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# Eldritch Horrors: the Modernist Liminality of H.P. Lovecraft's Weird Fiction

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ELDRITCH HORRORS: THE MODERNIST LIMINALITY OF H.P. LOVECRAFT'S  
WEIRD FICTION

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Bachelor of Arts in English

Baldwin-Wallace University

December 2014

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at

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May 2017

THIS THESIS IS HEREBY APPROVED FOR

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candidate for the Master of Arts in English

degree for the Department of English

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CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S

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9 May 2017

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ELDRITCH HORRORS: THE MODERNIST LIMINALITY OF H.P. LOVECRAFT'S  
WEIRD FICTION

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**ABSTRACT**

In the early part of the twentieth century, the Modernist literary movement moving into what was arguably its peak, and authors we would now unquestioningly consider part of the Western literary canon were creating some of their greatest works. Coinciding with the more mainstream Modernist movement, there emerged a unique sub-genre of fiction on the pages of magazines with titles like *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories*. While modernist writers; including Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, and T.S. Elliot – among others – were achieving acclaim for their works; in the small corner of unique weird fiction there was one eccentric, bookish writer who rose above his own peers: Howard Phillips Lovecraft. I would argue that within the works of Lovecraft there are glimpses of modernism. Lovecraft was aware of and wrote with an understanding of the concerns of the more mainstream literature of the Modernists, and he situated his narratives and stories within a modernist framework that reflected this. Most importantly, it is the way in which Lovecraft used science and religion, and blended myth with material culture, that Lovecraft most reflects modernist leanings. It's important to make the distinction that he is not part and parcel a Modernist, but he was influenced by,

interacted with, and showed modernist tendencies. There is a subtlety to the argument being made here in that Lovecraft was not Joyce, he was not Elliot, he was most definitely not Hemingway, and his fiction was by no means what we would consider traditionally modernist. In 2005 he received inclusion in the Library of America series and, although this isn't an indicator or guarantee of inclusion in a large canon, the argument that he in no way had a discourse, awareness, or did not contribute to what would be more properly termed 'Modernist' warrants consideration when properly situating Lovecraft within early-twentieth century literature. In the ways in which he subverted and changed what previously constituted horror fiction, Lovecraft holds a liminal place in the Modernist perspective.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTERS	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. SHAMBLING TOWARDS MODERNISM .....	6
III: A SENSE OF OUTSIDENESS: HISTORICITY.....	12
IV: “THE CALL OF CTHULHU” AND “THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH” AS MODERNIST TEXTS .....	23
V: FOLKLORE, MYTHOS, AND MATERIAL CULTURE AS MODERNIST PROXIES .....	41
VI: CONCLUSION .....	53
WORKS CITED .....	57

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In the early part of the twentieth century, the Modernist literary movement was growing and moving into what was arguably its peak, and authors we would now unquestioningly consider part of the Western literary canon were creating some of their greatest works. Coinciding with the more mainstream Modernist movement, there emerged a unique sub-genre of fiction on the pages of magazines with titles like *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories*. Distinct from the more realistic and form-subverting works of the avowedly non-commercial literature of the period, the decidedly commercial stories found therein were lurid tales about space exploration, alien monsters, ancient horrors, and strange worlds. On their surface, these weird tales seemed antithetical to the modern narratives that the canon authors were producing, focused as they were on the seemingly incongruous mix of science fiction and ancient myth and horror; however, these stories laid the basis for what would become known as the weird fiction genre. Weird fiction is a term Lovecraft himself used to describe the genre in which he wrote and, at its most simple, weird fiction is a fiction of cosmic fear. Lovecraft adopted the



term from Sheridan Le Fanu, an Irish Gothic writer, and further defined weird fiction in his long form essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature” where he wrote:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to 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 or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space (14).

Lovecraft would also use the adjective ‘weird’ in his stories, although he preferred using the medieval form “eldritch” which, per the OED, means “Weird, ghostly, unnatural, frightful, or hideous”. It’s also important to note that, when dealing with the pulps and other genre magazines, the term “commercial” is a somewhat misleading term. These magazines were indeed paying markets, but the circulation was small and the pay was exceedingly low. A mongrel mix of science fiction, fantasy, and horror – and sometimes all three - these ‘pulp’ magazines did enjoy immense popularity. They were considered, even at the time, a lower form of fiction. They were the precursor to what would become a widely accepted subgenre of horror literature, although that acceptance was slow in coming. While writers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, and T.S. Elliot – among others – were achieving acclaim for their works, in the small corner of unique weird fiction there was one eccentric, bookish writer who rose above his own peers: Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

Lovecraft was a reclusive descendant of New England’s founding fathers who wrote and labored and created a unique mythos that – even today – remains an indelible part of horror writing and popular culture. Much has been written of Lovecraft – his

introversion, his quaintly anachronistic pre-Edwardian principles, his reluctance to publish his own work – and his legacy and where he fits within the canon of American literature remains a source of contention among critics and scholars. In 2005 he received inclusion in the Library of America series, which simultaneously provided vindication to his proponents, and yet another source of disdain by his detractors. His influence on modern writers is undeniable, but is replete with reservations by some of those same writers. As Stephen King observes, “...it is [Lovecraft’s] shadow . . . and his eyes . . . which overlies almost all of the important horror fiction that has come since. Lovecraft opened the way for me, as he had done for others before me” (102). The period in which weird fiction arose was unique, and Lovecraft’s fiction represented that. Lovecraft considered himself an anachronism, a man living out of time. He frequently wrote that he wished he had been born in the eighteenth century. He also, in writings, proclaimed himself a displaced subject of King George III of England and an avowed Tory, while longing to not be simply an American living in the twentieth century (Montague 21). In this way, he is perhaps most like the more successful modernist, T.S. Eliot, whom Lovecraft repeatedly and vociferously railed against. They were both neoclassicist and avowed royalists, and were both guilty of racism and anti-Semitism, and despite Lovecraft’s claims otherwise, were more similar than different. Although some critics, most prominently S.T. Joshi, have attempted to minimize Lovecraft’s racism, Lovecraft’s racism is perhaps the most problematic facet of his philosophy and work. It is important to understand that racism was still very much alive in the early part of the twentieth century, obviously, and the modernist period was coming soon after the height of colonialism and exploration. The use of race by Lovecraft in his stories is not incidental,

but it is also undeniably archaic. Additionally, while Lovecraft would "... fulminate against such things as free verse, stream-of-consciousness, or the chaoticism of ... Eliot" (Joshi *I Am Providence Vol. I* 474), Eliot's work and poetry was a constant reference in Lovecraft's own writing. In fact, Eliot's seminal poetic work "The Waste Land" was parodied by Lovecraft in a stylistically similar poem entitled "The Waste Paper". As St. Armand and Stanley observe, Eliot and Lovecraft were "... brothers beneath the skin, for both shared a disgust for modern civilization and a horror of the mob" (43) as well as a somewhat virulent misanthropy. While Lovecraft's disdain for the writing and trappings of modernity may have only been partially tongue in cheek, his love for the eighteenth and nineteenth century and its literature are undeniable. Despite this, and his penchant for the verboseness of a prior century's prose – reminiscent in many ways of Henry James – does Lovecraft have a place in the Modernist movement? Should he be relegated to the fringe of genre fiction, separated by an elitist need to segregate Lovecraft and pulp fiction from the "serious" literature of the canon, or were there more modern and modernist attributes at play in his work?

