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PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS/INGLÊS E LITERATURA CORRESPONDENTE

WEIRD FICTION AND THE UNHOLY GLEE OF H. P. LOVECRAFT

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*My heart gave a sudden leap of unholy glee, and
pounded against my ribs with demoniacal force as
if to free itself from the confining walls of my frail
frame.*

H. P. Lovecraft

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ABSTRACT

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Supervisor: Dra. Anelise Reich Corseuil

The objective of this thesis is to verify if the concept of weird fiction can be classified not only as a sub-genre of the horror literary genre, but if it constitutes a genre of its own. Along this study, I briefly present the theoretical background on genre theory, the horror genre, weird fiction, and a review of criticism on Lovecraft's works. I also expose Lovecraft's letters and ideas, expecting to show the working behind his aesthetic theory on weird fiction. The theoretical framework used in this thesis reflects some of the most relevant theories on genre study. Todorov's (1995) insights on the definition of the boundaries of the fantastic genre and Neal's (1980) notions of genre are fundamental to demonstrate that a genre, in fact, has no boundaries and is in constant motion. Furthermore, through the analysis of Lovecraft's two short stories "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926) and "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) I present Lovecraft's cosmic vision and his use of atmosphere as a character on its own right.

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RESUMO

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O objetivo desta tese é verificar se o conceito de *weird fiction* pode ser classificado não somente como um sub-gênero da literatura de horror, mas também se ele constitui um gênero próprio. Ao longo deste trabalho, apresentei o arcabouço teórico sobre gênero literário, gênero de horror, *weird fiction* e uma análise das críticas sobre o trabalho de H. P. Lovecraft. Além disto, apresentei as cartas e as idéias do autor, esperando mostrar a base de sua teoria estética sobre *weird fiction*. O embasamento teórico deste trabalho reflete algumas das mais relevantes teorias sobre gênero. As idéias de Todorov (1995) a respeito das definições dos limites do gênero fantástico e as idéias de Neal (1980) são fundamentais para demonstrar que um gênero, de fato, não tem fronteiras e que está em movimento constante. Ademais, através da análise de dois contos de Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926) e “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), demonstro a visão cósmica do autor e seu uso da atmosfera como um personagem em si mesmo.

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Introduction

A major figure in the horror genre, H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1947) has left an immense literary legacy. His extant works comprise five hundred and forty-nine individual known titles, from his first stories and poems from 1897 to the notes he wrote just before his death in 1937. These titles are spread among several categories (fiction, poetry, literary criticism, amateur journalism, letters, essays, etc.). His short stories, including revisions and collaborations, add up to just over a hundred. Although he is mostly known for his short stories, Lovecraft was an avid and prolific correspondent and it is estimated that he wrote more than 100,000 letters during his lifetime, according to L. Sprague de Camp, one of his biographers. Of these, only 20,000 are extant in the John Hay library at Brown University, under the H. P. Lovecraft special collection.

The objective of this thesis is to verify if the concept of weird fiction can be classified not only as a sub-genre of the horror literary genre, but if it constitutes a genre of its own. In order to do so, the present study will be based on the works and aesthetics of H. P. Lovecraft, and the hybridization of a literary genre

The introduction presents several definitions of the theoretical concepts on which my research was based. These constitute some definitions of genre, the sub-genre, the horror genre, and finally, a short definition of *weird fiction*, as conceived by H. P. Lovecraft. These definitions are important, for they serve as parameters by which it is possible to judge the validity of the creation of a new genre and explain the working behind the genre of horror.

For the purpose of this research, in the next chapters, I will be referring mostly to two short stories (“The Colour Out of Space” and The “Call of Cthulhu”), a few of

his essays, several letters to friends dealing with the subject of literary criticism and theory, and his most important theoretical work, *The Supernatural Horror in Fiction*.

Despite his acknowledged importance in the field of horror, there are not many scholarly studies on Lovecraft's works, for most discussions of Lovecraft are being conducted by non-academicians. The body of critical literature is quite large, although one-sided since regarding weird fiction, modern genre theory has not yet dealt with the subject.

Lovecraft was the first author to attempt to define the genre weird fiction and the research carried out in this thesis will be based on his theory, as ascertained in his letters and essays. For instance, in one of his letters to August Derleth, Lovecraft attempts to explain his concept of 'weird': "It is my contention that real *weirdness* or imaginative liberation depends on the depiction of something *which does not exist*, or which probably does not exist. If ghosts, Tsathogguan monsters, or any sort of a "spiritual" world *existed*, weird fiction would sink to commonplaceness..." (*Selected Letters IV* 435)

Weird fiction can be defined as a *mélange* of horror and science fiction. It is a sub-genre, as it hybridizes different literary genres; that is, it is a genre that exhibits the conventions of more than one genre. In Lovecraft's writings, it is possible to find a theoretical and aesthetic unity relating to weird fiction.

In this introduction, I will mainly present criticism on H. P. Lovecraft and his writings, and, in order to do so, I will rely on the critical material provided by S. T. Joshi, Lovecraft's biographer and leading scholar in Lovecraftian studies, and the essays, articles, books and doctoral thesis written by Peter Cannon, Robert M. Price, Barton Levi St. Armand, Maurice Levy, Kenneth W. Faig, Jr, among others. These authors were selected for they have been engaged on extensive research on Lovecraft's

works for the past four decades and have unearthed important data related to his literary legacy, artificial mythology, processes of writing and literary theories.

It is important to note that Lovecraft wrote his stories based on his idea that “common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large” (qtd. in Joshi *Four Decades* 9). He was not interested in human values, fears and hopes, for he believed that man was only a small item in the cosmos and did not merit much attention. In his stories, one will not find complex human characters since their development within the plots can only be related to the knowledge they acquire at the closure of their journey of discovery. These characters, usually young scholars and/or students serve as narrators and are only important inasmuch as they are, most of the time, unwilling participants in weird and alien-related events. Theirs is a journey into horror, and they travel, reluctantly, from total ignorance to the full knowledge of mind-warping facts.

Given the alien themes in his stories, one could argue that Lovecraft shows a tendency toward the genre of science fiction, but this is only one of the patterns in his intrinsic cosmic vision. On this subject, Joshi suggests about Lovecraft that, “being a mechanist materialist philosophically, he felt that the existence of man on this planet represented nothing more than an infinitesimally small and incidental (...) occurrence in the universe.” (20).

Throughout Lovecraft’s stories, the reader encounters a myriad of alien beings that are utterly indifferent towards mankind. For these creatures, humans are no more than a speck in the universe and should be treated accordingly. Their existence and the myths surrounding them are the source of cosmic horror in the stories. This recurrent alien theme has been greatly criticized and found grotesque by some critics. Peter Penzoldt notes that “Lovecraft’s monsters are usually ridiculous compounds of elephant

feet and trunks, human faces, tentacles, gleaming eyes and bat wings.” (69) He did not appreciate Lovecraft’s descriptions of alien creatures, for, according to the critic, for a horror story to be effective, terror should be merely *suggested*, and if described at all, it should be through an indirect method with the use of metaphors and the like. However, Penzoldt contradicts himself when stating that “when the details are not too ridiculous one cannot but praise his [Lovecraft’s] precision” (68) and that “no author combined so much stark realism of detail, and preternatural atmosphere, in one tale.” (68) In this manner, Penzoldt although disliking Lovecraft’s penchant for description, acknowledges that his painstaking details are what provide the core of the realistically weird atmosphere in his stories, and that these elements, excessive details and atmosphere, are interdependent.

Penzoldt was not alone in voicing his complaints about the alien theme and their descriptions. Edmund Wilson¹ also remarked that he could not “swallow” the aliens in Lovecraft’s stories, “semi-invisible polypous monsters that uttered a shrill whistling sound and blasted their enemies with terrific winds” (qtd. in Joshi *Four Decades* 47).

It is quite clear that both critics resented Lovecraft’s cosmic concepts, especially his depiction of alien creatures. Perhaps one of the reasons Wilson did not tolerate Lovecraft’s vision is that the creatures did not have anthropoid shapes, thus not conforming to a more ordinary human concept of extraterrestrial beings. The choice of form, however, was intentional, for one of the results that Lovecraft aimed at was a suspension of natural laws, which was a personal prerequisite for a story to be considered weird, as he explains in “Notes on writing weird fiction”: “one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law

¹ Edmund Wilson’s *Tales of the Marvelous and the Ridiculous* was first published in the *New Yorker* on November 24, 1945.

which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis.” (*Miscellaneous Writings* 113)

By creating such impossible creatures, Lovecraft was carrying out his design, which was to imprint an uncanny mood and atmosphere to his works. He did not want the reader to regard the events and creatures in his stories as belonging to a rational and logical world, quite the contrary: for him, true horror was a result of the unexplainable and unnatural. For this reason, his “alien-monsters” are always outlandish and mostly comprised of unlikely matter. In his stories, Lovecraft has made use of a meteor with strange colors², amorphous jelly-like blobs³, “liquescent horror”⁴, and even an invisible being of huge proportions⁵. By describing in minute details this motley assortment of aliens, Lovecraft was able to create an atmosphere of dread so as to lead the reader into gradually accepting this strange reality as true, however unexplainable or improbable.

This descriptive style of writing annoyed Edmund Wilson, who professed a profound dislike for Lovecraft’s endless use of adjectives such as “unhallowed,” “unholy,” “blasphemous,” “hellish” and “infernal” and asserted that an effective horror story did not need these descriptions, observing: “Surely one of the primary rules for writing an effective tale of horror is never to use any of these words — especially if you are going, at the end, to produce an invisible whistling octopus” (qtd. in Joshi *Four Decades* 48). Wilson was not fond of the weird genre and also resented the fact that Lovecraft’s style was often compared to Poe’s, a comparison that he felt was preposterous and “one of the many signs that almost nobody pays real attention to writing.” (qtd in Joshi *Four Decades* 47)

² In “The Colour Out of Space”

³ In “The Mountains of Madness”.

