ascend to positions far above even the most ancient and powerful of angels and djinn, for humans must overcome the temptations and distractions that come with free will. In all of these various outlooks, humans carve out a place for themselves at the center of the action. The assumption of privileged humanity may be reasonable in a world culture with limited scientific information about basic astronomy, but Lovecraft indicates that adherence to the assumption of privileged humanity is absurd in light of modern knowledge about the world and the universe at large.

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<sup>82</sup> For example, Norse, Celtic, Hellenic, Babylonian, Egyptian, Sumerian, Hindu, Chinese, Aztec, and Incan gods are largely human in their appearance, behaviors, and communications. The beast-headed members of the Egyptian mythos and even the Winged Serpent Quetzalcoatl and the Jaguar Sun God Tezcatlipoca of South America were non-human primarily in appearance while reflecting human mental characteristics.

<sup>83</sup> The Hellenic gods (especially Zeus, Hera, and Ares) are particularly given to rage, lust, jealousy, and other human faults.

## Absurdity and Religious Institutions

Lovecraft's fascination with history, folklore, and mythology, combined with his life-long dedication to science, prompted him to create a new, satirical mythology to relate his views on the absurdity of assumptions of the validity of religious institutions. This mythology, which later devotees would come to call the "Cthulhu Mythos," includes satires of major world religions – a pantheon of deities and their servants, a cohesive world view and history, groups of worshipers, priests, holy relics, temples, and sacred texts. The primary difference between Lovecraft's mythos and the pantheons that presided over the world's populations for thousands of years is that Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, Sheb Niggurath, Cthulhu, Nyartholotep and their ilk could not possibly care less about the happiness or spiritual salvation of the human race. To these beings of infinitely superior and infinitely alien nature and power, certain cooperative humans are a minor convenience at best, a minor inconvenience at worst. Lovecraft was known among his friends as having a wicked sense of humor, which is identifiable in satirical elements that are the key to understanding his representations of absurdity. The comedy of Lovecraft's satirical religions is subtle, combining grotesque, modernist, and parodic elements in his mythos to create a statement about the absurdity of religious institutions that reflects a complex and ironic sense of humor. The "Cthulhu Mythos" stands as a distorted carnival mirror reflection of world religions, his way of saying that, if there were god-like beings in the universe, there is no reason to believe that they would be anything like humans in appearance, morality, or motivation. In Lovecraft's religions, temples are secret and disturbing places, priests are sinister and often non-human, congregations worship through orgies and blood sacrifice, holy artifacts are alien and monstrous, sacred texts

drive their reader mad, and the gods themselves are barely aware of the existence of the cult members who kill and die in their names. These themes are both disturbing and ironically humorous on a certain (perhaps twisted) level.

Lovecraft's satirical pantheon is unique, but the concept of religious satire is prominent in modernism. Monique Chefdor, Ricardo Quinones, and Albert Wachtel explain in *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives* (1986) that mythological parodies are an important element in modernist writing:

The large-scale parodies of myth, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, expand the techniques of quotation and allusion. Joyce's Homeric infrastructure provides a point-for-point analogue and critique of the "real" happenings in *Ulysses*; Joyce's tightly systematic double ordering of his materials resembles an allegory or expanded metaphor. Eliot's use of the Grail legend and fertility rituals is less systematic and somewhat after the fact; he had been reading *Ulysses* during the composition of *The Waste Land* and realized that "the mythical method" would be an important stylistic means for ordering "the chaos that was modern history." (132)

Lovecraft's parodies work similarly, and S.T. Joshi compares *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* to the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and Greek and Roman mythology. This observation of Lovecraft's classical influences represents yet another link between Lovecraft and the canonical modernists, but he deviates dramatically from classical mythology in ways that accentuate his message of human insignificance. He also provides a more thorough vision of his parodied pantheon than any other writer of his time.

Perhaps one of the most powerful statements of human absurdity in all of literature can be found in *At the Mountains of Madness* when the narrator examines the pictorial history of the Old Ones and finds a depiction of the creation and true purpose of humans: "Dyer and Pabodie have read *Necronomicon* and seen Clark Ashton Smith's

nightmare paintings based on text, and will understand when I speak of Elder Things supposed to have created all earth life as jest or mistake” (22). The narrator reports that certain scenes “make Lake whimsically recall the primal myths about Great Old Ones who filtered down from the stars and concocted earth life as a joke or mistake; and the wild tales of cosmic hill things from outside told by a folklorist colleague in Miskatonic’s English department<sup>84</sup>... Lake fell back on mythology for a provisional name– jocosely dubbing his finds ‘The Elder Ones’” (25-26). However, the explorers find that Lake’s name for the creatures of the mysterious Antarctic city is more appropriate than they would have imagined. The scientists find various art objects and hieroglyphic depictions indicating that “an infinity of other life forms– animal and vegetable, marine, terrestrial, and aerial– were the products of unguided evolution acting on life cells made by the Old Ones.” Furthermore, images appear “in some of the very last and most decadent sculptures as shambling, primitive mammals, used sometimes for food and sometimes as an amusing buffoon by the land dwellers, whose vaguely simian and human foreshadowings were unmistakable” (67). Unlike the human-created gods of world mythologies, the Old Ones create humans as nothing more than minor pets or food sources, not fit for the most basic of practical tasks.<sup>85</sup> Homo sapiens are the hamsters of the Old Ones, not dear enough to qualify as a lap dog, created for buffoonery and culinary delicacies, and eventually abandoned as a novelty. Nevertheless, isolated groups of human cultists like those featured in “The Call of Cthulhu” use artifacts and psychic impressions to reconstruct bits of their ancient past, voluntarily returning to a state of

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<sup>84</sup> This is an obvious reference to Wilmarth of “The Whisperer in the Darkness.”

<sup>85</sup> The Shoggoths are the giant amoeboid work horses of the Old Ones, incredibly strong and able to change shape to fit any task.

unappreciated servitude to their semi-dormant masters. Thus, Lovecraft makes his point about the absurd and slavish devotion of humans to the notions of servitude to powerful but uncaring forces.