Within the weird fiction works of Lovecraft, there are glimpses of modernism. Lovecraft was aware of and wrote with an understanding of the concerns of the more mainstream and successful literature of the modernists, and he situated his narratives and stories within a modernist framework that reflected this. Those concerns and techniques that are decidedly modernist, especially those around alienation, the impulse to decentralize notions of reality, and experimentation with form, can be found in Lovecraft's fiction. Additionally, in regard to the ways in which he subverted and changed what was previously constituted as horror fiction, Lovecraft holds a liminal place in the Modernist

movement. Most importantly, it is the way in which Lovecraft used science and religion while blending myth with material culture to reflect modernist leanings that he shows the strongest way in which he interacted with his modern contemporaries, or as Martin observed:

Just as scholars have labored over allusions, translations, and references of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, Lovecraft's constant mixing of real and fictional texts, historical events, places, and scientific knowledge has led countless readers to expand their own knowledge (204).

It's important to make the argument that he is not part and parcel a Modernist; but he was influenced by, interacted with, and showed modernist tendencies. This will be illustrated through a closer examination of what are – arguably – Lovecraft's two greatest stories, "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth".

## CHAPTER II

### SHAMBLING TOWARDS MODERNISM

The Modernist period was primarily rooted in the early years of the twentieth century, from approximately 1909 through 1939 (Butler 1). Modernists, as well as the canonical writers we think of as modernist, shared several traits that were emblematic of the literary canon of the early twentieth century. As the *Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* defines it, modernism:

...resists neat definition, but is perhaps best understood as an epoch of radical cultural upheaval which flourished predominantly in Europe and the USA from, arguably, around the last quarter of the 19th century to, no less debatably, around the start of the Second World War.

David Ayers argues even further for the complexities in defining Modernism in

*Modernism: A Short Introduction:*

Modernism... presents a bewildering plurality of material... while such an emphasis on plurality is entirely warranted I nevertheless believe that it is possible to develop an overarching narrative of the apparently fragmented arts of modernism. Broad themes about the nature of selfhood and consciousness, the autonomy of language, the role of art and the artist, the nature of the industrial world, and the alienation of the gendered existence form a set of concerns which manifest themselves across a range of works and authors (x).

Christopher Butler further defines Modernity as a reaction to:

The stresses and strains brought about within this period by the loss of belief in religion, the rise of dependence on science and technology, the expansion of markets and commodification brought about by capitalism, the growth of mass culture and its influences, the invasion of bureaucracy into private life, and changing beliefs about relationships between the sexes (1-2).

For Lovecraft and his contemporaries – who wrote during the time period roughly from the time after World War I until Lovecraft’s death in 1937 – there was an explosion of literature that reacted to the horrors of that post-war time. Writers of the period, like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, saw World War I as a pivotal point in history that destroyed the illusion that acting virtuously brought about good. Much like their British contemporaries, American modernists rejected traditional institutions and forms. Their antipathy towards traditional institutions found its way into their writing – not just in content, but in form as well – and some of the literary techniques utilized by these writers included stream of consciousness, social realism, regionalism, and unreliable narrators and perspectives. Typical themes include:

...question[ing] of the reality of experience itself; the search for a ground of meaning in a world without God; the critique of the traditional values of the culture; the loss of meaning and hope in the modern world and an exploration of how this loss may be faced (Lye)

The Modernist period is also important in that it saw the beginning of a bifurcation of literature in terms of respectability. The Modernist era saw a distinction between “high” and “low” fiction, but that distinction, as many texts choose to use when defining Modernism, is smaller than one would think. Suffering from what David M. Earle aptly calls a "prejudice of form (102)" many critics of Lovecraft and the other pulp writers of the interwar years attempt to situate them in the so-called “genre ghetto” of mass

production and consumerism. Genre pulp writers like Lovecraft were attempting to write for the masses, and not for loftier and more aesthetic goals that those elite literary authors we would consider part and parcel of the Modernist canon were. This distinction and criticism becomes problematic when one considers the fact that many of the most recognizable and lauded authors of the high Modernist movement were also writing for pulps. As David M. Earle covers extensively in *Re-Covering Modernism*, authors and poets as varied as James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and T.S. Eliot all contributed to and published in what was pejoratively referred to as the ‘pulp’. The reductive argument that commercialism is a definer of literary merit is found even more faulty when one considers that many of the Modernist masterpieces were commercially produced and distributed in much the same way pulp and genre fiction were. D.H Lawrence’s “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” shared shelf space with *Weird Tales* and, as Searles observes,

... the author is not introduced into a modernist sphere of consumption, for the milieu is not even literary, as in a book store, but a proletariat space – a Woolworth’s, a Kresge’s... In this realm, Woolf’s and Eliot’s peers are not Joyce, Pound, and Stein, but Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. P. Lovecraft, and Mickey Spillane (154).

This does raise the specter of snobbery on behalf of literary critics who argue for modernist literature’s elite separation from the supposed masses. From a critical perspective, Eminent Lovecraft scholar, S.T. Joshi has said repeatedly that “[Lovecraft] never embraced Modernism”. As Sean Elliot Martin observed, “[Lovecraft] showed a dissatisfaction with many of the experimental writers of his time” (66). Furthermore, other critics have argued that Lovecraft was removed from, “the political social, literary, and philosophical movements of the day” (Joshi *Topical* 247) and that this exclusion somehow made it possible for him to exclude himself. I would argue that this was, in

point of fact, not true. For example, Joshi's apologist attempt to remove Lovecraft from the politics and social discourse of the era is done to reduce Lovecraft's more distasteful racist and eugenics beliefs. Also, despite Lovecraft's avowed reverence for the style and writing of earlier centuries, he was also very modernist in his views, with a knowledge that showed a deep understanding of early twentieth century science, philosophy, and the literary developments of his contemporaries. Lovecraft was a rationalist and an atheist, an autodidact who fancied himself a learned man of scientific. He was a high school dropout, but he was amazingly well read and had an enthusiastic passion for astronomy and hard sciences. These seemingly incongruous worldviews, rather than hinder him creatively, were the very things that make him so powerful a writer. Norman R. Gatford, in "The Artist as Antaeus: Lovecraft and Modernism" comes closer to positioning Lovecraft within the Modernist movement through an examination of Lovecraft's correspondence, and observed that:

[Lovecraft's] letters and fiction destabilize humanocentrist philosophy and sciences... Lovecraft was a philosophical modernist, if not an entirely artistic one. Probing the limits of art and the use of geometric images, Lovecraft enters the prose versus poetry conversation of his time. He also enters the ongoing debate regarding tradition and orthodoxy (273-274).

The argument that he in no way had an awareness of or did not contribute to what would be more properly termed Modernist must be explored if we are to situate Lovecraft within early-twentieth century fiction and literature. Arguments that he is the 'father of twentieth century horror and weird fiction' are predicated upon whether or not his works were at all unique or different from what came before. There is a subtlety to the argument being made here in that Lovecraft was not James Joyce, he was not T.S. Elliot or Ezra Pound, he was most definitely not Ernest Hemingway, and his fiction was by no means



what we would consider traditionally modernist. Additionally, although Lovecraft's modernist contemporaries were also publishing their works in lower quality mainstream magazines, the magazines in which one would find, say Virginia Woolf, were of a much different caliber and reached a much broader audience. As Johansen observed, "It is also worth remembering that Lovecraft's whole career as a writer is by and large inextricably linked up with... pulp magazines belonging essentially to the 1920s and 1930s such as *Amazing Stories*, *Weird Tales*, and *Astounding Stories*" (290). The pulps in which Lovecraft plied his trade were incredibly small and, in many respects, might be considered by today's reader the equivalent of a fanzine. That being said, as Evans has argued,

In reaction to the breakdown of an older "reality" defined by tradition, Lovecraft posited a world in which reality could be created anew by the self-conscious artistic manipulation and creation of tradition... In reaction to the limitations of traditional genres, Lovecraft created a new, hybrid genre that combined horror, science fiction, and regionalism (127).