⁴ In “The Thing on the Doorstep”

⁵ In “The Dunwich Horror”

In direct opposition to this line of reasoning, T. O. Mabbot, at that time (1944) the recognized authority on Edgar Allan Poe, praised Lovecraft's style and stated that "Lovecraft is one of the few authors of whom I can honestly say that I have enjoyed every word of his stories" (qtd. in Joshi *Four Decades* 43). Mabbot believed that Lovecraft was a powerful and accomplished narrator of weird stories, and that this gift totally compensated for his tendency to melodrama — killing dozens of victims, when one would suffice and be more effective — and wordiness. He also thought that Lovecraft should not be compared to Poe, but for completely different reasons than Wilson's. Mabbot considered that there was no need to compare Lovecraft's works to Poe's, for although Lovecraft was an admirer of Poe's works and was influenced by his style, he restricted himself to a single sub-genre of horror, *weird fiction*, while Poe not *always* conformed to the horror theme in his stories. In addition, he thought that Lovecraft should not be considered an imitator of Poe, for he had his own particular style, and manner of structuring a style and excelled in the weird fiction sub-genre.

Penzoldt was also slightly more generous in some of his comments about Lovecraft, and after observing that "his exaggerated display of horrible details sometimes threatens to tire the reader before the end" (69), commended the perfect structure and pace of his narratives.

There are a few reasons for Lovecraft's overuse of adjectives. First, one of his trademarks for writing weird stories is precisely the use of seemingly superfluous adjectives. He was an insatiable reader of eighteenth-century authors, namely writers of gothic novels such as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory Lewis, Charles Robert Maturin, and seems to have admired their more dramatic style, adopting it for his own. While to some critics his language seems artificial and pretentious, Lovecraft used this form of writing for all purposes, as indicated in the hundreds of letters he

wrote to his friends and colleagues.⁶ Furthermore, anyone who reads Lovecraft is bound to notice that the adjectives in his stories also contribute to the eerie mood he carefully concocts. Although some of the adjectives could be removed without further loss to literature, the atmosphere in Lovecraft's stories is totally conditioned by his style of writing. According to Lovecraft, "atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation" (*Supernatural Horror in Literature* 427). In order to create this sensation, Lovecraft would meticulously establish the background of his stories with lengthy descriptions of setting and a proper build-up of tension and dread. As J. Vernon Shea observes: "Part of the reason for Lovecraft's unpopularity with the literary critics of his day lay in the fact that mainstream literature, following Sherwood Anderson's and Hemingway's leads, was turning more and more toward simple sentences and action – packed narration" (qtd in Joshi *Four Decades* 118). That is, the writers of the time did not make use of so many adjectives, having a preference for verbs and adverbs, which, they felt, contributed more for the progress of a story.

J. Vernon Shea also remarked that Lovecraft's strong points were his descriptive style of writing, for it gave more emphasis to the atmosphere of the story rather than his plots, which sometimes were quite obvious from the very beginning. In addition, he felt that although Lovecraft's use and choice of adjectives was not always the best, they were conducive to heightening the mood in his stories.

Likewise, Fritz Leiber, Jr presents an explanation for Lovecraft's style and is more liberal in his praises. He argued that Lovecraft used *orchestrated prose* to enhance the structure of his works, that Lovecraft was constantly adding adjectives, adverbs, and phrases in a *crescendo*, gradually increasing the tension and mood to create the perfect weird atmosphere. To illustrate his point, he contended: "The Statement of Randolph

⁶ Lovecraft's letters will be discussed on Chapter I.

Carter provides one of the simplest examples. In the story, the following phrases occur concerning the moon in order: "... waning crescent moon... wan, waning crescent moon... pallid, peering crescent moon... accursed waning moon..." (qtd. in Joshi *Four Decades* 57). The use of these strong repetitions throughout the story also follows closely the building suspense in the plot, thus contributing with a powerful background for the atmosphere, which, for Lovecraft, as stated before, was the most important element in a weird story.

Regarding Lovecraft's philosophical perspective, some critics have reacted most unfavorably to his ideas, such as the writer and philosopher Colin Wilson, who asserts that "Lovecraft carried on a lifelong guerrilla warfare against civilization and materialism, albeit he was a somewhat hysterical and neurotic combatant" (1). Wilson added that Lovecraft consistently attempted to undermine materialism in his works and was pessimistic about the role of mankind and their relationship to science. According to the critic, Lovecraft was in a battle against materialism because he wanted to frighten the reader, and thus reach the innermost depth of the human psyche with his writings.

I do not agree with Wilson's assessment of Lovecraft. He was against materialism only in the sense that he was not interested in human affairs and the human outlook on life *per se*. Lovecraft was an "indifferentist"; he did not care about human emotions, so the focus in his stories was *always* on the cosmos, the unnamable, and everything beyond reason and human values. Also, Lovecraft believed that man held very little importance when compared to the vastness of the universe. In his stories, Lovecraft's characters usually go mad because they are not capable of dealing with knowledge and their insignificant place in the universe. In the first paragraph of *Arthur Jermyn*, Lovecraft summarizes this thought:

Life is a hideous thing, and from the background behind what we know of it peer daemoniacal hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous. Science, already oppressive with its shocking revelations, will perhaps be the ultimate exterminator of our human species—if separate species we be—for its reserve of unguessed horrors could never be borne by mortal brains if loosed upon the world. (*Dagon and Other Macabre Tales* 65)

Also, in the first paragraph of “The Call of Cthulhu”:

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 of 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 light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (*The Haunter of the Dark* 61)

Lovecraft starts both stories by stating his non-anthropocentric views, i.e. that humans, when faced with the knowledge of outerworlds and a reality about which they know nothing about, cannot preserve their sanity. The concept that they are not in control of reality and that the universe cannot be measured by human values is truly horrifying, and, also, that the role of science as a provider of knowledge will bring forward the discovery that we are not alone in the universe and will reveal truths that defy logical reasoning. In his fictional statements, Lovecraft is trying to show that men rely too much on the given realities of what they know and that anything that could

break this tenuous illusion could be shattering for the emotional well-being of humankind.

Throughout Lovecraft's fictional works, essays, and letters, we can find a philosophical unity that goes beyond materialism. His thoughts are centered on the cosmos at large and the unknown as a major source of horror for humankind. Donald Burleson summarizes these concepts when proposing that "the horror, ultimately, in a Lovecraft tale is not some gelatinous lurker in dark places, but rather the realization, by the characters involved, of their helplessness and their insignificance in the scheme of things" (12). In this manner, when man perceives his own lack of importance, the ultimate reasoning that follows is that there is no all-powerful God to watch over them, that the universe is totally blind and indifferent to their fate. Lovecraft always professed his atheism in his works, fictional and non-fictional. There is no battle between good and evil in his stories, his alien-monsters cannot be judged by human standards and the evil perceived is originated by men's perceptions of them.

In conclusion, the critical thoughts presented here comprise only a small portion of the criticism on Lovecraft's works. The bulk of the critical material on Lovecraft is basically done by amateurs and fans of weird fiction; only recently his work has been the object of academic research. Furthermore, the criteria used for the presentation of critical material were based on the discussion of the most pertinent elements for the present research. The discussion of Lovecraft's literary theory and his philosophy, along with a basic introduction to modern genre theory, will be carried out in the next chapter.

I. Genre and Sub-Genre

There are several theoretical propositions for the discussion of the definition and classification of a literary genre. For René Wellek and Austin Warren (1949), a genre should be conceived "as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both

outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose - more crudely, subject and audience)” (231). They take into account three major elements in a genre: the overall organization and patterning (which includes plot, thematic, and form, i.e., conventions), and subject matter. However coherent such classification may be, though, it is important to note that, insofar as genres are not static phenomena—being on the contrary subjected to innumerable alterations over time—those elements are liable to variation. New works, while at first appearing to dismantle previous conventions, can eventually become part of a generic corpus. Specific genres are always changed by the addition of new material which, in turn, may take the form of reinforcement of current conventions, or addition of new ones. (Neale 1980)

Furthermore, Christine Gledhill argues that genres "are not discrete systems, consisting of a fixed number of listable items" (64). It is nearly impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between genres, for they tend to overlap and can also be hybrid thus becoming sub-genres. She also calls attention to Todorov's argument that "a specific genre should be understood as an abstract, theoretical and provisional structure, incarnated in specific examples, but itself transformed by each new production so “any instance of a genre will be *necessarily* different” (qtd. in Gledhill 59). Moreover, Stephen Neale in *Genre* argues that "generic specificity is a question not of particular and exclusive elements, however defined, but of exclusive and particular combinations and articulations of elements, of the exclusive and particular weight given in any one genre to elements which in fact it shares with other genres. (23).

Finally, in order to define a genre, one must take into account the social and ideological conceptions of a specific group, the similarities within a specific group of works, and the diversity of elements in them, which can transform and/or modify an individual genre. Tzvetan Todorov argued that "a new genre is always the

transformation of one or several old genres" (qtd. in Swales 36). The key element here is differentiation; it is by their distinctions that sub-genres can be classified. In general, sub-genres are recognizable for their differential elements, which are the most conspicuous ones in the works they represent.

The main difference between genre and sub-genre is that a genre is a plastic framework on which new material is always added. A genre is in constant mutation, for each new addition of elements transforms the already existing ones. Furthermore, a sub-genre represents a variation of major elements in a genre, i.e., the elements are deviated and given a new treatment. Each sub-genre, in fact, acts also as new fuel to a genre, for it is also responsible for the transformation a genre undergoes, adding new conventions and treatment to a whole. In this manner, a genre cannot exist without sub-genres, for without new additions and conventions it would become static.

II. The Horror Genre

The horror genre can be defined by atmosphere, mood, and by the reader's responses, instead of by definite character types and story elements. In general, the setting is not significant, for the source of horror can be found in practically any place. For instance, in the works of Stephen King, a dog, a beer bottle, and a lawnmower can elicit the most chilling reactions in the reader and the theme of horror itself can be approached through supernatural, biological or psychological elements, just to mention a few. The most important aspect of the horror genre, therefore, is the ability to arouse fear in the reader.

