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Contextualizing Lovecraft: The Existential Horror Necessitated by Fear

Introduction

H.P. Lovecraft is notorious for his reactionary and often xenophobic narratives, many of which have incited outrage in more recent years. Two of his particularly controversial works are "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Horror at Red Hook." In these works, and beyond, Lovecraft's antiquarian beliefs are presented at direct odds with the rapid societal changes occurring in the 20th century. Such drastic cultural change inspired a particularly radical reactionary response from same, namely Lovecraft himself. This response can be attributed to the mass globalization and cultural change during the period, but it is also indicative of a much grander set of fears regarding the very role of humanity in the cosmos. In order fully to understand how fear drives his writings, it is crucial to first identify the beliefs that influence Lovecraft's narrative perspective and how they result in the production of these problematic works.

Fear is the central tenet of Lovecraftian fiction. It is where the author derives much of the content of his stories, which are often indicative of his own personal set of beliefs. In a way, Lovecraft's own works function as microcosms wherein "the experiences that were his greatest source of pleasure transmute into his greatest source of despair" (Evans, "A Last Defense Against the Dark" 114). Lovecraft takes what he understands as familiar, and thus inherently

good, and places it in a space wherein it is perverted and destroyed by the unfamiliar and "other." In particular, much of his narrative derives from his own cultural fears regarding racial and cultural purity. Beyond this fear, however, Lovecraft is one of the pioneers of cosmic horror, that is, horror that emphasizes the unknowable and incomprehensible. "Cthulhu"[1] and "Red Hook"[2] each present different facets of the genre; however, they are equally revealing regarding Lovecraft's fear of the unknowable. The culmination of these fears results in an often-nihilistic undertone to the author's narratives that becomes an important through-line in understanding his works. In looking at "Cthulhu" and "Red Hook" as two of his fundamental works, we can come to better comprehend Lovecraft's employment of fear in the creation of his literary perspective.

Antiquarianism in a Modernizing World

Much of H.P. Lovecraft's belief system is fundamentally rooted in his antiquarian background. His consistent referencing of historical artifacts or manuscripts throughout his work, leave such a connection fairly self-explanatory. This comes, perhaps, as an inherent consequence of his New England upbringing, given the area is particularly rich in history in architecture as it relates to the American canon. These antique values eventually become the very thing Lovecraft is obsessed with retaining the purity of. Lovecraft's affinity for the antique provides a stark contrast to the rapid industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where progress and innovation took priority. The author's obsession with the antiquarian in his writing can then be understood as the projection of his desire for the known, and comfortable, into a world which is

[1] From here on, "The Call of Cthulhu" will be referred to as "Cthulhu."

[2] From here on, "The Horror at Red Hook" will be referred to as "Red Hook."

leaving tradition behind. As a direct result, the author's own inability to reconcile the two opposing worlds he inhabits contextualizes the beliefs he expresses.

While Lovecraft long displayed an appreciation for the antique, his focus developed into more of an obsession with retaining antiquated values (particularly those of the Anglo-American sort), despite the mass cultural diversification that took hold in the early 20th century. Where his earlier writings focused on the simple beauty of spaces or architecture, later ones focus obsessively on the perversion of such beautiful spaces. Lovecraft introduces "Red Hook" in a small town in Rhode Island, where former police detective Thomas F. Malone resides following a traumatic incident in the city. He has been moved to Chepachet due to the predominance of wooden colonial houses, in a hamlet described only as "quaint," so to avoid the red brick buildings which spark his traumatic episodes (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 1). This response to the urban, red brick houses of Pascoag acts as a reflection of Lovecraft's partiality to the older, less inflammatory (in his eyes) structures. The titular neighborhood, conversely, is described as being a "maze of hybrid squalor… a babel of sound and filth… [where] long ago a brighter picture dwelt, with clear-eyed mariners on the lower streets and homes of taste and substance where the larger houses line the hill" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 2). Lovecraft describes this space as one that has undeniably been perverted from its original beauty. The quaint hamlet of Chepachet is presented as a simple, more "right" aesthetic foil to the neighborhood of Red Hook. Beyond simply their aesthetic differences, Lovecraft presents them as ideologically opposed, with Chepachet reflecting his beliefs of how society should be. Red Hook, on the other hand, is shown to be blasphemous to its very core. This conflict is indicative of Lovecraft's growing fixation on the antique being of a higher moral or ideological standing than the modern, and the fear he has of its corruption. Consequentially, many spaces in Lovecraft's works feature similar settings that