Perhaps the only elements in Lovecraft's tales to supercede the absurdity of his creation myth lie in the nature of the Lovecraftian gods themselves. Azathoth is represented as the best equivalent to a king of the gods, the ultimate force at the center of the universe who is omnipotent, paradoxical, and absurd<sup>86</sup>. *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* describes Azathoth as

that last amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the centre of all infinity—the boundless daemon sultan Azathoth, whose name no lips dare speak aloud, and who gnaws hungrily in inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond time amidst the muffled, maddening beating of vile drums and the thin, monotonous whine of accursed flutes; to which detestable pounding and piping dance slowly, awkwardly, and absurdly the gigantic ultimate gods, the blind, voiceless, tenebrous, mindless Other Gods whose soul and messenger is the crawling chaos Nyarlathotep. (*Dreams of Terror* 107-108)

“The Haunter of the Dark” depicts Azathoth's role as a god of meaninglessness and absurdity even more clearly through the narrator's reference to texts describing “ancient legends of Ultimate Chaos, at whose center 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 demoniac flute held in nameless paws” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 220), a description that invokes Bakhtin's discussion of absurd carnivalesque celebrations in the early grotesque. This “daemon sultan Azathoth” and his court of Other Gods provide a parody of traditional mythological and religious entities, including a kind of satirical Christ figure in Nyarlathotep, who descends to earth in

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<sup>86</sup> Lovecraft's religion of meaninglessness may remind a reader of Thomas Hardy's poems “Hap” (1898) and “Going and Staying” (1919), which address the idea that all human experience is random, without a divine plan.

human form in the story “Nyarlathotep” as an avatar of chaos, bringing annihilation rather than salvation. Nyarlathotep incarnates in the form of an Egyptian prophet, a mystic priest who prepares the population of the world for the return of the Old Ones and, in turn, the direct rule of the God Azathoth. Cthulhu, worshiped by humans and non-humans alike, is also described in various works as a “priest,” implying a parody of religious institutional hierarchies as well as satirized deities. The non-human religious hierarchy extends downward to the level of Azathoth’s congregation of most devoted followers, “mindless and amorphous dancers” and flute players, accentuating the absurd elements that help to distinguish Lovecraft’s modernist grotesque satire from the standard horror tale. Images of flopping, dancing, flute playing creatures arise in most descriptions of Azathoth, as well as in various accounts of narrators who glimpse the unknown on Earth (as in “The Festival), indicating the prevalence of Azathoth’s chaos in all parts of the universe. Members of Azathoth’s “mindless” congregation are ironically enlightened: they worship the true god of the universe, but to properly commune with Azathoth they must be mindless. Perhaps this apparent paradox indicates that acknowledging and accepting cosmic absurdity is the most logical approach to understanding the nature of reality.

Although Lovecraft was an atheist, the presence of beings who are treated as gods in his tales is a stronger statement of absurdity than an exclusion of god figures. Atheism has the potential to lead to an unconventional yet strong sense of meaning. In fact, stripped of the sense of divinely granted purpose and assistance, the atheist may develop an even greater sense of human importance, the supremacy of humans in the universe, or at least on planet Earth. In Lovecraft’s universe, however, the human has no such

liberation from the impositions of higher powers, for all people are at the mercy of forces that could not be more indifferent to the human plight. Humans only have the meanings that they create for themselves. Ultimately, Azathoth, the center and origin of it all, exists as the very embodiment of absurdity, for Azathoth is not vengeful but oblivious – omnipotent, but completely uninterested in the affairs of any other beings. Humankind is trapped in every aspect – meaninglessness within meaninglessness, absurdity within absurdity.

## Absurdity and Institutions of Physical Science

The questioning of religious institutions was not new in Lovecraft's time, especially for those who put their faith in the physical sciences. Scientific developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries impacted the world of literature dramatically, from the more tangible inventions of the applied sciences, like the automobile or the radio, to the new concepts of the fundamental nature of physical reality, like Einstein's Theory of General Relativity or Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. Many writers of the early twentieth century attempted to keep abreast of major developments in scientific theory and methodology, incorporating scientific thinking into their work (they were not trained scientists like Lovecraft, but they attempted to keep up with some of the general ideas). In *The Antimodernism of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1994), Weldon Thornton addresses the problematic nature of scientific empiricism, where it is assumed that "instrumentalism supersedes and disavows fallible human perceptions"

(36). In his examination of the the influence of scientific thinking on modernist literature, Thornton asserts that

[we] must, then, recognize that the term “scientific empiricism” hides the treacherous implication that what science deals in is the empirical, with the implication that only valid “empiricism” is that amenable to instrumental science. We are thus deprived of the term for human use—i.e., empiricism no longer really implies a human perspective.... (36-37)

Thornton points out that traditional ideals of empiricism fail to take into account the fact that science is carried out by human scientists who are confined to the limitations and fallibility of the human senses. Lovecraft, as an enthusiastic student of science, an experimental writer of “weird fiction,” and an unconventional modernist thinker, combined a number of elements to create a new level of critical examination of the institutions of physical sciences and the problems with dogmatic adherence to those institutions and their paradigms. Lovecraft’s thorough knowledge of the physical sciences is one of the most important biographical differences between Lovecraft and his literary contemporaries. However, as Airaksinen explains, Lovecraft’s life-long interest in science did not influence him to accept scientific concepts unquestioningly. In fact, the criticizing of dogmatic adherence to traditional scientific modalities makes up one of his primary foci in his representation of absurd assumptions. Lovecraft perceived science as an ongoing process that humans may use as a tool to deal with their limited perspective of a much larger reality:

Lovecraft agrees that we tend to reason by using natural laws. We form our expectations and we plan our actions according to them. We trust them as if they were real. However, natural laws appear to fail in many cases where cosmic forces enter the realm of human perception. We may think that natural laws are no more than subjective regularities of perception which apply only in a given realm. In this way, Lovecraft returns to David Hume who claims that causal laws are nothing but psychological expectations based on repeated observations which have produced uniform results in the past. This is how we tend to think. If we

add something to this realm, something that comes from outside, then we cannot trust any of the scientific norms. Hence, Lovecraft extends his social nihilism to science. (Airaksinen 74)

Lovecraft saw true science as open-ended and ever-evolving, which led him to create tales that question the motivations of scientific institutions by introducing hypothetical situations in which scientists fail to make necessary adjustments to their paradigms: they seek to confirm old ideas rather than exploring new ones.

Much of Lovecraft's critique of the institutions of the physical sciences comes through the characterization of his narrators. The stories in question are most often narrated by characters who suffer mentally due to the violation of assumptions based upon the institutions to which they attempt to adhere. These reactions are merely a symptom of the absurdity of the assumption that established human intellectual structures are sufficient to contain and process any and all possible content. As Robert A. Rubinstein, Charles D. Laughlin, Jr., and John McManus explain in *Science as Cognitive Process: Toward an Empirical Philosophy of Science* (1984), paradigm structures limit cognition:

Structure in human cognition is the organization of thought. It should be distinguished from content, or that which is thought about. Structure is the information-processing system and content is the information processed...The definition of and responses to "objective" reality are determined by the structure of the apperceiving cognitive system. (38-39)

In the case of Lovecraft's narrators, the new "content" is so very incompatible with the "information-processing system" that the observing characters simply cannot force the two to function together logically. Therefore, their thoughts and behaviors become absurd in the absence of stable and logical paradigms within which to operate. Their reactions to the incompatibility of old paradigms and new information are a painful

process of questioning, obsessing, and analyzing that leads to absurd behaviors, ranging from paranoid secrecy to suicide.