From a psychological approach, horror should take place in the mind of the characters, as in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," where a killer is disturbed by the beating of a non-existent heart, which turns out to be his guilty conscience. In order

to accomplish this degree of horror, Poe, in this story, makes use of an oppressive atmosphere and an increasing tension, in the middle of which the main character is betrayed by his own mind. Horror can also be biological, as in Stephen King's *The Stand*, in which a virus is released and kills almost all mankind and the survivors must struggle to make a new life for themselves among chaos. In this case, science is the main source of horror, and the technological advances achieved over the last centuries by man, instead of bringing positive changes, have become a tool for destruction. In addition to that, there is of course, the supernatural horror, which can comprise a variety of elements such as zombies, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and the like.

Regarding the response of an audience, a genre can be defined as a set of cultural conventions, that is, in order to be classified, it must take into account the social and ideological conceptions of a specific group. In the case of a film, a genre can be classified by the audience itself, for according to Neale, genres consist of "specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with the films themselves during the course of the viewing process" (qtd. in Stam & Miller 109)

The filmmaker David Cronenberg describes horror "as the genre of confrontation which allows the viewer to confront things that disturb him or her. In other words in cinematic and literary horror the demons are dealt with only from discreet distances with the insulation of metaphor. It is the function of fantasy to encompass a real life fear and transform it into something that can be dealt with or obliterated"⁷. That is, for Cronenberg, the horror genre serves as a psychological release for the audience's utmost fear. In watching a horror film, the viewer is able to transfer his insecurities to the screen, and does not need to confront his private horror, for horror itself will be dealt with within the picture. It should be noted that these notions must be

applied specifically to film genres and that the definition of genre within the boundaries of literature is somewhat less flexible.

According to Joseph Gixti, horror fiction is "essentially a type of narrative which deals in messages about fear and experiences associated with fear"⁸. Lovecraft summarizes this notion in the opening paragraph of his seminal *Supernatural Horror in Literature*: "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (*Dagon and other Macabre tales*, 423). Furthermore, Stephen King, in *Danse Macabre*, suggests that "the horror film is an invitation to indulge in deviant, antisocial behavior by proxy--to commit gratuitous acts of violence, indulge our puerile dreams of power, to give in to our most craven fears" (31). Finally, Noël Carrol, in *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, suggests a short definition for horror: "The word 'horror' derives from the Latin 'horrere'--to stand on end (as hair standing on end) or to bristle--and the old French 'orror'--to bristle or to shudder" (24). In sum, the horror genre can take many forms and make use of several conventions, insofar as, all these elements have one essential purpose in common: to engender fear in the reader.

⁷ <http://www.cinemia.net/NLA/films.html> Accessed on September 04, 2001

⁸ <http://www.cinemia.net/NLA/films.html> Accessed on September 04, 2001

III. Weird Fiction and H. P. Lovecraft

It is interesting to note that the term *weird fiction* was coined by Lovecraft and is mainly used by Lovecraftian scholars in relation to his works. However, Lovecraft himself, and, later, some scholars have included other authors within this scope: Lord Dunsany, M. R. James, Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Machen, among others. These are mainly 19th century authors and, at the time of publication of their works, weird fiction did not exist as a sub-genre. Thus, the authors were labeled as belonging to this sub-genre at a later period, during the 1920's when Lovecraft wrote about them in the *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Only in 1923, though, with the establishment of *Weird Tales*, edited by Edwin Baird, was there a periodical devoted to weird fiction. This magazine published authors like Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, Lovecraft and horror writers who belonged to the same historical period in which the magazine was being published.

For Lovecraft, the main difference between mere horror and weird is that horror stories can deal with all sorts of phenomena: ghosts, werewolves, vampires and the like. However, in order to be considered truly weird, a story would have to be about some event or circumstance which could not possibly happen. A story would cease to be weird if any advance in science were to indicate the possibility of any phenomena related by the weird tale, for in that case, the particular phenomena would not be considered weird anymore and would no longer represent a suspension or violation of natural laws.

According to Lovecraft, the horror genre has survived through the ages because of mankind's response to fear, and more specifically, regarding the weird tale, he states that it has developed "and attained remarkable heights of perfection; founded as it is on a profound and elementary principle [fear] whose appeal, if not always universal, must

necessarily be poignant and permanent to minds of the requisite sensitiveness" (*Dagon and other Macabre tales* 423).

In his *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft clarifies his views on weird fiction and proposes a definition:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to the rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain — a malign and particular suspension of defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (*Dagon and other Macabre tales* 426)

In the above quote, Lovecraft establishes the main core of his works, aiming at the suspension of natural laws theme that would become a trademark in his fictional works. This concern of always attempting to insert an unknown quantity, which cannot be explained by science or logic, is the basis for the sub-genre weird fiction.

In the works of H. P. Lovecraft, some of the most striking elements are the manner in which the author makes use of language and setting as a means to establish a *weird* atmosphere, which for him was one of the main goals of a weird fiction writer. For instance, in "The Lurking Fear," Lovecraft manages to create an atmosphere of weirdness, as the passage below indicates:

The scene of my excavations would alone have been enough to unnerve any ordinary man. Baleful primal trees of unholy size, age, and grotesqueness leered above me like the pillars of some hellish Druidic temple; muffling the

thunder, hushing the clawing wind, and admitting but little rain. Beyond the scarred trunks in the background, illumined by faint flashes of filtered lightning, rose the damp ivied stones of the deserted mansion, while somewhat nearer was the abandoned Dutch garden whose walks and beds were polluted by a white, fungous, foetid, over-nourished vegetation that never saw full daylight. And nearest of all was the graveyard, where deformed trees tossed insane branches as their roots displaced unhallowed slabs and sucked venom from what lay below. Now and then, beneath the brown pall of leaves that rotted and festered in the antediluvian forest darkness, I could trace the sinister outlines of some of those low mounds which characterized the lightning-pierced region. (*The Haunter of the Dark* 359-360)

This description was carefully wrought by Lovecraft to ascribe the proper setting of horror and fear; the site of the main character's digging is transmogrified into utmost evil; the trees are unholy and their branches insane, the vegetation is foetid, and small hills look sinister. In one paragraph, Lovecraft manages to create a powerful imagery of a fantastic landscape and has horror oozing from every sentence. Throughout his works, Lovecraft uses this sort of device in order to achieve the desired atmosphere of wrongness and improbability.

Chapter I will be devoted to Lovecraft's published letters and theoretical essays, in which he presents his theories on weird fiction and the horror genre in general. Finally, in Chapter II, I will offer an analysis of two of Lovecraft's short stories. The stories were selected based mainly on theme and atmosphere: In "The Colour Out of Space", a huge meteor falls near the house of a farmer and mysteriously starts to shrink until it completely disappears. The essence of the meteor infects the land and brings

horror and madness to the farmer's family and the land itself. In “The Call of Cthulhu”, the narrator uncovers, through information collected from all over the world, an ancient secret cult of unworldly beings and discovers that a race of extraterrestrial creatures inhabited the Earth long before the human race and that they plan a triumphal comeback.

These short stories represent each a different aspect in the works of Lovecraft and are representative of the conventions of weird fiction, that is, they are a blend of horror with elements of science fiction and they are all illustrative, in varying degrees, of the insignificance of human beings in relation to the horrors and mysteries of the cosmos, which is the basis for most of Lovecraft's stories. Through the analysis of these stories, the theoretical background relating to hybrid genres, and Lovecraft's theoretical works, I expect to demonstrate that weird fiction is a valid literary sub-genre, for it combines a unique set of elements, which distinguishes this sub-genre from the general horror and science fiction category.

Chapter I

The Horror Within

Lovecraft's particular view of the cosmos was partially explained in his letters and fictional writings, and stands out in the horror genre for its total absence of supernatural phenomena *per se* and its emphasis on the cosmos. Lovecraft was certainly ahead of his time and was able to predict a trend that would be popular 20 years later. According to Joyce Carol Oates:

Weird fiction can only be a product, Lovecraft saw, of an age that has ceased to believe collectively in the supernatural while retaining the primitive instinct to do so, in eccentric, atomized ways. Lovecraft would hardly have been surprised, but rather confirmed in his cynicism regarding human intelligence, could he have foreseen how, from the 1950s onward, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of purportedly sane Americans would come to believe in UFOs and extraterrestrial beings with particular, often erotic designs upon them. (xiv)

In this manner, Lovecraft can be considered a visionary, in that he was already anticipating the drift horror genre would take in future years and how it would be blended with science fiction themes. Hence, he was indeed creating a new sub-genre, *weird fiction*.

In the present chapter I will analyze H. P. Lovecraft's definition of weird fiction, investigating the extent to which it fits modern genre theory and whether it can be classified as a sub-genre of the horror. Traditional approaches to genre define it as a set of paradigms as a means for categorization. Within this notion, genre would be merely

descriptive and consist of a list of conventions and describable items. This approach considers genre a somewhat closed unit, and as such it would not have problems of definition and could frame any category. Thus, the genre of science fiction would deal solely with spaceships, intergalactic travels, third dimension realities, time travel and the like; and the horror genre would portray vampires, werewolves, zombies, ghost and all the supernatural paraphernalia which accompanies it. However, the concept of genre as a restricted fixture has undergone revision, and at the present time, genre is not defined by such closed notions.

Genre, however, as defined by Neale and Todorov, can be seen as a more hybrid and dynamic category, which allows space for change. As a point of departure, it would seem difficult to make a clear-cut definition of genre, insofar as genres are not static or immutable entities, but, on the contrary, undergo continuous processes of adjustment through the addition and/or exclusion of specific elements. Notwithstanding the mutational nature of genre, the theoretical propositions of a few authors and Lovecraft's own definition of weird fiction suggest that it can indeed be considered a sub-genre of horror.

As genres have no boundaries or strict limits in time and space, they are continuously undergoing transformation, so new elements can be added and old conventions eliminated or presented in a different way. Within this concept, genres defy classification as lists of items or conventions, for they suffer a continuous process of inclusion. From this perspective, I would like to call attention to the short story "The Owl and the Pussycat," by Thomas M. Disch, based on Edward Lear's homonymous poem. Disch keeps the basic story line present in the poem but succeeds in adding interesting twists to Lear's work. The poem tells the love story of an owl and a pussycat who travel in a boat for a year and a day and finally arrive at an island where they meet

a pig with a ring at the end of his nose. They buy the ring from the pig, use it as a wedding ring, get married, and presumably live happily ever after. In the short story, Disch maintains the central love theme. However, although the owl and the pussycat actually get married, they are depicted as two stuffed animals, both male, that belong to an abused, autistic child, who communicates and acts solely through his animals, i.e., in the story, the owl and the pussycat are presumably the main characters, for the story is narrated through their point of view. However, at the very end of the story, the reader discovers that the animals have been anthropomorphized, and that their voice actually belongs to the autistic child. The boy murders his foster mother, blames his foster father for the murder and manages to have him sent to jail. Later he is adopted by a loving couple together with his stuffed animals and they all live happily ever after.