have forsaken the goodness of Lovecraft's beloved antiquarian world for the new, and unfamiliar.

Lovecraft's characters, as a result of his own inner conflicts, usually exhibit antiquarian beliefs or tendencies themselves. In the case of "Cthulhu's" Henry Anthony Wilcox, there is an inherent curiosity sparked by his attributed genius that leads him to the unknown. He is "essentially Faustian: he accepts risks deemed too dangerous and too costly by others in order to learn what, ultimately, is too awe-inspiring to reveal" (Sondergard 5). This knowledge is presented as being far beyond the traditional and is therefore presented to be at odds with the very foundation of humanity. Upon his very vivid dream of R'lyeh and Cthulhu, Wilcox is incapable of fully encapsulating the latent horror of both: "as Wilcox would have said, the geometry of the place was all wrong. One could not be sure that the sea and the ground were horizontal, hence the relative position of everything else seemed phantasmally variable…" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 17). The city of R'lyeh undermines the very foundation of humanity's comprehension of logic and physics the seemingly endless scientific discoveries of the early 20th century do to Lovecraft. The author doubles down on this defiance in the account of Gustaf Johanson: "In this phantasy of prismatic distortion it moved anomalously in a diagonal way, so that all the rules of matter and perspective seemed upset" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 17). The complete overturning of human understanding in favor of something so far beyond it is undeniably indicative of Lovecraft's own obsessive fears sparked by the "impossible" discoveries occurring around him. As such, the new, and unknown, is relegated by Lovecraft to the "wrong," while the antiquarian, and known, is presented as inherently good.

Xenophobia and Cultural Purity

The creation of Lovecraftian narratives is also fundamentally reliant on his distrust of racial minorities and general obsession with ideals of racial and cultural purity. While Lovecraft expressed the clear desire for a more homogenous, Anglo-centric American identity, the swiftly diversifying culture of the United States during this period presented an immediate foundational conflict. To Lovecraft, cultural purity is the only thing that separates humans, specifically Anglo-Americans, from mere animals. Immigrants, who are considered by him to be inherently inferior to whites, taint this purity with the development of a hybrid social body and threaten the very reversion of "civilized men" to their "primal archetypes" (Reinert 260). The globalization of American society, as a consequence, is indicative of the inevitable doom that the pure, Anglo-American society faces. Lovecraft utilizes this conclusion to justify a number of arguments, echoing "the contents of a plethora of fascist, pseudo-scientific publications justifying racial segregation, sterilization, and genocide" (McRoy 339). There is resounding xenophobic tone in Lovecraft's narratives, as a result; one that is further asserted by the active "othering" of racial minorities.

The xenophobic tone of Lovecraft's work is particularly present in stories such as "Red Hook." Here a focus on spaces that were once "pure," but have been thoroughly tainted by the presence of immigrants and minorities is at the placed at the forefront of the narrative. Lovecraft's initial description of the neighborhood of Red Hook is particularly telling in this manner, with him calling it a "maze of hybrid squalor" and "a babel of sound and filth," where "long ago a brighter picture dwelt" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 2). The depiction of this space echoes Lovecraft's view of hybridity as being a corrupting force. The continuous elaborations of the neighborhood's inhabitants as being "unclassified Asian dregs wisely turned back by Ellis

Island" or "the Persian devil-worshippers" further serves to solidify this tone (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 3). A resultant air of eminent chaos is present throughout the narrative, where the lawlessness presumed to be caused by the space's cultural hybridity is intended to induce a general unease. To Lovecraft, "the threat and sense of dread generated by this diverse social body rests not merely in its difference from the central protagonist, but also in its propensity towards hybridity and chaos" (McRoy 344). Lovecraft's fear of cultural diversity is especially crucial to the foundation of this narrative, just as his obsession with purity resulted in the very creation of it.