One of Lovecraft's most inventive and effective literary devices is the use of a narrator who is so conventionally reliable that his adherence to objective documentation forces the reader to reevaluate the very nature of reliability itself. These narrators are presented as mentally competent and publically respected individuals who are deeply rooted in scientific observation, empirical thinking, and rigorous documentation. The majority of Lovecraft's narrators in his modernist grotesque works are professional academics. Those academics who do not specialize in physical sciences demonstrate training in science that could reasonably accompany higher education in any chosen field. Lovecraft's scholarly narrators include a Geology Professor (*At the Mountains of Madness*), a Literature Instructor and Folklore expert ("The Whisperer in the Darkness"), and a Professor of Political Economics ("The Shadow Out of Time") among others. Although the principle narrator of "The Call of Cthulhu," Thurston, has no named occupation, his scholarly compilation and presentation of the relevant documentation (as well as his relation to a renowned academic) implies academic training. Secondary narrators include a noted Professor of Semitic Languages, a Professor of Anthropology, a Professor of Biology, a Police Inspector, an experienced sailor, and a surveyor. Lovecraft's use of highly trained observers is crucial in his discussion of absurdity in institutions of physical sciences, for these characters are conventionally reliable representations of traditional empirical thinkers.

Unlike the often deranged, unreliable narrators of Poe, Lovecraft's narrators tend to establish themselves as sane and almost obsessively scientific in their thinking: "It is

also critical for Lovecraft's narrators to be, on the whole, intelligent and rational men....

If these people can be convinced that something bizarre has happened, then how can the reader refrain from being convinced?" (Joshi, "Fiction of Materialism" 154). When faced with the "ESTRANGED WORLD," these pillars of the scholarly community find that their logic and beliefs no longer serve them. They face cataclysmic paradigm crises and try to explain them away through conventional concepts that simply do not work. In the end, many narrators choose to doubt their own minds rather than doubt their faith in traditionally dictated reality constructs provided by their scientific institutions.

Everything that they have come to understand is taken from them, leaving them to struggle to force an alien reality into a conventional paradigm. In the light of new, irrefutable, earth-shaking data, a paradox arises, in which case the most absurd course of action is to cling to traditional beliefs and methods that no longer apply. The true absurdity of this struggle emerges as the breakdown of traditional thought leads them to erratic, obsessive, and even self-destructive behavior driven by the very investigative spirit that led them to their chosen professions. The stories themselves are portrayed as first-person documents: journal entries, letters, and scholarly records that typically include the narrator's reasons for recording the supposedly true events. As Leiber explains, Lovecraft "set great store by the narrator having some vitally pressing motive for recounting his experiences, and was ingenious at devising such motives (55). These reasons may include warnings to others, personal edification and understanding, or a desperate attempt to maintain scholarly methodology (and thus, a faith in their own mental competence) by recording the unnatural events with as much objectivity as possible:

Lovecraft's matured method of telling a horror story was a natural consequence of the importance of the new universe of science in his writings, for it was the method of scientific realism, approaching in some of his last tales (*At the Mountains of Madness* and "The Shadow out of Time") the precision, objectivity, and attention to detail of a report in a scientific journal. Most of his stories are purported documents and necessarily written in the first person. This device is common in weird literature...but few writers have taken it as seriously as did Lovecraft. (Leiber 55)

However, the described "scientific realism...precision, objectivity, and attention to detail" are complicated in these works by the very nature of what the narrators are reporting. The end result always includes an eventual questioning not only of the narrator's own sanity, but of the very constructs of human knowledge upon which the criteria for that sanity are based. The breakdown comes not from the events themselves but from the violation of the expectations and assumptions that the narrator has amassed over a lifetime of traditional indoctrination.

"From Beyond," Lovecraft's earliest modernist grotesque story, stands as one of the most important examples of the criticism of scientific closed-mindedness. As discussed previously, Crawford Tillinghast succeeds in creating a device that expands his senses to perceive entire worlds beyond his normal range. Yet, he feels betrayed by members of the scientific community who do not acknowledge how limited their own scientific perspectives have become. Tillinghast serves as the voice of his creator's sentiments when he exclaims: "Our means of receiving impressions are absurdly few, and our notions of surrounding objects infinitely narrow. We see things only as we are constructed to see them, and can gain no idea of their absolute nature" (*Dreams of Terror* 46). As with most Lovecraftian alienated scholars, he is more enlightened than his fellows. However, Lovecraft, like Tillinghast, should not be confused for one who is anti-scientific. Lovecraft knew the history of the struggles between scientific pioneers

and those who would suppress true breakthroughs on the basis of tradition and dogma. He knew the troubles of Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, and others who were persecuted for their theories and discoveries because of the inability of others to adjust their thinking. A truly scientific approach, Lovecraft would say, includes the mental flexibility necessary to change world views as new information presents itself, no matter how radical the information may be. Lovecraft would open minds to new possibilities, acknowledge the limitations of scientific observation, and address the absurdity of adhering to old scientific paradigms when evidence reveals them as being insufficient.

Experts in various fields have examined the process of scientific paradigm shifts. For instance, Rubinstein, Laughlin, and McManus state that science passes through cycles of three phases, which include the construction of a paradigm, the application of the paradigm, and the de-stabilization of the paradigm. According to these theorists, the second phase is the one in which “the productive work of a mature science is carried out” (64-65), for the scientists can apply what is perceived as a stable paradigm. However, it is the third phase with which Lovecraft concerns himself. In the second phase, the phase representing the training of most of Lovecraft’s scholarly characters, “Normal science is something of a closed loop, minimally, if ever, open to serious modification at the core. Scientific behavior serves to maintain and solidify a paradigm’s dominance in addition to defining how problems are solved” (65). Rubinstein, Laughlin, and McManus go on to describe the trend in thinking when paradigms do not appear to fit a given situation:

When paradigm-constrained behavior fails to produce solutions for research problems, anomalies result. Contrary to what might be supposed, these do not generally threaten the integrity of the paradigm unless (1) the anomaly is deemed critical or (2) these anomalies become too numerous. In both cases the paradigm is fiercely defended (and not always by methods that fall within the bounds of scientific decorum). (66)

The defense of threatened paradigms comes into play with Lovecraft's characters as they use any means possible to convince themselves that they and their institutions are correct.

While skepticism in the face of apparently anomalous information may be reasonable under most circumstances, major threats to paradigms often result in absurd behaviors:

structural collapse inclines thought toward more categorical perceptions of the operational environment, increased affective response, and attendant bias on "objective" perception. Among the effects of such a collapse are increased egocentricity,... greater distortion of incoming information toward the internal model, and increased projection of internal content onto the operational environment. All this leads to less "objective" perception, dominated by the bias of earlier structures. (Rubinstein, Laughlin, and McManus 148-9)

The absurdity of this tendency of "scientifically minded" individuals to develop "less 'objective' perception, dominated by the bias of earlier structures" is a major factor in many Lovecraft stories where "rational" characters make attempts to rationalize anomalous criteria in ways that will maintain their intellectual status quo.