Lovecraft did function both inside and outside of the mainstream literary discourse. Conversely, Lovecraft did not work in a vacuum, completely devoid of interaction with his literary contemporaries. He was a prodigious correspondent who, by some estimates, wrote over 75,000 letters in his lifetime (Lovecraft *Lord* vii). He was also personally acquainted with and spent considerable time with his close friend, modernist Cleveland poet Samuel Loveman. Through Loveman, he met Hart Crane several times. While Loveman and Lovecraft were close, close enough for Lovecraft to visit and stay at Loveman's Cleveland home in July of 1924, the same could not be said for Lovecraft and Crane. Their relationship was chilly at best. Crane described Lovecraft as "Sonia Greene's piping-voiced husband" (Joshi *I Am* 523), while Lovecraft – a lifelong teetotaler

– wrote about Hart’s drinking and its negative effect on his talent. In fact, in a letter to his aunt on November 4, 1924, Lovecraft related having met with Hart Crane, who was recovering from a several day bender. At the same, time, he also met Crane’s companion on his drunken binge, “eminent modernist poet, E.E. Cummings” and that he hoped Crane would “sober up with the years, for there’s really good stuff and a bit of genius in him” (Lovecraft *Lord* 148). Beyond his own poetic work, Lovecraft’s fictional tales were unlike the weird tales and horror stories that came before them, and this change reflected a Modernist tone and sensibility. The question, in examining his work for clues about what makes him unique, becomes what is it about Lovecraft’s fiction that differentiates it from the horror fiction that came before it, and what is it in that difference that makes it modern? This specificity of detail can illuminate the ways in which Lovecraft was adding to and paving new roads into the very modern and early-twentieth century literary discourse.

### CHAPTER III

#### A SENSE OF OUTSIDENESS: HISTORICITY

Before the early twentieth century, horror fiction took the form of fairy tales and folk tales. It wasn't until the eighteenth century that horror literature was birthed, arguably, with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* and his invention of the Gothic. The Gothic aestheticism Walpole created helped define a new genre of fiction. *The Castle of Otranto* used crashes of lightning, dark foreboding castles, dungeons, moaning ghosts, and evil portents to introduce an influential narrative style that would be imitated by future novelists. Walpole's novel influenced and inspired the more refined Gothic works of Anne Radcliffe and Jane Austen, as well as America Gothic writers like Poe and Hawthorne. *The Castle of Otranto* and its ghostly and foreboding setting provided essential characteristics of narrative style and atmospheric details that became indispensable to what would later be termed "weird fiction." Lovecraft was a fan of the Gothic novels of the eighteenth century, and read and wrote extensively on them in his own long form essay, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Many critics have attempted to trace the path of the Gothic novel from Walpole's humble beginnings with *The Castle of Otranto* in the eighteenth century, to the later writings of the nineteenth- and early

twentieth-century on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, Gothic authors on both sides of the Atlantic were influenced by one another and, while specific locales and stylistic commonalities are notable in American Gothic fiction, many nineteenth and twentieth-century works shared a similarity in narrative style and theme. As Phillip Smith observed, both nineteenth and twentieth-century genre fiction were, like Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, a Gothic exploration of "similar social anxieties, irrespective of the author's home nation" (831).

The *Castle of Otranto*, and Gothic fiction itself, fell out of fashion rather quickly, but it also had an influence on later horror fiction, leading to an evolution of scary stories that evolved from the Gothic romance of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, to Shelley's *Frankenstein Or The Modern Prometheus*, and continued to evolve through the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Horror and weird fiction found a new home in the pseudo-scientific narratives of the Industrial Revolution-influenced and colonial British works of H.G. Wells and Robert Louis Stevenson, the xenophobic folklore of Stoker's foreign Dracula, the psychological madness and revenge of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction, and the shift towards the primordial weird fiction of the fin-de-siècle. This shift is best represented by Arthur Machen's highly influential melding of ancient Welsh folklore and urban horrors, and the weird and macabre *King in Yellow* by Robert W. Chambers. All of these works were influential to Lovecraft, and laid the groundwork for his and others' weird fiction – acting like ghosts or echoes in modern weird fiction. These prior works saw horror fiction as science gone awry, or it reworked older, darker folk tales into contemporary narratives, or, as Lovecraft observed, "Cosmic terror appears as an ingredient of the earliest folklore of all races, and is crystallized in the most archaic

ballads, chronicles, and sacred writings. (*Supernatural* 17). As Karen McGuire observed, many of the influential and weird fiction works that followed and were influenced by Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* – Stoker's *Dracula*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Machen's "The Great God Pan" and even Lovecraft's earlier work – all borrow the unique gloomy aesthetic, narrative tropes, and supernatural trappings of Walpole's original Gothic vision. This traceable line of literary horror fiction and shared narrative consanguinity is a direct result of a shared focus on the monsters – real or imagined – that the authors populate their work with. (3-4). These very same archaic or cliché literary effects within the Gothic, American Gothic, Victorian, and fin-de-siècle weird horror informed and influenced subsequent generations of writers of the weird. The discourses around the roots of horror and the weird, even to our twenty-first-century sensibilities, have been shaped by a narrative technique with certain axiomatic elements: the creepy, old medieval castle, the disconcerting feeling of spectral presences, and gloomy, fog-filled locales. All of these images have been passed down to us first from novels and stories, to the pulp magazines where Lovecraft was published, and even to horror movies and our own current popular culture. Lovecraft was aware of this lineage; however, it is against this aesthetic and atmosphere, especially in his Cthulhu mythos, that Lovecraft separates himself from the literary tradition and takes a more Modernist and realist approach. Lovecraft alluded to this himself, in terms of modernism, in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* when he wrote:

The best horror-tales of today, profiting by the long evolution of the type, possess a naturalness, convincingness, artistic smoothness, and skillful intensity of appeal quite beyond comparison with anything in the Gothic work of a century or more ago. Technique, craftsmanship, experience, and psychological knowledge have advanced tremendously with the passing years, so

that much of the older work seems naive and artificial; redeemed, when redeemed at all, only by a genius which conquers heavy limitations (87)

Lovecraft rejected the eighteenth and nineteenth-century horrors of Shelley, Walpole, or Stevenson, and, while he appreciated them for what they had done, he went his own way. In prior horror literature, Lovecraft correctly observed that, “Witch, werewolf, vampire, and ghoul brooded ominously on the lips of bard and grandma [sic], and needed but little encouragement to take the final step across the boundary that divides the chanted tale or song from the formal literary composition” (*Supernatural* 18). In Lovecraft’s early twentieth century, there was a powerful amalgam of science at odds and in reconciliation with the ‘old’ and mythical folklore of previous centuries. Lovecraft’s monsters were beings of science, but also legendary, and his protagonists were exemplary of this dichotomy as well. Men of science, they are scholars who find solace in their knowledge and comfort in their modernity. This reassuring logic, however, needs to be reconciled against what Lovecraft derisively considered the “backwoods voodoo” of the uneducated and illiterate. His heroes were what Lovecraft might have considered reflections of himself - the quiet, reposing scholarly gentleman who is faced with the incomprehensibly backwards myths of a world long gone. The result of this irreconcilable mixing of the old and new was invariably madness and death for the protagonists and supporting characters. It was a time of exploration as well, and there were still undiscovered swaths of wilderness or barren locale and empty places on the map— places of mystery and wonder and, possibly, terror.