The "case of Robert Suydam," as it is described, is a perfect example of the perversion of Anglo-American culture by racial and cultural heterogeneity on a more individual scale. Suydam is introduced in a thoroughly normal manner, as simply "a lettered recluse of ancient Dutch family," if not "merely a queer, corpulent old fellow" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 2). Suydam grows acquainted with some of the "blackest and most vicious criminals of Red Hook's devious lanes," and a "very unusual colony of unclassified slant-eyed folk" springs up near his property as seeks some mysterious "unlimited powers" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 2-3). Through the interactions he has with these individuals and his research of things beyond that which man should know (according to Lovecraft), Suydam is corrupted and driven mad. Ultimately, Suydam is consumed by the very powers which he seeks to control and forfeits his own soul in attempt to acquire it, literally collapsing into a "muddy blotch of corruption" in the hellscape observed by Malone (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 6). Aside from the not-so-subtle implication that the root of Suydam's corruption was his intermingling with minorities, his very humanity regresses over the course of this quest for power. While it may have simply begun as research of "strange tomes" or interactions with suspicious figures, Suydam eventually has his associates kidnap and murder

numerous children in attempt to achieve his goal. The corruption of Suydam's character is understood as being indicative of a far more vast and concerning contagion present in Red Hook, one "destined to sicken and swallow cities, and engulf nations in the foeter of hybrid pestilence" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook 5). For Lovecraft, the very presence of cultural intermingling is infinitesimally more terrifying than almost anything imaginable.

The presence of Lovecraft's xenophobic tendencies is marginally less central in "Cthulhu," wherein he draws on the internalized need to assert the perceived Anglo-American racial "superiority" over immigrants and minorities. In "Cthulhu," the presence of the consistently racist statements, as is seen in stories like "Red Hook," is somewhat diminished in favor of thematic or coded messages. A number of Lovecraft's works also see an Anglo-American protagonist looking to assert some degree of power or control over a designated "other," be it in a racial or cosmic sense. The author seeks to create avenues by which he can manipulate his reader's perception of the involved parties. Thus, the "good" is coded as being an inherently Anglicized force, while maintaining cultural "others" as evil, in order to establish a form a connection that extends beyond the realm of the narrative. In doing so, Lovecraft hopes to create avenues for his audience to sympathize with his own obsessive Anglo-centric beliefs.

During the second section of the narrative pieced together by Francis Wayland Thurston, the speaker details the exploits of "The Tale of Inspector Legrasse." This portion of the narrative features discovery of an idol of the entity known as "Cthulhu" and was discovered in the raid of a "supposed voodoo meeting" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 6). The space is which the raid occurred is described as being "one of traditionally evil repute, substantially unknown and untraversed by white men," in attempt to incite a feeling of excitement at the thought of this exotic and dangerous uncivilized space (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 8). Lovecraft seeks to further deepen this

sense through his explication of the sounds made by the people of the voodoo cult, conflating their rituals with those of beasts: “Animal fury and orgiastic license here whipped themselves to daemonic heights by howls and squawking ecstasies that tore and reverberated through those knighted woods like pestilential tempests from the gulfs of hell” (Lovecraft, “Cthulhu” 8). By comparing these people to mere beasts and reducing his reader’s comprehension of them to simply that of a primitive, beastly state, Lovecraft clearly seeks to assert his perceived superiority of whiteness over the “other.” He continues by describing them, unsurprisingly, as being “men of a very low, mixed-blood, and mentally aberrant type. Most were seamen, and a sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese from the Cape Verde islands, gave a coloring of voodooism to this heterogeneous cult” (Lovecraft, “Cthulhu” 9). Looking back on his description of the heterogeneous peoples of Red Hook, this is hardly a departure into the uncharted for Lovecraft. Rather, his consistently expressed contempt for the mixing of cultures and races is all the more apparent here.