This story serves as an illustration of a genre's lack of boundaries and hybridization. Disch, a poet himself, transforms Lear's poem, adding elements from the horror genre (the pussycat is disfigured by a horrible gash on its throat and his nose has been ripped off, presenting quite a different picture from the one depicted in Lear's poem: "lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,/ What a beautiful Pussy you are" (I, 7-8), and setting the tone of the story as belonging to a children's tale. Along the story, Lear's poem is quoted in comparison with the stuffed animals, thus creating a connection between both works, along with the bonding elements of the title and the central theme. Because the story is told through the child's point of view, the phrasing and choice of words are structurally simple and the tone evokes a children's story. One could argue that the juncture of the three genres (horror, poetry and children's fiction) is only intertextuality at play; however the insertion and treatment of conventions pertaining to other genres marks the story as a hybrid. In every genre there can be found several works that do not conform entirely with its paradigm and/or will prove to be a deviation

from the pre-established rules of inclusion and exclusion governing individual genres. In order to classify a genre, one must take into consideration not only the elements recurrent in a particular genre, that is, the repetitions, but also the differences that occur in the works belonging to a established genre corpus.

Because genres are not solely comprised of a list of conventions or elements, it is nearly impossible to make a precise distinction between genres, for they tend to overlap within a process of hybridization, thus becoming sub-genres. For this reason, a genre will always be modified by a new addition to its corpus, as in the example provided before, "The Owl and the Pussycat," although a horror story, it is not "pure" in its concept, i.e., it carries conventions from a different genre. In this instance, the poem by Edward Lear is being reshaped within the parameters of the fictional story and can also claim conventions from other genres. Neale has stated that genres are "instances of repetition and difference," (48) and as such, a genre can be defined through the repetition of specific characteristics. However, the repetitions also enable the emergence of differentials. The accretion of new elements or elements from other genres transforms and enriches the genre, and this blending can create a new one or even a sub-genre.

The emergence of a sub-genre occurs when a particular generic corpus expands, and conventions are regrouped, thus, enabling a new corpus to be created. It is also important to recognize the social nature of text production and the role of economic and technological factors and last, but not least, the shifting of an audience's preferences. Genres and their relationships are dynamic and allow great accommodation of other conventions over time, so it is fundamental to take into account the evolutions of conventions within a genre.

Lovecraft's works fit within this perspective of sub-genre, for he managed to transform the horror genre, by adding new conventions to it. He created an unusual fusion of horror and science fiction, through the means of his cosmic vision. The basic function in a horror story is to arouse fear in the reader, and this is usually achieved through the use of a set of conventions already established as traditional such as superstitious beliefs, "old wive's tales", ancient mythology, religious motifs, psychological aberrations, evil *versus* good. All these elements share the same basis, as they are solely related to mankind and their fears. The sub-genre *weird fiction*, which takes shape in Lovecraft's stories, deals almost exclusively with horror originated from *beyond* the human realm. In a letter to Clark Ashton Smith, Lovecraft further remarks:

The only things I can conceive as worthy protagonists of cosmic drama are *basic natural forces and laws*, and what spells *interest* for me is simply the convincing illusion of the thwarting, suspension, or disturbance of such forces and laws.[...] I use human puppets as symbols, but my interest is not with them. It is the situation of defeat itself – and the sensation of liberation therein implicit – which provides me with the thrills and catharsis of aesthetic endeavour. (*Selected Letters III* 436)

The characters in his stories function as mere spectators and are powerless against forces not belonging to the natural world. His "monsters" have no connection to earthly matters, such as ghosts and zombies, and are creatures belonging to other worlds and governed by laws completely alien to man. Fear is evoked through man's perception of the unknown as totally unrelated to his notions of reality.

For instance, in "The Colour out of Space", a meteor falls on Earth and mutates the land and vegetation. Lovecraft describes this transformation in the following manner: "No sane wholesome colours were anywhere to be seen except in the green

grass and leafage; but everywhere were those hectic and prismatic variants of some diseased, underlying primary tone without a place among the known tints of earth.” (*The Haunter of the Dark* 248) This excerpt is remarkable in its illustration of Lovecraft's choice of words to describe the mutation of the land. The colors are insane, diseased and unknown, thus Lovecraft imprints in the reader the notion that unknown elements are a source of horror *because* they do not belong to the human world. In practically all of his fictional work, Lovecraft takes great pains to describe in minutiae the atmosphere and setting of weird occurrences, aiming to achieve a mood of utter strangeness, so that his characters are faced with a momentary suspension of natural laws. Hence, the treatment accorded to conventions of the science fiction genre, combined with non-traditional concepts of horror is one of the differential elements that can be found in Lovecraft's stories.

Andrew Tudor remarks that a genre has three main characteristics: (1) cumulative, for innovations are added to a corpus; (2) conservative, for these innovations must conform to the existing corpus; (3) and different, for the process of inclusion of differential conventions leads to the establishment of specialist sub-genres (225-6) Therefore, the key element for the definition of a sub-genre is differentiation; it is by their distinctions that they can be classified and analyzed. In addition, Adena Rosmarin, in *The Power of Genre*, points out that new details inserted in a pre-established corpus of works paradoxically make the reader attentive to the “repetitions”, i. e., pre-established elements, existing in the corpus. The inclusion of new elements, while transforming a genre, also help to cement the old ones, for we only perceive differences in a genre, if we are familiar with their old conventions. (24)

Todorov proposes a straightforward definition of the *fantastic* genre, and his insights prove to be very helpful to genre theory. As he points out, the “fantastic is that

hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.” (25) What determines the fantastic for Todorov is the boundary between “dream” and reality, i.e., the impossibility from the part of the reader to define precisely the nature of a given event.

The basis of Lovecraft's definition of weird fiction differs somewhat from Todorov's definition of the fantastic. For Lovecraft, an event would cease to be weird if it had a rational explanation, and for Todorov, the fantastic belongs to the uncertainty of the veracity and/or unplausibility of a fact. Ambiguity is the key factor in the fantastic, whereas weird fiction relies on the certainty that the event does not belong to the rational world and cannot be explained by logical means.

Todorov places the fantastic between the realms of two other genres: the *uncanny* and the *marvelous*. If there exists an explanation for the event described, the work belongs to the uncanny, and if new laws of nature must be taken into account to explain the event, then it belongs to the genre of the marvelous. If one were to make use of Todorov's definitions, Lovecraft's work might be included in the *marvelous*, for he deals with previously unknown phenomena, which cannot be explained by natural events. However, Todorov mistakenly identifies Lovecraft as a *fantastic* writer. In *The Fantastic*, Todorov himself translates a quote from Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature*:

Atmosphere is most important, for the ultimate criterion of authenticity [of the fantastic] is not plot structure but the creation of a specific impression...

Hence we must judge the fantastic tale not so much by the author's intentions and the mechanisms of the plot, but by the emotional intensity it provokes... A tale is fantastic if the reader experiences an emotion of

profound fear and terror, the presence of unsuspected worlds and powers
(16)⁹

Todorov translated *weird* as *fantastique*, thus creating a conceptual problem, for Todorov's definition of the term does not conform to Lovecraft's concept of the weird. Lovecraft's works cannot be placed within the fantastic realm, for they do not leave margin for ambiguity. In his stories, although Lovecraft plays with the concept of real/unreal — for example, his characters are not sure if they have gone mad or are dreaming — by the end of these stories he makes it abundantly clear that the weird facts depicted do not belong to the human world and are imbued with cosmic horror. As stated in the introduction, atmosphere and cosmic horror are some of the main features of Lovecraft's concept of weird, as can be ascertained in the quotation erroneously translated by Todorov:

Atmosphere is the all-important thing for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation. We may say, as a general thing, that a weird story whose intent is to teach or produce a social effect, or one in which the horrors are finally explained by natural means, is not a genuine tale of cosmic fear; but it remains a fact that such narratives often possess, in isolated sections, atmospheric touches which fulfill every condition of true supernatural horror-literature. Therefore we must judge a weird tale not by the author's intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point. If the proper sensations are excited, such a 'high spot' must be

⁹ L'atmosphère est la chose la plus importante car le critère définitif d'authenticité [du fantastique] n'est pas la structure de l'intrigue mais la création d'une impression spécifique. (...) C'est pourquoi nous devons juger le conte fantastique non pas tant sur les intentions de l'auteur et les mécanismes de l'intrigue, mais en fonction de l'intensité émotionnelle qu'il provoque. (...) Un conte est fantastique tout simplement si le lecteur ressent profondément un sentiment de crainte et de terreur, la présence de mondes et de puissances insolites

admitted on its own merits as weird literature, no matter how prosaically it is later dragged down. The one test of the really weird is simply this - whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers. (*Dagon and Other Macabre Tales* 427)

Furthermore, in one of his letters to Helen V. Sully, Lovecraft reinforces his concept of weird fiction stating that it operates on premises that the laws of nature have been broken: "The real *raison d'être* of that art [weird fiction] is to give one a temporary illusion of emancipation from the galling and intolerable tyranny of time, space, change, and natural law" (*Selected Letters IV* 417). The concepts of timelessness and space are also important factors in the sub-genre *weird fiction*, for they are traits borrowed from the science fiction genre, and dealt with in a unique manner by Lovecraft. In his fiction, Lovecraft uses these notions in order to impart a sense of eternity to the alien and weird phenomena/creatures depicted in the stories. For instance, in "The Tomb," the main character, when confronted with a house redolent of horror, loses his notions of time: "In such surroundings the mind loses its perspective; time and space become trivial and unreal, and echoes of a forgotten prehistoric past beat insistently upon the enthralled consciousness." (20) Also, in "The Thing on the Doorstep," the narrator enters a house "which vast staircases led down to abysses of nighted secrets, of complex angles that led through invisible walls to other regions of space and time, and of hideous exchanges of personality that permitted explorations in remote and forbidden places, in other worlds, and in different space-time continua." (*The Haunter of the Dark* 313) In most of Lovecraft's stories it is possible to find references to space and time associated with horror, showing that any deviation from the normal concepts is bound to lead to horrific experiences and consequences.