Lovecraft addresses absurd tendencies in scientific institutions through stories where narrators attempt in vain to understand the unexplained through traditional, entirely insufficient, scientific methodology. Some of Lovecraft's representations of the unexplained are noteworthy in their restraint, moving just far enough beyond traditional science to challenge the intellect and sanity of the narrator. He "starts from the given world of science and asks what happens if these laws are altered, and if we add as small a number of extraneous elements as possible to this new world" (Airaksinen 74). These "extraneous elements" bring about threatening paradigm shifts, reflecting Ortega y Gasset's discussion in *Human Reality and the Social World* of the idea that "...a priori principles are the conditions under which one conceives the ordered system of nature.

The ‘laws of nature’ and all concepts of objects are specifications of the a priori forms: thus the ‘objective reality’ of phenomena consists in their conformity to the laws of the system as constituted” (27). Scientifically minded narrators and characters must re-think their training when it does not provide explanations, but Lovecraft does not create a world in which science must be thrown out entirely. In Lovecraft’s tales, science must be developed and altered radically, not done away with: for instance, when the phenomena of electricity and animal magnetism (hypnosis) were first described, to claim, as some people did, that the laws of nature do not apply any more was too hasty. The laws still applied although their scope needed to be expanded (Airaksinen 77). As Airaksinen indicates, Lovecraft brings in only a “small number of extraneous elements,” but he depicts those elements as causing bafflement and frustration among characters, the inflexibility of their perspective being a major source of their absurdity.

The paradigm shift resulting from the insufficiency of contemporary scientific paradigms is one of the most prominent themes in Lovecraft’s work, aligning Lovecraft with both scientific theorists (like Rubinstein, Laughlin, McManus) and modernist cultural theorists (like Ortega y Gasset). In Lovecraft’s stories, scientifically-minded characters are baffled by elements of nature beyond those they have come to understand: the strange meteorite in “The Colour Out of Space,” the non-terrestrial stone of the statue in “The Call of Cthulhu,” alien corpses in “The Whisperer in the Darkness,” strange fossils and corpses in *At the Mountains of Madness*, and the extra-dimensional creatures of “From Beyond.”<sup>87</sup> The exposure of scientists to unusual items of study is alienating but is not, in and of itself, absurd. It is theoretically possible for scientists to approach

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<sup>87</sup> Many scientific anomalies have already been discussed in Chapter Two with reference to alienating objects, places, or creatures.

new specimens with open-minded curiosity, but Lovecraft's characters tend to be more interested in maintaining the status quo than with developing new knowledge.

Lovecraft's criticism of scientific institutions comes through in his depictions of how characters handle, or fail to handle, data that threatens their institutionally developed paradigms.

"The Colour Out of Space" may be Lovecraft's strongest statement about the absurdity of closed-minded scientists, for the scientists who examine the meteorite dismiss a rare opportunity to gain knowledge due to their frustration that their new subject of study is too different from anything they have seen. Eventually, they grow frustrated and simply give up trying to understand the object, not a very scientific approach to a perplexing problem. As Airaksinen indicates, Lovecraft takes the absurd representation of the scientists so far as to mockingly refer to them as "wise men" from the east (80). However, these satirical wise men have nothing to offer to the newly arrived gift from the stars. Airaksinen goes on to explain that:

Here the problem of the "colour" involves the incompetency of scientists and the barrenness of their craft. Whether any laws of nature are violated is unclear. The only thing that becomes clear is that the scientists try to explain what they observed, but, after failing to do so, they give up. Their extraterrestrial particle vanishes in the laboratory, self-consumed via the radiation of energy. They try to measure it, and analyze its strange color, but nothing is revealed. This thing seems to come from somewhere where the world is epistemically foreign. (Airaksinen 76)

Rather than excitement at their discovery, the "wise men" recoil from the prospect of admitting their inability to comprehend the "colour." This is absurd.

*At The Mountains of Madness* provides the most thorough scientific account to be found in Lovecraft's works, and perhaps one of the most detailed fictional scientific accounts to be found anywhere. As Cannon observes, "In his close attention to

geological and paleontological background, Lovecraft creates a sense of verisimilitude that certainly far surpasses that of Poe in the polar part of Pym” (103). In this novella, the narrator is open-minded enough to eventually consider that his discoveries that range far outside of his scientific training. The absurdity lies within the scientific community at large, leaving the narrator to struggle to make his experiences known and acted upon in the face of scrutiny, skepticism, and opposition: “I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why” (179). The text of *At the Mountains of Madness* operates as a kind of scientific journal for the purpose of convincing the scientific community, that the narrator’s findings are real, and that the expedition was too dangerous to repeat. However, the narrator indicates that his reports have been ignored or mocked by the scientific community, dismissed as implausible despite his reputation and his evidence. Even the rare Lovecraft narrator who is able to maintain a balanced psychology while examining the unexplained must still face the absurdity of the closed-minded scientific community at large.

## Absurdity and Institutions of the Behavioral Sciences

The institutions of religion and the physical sciences are not the only institutions whose authority Lovecraft questions. The behavioral sciences are also brought under scrutiny, especially psychology and anthropology. As with the topics of insanity versus knowledge and conscious intelligence versus unconscious intelligence discussed in Chapter Three, the idea of the absurdity of assumptions of the validity of the institutions of behavioral sciences calls into question the constructs through which scholars and

mental health professionals evaluate human behavior. Like Lovecraft's physical scientists, his behavioral scientists face anomalies that range far outside of their institutional training. Yet, they adhere to their learned perspectives, expectations, and practices, in spite of overwhelming evidence of the insufficiency of such strategies. Certain Lovecraft stories, including "The Shadow Out of Time," *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," address the insufficiency of the behavioral sciences directly in a clinical capacity by depicting mental health professionals who mis-diagnose and even commit to asylums patients who experience anomalous symptoms that the behavioral sciences would interpret as delusions. Many other stories provide more subtle portrayals of adherence to the institutions of behavioral sciences as characters evaluate the mental health and cognitive processes of themselves and others on the basis of standard conceptions of sanity and reality. The absurdity of these stories is particularly apparent when examined with relation to the critique of the natural sciences, for characters who adhere dogmatically to both types of institutions are guarded from paradigm crises by a double layer of rationalization: their institutions of physical science tell them to believe only what they see, while their institutions of behavioral science tell them that seeing anything outside of the norm means that they are mistaken or insane.