Lovecraft’s reduction of non-Anglicized cultures as being primitive is further implemented through his description of the Esquimaux tribe encountered by Professor William Channing Webb. This tribe is described by Lovecraft’s speaker as being “degenerate[s]… whose religion, a curious form of devil-worship, chilled him with its deliberate bloodthirstiness and repulsiveness” (Lovecraft, “Cthulhu” 7). While it is stated that other tribes do also exhibit fear at the mention of this one’s religious practices, the description of the “nameless rights and human sacrifices” made to “a supreme elder devil” is far from subtle in relegating them to a fate similar to that of the voodoo cult. The explanation of this tribe’s cherished “fetish” sparks only the most condescending of responses from the author regarding his opinions on religious tradition, especially that of “inferior” peoples.

Lucas Kwong asserts that the explicit rejection of connections to the "European witch-cult" and the complete lack of knowledge of it beyond its members is seemingly impossible in his article, "H.P Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu' as Radicalizing Assemblage: An Anglo-Materialist Nightmare." For one, the presence of an intercontinental, multiethnic religion found in entirely separate ethnic groups with no shared history somehow managing to exhibit no notable religious differentiations certainly lends itself to the creation of an us vs. them mentality. This is especially so, considering the near impossibility that such a tradition would be able to avoid contact with Europe on accident, as Kwong points out (Kwong 16). The return of Cthulhu is prophesied to occur when "mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 10-11). Given the advantage of hindsight regarding the time in which Lovecraft sets his narrative, this could easily be read as coding in reference to the coming of the first world war. The regression of "civilized" white peoples to the primal behaviors of "inferior" groups that Lovecraft so vehemently fears can then be understood as the result of the primitive chaos of war. Considering Lovecraft's obsession with the "superiority" of the Anglo-American people and the resulting xenophobic tone of his works, such a conclusion is not especially hard to come to. The internalization of such fears, then, serves as both a foundational undertone and a consistent through line in much of his literature as a result.

Monsters as Physical Incarnations of Fear

A deceptively complex concept, monsters historically mean much more than they let on. The English word "monster" stems from the Latin root *monstrum* (lit. unnatural thing/portent), if this root doesn't already indicate such, "monsters, of course, always *mean*" (Miller, "Bodily Fear" 123). Monsters are not beings simply sprung from the head of someone looking to be

scared; rather, they are always indicative of some form of internalized fear that is being projected onto the world. At their most basic, monsters are the physical manifestations of societal fears: King Kong is coded as a representation of fundamental, racist fears of African American Men stealing away white women; the Wendigo of Native American origin is a projection of fears surrounding cannibalism; Godzilla is a beast sprung straight from the radiation of the atomic blasts of World War 2. Be it witches, sea monsters, aliens, ghosts, all monsters exist through the internalization and projection of some form of fear onto the world. Lovecraft's Cthulhu is no exception.

Considering the cosmic horror genre itself sprung from "The Call of Cthulhu," there should be no surprise that the titular Old God is representative of a number of things. Cthulhu is itself a projection of Lovecraft's terror regarding the concept of the unknowable terrors that might be hidden behind the shroud of reality beyond human comprehension. The very basis of Lovecraft's "cosmic horror" is the prioritization of the fear of the unknowable and incomprehensible over the simple gore of physical horrors. As T.S. Miller puts it, "It is no accident that the phrase 'cosmic horror' does double duty in referring to both the feeling of terror located in a human body and the physical manifestation of that horror as an immense entity" ("Bodily Fear" 124). The objective existence of Cthulhu, and all of the unspeakable cosmic entities that may lie beyond the veil of human comprehension, must then be understood as the consequence of the one's own internalized fears. Whether sparked by things such as the inception of quantum physics in 1925 (three years prior to the publishing of "Cthulhu," or even the non-Euclidean geometry of the mid-19th century, humanity's understanding of the universe was largely reshaped right in front of Lovecraft. Such radical discoveries inevitably play into the author's writing, though this sort of reckoning with the unknown is far from new. Most ancient