In "Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction," Lovecraft also stresses that a weird story should place its emphasis on mood, not action, for he believes that action coupled with the extravagant nature of weird events prove to be too absurd to be taken seriously. This is another instance where Todorov's definition differs from Lovecraft's, for Todorov stresses the action as fundamental, because for him the plot is a vehicle for the fantastic and leads to the culmination of supernatural events. Lovecraft also points out that a weird story has the handicap of incredibility to overcome, and this can only be achieved through a careful realism in all stages in the story unrelated to the weird, for by building an utterly realistic world (hence his diligence in describing very carefully the gradual culminating of atmosphere and mood) as opposed to the unreal one, it is possible to succeed in drawing the reader to the illusion of unreality. Although Lovecraft was enthusiastic about the science fiction genre, he criticized most of the conventions found in the genre at the time:

[...] Thus we should have no over-facile language-learning; no telepathic communication; no worship of the travellers as deities; no participation in the affairs of pseudo-human kingdoms, or in conventional wars between factions of inhabitants; no weddings with beautiful anthropomorphic princesses; no stereotyped Armageddons with ray-guns and ape-men of the polar caps; and so on, and so on. (*Miscellaneous Writings* 120)

One will not encounter in Lovecraft's fiction any of the elements above. He considered the use of them in a story cheap and uninspiring, so he revolted against the basest conventions of the time and invested his creative energy into the devising of the sub-genre *weird fiction*, which combines what he believed were the best ingredients of the horror and science fiction genres: the ability to inspire fear in the reader and the relating

of fear to the unknown cosmos by means of reliance on realistic plots with non-human agents.

It is important to keep in mind that Lovecraft was an atheist who did not measure facts or events based on the so-called battle between good and evil present in most religions. Also, there are no moral judgments in his stories, and the weirdness he portrays carries no such values, his creatures being totally devoid of human feelings and emotions. In his essay "Idealism and Materialism — A Reflection," Lovecraft argues against a humanocentric vision and the concept of a man-related purpose in the universe: "Lacking the power to conceive of a mighty interaction of cosmic forces without a man-like will and a man-like purpose, humanity forms its persistent conviction that all creation has some definite object; that everything tends upward toward some vast unknown purpose or perfection." (*Miscellaneous Writings* 135-6) He possessed a scientific mind and was not prone, in his stories, to provide facts or solutions based on the supernatural. For him, a weird occurrence was one that defied logic and suspended the laws of nature, as stated before. In one of his letters to Clark Ashton Smith, he also revolts against the more traditional personages found in a horror story: "Ordinary tales about a castle ghost or old-fashioned werewolf are merely so much junk. The true function of phantasy is to give the imagination a ground for limitless expansion..." (*Selected Letters II* 196)

Lovecraft was not concerned with human events and, as can be ascertained by his stories, doubted that man had the ability to cope with the idea that he was insignificant before the vastness of the universe. Also in his correspondence, it is also possible to find instances of his cosmic vision. He was profoundly indifferent to the fate of mankind and not in the least concerned with humans emotions and events. In his letter to Fanrnsworth Wright, Lovecraft attempts to explain his indifference to human

matters: “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 II* 150) Inasmuch as Lovecraft is not concerned with mankind, the characters in his stories are not significant; they are quite ordinary people and are important only to the extent that they are unwilling participants in hair-raising events and phenomena. Lovecraft places the focus of his stories on the weird atmosphere and events, rather than privileging an anthropocentric approach. In a letter to E. Hoffman Price, Lovecraft further explains his views on the constructions of characters in a weird story:

[...] the *real* protagonists of the drama are *phenomena, and not people at all*; hence if we strike the proper atmosphere and unfold the chosen events in the most vivid possible fashion, we do not need to rely very heavily on the delineation of subtleties of human characters. It will be sufficient if our human figures do not act in too improbable and inconsistent a fashion. They must be accurate enough not to spoil the realism of the picture — but beyond that we can afford to let them remain lightly sketched. (*Selected Letters IV* 119)

For these reasons, the characters/narrators in Lovecraft's stories are almost uniform in their depiction. They are usually young scholars, students or gentleman of leisure who find themselves embroiled with quite unsavory events and persons, and, as a result of their unfortunate associations, discover terrible truths about themselves¹⁰, and about past events in human history. In his stories, Lovecraft associates the search for

¹⁰ In “Arthur Jermyn,” the main character discovers that he descends from a tainted line, for his great-great-great-grandmother was a white ape, worshipped as a goddess in the depths of the African forest. Also, in “Rats in the Walls,” the main character discovers that his family had terrible associations with non-human creatures.

knowledge with horror, for he believed that man could not cope with the fact that his place within the cosmos is of little importance and that there is no great Architect governing the chaos.

Another important aspect in Lovecraft's fiction is the actual construction of the weird atmosphere and events. In order to achieve the proper mood, Lovecraft makes use of an interesting device, in the form of a hoax, providing “evidences” belonging to the real world to corroborate the weird phenomena described in his stories. In a letter to Clark Ashton Smith, he explains the function of the hoax in a weird story:

The author must forget all about “short story technique”, & build up a stark, simple account, full of homely corroborative details, just as if he were actually trying to "put across" a deception in real life — a deception clever enough to make adults believe in it. My own attitude in writing is always that of the hoax-weaver. (*Selected Letters III* 193)

In his stories, Lovecraft mentions and quotes several books read by his characters in their inexhaustible search for forbidden lore and “hideous cults.” Some of the books mentioned are quite real, such as *The Golden Bough*, by Sir James George Frazer, *Wonders of the Invisible World*, by Cotton Matter, *The Story of Atlantis and the Lost Lemuria*, by W. Scott-Elliot, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, by Margaret Murray, and others. Among these, Lovecraft included books of his own invention and others coined by his friends and colleagues; the most famous ones being *The Necronomicon* or *Al Azif*, by Abdul Alhazred, *Nameless Cults*, by Friedrich von Junzt (contributed by Robert E. Howard), *De Vermis Mysteriis*, by Ludvig Prinn (created by Robert Bloch), *The Book of Eibon* (invented by Clark Ashton Smith), and a few other ones.

Lovecraft and other weird authors frequently cited each other inventions in their stories in order to build the illusion of reality of a body of inter-connected myths, and also for the purpose of fun. Although Lovecraft cultivated the illusion of reality of his forbidden books, he was always truthful when inquired about the veracity of his books. In a letter to Margaret Sylvester, Lovecraft disabuses the idea that *The Necronomicon* is real:

Regarding the *Necronomicon* — I must confess that this monstrous & abhorred volume is merely a figment of my own imagination! Inventing horrible books is quite a pastime among devotees of the weird, &... many of the regular *W. T¹¹*. contributors have such things to their credit — or discredit. (*Selected Letters IV* 346)

And, in a letter to William F. Anger, he explains further the nature of the hoax:

[...] I must confess that both the evil volume & the accursed author are fictitious creatures of my own [...] For the fun of building up a convincing cycle of synthetic folklore, all of our gang frequently allude to the pet daemons of the others [...] Thus our black phanteon acquires an extensive publicity & pseudo-authoritativeness it would not otherwise get. We never, however, try to put it across as an actual hoax; but always carefully explain to enquirers that it is 100% fiction. (*Selected Letters V* 16)

What started as a jest and an object of fun for Lovecraft and his friends resulted in quite unforeseen consequences and created a pop phenomena. Their collection of fictional grimoires inspired several of authors, who used the so-called “Cthulhu Mythos” (label used to identify the more superficial elements of Lovecraft's fiction) in their works. Among the best-known authors, we can include Stephen King, Peter

¹¹ The magazine *Weird Tales*

Straub, Colin Wilson, T. E. D. Klein, and J. Ramsey Campbell. In addition, Lovecraft's mythos also inspired a multitude of films, including *Monster of Terror* (1965), *Die, Monster, Die* (1965), *The Crimson Cult* (1968), *Re-Animator* (1985); *The Resurrected* (1992), and *Necronomicon* (1993), to cite only a few. A number of television shows and cartoons have also based their stories on elements created by Lovecraft, such as "Pickman's model," an episode in the *Night Galleries* series, and "Collect Call of Cthulhu", an episode in the *Real Ghostbusters* cartoon. In addition, Lovecraft's fiction has inspired role-playing games, such as *The Gateway Bestiary* (1980), and *The Call of Cthulhu* (1981). In the realm of art, Lovecraft's influence may be found in the works of H. R. Giger and other less-known artists. The list could continue indefinitely. This material has been included to demonstrate the extent to which a harmless "prank" resulted in the birth of widely-diffused iconography and narratives and served as inspiration to several artists.

Lovecraft's treatment of fiction was certainly unique in that he added several differential elements to the horror genre, including his own brand of science fiction, which was modified by Lovecraft's creation of a sub-genre, *weird fiction*. As can be discerned in the excerpts presented in Chapter I and II, the elements that stand out from the average horror story are his particular blend of horror and science fiction, unique cosmic vision that emphasizes the cosmos, rather than man, and his careful crafting of atmosphere as virtually a main character.

Lovecraft did not consign to any one volume or essay his concepts of the weird; on the contrary, most of the material presented was scattered in a few essays, several letters to friends and associates several years apart and had to be organized. With this in mind, I have tried to communicate the unity and coherence of his ideas on the subject.

In the next chapter, I will analyze two of Lovecraft's stories, "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Colour out of Space," for they are the most representative of his works, in order to further demonstrate how his thoughts and philosophy regarding weird fiction are applied to the actual writing of a weird story.

Chapter II

Cosmic Horror

Introduction and chapter I presented a review of the criticism of Lovecraft's works, a critical analysis of Lovecraft's conceptions of weird fiction, and a discussion concerning the definition of genre and sub-genre. This chapter will deal with the analysis of two short stories by H. P. Lovecraft. I will draw attention to the conventions to be found in the sub-genre *weird fiction* and focus on the cosmic imagery that permeates Lovecraft's works.