Joshi in an interview with Michalkow, incorrectly, argues that:

Overall... I think it is safe to say that most of these “classic” weird writers [Lovecraft included] did not have any significant affinities with the Modernists. Weird fiction as a whole generally looks backward rather than forward, drawing its strength from ancient myth and folklore; on occasion, the literary methods used to express these myths may approach the avant-garde, but that is almost by accident (no pagination).

Lovecraft’s works were indeed perhaps an exploration of the prehistoric, a time that predated humanity’s existence, but they were always forward-looking in their execution and thematic approach. The subtle mix of the ancient with an ever-present attempt to situate the horrors of his narrative in the contemporary era show a much more modern flair than Joshi gives Lovecraft credit for. The intrusion of a pre-human past into modern time contributed to modern sensibilities and anxiety. In effect, Lovecraft was creating a unique mythology with a scientific and modern twist. Prior to Lovecraft, the gods were looking out for us and the hero might likely survive because the gods were benevolent. Lovecraft changed that. He wrote of the indifference of the cosmos and the insignificance of man. Despite several thousand years of religious belief and the inherent hubris of humanity, he posited that humankind – instead of being unique and the masters of all we see – were in fact insignificant when compared to the backdrop of the larger universe.

A hallmark of the Modernist movement is a turning away from religion and a reliance on technology and science (Butler 2). Religion has traditionally argued that we are the center of the universe, but science argues otherwise, and Lovecraft’s fiction falls squarely on the side of science. We are not the center of the universe; our impact on a cold and unforgiving universe is infinitesimal. Lovecraft said as much himself when he wrote to Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales*, in July 1927:

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing

but puerility in a tale in which the human form – and the local human passions and conditions and standards – are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. 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 race called mankind, have any existence at all (Joshi *Nightmare* 102).

Lovecraft was aware that he was developing his own unique atheistic mythology, and that mythology very specifically denied religiosity. Calling it “a sense of outsidersness”, Lovecraft described it in a letter to Frank Belknap Long in February of 1931 as:

The aesthetic crystallization of that burning and inextinguishable feeling of wonder and oppression which the sensitive imagination experiences upon scaling itself and its restrictions against the vast and provocative abyss of the unknown (Lovecraft *Lord* 258).

Lovecraft created his sense of outsidersness using the dearth of available scientific knowledge of his own modern time in conjunction with the earlier, more anthropocentric, scientifically lacking, and folklore-based horrors of the late Victorian and fin-de-siècle. It is, as Gary Farnell recently observed while attempting to trace the unique aesthetic of weird fiction, a definition by way of Jacques Lacan’s ‘The Thing’. The Lacanian Thing echoes ideas from the work of Kant, Hegel, Freud, Saussure, and Heidegger, and The Thing can be defined as “the absolute otherness”. Seen as a reworking of Kant’s unknowable *Ding an sich*, the Thing is “...a phantasmic reference to an unnameable void at the centre of the Real, an amorphous, chaotic, meaningless physical level beyond all reference that both resists and provokes symbolization” (114). This Thing, in other words, is not of the order of signifiers within the symbolic order; hence its



unnameability except as *the Thing*. It is rather “that which in the real suffers from the signifier” (Farnell 114). Farnell applies this specifically to *The Castle of Otranto* and the Gothic, but argues – correctly – that it traces the concept in as a hallmark of later genre fiction, especially during the *fin de siècle* and in early twentieth century weird fiction (Farnell 116). More specifically, it applies to the way in which Lovecraft altered that which came before, and fits with his sense of outsidership. Lovecraft was a voracious reader, self educated and amazingly literate, and was undoubtedly aware of earlier explanations of the universe. Whether biblical or mythological, it is inexplicable and nameless and, although the order and makeup of the world had been written of before, Lovecraft was moving in a different, more modern direction.

The mythological world – and the plane where humans exist – has been explored numerous times throughout written history. However, there has been some commonality to the structure. At its simplest, the world is divided into realms – heaven, hell, and the central realm where humanity dwells – what was known in Old English and ancient Norse mythology as Midgard. This same Midgard – which J.R.R. Tolkien would put to use as Middle Earth in his own opus, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1930s – is a special place between the celestial bookends of the upper and lower worlds. Tolkien, as an aside, is an interesting foil for Lovecraft. Writing at the same time, he too was outside of the literary mainstream, used fantasy elements, and was deeply conservative and backwards looking, but his approach was radically different from Lovecraft’s. Nonetheless, this religious motif of Midgard has resonated throughout literature, whether it is the medieval concept of the Chain of Being, or the delineated

worlds of Milton in *Paradise Lost*. As Northrop Frye explained, in a much less modernist way than Lovecraft might have:

The physical world has usually been not only a cyclical world but a “middle earth” situated between an upper and lower world... The upper world is reached by some form of ascent, and is a world of gods, or happy souls.... The lower world, reached by descent through a cave or underwater, is more oracular and sinister (58).

In other words, this particular mythological view has been divided between a higher plane of good where God, or gods, and angelic beings reside; and the middle ground (or Middle Earth) where humanity toils and strives to ascend to the higher plane; and, finally, Hell – the underground or underwater world – where torment and demons await and where we find punishment and darkness. It is from here that we must work out of, or, as Virgil wrote, “the path to hell is easy: black [Death]’s door is open night and day: but to retrace your steps, and go out to the air above, that is work, that is the task” (127-129).

Lovecraft altered this historic literary view to better match his own individual worldview. The changes, while subtle, were powerful in their implications. Lovecraft’s view of the mythological world was tempered by his own love for science and his own atheism. Lovecraft did not have an upper level. There was no heaven. To Lovecraft’s mind, humanity is sandwiched between the dead, forgotten underworld and the cold, uncaring cosmos or higher level; or, as Fritz Leiber observed, “[Lovecraft] ...altered the focus of the supernatural dread from man and his little world and his gods, to the stars and the black and unplumbed gulfs of intergalactic space” (Joshi *Nightmare* 103). The idea of tombs and underground catacombs that hide ancient secrets are replete throughout the fiction of Lovecraft. Whether it’s the underworld of the city of the Old One’s in “At The Mountains of Madness”, or the forgotten tombs beneath the Australian desert in “The

Shadow Out of Time”, or the horrifying catacombs beneath the Exham Priory in “The Rats in the Walls”, Lovecraft created an underworld of pre-human antiquity and decidedly inhuman origin. The underworld and the things found there supersede and deny Christian - and older - human religions.

It is this denial of religion for the cold, logic of science that separates the fiction of Lovecraft from the earlier representations of the Chain of Being. Additionally, Lovecraft was an unrepentant atheist. He was a disciple of science – with a special love for astronomy and chemistry. As Joshi observed, contradicting his own statement that Lovecraft was not in fact a modernist:

The entirety of Lovecraft’s philosophical (and perhaps even literary) career can be seen as a gradual weaning away from the dogmatism, positivism, and optimism of the late nineteenth-century science, art, and culture to the indeterminacies of relativity and modernism” (Joshi “The Decline...” 5).

In other words, Lovecraft was a man of the twentieth century. His writing style and political views may at times seem anachronistic and Edwardian, but his scientific and religious bent clearly leaned towards the darker and more pragmatic realism of the day. This realism and denial of religiosity reflected in the mythology he created. In Lovecraft’s decidedly non-religiously based mythology, our Midgard is a thin precipice – a tiny island of humanity occupied by chance. Instead of being the center of the universe and the beloved of a benevolent God, we are here solely at the whim of the ‘others’ – monstrous creatures to whom we are inconsequential. To these creatures we are, at best, ants scurrying about and, at worst, a food source. These Gods are neither good nor evil, they simply are, and as Joseph Campbell succinctly summed them up, they are “some horrendous presence or apparition that explodes all of your standards of harmony” (278).