The concepts of intelligence versus ignorance, conscious versus unconscious mind, and sanity versus insanity addressed in the previous chapter serve to effectively undermine the validity of traditional, monolithic institutions of behavioral science that would attempt to preserve a clear distinctions in these dichotomies. Among the various scholarly narrators who make grievous errors, the narrator of "The Whisperer in the

Darkness,” Albert N. Wilmarth, stands as one of the most absurd in his assumptions about facts that he has no evidence to confirm. Lovecraft reveals the absurdity of his assumptions through a satirical portrayal of the narrator’s arrogance and closed-mindedness when he responds to reports of strange remains found in Vermont:

They were pinkish things about five feet long; with crustaceous bodies bearing vast pairs of dorsal fins or membranous wings and several sets of articulated limbs, and with a sort of convoluted ellipsoid, covered with multitudes of very short antennae, where a head would ordinarily be .... It was my conclusion that such witnesses—in every case naive and simple backwoods folk—had glimpsed the battered and bloated bodies of human beings or farm animals in the whirling currents; and had allowed the half-remembered folklore to invest these pitiful objects with fantastic attributes. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 135)

Wilmarth is an English Instructor and folklore expert who has not seen any of the remains in question. More importantly, he does not take into account that “naive and simple backwoods folk” may know more about the local animals than most university professors, or that they are more likely to handle and prepare their own dead. The rural folk have a better chance than a city-dwelling academic of knowing a “battered and bloated body” or a farm animal from something truly unusual. Wilmarth’s errors reflect his training in folklore study as it relates to anthropology and psychology, which leads him to be

correspondingly amused when several contentious souls continued to insist on a possible element of truth in the reports. Such persons tried to point out that the early legends had a significant persistence and uniformity, and that the virtually unexplored nature of the Vermont hills made it unwise to be dogmatic about what might or might not dwell among them; nor could they be silenced by my assurance that all the myths were of a well-known pattern common to most of mankind and determined by early phases of imaginative experience which always produced the same type of delusion. (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 138)

His faith in his own understanding of human psychology and culture creates an illusion of an elite and privileged position from which he may judge even his scholarly colleagues,

although he has no evidence upon which to base his assumptions: “the more I laughed at such theories, the more these stubborn friends asseverated them; adding that even without the heritage of legend the recent reports were too clear, consistent, detailed, and sanely prosaic in manner of telling, to be completely ignored” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 138). The narrator emerges as a satirical character whose absurd (and arrogant) adherence to conventional approaches to reality lead him to doubt on psychological grounds the cognitive or intellectual abilities of anyone who might propose the possibility of an event outside of the norm.

Wilmarth’s reasoning borders on the comical when he is eventually contacted by an eye witness, Henry Akely, who “had been a notable student of mathematics, astronomy, biology, anthropology, and folklore at the University of Vermont... a man of character, education, and intelligence, albeit a recluse with very little worldly sophistication” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 139). Even this expert witness is doubted by Wilmarth, who simultaneously commends Akely for his scientific mentality and then himself violates that very type of open-mindedness: “he was amazingly willing to leave his conclusions in a tentative state like a true man of science. He had no personal preferences to advance, and was always guided by what he took to be solid evidence. Of course I began by considering him mistaken, but gave him credit for being intelligently mistaken” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 139). Akely holds an important place in Lovecraft’s works, for he represents what Lovecraft seemed to have considered to be a proper scholarly mentality. He is “willing to leave his conclusions in a tentative state like a true man of science,” and there is no particular reason to believe him to be mistaken, “intelligently” or otherwise. Yet, Wilmarth makes assumptions about Akely’s

psychology that allow him to continue to maintain his belief that those whose opinions deviate from the status quo are naive, misguided, insane, or, at best, “intelligently mistaken.” The narrator’s characterization of Akely makes him sound far more credible than Wilmarth, for Wilmarth has a wider base of learning, including biology. However, the narrator’s desperation to avoid a paradigm crisis leads him to assume that the scholarly Akely must be mistaken. Wilmarth turns his scrutiny even upon himself: “Was it too presumptuous to suppose that both the old legends and the recent reports had this much of reality behind them? But even as I harboured these doubts I felt ashamed that so fantastic a piece of bizarrerie as Henry Akley’s wild letter had brought them up” (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 144). Wilmarth’s application of observational paradigms based upon traditional psychology appears to be one of his greatest sources of stress, for his anxiety related to his temptation to believe something outside the norm is greater than the anxiety related to any potential threat from the Mi-Go. “The Whisperer in the Darkness” may depict the absurdity of assumptions of the validity of the behavioral sciences more acutely and more comically than any other Lovecraft story, but it is one of many Lovecraft works in which traditional concepts of behavioral sciences, like those of the physical sciences, prove to be insufficient for understanding new circumstances.

## Absurdity and Institutions of the Humanities

Of all of the institutions that Lovecraft challenges or undermines through his modernist grotesque writings, the institution of humanities scholarship is the one that provokes his most subtle and most experimental treatment of absurdity. Lovecraft

addresses religion, physical sciences, and social behavioral through depictions of creatures, characters, objects, and actions that are absurd in a number of ways. However, he also explores absurd aspects of humanities scholarship through a unique approach to the modernist notion of literary difficulty. The topic of difficulty is nearly unavoidable when discussing modernism; Leonard Diepeveen's *The Difficulties of Modernism* (2003) is a particularly useful guide when analyzing the role that difficulty plays in modernist literary studies. As Diepeveen notes, difficulty "was the most noted characteristic of what became the canonical texts of high modernism; it dramatically shaped the reception of Faulkner, Joyce, Stein, Moore, Eliot, Pound, and Woolf, just to name those who early were considered to be central modernist writers" (Diepeveen xi). Difficulty was created in slightly different ways by various modernist writers, revolving around the idea that difficulty encourages (or even forces) the reader to actively engage the text:

For modern readers, difficulty was the experience of having one's desires for comprehension blocked, an experience provoked by a wide variety of works of art ('comprehension' is here defined broadly). Without dealing with this barrier in some way—and such dealings were not restricted to *understanding* or decoding the syntax of the difficult moment—it was impossible to interact significantly with the text. Difficulty thus drove its readers forward, for they realized that their bafflement was an inadequate response. (x-xi)

As Diepeveen explains, modernist literary difficulty involves the complication of a text for the purpose of forcing a reader to participate more directly with the text, an engagement that has the potential to enhance the intellectual experience of reading. Furthermore, literary difficulty serves to distinguish levels of readership by providing material that less educated readers cannot fully comprehend. This aspect of the modernist motivation to create difficult texts has received a variety of responses, from admiration to accusations of exclusionary elitism.

Difficulty's incarnations are many and various in modernist literature, resulting from a number of experimental literary techniques: fragmented narratives, countless historical / literary / cultural allusions, vernacular and dialect, multiple languages, literary impressionism, collage, and stream-of-consciousness to name only a few. In the case of Lovecraft, modernist difficulty is pushed to new levels through the use of weird and grotesque elements. Lovecraft's depiction of the absurdity of assumptions of the validity of humanities scholarship is particularly noteworthy because of the subtle elements of difficulty he uses for this purpose. By using practically every modernist technique for creating textual difficulty (including all of those listed above), Lovecraft raises implicit questions about the nature of literary and historical authority and validity. However, in addition to the conventional modernist devices of difficulty, Lovecraft contributes his own strategies for engaging the reader and leading the reader to question the validity of literary and scholarly sources. One of Lovecraft's most unique contributions to literature may be found in his elements of hoax and verisimilitude with relation to absurdity and the modernist notion of difficulty. The difficulty represented by the canonical modernists through various types of allusions, language play, and cultural references tend to be traceable and somewhat linear. Diligent scholars have been able to unravel the difficulties of Eliot's "The Wasteland," Joyce's *Ulysses*, and even Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* to a large extent. Lovecraft's difficulties equally inaccessible.