traditions were based in similar attempts to conceive the entities behind the creation or destruction of the universe. Be it the Mesopotamian sea goddess of creation, Tiamat, or the end of the world at Ragnarök, the human obsession with attempting to rationalize the inconceivable is far from Lovecraftian. Where Lovecraft does diverge, however, is in his understanding of the idea that there are few things more unsettling than the indescribable. While some monsters may exist for the explicit purpose of humanity's destruction, many more act as representations of the universe's entirely indifferent disposition toward humanity, a thought far more terrifying.

Strictly in terms of its physical appearance, the manifestation of Cthulhu as beyond physical description serves as Lovecraft's own quintessential addition to these nameless horrors. At the start of "Cthulhu," Thurston's writings contain ramblings about the ignorance of humanity being the universe's most "merciful" act toward them. Having attained a glimpse of that which is beyond the veil of human ignorance, Thurston asserts, "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 flee form the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 1). While the very concept of Cthulhu's manifestation is clearly enough to drive Lovecraft's protagonist mad, the descriptions of its physical appearance are not altogether unrecognizable. "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" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 2). Despite the knowledge that the narrator only succeeds in maintaining his sanity due to the secondhand experience of the creature, the implication is that the image does nothing to justify the terror of its appearance. There is still, however, the notable fusion of draconic imagery with that of an octopus. Such

imagery is extremely common in the appearance of apocalyptic beasts, as is also asserted by Miller ("Bodily Fear" 7). The mention of its characteristics as being somewhat human, however, create an additional layer to its inception. In doing this, Lovecraft creates both the implication that while Cthulhu's appearance is beyond human comprehension and the sight of it is enough to drive one mad, and that very same figure is not altogether alien.

By implicating the presence of human features in the Cthulhu's appearance, Lovecraft also cements the coding of the monster as being a racial other: intentional, or not. Looking back to the author's depiction of non-Anglicized peoples in both "Cthulhu" and "Red Hook," there are similarities in how both they and Cthulhu are described. Where Lovecraft depicts the "inferior" non-white people of his stories as being primal, even animalistic in their behavior, Cthulhu, one of the Old Ones, is only destined to return when "mankind would have become as [them]; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy… and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 10-11). Considering the Old Ones appear to be the apex of such a primal force of the universe, the conflation of the two is particularly simple. In coding the Old Ones, Cthulhu especially, as racial "others," the defense of the civilized world from them by Lovecraft's white characters is drastically similar to the attitude with which he takes the protection of Anglo-American purity from the hybridization of other cultures. Such coding also makes the assertion of his white protagonists as being forces in defense of humanity or in conflict with beings representative of all manner of "wrongs" even more indicative of this internalized obsession.

Ironically enough the implication made by Thurston, and by association Lovecraft, at the beginning of "Cthulhu," surrounding the mercy of ignorance is also inherently contradictory.

While Lovecraft consciously attempts to assert a sense of the superiority of the Anglo-American, knowledge is inherently required for such. Otherwise, it could be argued that the absence of intelligence entails the exact opposite. Lovecraft's assertion, at the same time, argues that the knowledge of such beings as Cthulhu are beyond human comprehension, calling for the regression of humanity away from such knowledge. Therefore, Lovecraft presents a paradoxical need for knowledge, as is necessitated by his ideals of superiority over other races, while simultaneously expressing a deep-rooted, internalized fear of the unknown, dictating a shielding from it.