There is no reward for good behavior. The closest we come to Paradise in Lovecraft's vision is through his Dunsanian-like Dreamlands earlier in his writing career, which he abandoned as pretentious later in his life and as he developed his Cthulhu mythos.

This adherence to strict rationality and realism, while also gesturing towards the mythic and old, are critical in positioning Lovecraft within a modernist perspective. He used the cold depths of space and the chilling predatory sea as a means of realistically refuting the providence of the mythological. As Mariconda observed, in defining traits of modernism, modernism is concerned with "a sense of the threat of the void and weight of vast numbers" (118) and, as T.S. Eliot said, myth can be used as a way of "...ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense paradox of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (126). This combination of threat – in terms of the rationale and scientific – and the comforting order of myth are crucial to Lovecraft's style and aesthetic, and also uniquely modernist. As Lovecraft himself argued in a letter in December of 1929:

I am fundamentally a prose realist whose prime dependence is on building up of atmosphere through the slow, pedestrian method of multitudinous suggestive detail & dark scientific verisimilitude. Whatever I produce must be the somber result of a deadly, literal seriousness & almost pedantic approach (Selected Letters 3.96).

To return to Butler's definition of Modernism, it is important to remember that modernism is an artistic response to "... the stresses and strains brought about within this period by the loss of belief in religion, the rise of dependence on science and technology" (1). Lovecraft fits this definition, especially in the way in which he creates a world where humanity and its puerile religious beliefs are inconsequential in the grander scheme of the universe. Science, the mechanization of society, the indeterminacies of a post-war world,

and explorations of where humanity fit within that new world, led to a new way of writing horror fiction, and Lovecraft embraced that new horror.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**“THE CALL OF CTHULHU” AND “THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH” AS**  
**MODERNIST TEXTS**

What may now seem to be a trope of horror fiction was new when it first appeared in the early twentieth century, and Lovecraft was a master of using these new horrors to create a uniquely terrifying world where belief and myth are perverted. Our old ideas of where we fit in the world were supplanted, and what was once familiar is now oppressively mysterious. Further supporting the idea of an underworld – or, more appropriately, an *underwater* world – where the horrors of the cosmos lurk hungrily can be found in the sea-related stories of the Cthulhu mythos, and as specifically seen in “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”. Before delving into the ways in which “Call of Cthulhu” and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” – and the Cthulhu Mythos more generally – are part of a more Modernist perspective, we must digress and note that it is important to situate these two stories historically in order to provide a context and definition for what is meant by ‘Cthulhu’ or ‘Cthulhu Mythos’ when referring to Lovecraft’s body of work. Lovecraft’s writing can be roughly divided into two distinct periods. The first consisted of less original works, pastiches of his greatest influences:

Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen, and Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, 18th Baron of Dunsany (more commonly referred to as Lord Dunsany). It is the final period, however, where Lovecraft grew into his own as a writer and contributor to horror fiction. Commonly referred to as the Cthulhu Mythos period in reference to his story and creature of the same name, this latter part of his life is that which he is best known for. In March of 1924, Lovecraft married Sonia Hafte Greene in a surprise ceremony, and moved with her to New York City. The marriage was essentially over within two years and in 1926, after separating from Greene, he returned to Providence. During his New York years he wrote almost nothing. Afterwards, however, he began writing again and Lovecraft's mastery as a writer reached its zenith (Joshi *More Annotated...* 6). To be precise, however, it should be noted that there is some overlap between the periods – and he wrote stories that would be considered Cthulhu Mythos-like in nature throughout his life. The lion's share of the works that are now considered classic "Lovecraftian" were written mostly after 1926.

In "The Call of Cthulhu", the most well-known and best example of Lovecraft's unique mythology, we find a story that was built gradually over Lovecraft's writing career. There are images of it in the earlier story, "Dagon", and there are echoes of both stories in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth". "Dagon" (published in 1919), was the genesis for the mythology he would later be credited with creating. Though written at the onset of his career, it has been observed that:

"Dagon" plants the seeds for not only the nature of his mythos creatures, modes of narration as in the epic journeys and telling pre-history via archaeological remains, "Dagon" even hints at the cosmic view which underlines the later developments in the mythos and which has been averred to be the true nature of the nebulous link between what are known as the mythos stories (St. Pierre 17).

“Dagon” was, in other words, the seed that grew into “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”.

“The Call of Cthulhu” represented a shift in Lovecraft’s writing and the mythology that have been previously discussed here. As Joshi observed, “The Call of Cthulhu” changes everything because it introduces to Lovecraft’s work a “... coherent and plausible use of the theme that would come to dominate his subsequent tales: alien races dwelling on the underside of the known world (Joshi “Poe, Lovecraft...”). Through “The Call of Cthulhu”, Lovecraft uses the ocean and its black, unfathomable depths as a stand in for the previously mentioned tombs, catacombs, and underground hells in which we find his loathsome alien creatures. Though invented by Lovecraft, the name “Cthulhu” is probably derived from the classic Greek word, “chthonic”, which means “dwelling in or beneath the surface of the earth” (OED). It is likely another possible reference to the classical model of Midgard on Lovecraft parts. Again, he was well read and largely self- educated with an encyclopedic knowledge of etymology especially suited for the development of the monsters and geographic places of his mythos. Much of this tendency comes from his reading of Lord Dunsany and Dunsany’s elaborately constructed pre-human deities and places. It was also informed by his reading of other pulp writers. Lovecraft frequently gave his stories a sense of realism based on his own understanding of language, modern and classic; although, he still made a point of deviating from the ancient and prehistoric to something modern, especially in the pronunciation of “Cthulhu”. In a letter to Duane W. Rimel in July of 1923, Lovecraft wrote about his enduring fictional creation:



The name of the hellish entity was invented by beings whose vocal organs were not like man's, hence it has no relation to the human speech equipment. The syllables were determined by a physiological equipment wholly unlike ours, *hence could never be uttered perfectly by human throats* ... The actual sound -- as nearly as any human organs could imitate it or human letters record it -- may be taken as something like *Khîl'-hloo*, with the first syllable pronounced gutturally and very thickly. The *u* is about like that in *full*; and the first syllable is not unlike *klul* in sound, hence the *h* represents the guttural thickness (*Selected Letters* 10).

Despite this, Lovecraft gave several different pronunciations of Cthulhu during his lifetime and, in 1981, the publication of the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game pronounced it as one would “chthonic”, like *Ca-thoo-loo*. This is the modern, preferred pronunciation by all but Lovecraft scholars.

Written in the summer of 1926, and published in the February 1928 issue of *Weird Tales*, “The Call of Cthulhu” builds slowly and the mysterious evil of the sea acts as a surrogate to the cold expanse of outer space. The narrator, Francis Waylon Thurston relates the story of having become the executor of his late great-uncle, Professor George Gammell Angell of Brown University. It is in the late professor’s papers that the narrator discovers and resumes a quest begun by his great uncle. Among his papers, Thurston finds a lockbox that holds a “queer clay bas-relief and the disjointed jottings, ramblings, and cuttings” (Lovecraft “Call...” 69). The ancient clay bas-relief provides our first glance at the monster at the heart of the story – the Great Old One, Cthulhu - a god-like creature that came to earth countless eons ago. This first impression, though crude, captures the horror of Cthulhu, which is, as Thurston describes, a monster that is simultaneously “...an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature” with a “pulpy, tentacled head surmounted [on] a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings”.

Behind the figure was a "...vague suggestion of a Cyclopean architectural background" (69).