"The Call of Cthulhu" (1926) is one of Lovecraft's most important fictional works, for it represents the fulfillment of his cosmic vision, the maturity in his writings, and marks the dawning of the "Cthulhu Mythos" that imbues the horror genre in the present time, as demonstrated in the last chapter.

The plot in "The Call of Cthulhu" is built on a series of fragmented accounts, pieced together by the narrator. He is the sole heir of his great-uncle, George Gammell Angell, Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages in Brown University, who died a rather mysterious death. Among his bequests, the narrator finds a peculiar bas-relief and a baffling manuscript. This manuscript is a collage of apparently disconnected events, which, when connected, reveal a mind-warping secret. It is divided into three main sections: the dreams and dream work of a young artist, the report of a police inspector, and several newspaper clippings. Through these accounts, the narrator starts unearthing events with cosmic proportions. The basic story line goes as follows: On March 1st, a young artist, Wilcox, called upon Professor Angell to consult him on the translation of the hieroglyphics on a bas-relief of recent manufacture. Wilcox tells Angell that after having a strange dream the night before, he felt compelled to make the sculpture and

wishes for him to identify the language on it. Angell is not able to identify the strange language, but his curiosity is piqued and he asks Wilcox to continue narrating his dreams. On March 22, Wilcox is suddenly taken ill and remains in a delirious fever until April 2nd, when he wakes up and has no recollection of his illness or prior events. Later on, Angell takes the sculpture to the annual meeting of the American Archaeological Society. There he finds Inspector Legrasse, who has brought a sculpture of the same likeness as Wilcox's bas-relief, of obvious antiquity, but made of an unknown material. He recounts the strange story of the unearthing of a dark cult in the swamps of New Orleans. The worshippers of this cult were found conducting human sacrifices to a strange "deity" and chanting in an unknown language. They were captured and revealed the origins of their beliefs:

They worshipped, 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 always would exist, hidden in distant 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. (78)

Thus, the narrator, based on the two different accounts provided by Inspector Legrasse and Wilcox, makes the connection between Wilcox's dreams and the cult of Cthulhu. From this starting point, the narrator goes on a private quest in order to

discover more information. By accident he discovers another newspaper clipping in a museum recounting the story of a New Zealand yacht, the *Emma*, which was thrown out of her course by a great storm on March 1st. On April 12th, the yacht was sighted and was discovered with only two men aboard, one dead and the other one delirious. The survivor was found with a strange idol and said that on March 22nd, the yacht ran into the ship *Alert*, which was conducted by an evil-looking crew. They went into battle and the *Emma* crew was forced to kill the men from the *Alert*. The next day they sighted and landed on a small island, although none is known to exist in that part of the ocean. Through rather mysterious circumstances, six members of the crew were killed on shore, and the two survivors boarded the yacht, but were buffeted by the heavy storms on April 2nd. From this date until his rescue on April 12th, the survivor, Second Mate Johansen, remembered nothing.

Armed with this new piece of the cosmic puzzle, the narrator goes to New Zealand to interview Johansen. On his arrival, he discovers that the second mate had not survived long after the shipwreck, having been killed by a bundle of papers that fell down from a window. However, Johansen left a diary, written in English, which his widow placed in the narrator's care. This diary supplies the last pieces of the riddle, being the true account of what happened when the *Emma* arrived on the unknown island. Johansen's tale proves to be a truly horrific account of incredible events. The island, apparently had half-risen from the abysses of the sea, for the crew could see only a huge monolith, decorated with colossal sculptures and weird masonry. Upon investigation, they found an opening and out came a gigantic monster, which was of course, the great Cthulhu, although the crew was unaware of its identity. Six men were killed outright by the titanic monster and only Johansen, followed by his mate, Briden, managed to reach the boat and attempt an escape. The monster relentlessly went after them, and Briden looking back, went insane. Johansen, attempting one last ruse, directed the boat toward Cthulhu, and on collision, the monster burst into pieces.

Johansen continued with the boat at full power, looked back and saw the monster recombining itself slowly. That gave him time away to escape and after that, came the gigantic storm of April 2nd and later on, Johansen was saved.

After reading this last manuscript, the narrator concludes that the storm of April 2nd must have sunk the island again, thus trapping Cthulhu once more in its dreaming state in the city of R'lyeh under the waters. The narrator also realizes that he will not live for long, for he now knows too much and will probably encounter the same fate of his great-uncle and Johansen.

“The Call of Cthulhu” is written in a purposefully journalistic style, so as to convey to the reader the impression that the events related in the story are fully traceable and real. In order to accomplish this illusion, Lovecraft fills his story with realistic details, such as the exact dates of events, the academic credentials of Professor Angell, references to scientific publications, as when the narrator informs the reader that much of the material that he had correlated will be later published by the American Archaeological Society (Haunter of the Dark 63); references to books that actually exist, such as William Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Margaret Murray's *Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Haunter of the Dark 64), and the exact latitude of the *Alert's* sighting (S. Latitude 34°21', W. Longitude 152°17') (Haunter of the Dark 86) mentioned in Chapter I, Lovecraft also inserts in his stories imaginary books, mingled with the existent ones, so as to validate their existence. The use of these devices suggests an attempt to establish the credibility of the information provided about the unearthly events depicted in the short story and to create a “willing suspension of disbelief,” a concept defined by Coleridge as people’s or reader’s suspension of disbelief in order to allow themselves to be “taken in” by art. The use of this technique is primordial in Lovecraft's fiction, for the author wished the reader to experience a momentary suspension of the natural laws

that govern the known world. Thus, in “The Call of Cthulhu”, a level of extreme and detailed realism coexists with the weird events of the narrative. The same occurs in some of Poe’s short stories, as in “A Descent Into the Maelström,” where a Norwegian sailor narrates the story of his escape from the fabled Maelstrom with a mixture of weird events and scientific explanations.

Furthermore, one of Lovecraft's thematic concerns the mental breakdown of the characters in the face of cosmic horror, which is presented as the ultimate “truth”. In the present times we can perceive similar techniques in the now extinct television show *X Files*, which carries the motto “The truth is out there”. In the show, the main characters, two investigators, are constantly in search of proof of a worldwide alien conspiracy to dominate the world, and the ultimate “truth” is always eluding them, for there is always a piece of the puzzle missing. In the opening paragraph of “The Call of Cthulhu,” Lovecraft presents his thoughts on the subject (the quest for knowledge) quite clearly:

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 of 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 light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (61)

Through this introduction, Lovecraft sets the tone of the story and clues the reader to what he can expect. Throughout the plot, the main character will “correlate” a myriad of apparently unrelated events and in doing so, will uncover a conspiracy of cosmic proportions. Lovecraft implies that mankind will some day discover that its

“frightful position” is one of insignificance in the universe and that this knowledge might present dreadful consequences. Lovecraft’s writings suggest that humanity is not intellectually capable of dealing with the unknown, and along the story it is possible to find many instances of this notion. For instance, during Prof. Angell's many interviews with artists about their dreams, he finds that “some of the dreamers confessed acute fear of the gigantic nameless thing visible toward the last.” (69). Fear of the unknown is so acute that the artists cannot even name what they saw and the stress on the size of the monster is also important, for it enhances its cosmic dimension and places man in a physical inferior position. Moreover, when the narrator is examining his uncle's papers, he finds that the newspaper clippings “touched on cases of panic, mania, and eccentricity during the given period.” (69) This again brings attention to the fact that a glimpse into unknown matters leads to mental disintegration.

In his fictional works, Lovecraft always placed emphasis on man's fear of the unknown, fear, which for him was the ultimate bastion left for humanity to conquer. He criticized man's practice of anthropomorphizing every unknown or apparently unexplainable phenomena in order to relate to the uncanny. Thus, man invented ghosts (the disembodied spirits of a dead person), gods (entities that have special powers over the lives and affairs of people and the course of nature), werewolves, vampires, and all sorts of creatures that are in some way concerned with or related to humanity.

In “The Call of Cthulhu”, Lovecraft gives an alien shape to his criticism of a humanocentric vision, for even the name of the “monster,” *Cthulhu* and the alien cult chanting, “Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn” (74) are quite unpronounceable, consequently, men could not even relate to the naming of the creature they worshipped, for they could not be uttered perfectly by human throats. As Lovecraft remarked in “Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction”: “The human-like aspect,

psychology, and proper names commonly attributed to other-planetarians by the bulk of cheap authors is at once hilarious and pathetic.”(121) Lovecraft is careful to dehumanize any characteristics pertaining to Cthulhu and his unearthly gang. Cthulhu is described as having a “pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings” (63) and the creatures related to him are depicted as a “formless white polypous thing with luminous eyes” (76) and “bat-winged devils” (76).

However, it is interesting to note that the narrator, falls into the old mistake of attempting to humanize the creature when he says that his “somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature.” (63) The narrator is left unnamed in the story, to represent humanity as a collective in its quest to explain what defies rational explanation. He spends almost the entire story struggling between rationality and imagination as, when perusing through Prof. Angell's papers. He comments that they were a “weird bunch of cuttings, all told; and I can at this date scarcely envisage the callous rationalism with which I set them aside.” (70), and again, further in his research, he notes that the “dream-narratives and cuttings collected by the professor were, of course, strong corroboration; but the rationalism of my mind and the extravagance of the whole subject led me to adopt what I thought the most sensible conclusions.” (82) In this manner, the narrator goes through the story abandoning his own materialistic and rational views and embracing the full reality of the unknown and the impossible. The reader is clued to his change of view when the narrator states that his “attitude was still one of absolute materialism, as *I wish it still were,*” (85) implying that he cannot anymore live and maintain his rationality. For this matter, he fears for his mind and stresses the fact that there is a link between the unknown and madness. When referring to the sculpture of Cthulhu, he implies that only a “diseased fancy” (63) could conceive such a sculpture. When describing Legrasse's

progress through the swamps, the narrator says that “only poetry or madness” (76) could attempt to describe the sounds heard by the men.