As discussed in relation to subjectivity, the concepts of history and literary scholarship are undermined in many of Lovecraft's works. In fact, the very notion of reliable documentation is attacked at several different angles through the use of alternate histories, suppressed histories, indecipherable communications, and the mixing of fact

and fiction, one of Lovecraft's most noteworthy trademarks. This tendency toward verisimilitude is not a matter of a malicious hoax or pointless intellectual posturing. Lovecraft's realistic details involving documentation, geography, scientific practices, and historical events create a level of difficulty that truly challenges the reader. Lovecraft brings a new aspect of difficulty to the dialogue by seamlessly blending his own fictional details with allusions, citations, and accounts from traditionally accepted sources. Fabricated details are added to established histories. Fictional locations are described in their proximity to actual places. Hoax texts are named along with real ones, and the whole of the narrative is most often related from the point of view of scientific objectivity through a narrating character or characters who possess titles and occupations that imply intellect, integrity, and authority. The overall effect brings the concept of literary difficulty to a new level at which the active reader who attempts to research and decipher the "truth" behind the mingled facts and fictions is likely to uncover the deeper intrinsic absurdity underlying the verisimilitude of Lovecraft's fiction: the idea that the criteria by which most contemporary humans evaluate what is real and what is fictional are subjective, fallible, and very easy to imitate. Therefore, the active reader may experience first-hand the absurdity of his or her own assumptions about what representations of reality are valid and what ones are faulty or even deliberately fabricated. By going beyond the depiction of a narrating character's catastrophic paradigm crisis and encouraging the reader to face the absurdity of contemporary assumptions of what constitutes textual validity of secondary sources, Lovecraft pushes the dialogue of universal absurdity from the world of fictional depiction into the personal intellectual life of the reader.

In Lovecraft's modernist grotesque works, the readers cannot even enjoy the solace of approaching the modernist reality crisis from a distanced perspective, for the disorienting elements of the text invade the reader's world through the mixing of fact and fiction, leading to confusion as to which elements are facts and which ones are fabrications. There is no solid intellectual ground upon which to stand when reading Lovecraft, as addressed by Dziemianowicz with reference to Thurston's opening line in "The Call of Cthulhu," which states that the "most merciful thing in the world... is the inability of the mind to correlate its contents" (*Bloodcurdling Tales* 76):

[Lovecraft] says, in effect, that one does not need to investigate the dark corners of the universe to uncover mind-shattering cosmic truths; they may be evident in the events of the day if one knows the perspective from which to view the right events. The narrator's despair comes about simply through the realization of the pattern these events fit. In a sense, Lovecraft is expressing his belief that each one of us teeters on the brink of alienation along with Thurston. (Dziemianowicz 176)

This observation has the disquieting effect of indicating that, if any given person were to actually try to piece together all of the various and subtle clues available, he or she may have a chance at revealing patterns that lead to entirely new ways to perceive the fabric of reality. However, it is more than likely that this new paradigm would create panic, terror, and chaos. To this way of thinking, ignorance, indeed, is bliss (or at least a comfortable illusion of safety). Lovecraft's brand of difficulty brings the reader into Thurston's discussion by illustrating through textual hoax the ease with which the difference between fact and fiction may be obfuscated. Just as Thurston faces the idea that his conception of reality is based on an illusion, Lovecraft's readers may face the uncomfortable realization that discerning "truth" is not so simple as they might have

believed. Readers may even wonder what kinds of “dissociated knowledge” lies before them, overlooked and waiting to be pieced together.

Lovecraft’s mixing of fact and fiction goes beyond simple play, for it can be interpreted as a unique way to inspire scholarly inquiry on the part of his readers. Just as scholars have labored over the allusions, translations, and references of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, Lovecraft’s constant mixing of real and fictional texts, historical events, places, and scientific facts has led countless readers to expand their own knowledge. The works of Lovecraft provide puzzles that are just as convoluted and obscure as those of the members of the accepted modernist canon, challenging readers to research and differentiate established history, geography, and scientific thought from Lovecraft’s own inventions:

The reader’s problem is that Lovecraft is such a demanding author.... His writings create a new kind of world, based on science, myth, and magic, so that he can be classified among the most difficult authors to understand. Without knowledge of this background philosophy, to discover what he is writing about is difficult. (Airaksinen 2-3)

Lovecraft’s philosophical observations are often missed by readers, especially those who mistakenly expect nothing more than a mere pulp horror story. However, when combined with the difficulties of his innumerable factual and fictional histories, texts, scientific details, and geographical locations, the level of difficulty represented in his tales rivals that of any “high modernist.”

Alienating documentation plays an important role in Lovecraft’s works, especially when the topic of private libraries of real and non-existent books is applied to the responses of actual readers rather than the fictional characters. By placing actual texts on the same shelves as his “remarkable series of imaginary but deceptively realistic ‘secret

books,' chief among them the *Necronomicon*" (Leiber 55), Lovecraft confuses the issue of authorship, authority, documentation, and the veracity of human knowledge itself. As Edward Lauterbach explains in "Some Notes on Cthulhuian Pseudobiblia" (1980),

the purpose of Lovecraft and his collaborators in creating this library of imaginary titles was to give a feeling of verisimilitude to their stories. Most of these titles have a proper, classical, even pedantic flavour and sound as if they originated in the ancient Orient or the Mediaeval and Renaissance worlds of learning. The pseudo-Latin, French, and German of many of the titles can easily be translated to hint at the forbidden contents. Such titles seem to echo lists of actual alchemical and occult treatises from the days of early printing, and the ability to quote passages of magical lore from such books, sometimes intermixed with actual occult titles, allowed a writer to add great authenticity to fictional supernatural narratives.<sup>88</sup> (97)

The fact that Lovecraft incorporates not only his own invented titles but those of other writers with whom he associated further complicates the reader's sense of veracity, for the same titles come up in multiple works by multiple authors, creating a consistency that adds to the illusion of believability. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the libraries of Lovecraftian scholars usually include *The Book of Eibon* (Clark Ashton Smith), *Unausprechlichen Kulden* and *People of the Monolith* (Robert E. Howard), *De Vermis Mysteriis* and the *Cultes des Goules* (Robert Bloch), the *R'Lyeh Text*, the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, and the *Necronomicon* (Lovecraft). These are usually placed, in relatively random order, with such titles as Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Murray's *Witch-Cults in Western Europe*, W. Scott Elliott's *Atlantis and the Lost Lemuria*, and Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, leading many readers to confuse the fictional texts with the real ones, challenging the reader to decipher what sources are believable.

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<sup>88</sup> Lauterbach mentions that pseudobiblia in literature goes back at least as far as Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantegral*, which implies further connections between the grotesque, literary experimentation, and Lovecraft.