While "Cthulhu" presents a more straightforward monstrous entity to serve as representative of Lovecraft's internalized fears, "Red Hook" is a tad more convoluted in its implementation. Due to the centralized focus on the hybridity that plagues the neighborhood itself, it can be inferred that the portal through which Malone enters, home to a host of unspeakable evils, is also indicative of such. This is particularly feasible as a consequence of the usage of the word "contagion," which can only be found twice in the story (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 2,5). The first mention of this contagion is in reference to the "degeneracy" present in the inhabitants of Red Hook. Here, the speaker mentions the impossibility of their reform, stating that is necessary to erect barriers in order to protect the outside world from such "blasphemy" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 2). The second mention immediately follows Malone's entrance into the portal. This instance details "the root of a contagion destined to sicken and swallow cities, and engulf nations in the foeter of hybrid pestilence," which is a far cry from different in purpose (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 5). The monster created by Lovecraft in this narrative, then, can be understood as hybridity itself, undisguised and unapologetic.

While the centralized evil of "Red Hook" may be hybridity it, a host of known evils are also named in the hellscape witnessed by Malone. Given Lovecraft's beliefs of the inferiority of immigrants, as is thoroughly expressed throughout the narrative, these evils can also be understood as indicative of further internalized fears. The speaker details this cast in a frenzy:

> "Satan here held his Babylonish court, and in the blood of stainless childhood the leprous limbs of phosphorescent Lilith were laved. Incubi and succubae howled praise to Hecate, and headless moon-calves bleated to the Magna Mater. Goats leaped to the sound of thin accursed flutes, and aegipans chased endlessly after misshapen fauns over rocks twisted like swollen toads. Moloch and Ashtaroth were not absent; for in this quintessence of all damnation the bounds of consciousness were let down, and man's fancy lay vistas of every realm of horror and every forbidden dimension that evil had power to mould."
>
> (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 5)

Among this host of evils, the incubi and succubae praise Hecate, the Greek goddess of witchcraft and magic, who has been increasingly conflated with evil dealings and the corruption of men throughout history. The presence of these succubae and incubi themselves suggest the submission to carnal desires like lust. Satan and Lilith, along with many others, can also be understood to serve as the representation of a regression from the goodness of civilized humanity in favor of the parasitic "hybrid squalor" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 2). Through the imagery deployed by Lovecraft within this scene, and in many others, there is an undeniable connection present between the meanings that references to these entities have and the vitriol and fear with which the author depicts immigrants and hybridization. Thus, Lovecraft's fear of cultural integration, among countless other fears, often serves as the foundation for the monstrous entities present in his stories.

Settings of Cosmic Horror in Anthropocentric Narratives

Beyond monsters, Lovecraft also employs settings of cosmic horror in his narratives. Drawing on the concept of cosmic horror as is applied through the implementation of monstrous entities in his stories, such settings similarly draw on the terror of the unknowable. These spaces achieve the "inconceivable" through a number of stylistic choices, but also through Lovecraft's employment of scientific aspects that defy, in his own perception at least, the very laws of physics or nature. By inserting such settings into narratives that are inherently anthropocentric, Lovecraft forces the reexamination human purpose in relation to the universe. The very existence of cosmic horror spaces within these stories challenge human comprehension to such a degree that they, drive Lovecraft's characters mad in the process, perpetuating a cohesive sense of dread.

"Cthulhu's" R'lyeh is a perfect implementation of such settings of cosmic horror. In order to present it in a way that actively defies human logic and explanation, the descriptions of the "city" Lovecraft's provides his readers are used to cement the sense of the inconceivable. The image laid out by the speaker in the initial introduction to the space vaguely detail it as being "abnormal, Non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours" (Lovecraft, 'Cthulhu" 17). Through the employment of non-Euclidean geometry, of which the layman certainly has little more than the vaguest knowledge, Lovecraft seeks to immediately alienate both the speaker and audience from the space. The continued contextualization of the space being no more than general ramblings expanding on this "unnatural" geometry is further indication of his continued attempts to alienate the reader: "As Wilcox would have said, the geometry of the place was all wrong. One could not be sure that the sea and the ground were horizontal, hence the relative position of everything else seemed phantasmally variable"

(Lovecraft, ‘Cthulhu” 17). This passage, in particular, is an undeniable attempt by Lovecraft to cement one thing about the “city” above all else: this is not a place meant for humans, and the very presence of it defies all human comprehension.