Lovecraft's views on humanity as one single organism are strictly Eurocentric and relate mostly to the white, western culture, and, according to this perspective, he attempts in this story to globalize the *Cthulhu* phenomena, as in the following passage:

Here was a nocturnal suicide in London, where a lone sleeper had leaped from a window after a shocking cry. Here likewise a rambling letter to the editor of a paper in South America, where a fanatic deduces a dire future from visions he has seen. A dispatch from California describes a theosophist colony as donning white robes en masse for some 'glorious fulfillment' which never arrives, whilst items from India speak guardedly of serious native unrest toward the end of March. Voodoo orgies multiply in Haiti, and African outposts report ominous mutterings. American officers in the Philippines find certain tribes bothersome about this time, and New York policemen are mobbed by hysterical Levantines on the night of 22-23 March. (69-70)

This passage relates to the events of the period between March, 23 and April, 2 and aims to establish *Cthulhu* as a major force affecting several segments of society worldwide. However, Lovecraft's choices of places and people disturbed by *Cthulhu* only serve to emphasize his Eurocentric views. London, which could be represented as a “civilized environment,” reports only a suicide, demonstrating that the (presumed) civilized British could not cope with the horror envisioned in his dreams and chooses to end his misery; whereas. South America produces a disturbed seer, a theosophist colony is affected in California, a state known for its liberal tolerance towards non-mainstream religious beliefs. New York, famous for its cultural and ethnic diversity, presents a

Levantine mob. In addition, the other places mentioned, India, Haiti, Africa and the Philippines, focus on native revolts and primitive religions. Therefore, in spite of the fact that Lovecraft attempts to present humanity as a uniform mass, he nevertheless uses two different set of values in describing human reactions; the British suicide stands for the human inability in facing the unknown, whereas the people from less “civilized” countries/continents are affected by going into a mad collective frenzy or having delusional fantasies.

Furthermore, one of the most pervasive characteristics of Lovecraft's fiction is the creation of an atmosphere that is practically built on a character in its own right. The painstaking description of landscape and events serves to immerse the reader in the alternate reality created by Lovecraft. That is, atmosphere in Lovecraft's stories is the main element and the plot is built around it to support a certain mood or state. For instance, when Legrasse's men set out to investigate New Orleans' swamp:

At the end of the passable road they alighted, and for miles splashed on in silence through the terrible cypress woods where day never came. Ugly roots and malignant hanging nooses of Spanish moss beset them, and now and then a pile of dank stones or fragment of a rotting wall intensified by its hint of morbid habitation a depression which every malformed tree and every fungous islet combined to create. (75)

The above description was carefully constructed by Lovecraft to convey an atmosphere of dread, with every word chosen to provide a certain effect and work in unison, achieving a synchronous horror. First he establishes a difficult terrain so that the police must leave behind their means of transportation and follow on foot, thus isolating the characters from the ‘civilized world’. Secondly, Lovecraft stresses silence, which enhances the character's sense of isolation and heightens their senses to the

surroundings. Next, Lovecraft establishes that the journey is made through darkness, “where day never came,” and points out the vegetation around them: “terrible cypress woods,” a common variety in swamps, but also found in cemeteries, used as a symbol for mourning, and “malignant hanging nooses of Spanish moss.” The vegetation is now against them and begins displaying signs of evil and threat, especially in regard to the Spanish moss, a romantic symbol of the South, now shaped as instruments for hanging, foreshadowing the later body count. By the end of the long descriptive sentence, Lovecraft also is able to suggest that the swamps the policemen are traversing through were once inhabited by unwholesome beings and that their ancient taint has pervaded the environment.

Another interesting aspect to be found in “The Call of Cthulhu” is the subtle connection that Lovecraft establishes between modernist art and horror. At first Lovecraft was not fond of the modernist movement and what he disliked most about modernism was its apparent chaotic nature, best represented by T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*. His aesthetic notions were offended by what he saw as a collection of meaningless phrases, allusions, and quotations. When the *Waste Land* first came out, its novelty and daring form created quite a shock among the literary world, and naturally Lovecraft was not exempt from forming a rather harsh opinion and reaction about this piece of work and what it represented. He was quite put out by the *Waste Land*’s standing as a “poem of profound significance,” and even wrote a parody in answer to Eliot’s *Waste Land* called “Waste Paper: A Poem of Profound Insignificance,” ending with a final pun: “Henry Fielding wrote *Tom Jones*/ And cursed be he that moves my bones./ Good night, good night, the stars are bright/ I saw the Leonard-Tandler fight/ Farewell, farewell, O go to hell./ Nobody home/ In the shantih” (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* 316).

In “The Call of Cthulhu”, Lovecraft gives free reins to his dislike of the modernist movement and links the art form to the ultimate horror in the story, when the narrator is recounting Johansen's account of the lost city of R'lyeh:

Without knowing what futurism is like, Johansen achieved something very close to it when he spoke of the city; for instead of describing any definite structure or building, he dwells only on broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces - surfaces too great to belong to anything 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 said that the geometry of the dream-place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours. Now an unlettered seaman felt the same thing whilst gazing at the terrible reality. (93)

In this passage, Lovecraft implies that the city was built on futuristic lines and that it could not belong to Earth as it was too horrible and insane to be connected with anything human. Thus, futurism here represents the suspension of natural laws, prized by Lovecraft, and was an important element of weird fiction as a sub-genre of horror. Along with the futurist link, there are also several elements of the science fiction genre, especially when the narrator mentions that the geometry of the place is “abnormal, non-Euclidian.” In other passages of the story, the narrator also remarks several times that the angles in the city are all wrong: “twisted menace and suspense lurked leeringly in those crazily elusive angles of carven rock where a second glance showed concavity after the first shewed convexity” (94); when the mighty door of R'lyeh is opening: “In this phantasy of prismatic distortion it moved anomalously in a diagonal way, so that all the rules of matter and perspective seemed upset.” (95); and when one of the shipmates

falls down in the city and “was swallowed up by an angle of masonry which shouldn't have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse.” (96)

There are many similar references to scientific matters throughout “The Call of Cthulhu”. By emphatically describing the subversion of basic geometric rules, Lovecraft seems to suggest that the natural laws that govern the world have been broken and cannot be applied to unearthly physical matter. Combined with all the other elements/themes aforementioned in the story: atmosphere, fear of the unknown, aliens, horror, and science fiction, the suspension of natural laws serves as a culmination for the weirdness of Lovecraft's narrative. The treatment given to these conventions and non-convention of the horror genre is the quintessence of weird fiction.

In “The Colour Out of Space,” Lovecraft has elaborated to a greater extent the science fiction theme and, as in “The Call of Cthulhu,” horror comes from beyond the spheres of Earth, although it takes a much different form: a “living” meteor. The plot is much less convoluted than “The Call of Cthulhu,” and is told in a linear narrative style. The narrator, again nameless, is working on a survey for the building of a reservoir in the backwoods of New England. As he goes about his business, the local residents tell him that the place he is surveying reeks of evil, and they refer to the place as “blasted heath”. He mistakenly assumes that the horror whispered about by the country folk concerns old legends and superstition, but soon discovers that the strange events that gave rise to much speculation occurred only fifty years before.

The narrator finds an old man, Ammi Pierce, who has witnessed the weird events and is willing to talk about them, and he recounts the old man's story. Everything began, he told, with a meteorite that fell on the lands of a local farmer, Nahum Gardner. From the very beginning, people were intrigued by the strange nature of the meteorite. It did not cool off even after a reasonable amount of time had passed and it visibly shrank

day after day. Scholars were summoned from the nearby city, Arkham, who collected pieces of the meteorite to study at their laboratories. There, they were even more puzzled, as it defied classification and reacted strangely with many chemical solutions until it disappeared completely. Besides being composed of undefined material, it had in its core strange globule, which popped, when prodded. Also, the meteorite had strange colors that could not be classified within a known chromatic range. Meanwhile, at Nahum's farm, the meteorite, which had fallen beside a well, had also vanished. With no physical evidence left of the meteorite, scholars and neighbors soon lost interest and Nahum went back to his average farming chores. A few months later, the fruits in his land began to grow enormously and all around him nature seemed to be bountiful. However, when the time came to harvest his crops, everything was bitter and inedible for either humans or animals. As the months rolled on, life on the farm and in the surrounding area became more and more bizarre. The cows and swine also started to get sick, although they grazed in upper lands, the vegetation around Nahum's land started glowing in the dark, and neighbors and travelers started reporting strange sightings of strange animals and trees. The vegetation acquired a gray, brittle color and everything appeared doomed and blasted. Soon Nahum and his family were isolated from society, for almost no one dared venture his lands during nighttime nor visit the increasingly bizarre surroundings. Only one of his oldest friends, Ammi Pierce, still visited him from time to time. One year later, the people at the farm, namely Nahum's wife and three children started displaying disturbing behavior. The wife was locked up in the attic, for she was losing her mind and scaring her children with her odd ravings and odd facial spasms. One of the children also started going insane and was also locked up in a room in the attic. Nahum and his remaining sane children walked around dejected. Ammi, in one of his infrequent visits noted that the water from the well tasted strange and smelled

very bad and urged his friend to stop drinking the water. Nahum ignores him, and his refusal is the starting point of the real tragedy. The child locked up in the attic dies under mysterious circumstances, which Nahum refuses to disclose, only hinting at unconceivable horrors. Later on, his remaining children disappear in the woods and Nahum is left alone in the farm with his insane wife. Ammi, very worried, pays him a final visit and encounters a completely deranged Nahum and a nameless thing crawling in the attic, which he mercifully disposes of without further ado. In the meantime, horrible shrieks come from downstairs and Ammi is faced with a decomposing corpse, Nahum, barely recognizable, who manages a few final words and discloses that there is a horror in the well that sucks out the life of living creatures and burns them badly.

