
From Poe to South Park: The Influence and Development of Lovecraft's 'Cosmic Horror' in American Culture

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ABSTRACT H.P. Lovecraft's 'Cosmic Horror' has been a staple of horror and gothic fiction, and therefore American culture, for more than 80 years. In this paper, I examine the development of the genre of horror, starting with Edgar Allan Poe's influence, and trace its development up to contemporary popular American culture exemplified by the TV show *South Park*. While Lovecraft's material has always been drawing from the same concept of the fear of the unknown and human powerlessness in the face of greater forces, the context, sources and reasons for this powerlessness have constantly changed over the decades. In this paper I offer an examination of where this idea of 'Cosmic Horror' originally came from, how Lovecraft developed it further and, ultimately, how American culture has adapted the source material to fit a contemporary context. By contrasting Lovecraft's early works with Poe's, I shed light on the beginnings of the sub-genre before taking a look at the height of 'Cosmic Horror' in Lovecraft's most famous texts of the Cthulhu myth and ultimately look at a trilogy of *South Park* episodes to put all of this into a modern American perspective. By doing so, I reveal how Lovecraft's tales and the underlying philosophy have always been an important part of American culture and how they continue to be relevant even today.

KEYWORDS cosmic horror, gothic, Lovecraft

1. INTRODUCTION

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was arguably “the most memorable and important American writer in the surprisingly enduring pulp terror genre” (Tyree 2008, 143) and one of the most diverse authors of gothic and horror fiction in American literary history. He left the world a significant number of short stories, novellas, and essays after his passing in March 1937. His influence is not limited to the world of literature; it covers the whole repertoire of modern popular culture (Evans 2005; Hull 2006). This strong appeal is partly due to the diversity of Lovecraft’s literary output. His works of fiction are usually divided into three categories: the ‘Macabre’ or more classic gothic stories written in the fashion of Edgar Allan Poe, the ‘Dream Cycle’ stories which take place in an alternative dimension entered through one’s dreams and, most famously, the ‘Cthulhu Mythos’ stories that feature gods and other entities from outer space and other dimensions like the aforementioned Cthulhu or Azathoth.

However, apart from the recurring characters and the gods, there is one major topic that links all of Lovecraft’s stories, which will also be the focus of this thesis: ‘Cosmic Horror’. The main idea behind this literary philosophy ushered forth by Howard Phillips Lovecraft is the idea that humanity and its actions are ultimately meaningless in the greater scheme of things (Lovecraft 1927b). Stemming from his disdain for religion and the numerous discoveries in the scientific world during his lifetime, Lovecraft was convinced that the human quest for knowledge eventually results in the realization that we are absolutely powerless to comprehend or influence what is really out there in the cosmos. Therefore, the characters in his story constantly find themselves subjected to this ultimate horror. Their search for knowledge and enlightenment brings forth something that they ultimately have to admit is utterly beyond their understanding and control, and has no interest whatsoever in their existence. It is this fear of the unknown and incomprehensible that stood at the center of all horror for Lovecraft.

In this paper, I will take a look at the development of ‘Cosmic Horror’, from Lovecraft’s 1923 story *The Rats in the Walls* and its connections to classic gothic horror and Edgar Allan Poe, all the way to how this concept was adapted by modern popular culture in the form of a TV series *South Park*.

2. POE’S INFLUENCE ON ‘COSMIC HORROR’ EXEMPLIFIED BY “THE RATS IN THE WALLS”

2.1. SIMILARITIES AND DISCREPANCIES TO “THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER”

The first and foremost similarity between the two stories is the setting itself. Both works feature a secluded building somewhere quite a distance away from other houses or villages, and both have a long family tradition. Whereas the Usher mansion served as the seat for the family of Roderick and Madeline for many generations (Poe 1839), the castle of Exham Priory in *The Rats in the Walls* (Lovecraft 1923) is even older. Built on “the site of a prehistoric temple” until eventually “Henry the Third granted the site to [...] Gilbert de la Poer, First Baron Exham, in 1261” (Lovecraft 1923), it has been in the possession of the Delapores for almost 700 years.

Furthermore, both share a strange connection to their inhabitants. In Poe’s story (1839), this connection is subtler than the one Lovecraft establishes. It is mentioned early on that “the ‘House of Usher’ [...] seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion” (Poe 1839). This bond is made evident at the very end when both Madeline and Roderick die, and their mansion begins to fall apart with them.

Lovecraft, on the other hand, uses a more straightforward approach to this matter through the titular rats. They serve as the main connection between the protagonist and the castle of his ancestors. The fact that the rats are directly linked to the Delapores, and not to the castle,

is addressed forthright by the protagonist himself when he states that, "no one had heard the rats save the felines and me" (Lovecraft 1923) and the fact that during his absence not even the cats showed further signs of agitation.