The narrator follows his uncle's research, and begins his own investigation. He learns that, in the spring of 1925, there was an outbreak of mental illness and madness that lasted for several days, affecting people around the world. One of those affected by the inexplicable mania is a young artist in nearby Providence, and it is this same artist who created the bas-relief afterwards. Lovecraft follows the narrator as he pieces together his uncle's findings, and the story builds with methodical care. We learn of cults of "primitive people" around the world who worship a strange idol that matches the artistic impression on the bas-relief. Separated by great distances, from "noxious voodoo" worshippers in the steamy swamps of Louisiana, to "degenerate esquimaux tribes" (Lovecraft 78) in the Arctic north, these worshippers practice "nameless rites and human sacrifices" and are led by leaders who chant a virtually identical phrase: "*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*" (Lovecraft 78). Roughly translated, it means, "*In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming*" (Lovecraft 78). It is revealed that they are worshipping the Great Old One Cthulhu – a being that came here to Earth from the stars during our planet's infancy. Cthulhu still lives, but slumbers, as he has for millennia, beneath the waves of the Pacific Ocean in a submerged prehistoric city known as R'lyeh. As he occasionally turns in his slumber, coming close to wakefulness, his dreams psychically reverberate around the world and cause madness and terror among humanity. Thurston eventually learns of a harrowing, terrifying encounter with an awakened Cthulhu by a crew on a merchant ship, who come face to face with the horrible monster, at the risk of their very sanity. Preceded by a "a darkness almost material (95)"

that bursts forth from Cthulhu's tomb "like smoke" that slinks away "into the shrunken and gibbous sky on flapping membraneous wings" (95), Lovecraft uses a stream of conscious-style narration that echoes that of other modernist contemporaries to try to describe the near indescribable horror they see:

The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order. A mountain walked or stumbled...The Thing of the idols, the green, sticky spawn of the stars, had awaked to claim his own. The stars were right again... After vigintillions of years great Cthulhu was loose again, and ravening for delight" [95].

This story has many of the traits for which Lovecraft is known and it remains an indelible part of his literary legacy. In "The Call of Cthulhu", one finds references to some of H.P. Lovecraft's most enduring fictions. We learn of the accursed *Necronomicon*, a book written by the mad Arab, Abdul Al-Hazrad, in whose pages ancient evil and dark magic lurk. It has the ability to destroy sanity, and it is the source of the Cthulhu-referent couplet: "*That is not dead which can eternal lie/ And with strange aeons even death may die*" (84). In "The Call of Cthulhu" we find a monster of unimaginable power and alien qualities, a creature who personifies all that Lovecraft hated about the ocean and the cold and unforgiving depths of infinite space, and that is an ancient evil let loose in the modern world.

While *The Call of Cthulhu* is likely one of the defining examples of weird fiction, it can also be more broadly fit within the framework of modernism. In defining modernism, Bradbury and McFarlane describe the way in which chaos and subjective reality were an essential hallmark of Modernism. As they observed:

[Modernism] is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos... of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity ... It is the art

consequent on the disestablishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions (27).

This “response to chaos” and “existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity” are personified in the unearthly, alien monster Cthulhu. Lovecraft points at this from the very opening line of the short story 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 (Lovecraft 67).

While Lovecraft, by his own account, saw himself as an antiquarian and an intellectual from another age, his knowledge of modern science and modern rationality forced him to break from the supernatural and mythic monsters of previous eras. He focused on the insignificance of man in a cold, limitless cosmos. As Martin observed, “... he creates an artistic impulse that is uniquely modernist, informed by new theories in science, philosophy, and literature” (66). There are parallels between the idea of alienation, as defined by Modernist scholars, and Lovecraft’s own theory of outsidership. Despite several thousand years of religious belief and the inherent hubris of humanity, he posited that humankind -- instead of being unique and the masters of all we see -- were in fact insignificant when compared to the backdrop of the larger universe. In “The Call of Cthulhu”, this insignificance manifests itself as a powerful, mad god who causes chaos

with merely his dreams. Cthulhu is unimaginable, we are insignificant, and this hyper-realistic scientific notion that we are alone in an emotionless universe has a root in the modernist idea of alienation. Lovecraft takes an approach that many of his fellow inter-war contemporaries did, and rejected the notion that we are special and unique. To Lovecraft's way of thinking, religion has always argued that we are the center of the universe, but science has argued otherwise. When deciding which wins, Lovecraft takes the modernist route and his fiction falls squarely on the side of science. We are not the center of the universe; our impact on a cold and unforgiving universe is infinitesimal. Lovecraft said as much himself when he wrote to Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales*, in July 1927:

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form – and the local human passions and conditions and standards – are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. 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 race called mankind, have any existence at all (Joshi *Nightmare Countries* 102).

Lovecraft's worldview, his atheism, and his rationality subverted the standard archetypes of classical literature to create a distinctly different universe -- a modern take for the twentieth century, as it were.

Lovecraft was a man of the twentieth century. His early writing style and political views were anachronistic and Edwardian, as were his ideas about race, his scientific and religious beliefs did evolve over time and he clearly leaned towards the darker and more pragmatic realism of the modern twentieth century. It is in this scientific and religious

bent that we see glimpses of the way in which Lovecraft interacted with the Modernist aesthetic. In *Supernatural Tales in Literature*, Lovecraft himself recognized the amazing technological and scientific possibilities of the time in which he lived, and argued for the inclusion of weird fiction in a larger modern literary canon as it allowed for a “stimulation of wonder and fancy by such enlarged vistas and broken barriers as modern science has given us with its intra-atomic chemistry, advancing astrophysics, doctrines of relativity, and probings into biology and human thought” (106). Lovecraft was working within the boundaries of modernist thought and scientific developments augmented his writing, that of weird fiction, and that of the larger canon by provoking “an affective response of ‘wonder and fancy’ in American writers and readers which translated into an aesthetic preference: fiction that reflected the disorienting and chaotic world modern scientists and philosophers were uncovering” (Bealer 45).

The first-person narrator of “The Call of Cthulhu” notes, upon learning of all that his uncle had found, and after his own investigation, asks the question, “Was I tottering on the brink of cosmic horror beyond man’s power to bear? If so, they must be horrors of the mind alone...” (91). The cosmic horror of “The Call of Cthulhu” finds a surrogacy in the ocean. Lovecraft used the sea and its black, cold depths as a stand-in for the coldness of space. The sea was an appropriate metaphor for the dawning modern age. As astronomy and science began to delve into the mysteries of the infinite black gulf of space, the world of the 1920s was growing smaller because of scientific and transportation advances. Despite that, the sea still represented a chasm that held sway over mankind. Transatlantic air flight was still in its infancy in the mid-1920s, and the first night time transatlantic crossing wouldn’t take place until three months after the

publication of “The Call of Cthulhu”. Despite man’s quest and desire to cross the ocean by air, the technology and science of the time still necessitated long sea voyages. Limited by this, the sea was still, even in this modern time, a place of vastness, crushing depths, and peril.

Lovecraft’s hatred for the sea was well known. He hated seafood in all of its forms and that hatred extended to its source. De Camp observed that Lovecraft “often used the sea, along with the cold, wet, and darkness as a symbol of evil in his stories” (78). Lovecraft himself even went further and once said to Donald Wandrei, “I have hated fish and feared the sea and everything connected to it since I was two years old” (De Camp 78). It is this hatred that makes the sea-related Cthulhu mythos stories so wondrously chilling. “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”, while less a Cthulhu mythos story than others we’ve mentioned - and more a New England based horror story - still manages to capture the horrifyingly alien quality of his demons. The demons of Lovecraft’s mythology, as opposed to the fallen angels of classical literature, are outside of human understanding or definition; and the croaking, bleating Cthulhu- or Dagon-spawned monsters of this and his other sea stories only further reinforce Lovecraft’s mythology. We now have the yawning chasm of an uncaring cosmos above us, and the dark depths of earth below us. Add to that the forbidden, cold waves of monster filled oceans surrounding us, and Lovecraft has effectively bound us on all sides by evil and horror. Midgard, classically a place of light and human residence, is suddenly a sliver in an indifferent universe.