When examining the notion of “difficulty” in Lovecraft’s writing, the *Necronomicon* deserves its own discussion. The *Necronomicon* is probably the most famous book to never exist. It is a useful recurring plot device in many of Lovecraft’s stories, an ancient book penned by the “Mad Arab Abdul Alhazred” (the pseudo-Arabic name that Lovecraft created for himself in his childhood). This fictional text has become so believable to readers that even individuals who have never heard of Lovecraft have heard of the *Necronomicon* and believe that it is an actual text of great historical significance. There seems to be no real evidence to substantiate the claim of many occult scholars that Lovecraft based this illusory tome on a real text. As Lauterbach explains, belief in the existence of the fictional text grew beyond the ranks of “weird fiction” fans: “Among collectors of supernatural fiction the *Necronomicon* had taken on near-corporality. Many bibliophiles have attempted to find actual copies of the *Necronomicon* in any edition and have plagued numerous book dealers to be on the lookout for this tome” (Lauterbach 97). The fact that so many people believe in the authenticity of this fictional book is not entirely unreasonable, for Lovecraft himself composed and published a convincing pseudo-scholarly paper entitled “The history and chronology of the *Necronomicon*” (1938). This paper details the creation and distribution of the various copies, versions, and translations of the book, including the past and present locations of copies (many of them allegedly destroyed or lost). *The Necronomicon* has appeared in countless works of Lovecraftian spin-off fiction, films, and games, and in many films that have no direct relationship to Lovecraft at all. *The Necronomicon* stands as Lovecraft’s most enduring hoax, and a testament to his ability to write fiction that is simultaneously “weird” and convincing. The mix of titles and authors is so believable, and so

convoluted, that most readers would probably have a difficult time distinguishing the “real” from the invented ones, an effect that goes beyond a mere accentuation of the reader’s reaction to a “weird tale.” This mixture of fictional titles like *The Necronomicon* with actual texts like *The Golden Bough* calls into question the very nature of the written word and the amorphous sense of reality and authority given to any secondary textual source.

In addition to his mixed lists of titles, Lovecraft complicates the validity of humanities scholarship by providing allusions to supporting documentation in other publications, such as newspapers and scholarly journals. In this way, he brings an even deeper level of difficulty to the concept of authorship, scholarship, and literary validity by suggesting that the places, objects, and events portrayed in his works have some documented validity not only in books but in current scholarly or journalistic sources. The tone of these references often bears a casual confidence in the reader’s recognition,<sup>89</sup> fortified by the Lovecraftian narrators’ claim that various types of corroborating documentation appear in periodicals like *The Providence Telegram*, the *Journal*, the *Sydney Bulletin*, and his fictional *Arkham Advertiser*, adding an additional element of complexity to the question of what types of literary sources are valid or trustworthy.

Lovecraft’s unique approach to difficulty through the mingling of fictional and factual material brings into question the criteria by which factuality is assessed in secondary sources, thus providing the reader with a more direct experience and understanding of the absurdity of contemporary assumptions about the process commonly used to sort fact from fiction in humanities scholarship. The effect of Lovecraft’s brand

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<sup>89</sup> Phrases like “as the papers have stated,” “as everyone will recall,” or “the public first learned of it in February” appear often in these stories.

of difficulty upon the reader is complex. On one hand, the mixture of fictional and fact-based allusion develops a kind of distrust of information sources, for readers who realize that they have been tricked by Lovecraft's hoaxes face the question of whether or not other seemingly supportable information from other sources has been altered or entirely faked. Even the minor details of the stories are often hoaxes, leading the reader to wonder how much of his or her daily exposure to historical or literary documentation may be just as easily faked or altered.

By combining elements of the modern grotesque and modernism in much of his weird fiction, Lovecraft intensifies his absurdist statement of human insignificance. Modernism brings subtlety, intellectualism, and technical experimentation to the concept of absurdity, while the grotesque provides a greater textual tangibility, emotional force, and cosmic scope to the tales in question. With the modern grotesque and modernism combined as complimentary forces into the modernist grotesque, Lovecraft's works deliver a much more powerful representation of cosmic absurdity than would have been possible with either one modality or the other. In light of the apparent nihilism behind Lovecraft's statements of cosmic absurdity in his fiction, it is useful to bring his letters into the discussion to clarify his thoughts on the position of humanity within a chaotic and mechanistic universe, for his underlying statement about the value of humanity is elusive in his fiction: "It is... our task to save existence from a sense of chaos & futility by rebuilding the purely aesthetic & philosophical concept of character & cosmic pseudo-purpose – reestablishing a realisation of the necessity of pattern in any order of being complex enough to satisfy the mind and emotions of highly evolved human personalities" (*Selected Letters* 4.280). Thus, the modernist grotesque exists as an important coping

mechanism in developing “a slow, gradual approach, or faint approximation of an approach, to the mystic substance of absolute reality itself—the stark, cosmic reality which lurks behind our varying subjective perceptions” (*Selected Letters* 2.301). The “cosmic reality” to which he refers is that of his “fundamental principle” of cosmic disinterestism, the only higher truth to which he seems to give validity. Yet, the approach to be taken by modernist grotesque art, to acknowledge and then cope with the ultimate alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity of human existence, is crucial because “although meaning nothing in the cosmos as a whole, mankind obviously means a good deal to itself” (*Selected Letters* 5.241). Thus, it appears as though Lovecraft attempts to find a kind of balance between intellectual realism and artistic optimism, acknowledging the problematic nature of human perceptions, representations, and institutional paradigms, while simultaneously suggesting that art can create a kind of mental life raft to which humans may cling in order to survive the surrounding cosmic maelstrom.

## Conclusions

Lovecraft is one of the many artists who have been misrepresented and undervalued, largely due to his frequent appearance in publications of low scholarly reputation, his overzealous fan base, and his “weird” subject matter. However, if his work is judged on its own merits, its strengths become apparent. True, a few of Lovecraft’s early works fell squarely into the category of traditional Gothic horror (“The Tomb” being the most traditional of them). However, it is common for young artists to go through a period of imitation of traditional forms before finding their own style. In fact, the mature Lovecraft was almost brutal in his appraisal of his own shortcomings as a young writer. However, Lovecraft’s reputation as a “pulp horror” writer has predisposed certain critics to scrutinize his work unfairly. Picasso is not remembered for his early realist paintings (which were technically sound but not in any way ground-breaking), but for his experiments in cubism. Joyce is not judged by his early failures in poetry but for his later triumphs in prose. Lovecraft deserves the same courtesy: to be judged by his best and most representative work, not his early attempts or certain misunderstood tendencies. The erroneous generalization that Lovecraft’s work is straight “horror” also led readers to miss the humor in his writing, which is a key to understanding his absurdist approach to paradigm shifts and the nature of knowledge. Those who go looking for serious horror and find “weird” fiction with absurdist humor thrown in can easily mistake absurdist commentary for a failed attempt to inspire fear.