Another commonality between the two stories is the employment of inherited guilt. In *The Rats in the Walls* (Lovecraft 1923), Delapore discovers something evil about his ancestors and learns about the atrocities they have committed. The end result of this revelation is usually similar across his stories: either they pay for their own and their ancestors' guilt and deeds with their lives, or they go insane as is the case with Delapore (Evans 2005).

Ancestral guilt, more precisely incest, is also a possible explanation for Roderick's supposed illness, which seems hereditary. Eventually, he and Madeline end up the same as the characters in Lovecraft's stories whose background is not free of such immoral doings; they both die and eradicate their whole family line with them. Furthermore, the Ushers even take their family estate with them, just as Delapore who destroys Exham Priory completely after uncovering its secrets and falling into madness.

This ending seems to be an attempt to recreate what Lovecraft thought was one of Poe's strongest instruments in storytelling as Lovecraft (1927b) mentions in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*:

Inconceivable abnormalities slyly hinted into a horrible half-knowledge by words whose innocence we scarcely doubt till the cracked tension of the speaker's hollow voice bids us fear their nameless implications; daemonic patterns and presences slumbering noxiously till waked for one phobic instant into a shrieking revelation that cackles itself to sudden madness or explodes in memorable and cataclysmic echoes.

2.2. A FIRST GLIMPSE OF 'COSMIC HORROR'

As demonstrated before, Lovecraft took a lot of inspiration from his idol Edgar Allan Poe (Lovecraft 1931). However, he still succeeded in putting in some of his principles of 'Cosmic Horror' in *The Rats in the Walls*.

An assault of demons from space and the defeat of the laws of nature are recurring themes in Lovecraft's writings, and the essential parts of what creates 'Cosmic Horror' (Lee 2009). Traces and hints of it can be found in *The Rats in the Walls* (Lovecraft 1923) which make the story a great vantage point from which one can track the progression of this 'Cosmic Horror' throughout his bibliography.

The easiest way to spot elements of this Lovecraftian aspect of horror is the mentioning of one of the gods he invented, Nyarlathotep. Delapore states that he was venturing further and further into "those grinning caverns of earth's centre where Nyarlathotep, the mad faceless god, howls blindly to the piping of two amorphous idiot flute-players" (Lovecraft 1923). This god is one of the 'Other Gods' Lovecraft created throughout his lifetime and serves as an emissary for them, mainly for Azathoth. He is the central antagonist in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (Lovecraft 1927a) and later also appears in other stories of both the 'Dream Cycle' and the 'Cthulhu Mythos'. Lovecraft even dedicated a vignette to him titled *Nyarlathotep* (Lovecraft 1920).

The fact that he is mentioned by Delapore in this story raises the question of how he can even know his name. Usually, the names of these gods are only found in the fictional *Necronomicon* (consult Lovecraft 1927c), or are related by other characters that devoted their life to the studies of black magic and the 'Other Gods'. Delapore never mentioned having anything to do with any of this. However, the mentioning of Nyarlathotep gives the story this demon from outer space. Even though it is not mentioned that Delapore's predecessors were successful in possibly trying to summon one of the gods or other things from their realm, it adds to the feeling that there was something sinister going on in those catacombs besides the already horrible cannibalism and sacrifices, something even darker that is beyond the understanding of regular human beings.

This also deviates from the form that was already used in ancient works like Homer's *Iliad* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where all the horror stems from being at the mercy of the gods. As Oates (1998, 179) puts it: "In these great works of the ancient world, existential horror would seem to be the result, not of human volition and responsibility, but of mere chance: the cruel caprice of gods." In *The Rats in the Walls* (1923) and Lovecraft's works in general, the horror, although rooted in the power of these gods and other beings, is called upon by humans. They are the ones who summon them or try to use some of their powers for their own purposes, and most often end up losing control. However, the element of chance is omitted here; it all comes back to an active role of the human characters that are directly responsible for the horror they let loose on the world through their doings.

According to Oates (1998), there is something else that contributes to a successful gothic story: man as a creature of instinct. This also holds true for *The Rats in the Walls* (1923) and basically every other story by Lovecraft. In *The Rats in the Walls* (Lovecraft 1923), this primitive instinct is highlighted through curiosity. Delapore is one of the characters who, despite also being a slave to his curiosity, goes about it in a slightly different manner than many other Lovecraft characters. The main difference is that he seeks the assistance of other people, mainly scientists, while uncovering the tombs under the Exham Priory.

However, the succumbing to one's primal instincts is best emphasized by the degeneration of Delapore towards the end of the story. There, he goes back in time linguistically, mumbling and screaming in languages and sounds that date further and further back in time. Furthermore, it not only reminds the reader almost violently of the basic nature of this character, it raises another question that is essential to the gothic story: "How human are we? How deep is our humanness? [...] Anxiety arises when we ponder to what degree we share in the civilization to which we belong. The most extreme "fall" is to revert to vampirism/cannibalism" (Oates 1998, 184–185). By connecting this essential question with ancient, unknown gods and human sacrifices, Lovecraft creates a powerful first glimpse of what 'Cosmic Horror' can be.