Aside from the rest of R’lyeh’s spatial imagery being comprised of grotesque ramblings, (i.e., the “polarizing miasma weeping out from this sea-soaked perversion” (Lovecraft, ‘Cthulhu” 17)), there are very few details actually cemented regarding the appearance of the city. Rather, Lovecraft favors the usage of metaphor in order to convey the unknown by linking it to the known. As Matolscy describes it, “The knower can only know what he or she has embraced through the network of knowledge, which necessitates supplying the unformed with a form, the unnamed with a name” (Matolscy 157). By attaching some quality of the unknown to what is known, there is an inherently ability to create some degree of comprehension in the incomprehensible. At the same time, the metaphorical detailings of the indescribable can only ever fail to adequately capture the true nature of it. Such metaphor, then, “also exposes the world of human categories to the risk of being contaminated by the unknown” (Matolscy 157), as the act of very tying the known to the unknown can completely shatter the human understanding of it. This is arguably a major part of what drives the sailors of Johansen’s account mad, as they compare things like the “door” that is opened, releasing Cthulhu, to an actual one, “it was… like a great barn-door; and they all felt it was a door because of the ornate lintel, threshold, and jambs around it” (Lovecraft, ‘Cthulhu” 17). In comparing the two, the sailors seek to rationalize what its purpose or shape is. Yet that object alone, much less the cosmic deity that proceeds to pursue them, is impossible for the men to determine even the mere orientation of. Thus, the indeterminable space of R’lyeh, with its “wrong” geometry, serves to further alienate the reader from the space of the story and invoke a sense of complete existential dread and terror.

The hellscape at “Red Hook” functions similarly to R’lyeh in its employment as a setting of cosmic horror, though it is fundamentally different in its execution. In “Red Hook,” the cosmic horror aspect of the setting comes largely from the beings witnessed in it. While aforenamed entities and monsters are also present, this space itself gives Malone a glimpse the realm of human comprehension and the entities that inhabit it: “Nothing can ever efface the memory of those knighted crypts, those titan arcades, and those half-formed shapes of hell… the black air was alive with the cloudy, semi-visible bult of shapeless elemental things with eyes” (Lovecraft, “Red Hook 5”). While this space is far from the intense application of a cosmic horror setting as is seen in “Cthulhu,” its implications do invoke a similar sense of existential dread. The realm, as witnessed by Malone, is home to countless unspeakable primal evils that far predate, and will inevitably outlast, humanity. Lovecraft takes advantage of this implication to further assert the grim nature of human impermanence and assert a lack of human significance altogether. To these ancient cosmic horrors, humans are simply mindless distractions at best. Malone asserts: “Who are we to combat poisons older than history and mankind? Apes danced in Asia to those horrors, and the cancer lurks secure and spreading where furtiveness hides in rows of decaying brick” (Lovecraft, “Red Hook 6”). These evils, the very contagion at the root of the world, are far beyond human ability to stop, just as the diversification of Anglo-American culture is made inevitable by the mere presence of immigrants. Despite his hatred of such people, Lovecraft understands that the cultural “purity” of the Anglo-American can never triumph over the contagion of hybridity. Thus, the primal forces of the “other” that Lovecraft puts in foundational conflict with his white characters represent a horror of both cosmic and anthropocentric. Through this, Lovecraft seeks to instill a general feeling of existential terror within his audience, a cosmic horror dissimilar from “Cthulhu,” yet not altogether foreign.