In almost all of Lovecraft’s stories, the narrator or protagonist is a modern scholar or scientist, someone with higher education, good social breeding and standing, and in

possession of a healthy skepticism. In other words, the characters were in many cases reflections of what Lovecraft preferred to see himself as. His rationalism and disdain for religion in all its forms built upon established classical mythology and resulted in something new and revolutionary – a horror story rooted in the modern aesthetics of Einstein and Fermi, and that eschewed the quaint philosophy and primitive folklore of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The reflectiveness of his narrators only scratches the surface. Lovecraft’s mythology is also a reflection of his own worldview, his own feelings of alienation. It is a profound recognition of the changing face of horror literature in the early part of the twentieth century. “The previous century’s stories of the ghost, the vampire, the werewolf, the sorcerer, the haunted house, and so on... had simply become too implausible in the wake of advancing human knowledge” (Joshi *Nightmare* 103).

Lovecraft was also capable of less cosmic horror narratives, and this can be seen in the 1936 short story, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”. Thematically linked to “The Call of Cthulhu”, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” focuses on modern horrors closer to home than the dark depths of the ‘outside’. “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” was the only story of Lovecraft’s published in book form during his lifetime, and tells the story of a young man from Toledo, Ohio, who is unnamed in the published version, but is named Robert Olmstead in an earlier draft of the story. Olmstead is taking a historical, antiquarian, and architectural tour of New England. He stops on his way to his family’s ancestral home in the Lovecraftian town of Arkham, Massachusetts to visit Newburyport. There he encounters a weird, disturbing piece of jewelry in the local museum. He inquires about it and learns that it is from Innsmouth, a decrepit and ancient sea town, “at the mouth of the Manuxet” that has “all gone to pieces in the last hundred years or so”



(Lovecraft *Best...* 327), especially after an epidemic that struck the town in 1846. Once a thriving seaport, the town has declined and the only industry it now has is through the refinery run by “the queer old duck... Old Man Marsh” who is “richer than Croesus” (328) and the grandson of Captain Obed Marsh. The refinery is where the weird jewelry comes from, and its alien qualities are noteworthy. The Newburyport residents also comment on the oddness of the town’s inhabitants and the weird “Innsmouth look” (330) many of them seem to have. This physical anomaly smacks of bad genetics, inbreeding, or worse. They have “queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy, stary [sic] eyes that never seem to shut, and their skin ain’t quite right. Rough and scabby, and the sides of their necks are all shrivelled or creased up. Get bald, too, very young” (329). As for the jewelry, the pieces are “predominantly gold, though a weird lighter lustrousness hinted at some strange alloy with an equally beautiful and scarcely identifiable metal” (333). Lovecraft goes to great lengths to attempt to place the otherworldly qualities of the jewelry and the way it hints:

... of remote secrets and unimaginable abysses in time and space, and the monotonously aquatic nature of the reliefs became almost sinister. Among these reliefs were fabulous monsters of abhorrent grotesqueness and malignity—half ichthyic and half batrachian in suggestion—which one could not dissociate from a certain haunting and uncomfortable sense of pseudo-memory, as if they called up some image from deep cells and tissues whose retentive functions are wholly primal and awesomely ancestral. At times I fancied that every contour of these blasphemous fish-frogs was overflowing with the ultimate quintessence of unknown and inhuman evil (334).

Further inquiries by Olmstead convince him that there is more going on in Innsmouth than suspected, and he eagerly decides to visit the town. He rides a bus into the town, seeing the Innsmouth look firsthand, and takes a room for the night. As he wanders the

town, he gets a feel for its malevolence, and encounters the town drunk, with whom he strikes up a conversation.

Olmstead learns that, when the town's economy started to decline, Captain Obed Marsh returned from a South Seas trip with a new wife with a proposition for the town. In his travels, he'd learned of an ancient, profane rite that was practiced by South Sea islanders. In exchange for riches and prosperity in the form of the weird jewelry, they called up the 'Deep Ones', a race of frog-like monsters from the depths of the ocean. The deal was simple: the Deep Ones provided gold, and the townsfolk provided new blood. In other words, they would breed with the Deep Ones. The offspring would be human at first, but as they aged, they'd become more and more like the monsters from the sea until they eventually went into the water to join their inhuman brethren, immortal and never to return to dry land except to breed and carry on the vile rite. Captain Marsh proposes making the same deal, and forces the townsfolk to take part in the rituals and kills those who won't. The result is that the town, some hundred years later, is what it now is – a place of decadence and evil.

Horrified, Olmstead returns to his hotel room to collect his belongings, but his inquiries have not gone unnoticed. He flees in the night, pursued and hunted through the twisted, decaying streets of Innsmouth by its residents, who he sees fully for the first time, as they pursue him “in a limitless stream—flopping, hopping, croaking, bleating—surging inhumanly through the spectral moonlight in a grotesque, malignant saraband of fantastic nightmare” (385-386). After a harrowing chase, Olmstead escapes, and the authorities destroy the town after he reports what he has seen. He is not safe, however. He is later horrified to find that the grotesqueries of Innsmouth have inexplicably

followed him home. His genealogical research finds that there is Innsmouth blood in his family, and he realizes he too has slowly gained the Innsmouth look and he is haunted by dreams of returning to the sea as a Deep One.

Although set in an ancient sea town with dark secrets, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” is, at its heart, a story about race and sex in the early twentieth century. Much in the way that Harlem Renaissance writers George Schuyler did with *Black No More*, or as in the early science fiction work “The Comet” by W.E.B. Dubois, Lovecraft was dangling his feet in the waters of commingled race and science fiction, although his own personal views on race and eugenics were decidedly pre-Modernist. “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”, as Tracy Beale observed:

literalizes the racial anxieties activated by modernist social change into a horror plot, and, through the resolution of that plot, reveals a writer working through and considering an empathetic, though still deeply ambivalent, aesthetic response to racial difference (45)

Although his attempts were far less socially aware and rooted in his own strong fears of racial integration, Lovecraft, in his own conservative and xenophobic way, was interacting with other modernists in a horror tale that is, reductively, about people having sex with fish monsters. Lovecraft’s racism is perhaps the most problematic facet of his philosophy and work. Given the controversy surrounding The Hugo Awards Lovecraft bust, there has been quite a bit of recent criticism around his belief around race. The simple fact is that his beliefs – by the mid-1930s – were woefully antiquated. Racism was still rampant in the early part of the century, obviously, and the Modernist period was coming soon after the height of colonialism and the Age of Exploration. The use of race by Lovecraft is incidental, and actually, somewhat archaic. Either way, his beliefs were

inexcusable. Joshi has noted, with some perplexity, that all of Lovecraft's beliefs evolved over time, but he never truly disavowed himself of his racist belief in the cultural superiority of Nordic and Celtic races. Even when, by 1930, every scientific justification for racism had been effectively dismissed by the intelligentsia, of which Lovecraft would have liked to imagine himself. Point in fact; his beliefs were not really modern. He showed a "resolute unwillingness to study the most up to date findings on the subject from biologists, anthropologists, and other scientists of unquestioned authority... who were systematically destroying each and every pseudo-scientific 'proof of racial theories'" and, for Lovecraft, "Parental and societal influence, early reading, and outmoded late 19th century science shaped his racism and anti-Semitic beliefs" (*I Am...* 939). Placing his racism and eugenicist views at the center of his work gives them too much credit. Also, it should be noted that racism or other distasteful views does not in anyway exclude one from the accepted modernist canon. One need only look at Eliot's anti-Semitism or Ezra Pound's open fascism. And, while racial theory may enter into many of Lovecraft's stories (miscegenation and fear of aliens in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" or "The Call of Cthulhu"), they don't affect his larger, more cosmic ideology – that sense of outsidership that all of his stories reflect. Humanity and its myriad racial identities are inconsequential, and they act only as a means of conveying the horror of the eldritch. It does not affect his many other philosophical and scientific ideas, which are more paramount to the structure of his stories. It is this fear of miscegenation and mixed blood that drives the horror in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth", but it is less a reflection of Lovecraft's ideology, and more a larger social commentary. As the old drunkard of the

tale, Zadok Allen, relates the town's history to the narrator, we see the true horror in Innsmouth; a horror based in – for Lovecraft – frank sexuality.