3. LOVECRAFT'S LEGACY IN PRESENT DAY TV SERIES "SOUTH PARK"

While the main focus of *South Park's* episodes *Coon 2: Hindsight*, *Mysterion Rises* and *Coon vs. Coon and Friends* on the Lovecraft material is a humorous one, certain elements of 'Cosmic Horror' can still be found. Most prominently, the idea that the downfall of humanity would be caused by discoveries of the scientific world which would eventually uncover things that are beyond human control. In the trilogy of *South Park* episodes about Cthulhu, this is symbolized by oil drillings that cause a hole to another dimension to appear and eventually even bring Cthulhu itself forth. Here, the scientific progress and the never-ending desire to uncover more and more about the universe are transformed into a greedy need for oil and eventually money, ultimately turning the message into an environmental one.

However, the basis is the same; man's tempering with nature beyond his means eventually brings its downfall. While it certainly will not bring forth a 'Great Old One', disasters like oil spills, the overfishing of the oceans, or the consequences of global warming, like melting glaciers and polar caps resulting in flooding and extreme weather conditions around the globe, are closer to the truth than Lovecraft himself would have probably imagined.

Furthermore, even if the heroes of the show eventually defeat Cthulhu, it still stands without a doubt that compared to beings like it, humanity is absolutely insignificant. Therefore, the twist at the end that only child superhero 'Mintberry Crunch', who is revealed to be an alien himself, can save the earth emphasizes the central point of 'Cosmic Horror' perfectly. Additionally, the incident left the people of the world in the knowledge that such things as Cthulhu do exist and that they could destroy the world on a whim, as long as humanity is not saved by something or someone equally powerful. The hero 'Mysterion' is especially left with uncertainty about his origins and powers at the end that goes hand in hand with the fear of the unknown found in Lovecraft's literary legacy.

Even if the shadow of satire hangs heavy over the legacy of 'Cosmic Horror' in *South Park*, the sheer look and magnitude of the beings that are summoned onto earth by a man-made mistake are enough to evoke at least a slight feeling of terror of what the future will bring if humanity cannot contain its urge to temper with nature and things it does not understand to its full extent. In this sense, Francis Wayland Thurston's words at the beginning of *The Call of Cthulhu* (Lovecraft 1926) hold true in a frightening way when he writes:

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 deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

Therefore, maybe the characters of the show are blessed by their ignorance of Kenny McCormick's immortality, its origins and the horrible implications of what lies in dimensions beyond human understanding.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have shown how 'Cosmic Horror' has developed over time, not only in the writings of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, but also in modern popular culture, in the form of the TV show *South Park*.

By comparing *The Rats in the Walls* (1923) with a story from Lovecraft's role model Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), I pointed out that, despite his heavy lean towards a stereotypical gothic story, Lovecraft was able to put his own trademark on the story by infusing it with a first small dose of 'Cosmic Horror'.

His 'Cosmic Horror' had fully developed by the time he wrote *The Call of Cthulhu* (1926), and is manifested in many of his stories in the form of the 'Great Old Ones' later on. These beings from another dimension stand for everything that is 'Cosmic Horror' in Lovecraft's writings; the fear of something beyond human understanding, powers that are too great to understand, let alone control or defeat, and the possibility that they awake from their slumber by the human quest for knowledge represented in the sciences. Furthermore, their sudden appearance as well as vanishing at the end of the stories convey another incredibly important aspect of his works; the fear of the unknown. Knowing that these gods and creatures lie waiting without having any idea of when the final day will arrive evokes an uncertainty that makes one shiver.

While the characters in Lovecraft's works have indeed caught only a glimpse of these terrifying vistas, the *South Park* episodes *Coon 2: Hindsight*, *Mysterion Rises* and *Coon vs. Coon and Friends* have gone all the way by calling forth the great Cthulhu through human hubris and greed. In this modern setting, Lovecraft's 'Cosmic Horror' suffers some blows for the sake of humor, but still conveys its principles and frightening implications of terrible monsters and powers in dimensions beyond human imagination, insignificance compared to these powers, and uncertainty about what is to come once these powers are awoken. In this sense, they prove that 'Cosmic Horror' indeed has transformed over time, from a substantial fear of what the sciences will uncover that is not meant to be known by the human mind, to more of a cautious tale about tempering with nature, but it has not lost its appeal.

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Perwein, Christian. 2018. "From Poe to South Park: The Influence and Development of Lovecraft's 'Cosmic Horror' in American Culture." *XA Proceedings* 1(1): 96–105. Zagreb: English Student Club.

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