The Inevitable Nihilism of Lovecraftian Fiction

Due to the nature of his works, it would not be impossible to mistake the inherent nihilism of Lovecraft's writing for some twisted form of naturalism; however, there is a key difference distinguishing the two. While naturalism acknowledges the indifference of nature to humanity, there is still an attempt made to assign some form of meaning to it, whether it be optimistic or pessimistic. Naturalists like Stephen Crane seek out the potential for some form of meaning in their writing. Lovecraft, however, rejects this notion altogether, asserting instead a state of cosmic insignificance (Miller, "Open Boat" 150). The clear acceptance of such cosmic insignificance is what motivates the tone for "Cthulhu," as well as many of his other works. While, this may be the case, though, this comprehension of humanity's own inconsequence is itself a terror plaguing Lovecraft: "We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 1). The inherently nihilistic tone of Lovecraft's works is further perpetuated by his own fears regarding the insignificance of humanity in relation to the universe.

Yet another concept that lends itself to Lovecraft's inherently nihilistic perspective is millennialism. This concept, as is found a number of religious traditions, dictates that humanity is destined to enter some kind of Golden Age on Earth before the judgement day. Seeing as how Lovecraft is an active proponent against spiritual values, going so far as to declare himself a materialist, it comes to no surprise that he takes issue with such an idea. As such, there is a resounding presence of "anti-millennialism," as coined by Zeller, in Lovecraft's narratives. This anti-millennialism draws on the idea that, to Lovecraft, "there is no hope in a collective salvation, but rather expectation that the imminent future would bring a transition to something far worse" (Zeller 5). Given the interwar period during which Lovecraft writes his stories, and

the nature of his beliefs, it's hardly a stretch, contextually, to see the bleak future that the author asserts as being inevitable. This also aids in further explaining the frequent implementation of world-ending entities and religious groups obsessed with bringing about the apocalypse. Such groups and beings are notably at the center of "Cthulhu:" "The prisoners had said it had always existed and always would exist, hidden in distant wastes and dark places all over the world until the time when the great priest Cthulhu… would call, when the stars were ready, and the secret cult would always be ready to liberate him" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 9-10). This cult can then be understood as a product of Lovecraft's contempt for spiritual practice, representing his perception of religious practices as existing for the worship of deities whose very existence necessitates the destruction of humanity. Anti-millennialism, as a result, further lends itself to contextualizing Lovecraft's already inherently nihilistic perspective.

The fundamental conflict of his beliefs with those of the modernizing society he is a part of, as well as the vast expansion of human knowledge beyond what maybe "should" be known, also seems to inevitably perpetuate that Lovecraft arrives at a nihilistic conclusion. His obsession with maintaining the cultural purity of the Anglo-American seems to be particularly connected to such beliefs. Seeing as how Lovecraft appears to be disgusted at the mere thought of the tainting of the "superior" Anglo-American culture, it clearly acts as a motivator for many of his reactionary musings. It comes as no shock that such reactionary beliefs manifest themselves in the creation of monstrous entities, as well, considering that Lovecraft's internalized fears span such a vast expanse. Cthulhu's coding as a cosmic "other," as well as a racial one also furthers this notion of human, and especially Anglo-American insignificance: a thought that clearly terrifies the author to no end. "Red Hook" sees, perhaps, one of the most clear examples of the manifestation of these racial fears, as the conflation of immigrants with a contagion infecting the

world is far from subtle. As such, his narratives continuously fill themselves with an overarching sense of existential dread, mirroring the author's own internalized fears.

From their very inception, Lovecraft formulates his narratives in a way that seeks to inspire a perverted sense of comfort in the known, while thrilling his readers with the contemplation of the unknown. Inspired by his own fears and existential dread, he laces these narratives with the shattering of the human comprehension, seeking to invoke the same. Lovecraft utilizes elements of cosmic horror to further emphasize the incapability of humanity to influence the universe in any perceived meaningful way. Thus, Lovecraft's literary perspective manifests itself in an inevitably nihilistic manner, fueled by existential dread and internalized fear. After all, "Who are we to combat poisons older than history and mankind?" (Lovecraft, "Red Hook" 6).

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