In short, in terms of challenging traditional notions of reality, perception, and representation through experimentation, Lovecraft was more of a modernist than many of the writers who have received that title. He produced a vast amount of work that

represents the themes (including alienation, subjectivity, absurdity, and difficulty) and techniques (the masque, the hoax, inter-textual reference, fragmented plots and narrative perspectives, literary impressionism, historical and cultural allusion, vernacular dialogue, multiple languages, word-play, and visual experimentation) of modernism. In fact, there seem to be few criteria for excluding him from the modernist canon except that he chose “weird” rather than mundane subject matter and that he lacked the connections to associate with the established literary elite. The best way to understand Lovecraft is to ignore the factors of fan base, publication history, and minor works, and to focus on the themes and forms of his more ambitious and experimental writing.

Lovecraft has been done an injustice, and there are a few of us who would attempt to correct that injustice in some small way. The importance of including certain Lovecraft works in the modernist canon is not a matter of simply winning some victory for a writer we happen to like. That would be a rather meaningless victory in and of itself, merely reinforcing the concept that the only good writing of the twentieth century is modernist writing. I therefore do not insist upon Lovecraft’s modernist nature as a matter of quality so much as a matter of definition. His merits could be successfully argued on the basis of other criteria as well. The importance of encouraging readers to examine Lovecraft works through a modernist perspective lies in what may be learned from doing so. Moreover, to acknowledge Lovecraft as a writer who brings together modernism and the grotesque into a the modernist grotesque is to address the close relationship between these two creative impulses - a relationship that appears to have been largely ignored or forgotten, but which can be discovered or reclaimed.

Accordingly, one of the things that I hope to have accomplished with this work is the start of a dialogue that addresses what I see as a direct relationship between modernism and the grotesque. As illustrated, the two artistic impulses share much: the “art of diagnosis” and “cult of ugliness,” experimental technique, the emphasis on historical modernity, many artistic influences (Dante and Poe in particular), and the major concepts of alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity. The acknowledgment of the relationship between modernism and the grotesque has many potential benefits to literary scholarship. On a very basic level, there is the matter of influence. Scholars of modernism who explore the various origins and influences of modernism would benefit from tracing grotesque influences to develop a more well-rounded understanding of how modernism developed. In such a project, starting with Lovecraft would be very beneficial because he shares so many factors in common with both the “high modernists” and the writers of the grotesque. He is a historical contemporary of the “high modernists” who kept abreast of their various debates, influences, and developments. Yet he is a lover of the “weird tale,” the ancient myth, horrific folklore, and speculative science. Lovecraft stands as the “missing link” or perhaps the “Rosetta Stone” that allows for a more clear understanding of the relationship between modernist and grotesque impulses and techniques. By studying his works, scholars may better understand these connections and then move on to pursue similar connections in the works of others (perhaps Conrad, Kafka, Beckett, Eliot, and Joyce would be good to start).

Another benefit of studying Lovecraft with reference to modernism and the grotesque concerns pedagogy. Anyone who has attempted to explain the basics of

modernist theory and form to a group of undergraduates will have experienced a variety of obstacles, from a lack of general interest to the complications involved in explaining any abstract concept to a group of uninitiated listeners. I have found that it is helpful to begin with Lovecraft (“The Call of Cthulhu” is a particularly good story with which to start) and then move on into the traditionally canonized modernist writers. Of course, each student has different preferences and inclinations, but students often respond positively to the striking imagery and imagination in Lovecraft’s work, making the explanation of the modernist concepts and form therein much easier to identify and examine. After they have come to understand the applications of modernist concepts and techniques through Lovecraft’s work, the students are more easily able to move on and recognize similar elements in the work of other writers of modernism and / or the grotesque.

In this connection of audiences to abstract and difficult concepts, Lovecraft is unique. His modernist grotesque tales present audiences with certain elements of a popular genre that the readers identify as “weird” or even “horror” fiction, and then introduce those audiences to complex theoretical concepts such as the alienated consciousness, the fragmented and limited nature of reality, the absurdity of existence, the unreliability of information sources, and the complications of language and representation. If literature is to have a purpose beyond pure aesthetics or academic pontification, developing the minds of its readers in significant ways (the very core of the modernist idea of “difficulty”), then the delivery method by which the mind-changing material gets to the reader is of high importance. In other words, it does not matter how potentially beneficial something is if no one is making use of it. Lovecraft’s approach of

combining modernist concepts with “weird fiction” may make modernist theory more accessible to those students who show enthusiasm for the “weird tale.” Those who are excited by “weird fiction” may be inspired to work harder to understand the meaning and nuances within a work of the modernist grotesque than they would be to understand other modernist works. Through Lovecraft, readers who have never come into contact with modernist or grotesque concepts and technique may experience a widening of their intellectual and artistic perceptions. Lovecraft can serve as an introduction to experimental writing that encourages readers to continue their study of literature. I have met a few young English Literature majors who were drawn into literature specifically because of their discovery of Lovecraft. This is a fundamental boon of “weird fiction” that has not been sufficiently appreciated: it gets certain people to study literature who may not have done so otherwise.

At this very moment, I know that somewhere in the world someone is reading Lovecraft and being deeply affected. The reader may be enthralled, amused, confused, inspired, frightened, maybe even disappointed or disgusted. It would depend upon the reader and the work being read. Others are reading some of the countless spin-off stories that have been based upon Lovecraft’s writing, or watching one of the dozens of movies that are based on his work and ideas. Still others may be playing one of the role-playing games or video games inspired by Lovecraft, or chatting online at one of the hundreds of Lovecraft-based web sites, or purchasing one of the scores of Lovecraft novelty items: Cthulhu statues, buttons, bumper stickers, diplomas from Miskatonic University. And then there are those who believe it all. They believe in the Old Ones and the Elder Gods. They believe that Lovecraft was a vessel, a prophet, an instrument for the alien powers to

communicate the truth to the faithful who would see the former rulers of this world rise from the sunken city of R'lyeh to dominate the planet again. The prominent British novelist Neil Gaiman claims that he attended a convention where “[a] thin, elderly gentleman in the audience stood up and asked the panel whether they had given much thought to his own theory: that the Great Old Ones, the many-consonanted Lovecraftian beasties, had simply used poor Howard Phillips Lovecraft to talk to the world, to foster belief in themselves, prior to their ultimate return” (ix). Such people exist. I have met them. They read from their Barnes & Noble copies of *The Necronomicon* and attempt to summon Cthulhu or Yog-Sothoth. They discuss theories about conspiracies and other cults, the ones that Lovecraft describes among the Eskimos and Louisianans. Even now some speculate that the flooding of New Orleans in 2006 was a government plot to squelch the operations of a Cthulhu cult in that city. Others examine such theories only to understand the depth of Lovecraft’s influence. The collective body of Lovecraft fans are unique in their diversity, their devotion, their enthusiasm, and even in their scholarship, with at least one thing in common; H.P. Lovecraft has made them think about reality in a new way. It is unlikely that even Lovecraft himself could have guessed the impact that his writing would have upon the world, but given his predilection for the absurd, he probably would have been pleased.

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