Ammi hastens to the city and brings back with him officers, the coroner, and a medical examiner. When they arrive at Nahum's farm, they decide to drain the well and discover the remains of Nahum's missing children and the putrefied bodies of several animals, and they find out that the bottom is strangely soft and was bubbling. The men cannot find any explanation for this and go into the house. In the meantime, night has fallen and, although there is no wind, the trees start shivering mysteriously, a strange light glows from the well, and other weird phenomena starts taking place. The horses outside react to these strange happenings and neigh nervously. The men, frightened, decide not to go outside and the light from the well seems to burn brighter. Suddenly, all hell breaks loose, the horses have run off and a faint phosphorescence starts invading the room where the men stand. They leave the house in a hurry and are able to get to a safe distance. They look back toward the house and see that the whole place is burning up and a huge ray of light rockets towards the sky, which opens up in a strange circle, and disappears, leaving no trace. The men start leaving the unholy grounds, but Ammi looks back and sees that another ray of light attempts to follow its predecessor, but is

very feeble and falls back in the well. Such is the story told by Ammi to the narrator of “The Colour Out of Space”. The reservoir will flood Nahum’s land, burying the horror even further, although it stills lurks underground, growing inch by inch over the years.

In this story, Lovecraft achieves a fusion of vanguard science fiction and archaic language. The meteor theme combined with the eerie descriptions of New England were a novel touch to the horror genre of the time. Although “The Colour Out of Space” was written in 1927, the science fiction conventions used were quite avant-garde, and nowadays can be considered a precursor to the themes of ecological disaster and the effects of the nuclear bomb on the environment and on humans. The “blasted heath” depicted in the story is the final result of the meteorite landing and its effects on the surroundings, similar to the effects of radiation.

Lovecraft is able to convey an atmosphere of ultimate horror without resorting to the usual supernatural paraphernalia that accompanies the genre. Although the meteor is a living entity, feeding on the minds and bodies of Nahum’s family and corrupting the vegetation and the farm stock, it is beyond evil and its intentions are never clear throughout the story. Therein lies the true horror of “The Colour Out of Space,” the meteor, an unknown quantity, conscious, but not in any form recognizable by humans, with a hidden agenda, spreads a disease and corrupts the land, leaving men baffled and unable to understand its motives.

Again Lovecraft uses the fear of the unknown as a major theme in force, and this is made evident in the following paragraph:

Aside from being almost plastic, having heat, magnetism, and slight luminosity, cooling slightly in powerful acids, possessing an unknown spectrum, wasting away in air, and attacking silicon compounds with mutual destruction as a result, it presented no identifying features whatsoever; and

at the end of the tests the college scientists were forced to own that they could not place it. It was nothing of this earth, but a piece of the great outside; and as such dowered with outside properties and obedient to outside laws. (*The Haunter of the Dark* 243)

The above description refers to the analysis of the meteor in the scientists' laboratory. In this story, as in "The Call of Cthulhu", the scientists represent the power of reason against the unknown, and again, they are not successful in defining the meteor within their logical reasoning. Since later on, the meteor disappears completely, "the professors felt scarcely sure they had indeed seen with waking eyes that cryptic vestige of the fathomless gulfs outside; that lone, weird message from other universes and other realms of matter, force, and entity." (244) In a single sentence Lovecraft summarizes his view of humankind: they are not capable of rationalizing the unknown and prefer to wallow in ignorance than accept the existence of life beyond the human sphere.

Another interesting characteristic of the destructive meteorite is that it not only spreads a disease of the body, but also of the mind. Nahum and his family become practically isolated from the rest of the world and the meteor drains their life force and their willpower. It can be said that the meteor acts like a "vampire", in that it feeds on the environment and the psyche of the people around. In his stories, Lovecraft always stresses the mental disintegration that his characters undergo when confronted with the *weird* (in this context, referring to the elements that comprise weird fiction), and, in "The Colour Out of Space", this characteristic in Lovecraft's fiction has been fully developed.

The first sign of madness came from Nahum's wife. Apparently she was affected first because she had less contact with people; Nahum worked the fields during the day and her children were at school most of the time. Being almost completely

isolated from society and shunned by the neighbors, Nahum's wife lacked resources to deal with the mental poisoning caused by the meteorite. However, in the initial stages of her madness, she was able to describe what was happening to her: "Something was taken away - she was being drained of something - something was fastening itself on her that ought not to be - someone must make it keep off - nothing was ever still in the night - the walls and windows shifted." (250) It is interesting to note that Nahum's wife goes practically nameless through the story, with no identity of her own. She is known as "Nahum's wife" or "Mrs. Gardener", and only by the end of the story the reader learns her name, and even that is only her nickname—Nabby—, when Ammi, visiting Nahum, inquires after her. She slowly evolves from "Nahum's wife" to "blasphemous monstrosity", "the horror", and finally, to "the shape in the corner", finally losing all human characteristics.

Thus, through the theme of isolation and contact with the unknown, Lovecraft again demonstrates his lack of faith on the human condition. Nahum and his family are abandoned by society due to the strange and unexplainable events surrounding them. Confronted with the unknown, people (as perceived by Lovecraft) either avoid it or in the case of the Gardners, lose their sanity and are destroyed.

In summary, these short stories represent each a different aspect in the works of Lovecraft and are representative of the conventions of weird fiction, that is, they are a blend of horror with elements of science fiction and unexplainable phenomena, and are all illustrative of the insignificance of human beings in relation to the horrors and mysteries of the cosmos, which is the basis for most of Lovecraft's stories.

Conclusion

The previous chapters of this thesis have attempted to demonstrate the importance of Lovecraft's work within a contemporary literary movement. Despite the fact that Lovecraft, up to the present time, has remained practically undiscovered to the academic world, his literary production has been prolific and important for writers and readers interested in the horror genre. Only a small group of independent scholars and enthusiasts has demonstrated any interest in his works and aesthetic theories, for the new sub-genre he created, *weird fiction*, does not readily fall into the lines of mainstream horror and, as a more obscure literary sub-genre, has not been an object of study.

As discussed in the Introductory Chapter of this thesis, H. P. Lovecraft is the most representative writer in *weird fiction*, and for this reason the analysis of his works provided a basis on which to define with more precision the stylistic, thematic and structural elements in weird fiction, as a distinctive art form. During his lifetime, Lovecraft's essays, poems and stories were scattered in various amateur and pulp magazines. Only after his death, in 1937, was he published, thanks to his industrious friends, August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, who formed the publishing firm of Arkham House for the sole purpose of publishing his works. Since then, Lovecraft's works have become available in paperback and translated into a dozen languages. His works have had a mixed reception and some critics reviled his style of writing as too pompous and accused him of 'adjectivitis', due to the excessive use of adjectives in his prose. As stated before, his rather verbose style was intentional, for Lovecraft felt that, in order to create a proper atmosphere of weirdness, he had to describe the setting and events in painstaking details. Moreover, Lovecraft has also been accused of imitating

Poe's style, which is not true, for, although he was highly influenced by Poe's work, he managed to create a style of his own and confined himself to the weird prose and poems, whereas Poe alternated in other genres, such as the detective story.

Despite the bad reviews he received when publishing his works, at the present time, Lovecraft is considered by most critics to be a major figure in twentieth-century supernatural fiction and many modern horror writers, such as Peter Straub and Stephen King acknowledged his influence and even quoted him or used some of his characters in their own stories. Lovecraft's creations were also transported to the big screen and his stories served as inspiration to several films, such as *Die, Monster, Die* (1965), *Re-animator* (1985), and *Necronomicon* (1993), among others. Furthermore, Lovecraft was able throughout his works to converge two genres: horror and science fiction and imprint his own particular brand to this blend. He united the fear of the unknown to fear of the future, as represented in his alien characters. However, he actually managed to go beyond this point, and also include fear of the past, with the theme of a long-lost alien civilization which had populated Earth way before the rise of man. Lovecraft accomplished another *coup de grâce* with the slow building of tension and structuring of stories around atmosphere, following his theory that atmosphere was the most important element in a weird story, probably influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, who in his "Philosophy of Composition," already pointed out the importance of the creation of atmosphere and mood in a story.

The greatest horror in a Lovecraft story is not about aliens, mysterious forces or unexplained phenomena, but the slow awakening in man that he is not the center of the universe, but only temporary matter in cosmic chaos. The theme of cosmic indifferentism is the trademark of Lovecraft's aesthetic theory. For, being an atheist, he did not conform to the subscribed mode of the horror genre of the 1930's, which

consisted on constant battles between good and evil, vampires, ghosts and other supernatural phenomena. With his short stories, Lovecraft was able to turn focus off man and transfer it to the universe at large. In his stories, the human characters can be classified within three categories: (1) blissfully ignorant of their insignificance and place at a cosmic level, (2) knowing and alert who learn the truth and go insane, and (3) knowing and alert and capable of adjusting to the idea that the cosmos does not revolve around them. Lovecraft used the theme of cosmic indifferentism throughout most of his stories and in “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Colour Out of Space”, this theme is well developed and represented, as was seen in chapter II.

In the Introduction, I briefly presented the theoretical background on genre theory, the horror genre, weird fiction, and a review of criticism on Lovecraft’s works. In Chapter I, I exposed Lovecraft’s letters and ideas, expecting to show the workings behind his aesthetic theory on weird fiction. It is important to keep in mind that theories enlighten. A theory is a set of related propositions that help explain why concepts are interpreted the way they are. A theory is an abstract, conjectural or speculative representation of reality. The theoretical framework used in this thesis reflects some of the most relevant theories on genre study. Todorov’s insights on the definition of the boundaries of the fantastic genre and Neal’s notions of genre were fundamental to demonstrate that a genre, in fact, has no boundaries and is in constant motion. The other authors mentioned throughout this work also served to show the diverse theories on genre over time.

In Chapter II, through the analysis of two short stories I made evident Lovecraft’s cosmic vision and his use of atmosphere as a character on its own right. I hope to have demonstrated that Lovecraft’s aesthetic theory concerning weird fiction is a valid one and could be used to classify the sub-genre *weird fiction*. Lovecraft was the

creator of this sub-genre and before he undertook the task of explaining it in full, there was no other theoretical study about weird fiction. He was a pioneer in this field of study and his comments, opinions and theories were spread among most of his essays, innumerable letters to friend and in his seminal work *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Through the selection of his papers I was able to piece together his thoughts and present them in a uniform manner to accomplish the object of this study which was to present Lovecraft's theories regarding weird fiction and demonstrate that he created a successful and new sub-genre of the horror genre which could be understandable through genre theory.

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