As Zadok explains, in Lovecraft's stunted and unrealistic rustic New England sea town patois:

‘When it comes to mating with them toad lookin’ fishes, the [South pacific islanders] kind o’ balked, but finally learned something as puts a new face on the matter. Seems that human folks has got a kind o’ relation to sech water-beasts – that everything alive come aout o’ the water onct, an’ only needs a little change to go back again’ (354)

As he explains the atavistic de-evolution of those who interact with The Deep Ones, Lovecraft is hinting at contemporary and modern scientific understandings of evolution. His very modern, early twentieth century fear is that the polluting of blood leads to a reversion to a more primitive state. Old man Obed Marsh's sin wasn't that he'd betrayed his community by strong-arming them into a union with the Old Ones in exchange for gold and prosperity, it was that he had brought these foul sexual practices back to New England with him and “had introduced sexual irregularity into his own community” (Joshi *I Am Providence II* 930). As “anti-modern as Lovecraft's ideas might have been in the beginning, they evolved dynamically over time, incorporating contradictions that encapsulate the anxieties of many twentieth-century artists and intellectuals” (Evans 100).

To Lovecraft, the town's degradation – and the blood of its villagers – is polluted by the illicit mating with the fish-frog monsters, and generations of doing so has resulted in a town that has lost all vestige of humanity. Zadok furtively whispers to the narrator how the children born in the town since the pact with the monsters have now begun to grow up, how the town has changed over consecutive generations as it becomes more and

more inhuman. The town has become a place of evil and terror as “more an’ more attic winders got a-boarded up, an’ more an’ more noises was heerd in haouses as wa’n’t s’posed to hev nobody in ’em. . . .” (360). The town pays the price for this perversion of nature, and the pervasiveness of the Deep Ones transcends the laws of science. Mixing of bloodlines, in this case a metaphor for racial miscegenation is a consequence of what is perceived by outsiders as foreign blood or some type of distemper in the sea-faring Innsmouth denizens (362). This implication is, unfortunately, rooted in the problematic racism that Lovecraft was guilty of. This can be seen especially in his letters. When writing in January of 1926 to his aunt, Lillian D. Clark, about the teeming masses of foreigners he had encountered in New York City, he expressed his personal views on miscegenation and expressed a similar horror to the mixing of what he saw as “pure “bloodlines and those of a more multicultural slant:

It is not good for a proud, light-skinned Nordic to be cast away alone amongst squat, squint-eyed jabberers with coarse ways and alien emotions whom his deepest cell-tissue hates and loathes as the mammal hates and loathes the reptile, with an instinct as old as history (*Lord 181*).

It is this admittedly unflattering quote that sheds some light on the basis of the horror Lovecraft builds into “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”. It is a fear of otherness that propels the story; it is the fear and unacceptability of polluted bloodlines by foreigners that is anathema to Lovecraft. Although this is in no way meant to be a defense of Lovecraft’s darker, eugenicist views, his opinions on race did temper as he aged. Timothy Evans notes that:

Lovecraft did present aliens sympathetically in several of his late stories, a movement which paralleled the abandonment of much of the racism and anti-immigrant xenophobia that marked his upbringing. It is worth noting

that Lovecraft, who for much of his life was anti-Semitic and horrified by miscegenation, married a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant (125).

That being said, from a modernist perspective, Lovecraft is reacting to and pushing against the more libertine early twentieth century loosening of morality in his own unique way. To Lovecraft, the horrifying changes interbreeding does to a proud and pure New England family line by The Deep Ones is no different than the damage done by the teeming masses of foreigners who interact with white America in the streets of Providence, New York, or Toledo (where the narrator from “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” comes from). He is in fact, in a very modernist way, mourning the “...loss of New England traditions while at the same time he is learning to accept new cultures, acknowledging a future in which hybrid people and cultural forms may be recognized as the norm” (Evans 120).

**CHAPTER V**  
**FOLKLORE, MYTHOS, AND MATERIAL CULTURE AS MODERNIST**  
**PROXIES**

In addition to race and scientific innovation Lovecraft was also assiduously melding the old world with the scientific and modern twentieth century. Specifically, he was looking at old folklore and subverting it for his own purposes. In 1931, he articulated this when he wrote, “I consider the use of folk-myths as even more childish than the use of new artificial myths” (Lovecraft *Lord* 257). In other words, he was aware of folklore and older myths, but rejected them and supplanted them with his own, new myths and mythology. Lovecraft was undoubtedly influenced by Sir James George Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, which was commonly read at the time. Lovecraft himself also had an extensive personal library of folklore, with copies including:

The works of European authorities, such as Walter Scott, J. G. Frazer and Sabine Baring-Gould; well known collections of folk narratives such as *Aesop’s Fables*, *The 1001 Arabian Nights*, and works by the Grimm Brothers; numerous collections of American legends and beliefs (including works by Samuel Adams Drake, Lafcadio Hearn, and Charles M. Skinner); and “primary sources” on early American folklore such as Cotton Mather (Joshi *I Am... II* 2002).



This basis in myth and folklore, while not seemingly so at first glance, is one of the strongest indicators of the way in which Lovecraft made weird fiction new in the modern era. Following the lead of Welsh weird fiction writer, Arthur Machen, Lovecraft took science and twentieth century pragmatism and melded it with the horrors, boogeymen, and Baba Yaga of the ancient – creating something uniquely avant-garde. Lovecraft did so by referencing folklore that would have been recognizable to readers of the day, but then deliberately moving the narrative in a completely new and different direction. In *The Call of Cthulhu*, for example, Lovecraft lends credibility to the story he is telling by citing “W. Scott-Elliot’s *Atlantis and the Lost Lemuria*”; “Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”; and “Miss Murray’s *Witch-Cult in Western Europe*” (70), but then introduces the fictitious *Necronomicon*. An invention by Lovecraft, the *Necronomicon* represents one of the many ways in which Lovecraft mixed the old with the new in a modernist way. Juxtaposed against authentic anthropological and archaeological volumes of work, Lovecraft blurs the border between real and fiction. As Martin observed:

The works of Lovecraft provide puzzles that are just as convoluted and obscure as those of the members of the accepted modernist canon, challenging readers to research and differentiate established history, geography, and scientific thought from Lovecraft’s own inventions (204).

“The Call of Cthulhu” voodoo tribes have all the hallmarks of witches or other non-Christian “savages” that a modern western person would recognize, described by Lovecraft as an “indescribable horde of human abnormality” that were “void of clothing” and who were “braying and bellowing about a monstrous ringshaped bonfire” with the suspended bodies of human sacrifices above the fire (80). What would appear to be some African or “primitive” ritual is something more in Lovecraft’s world. Instead of

worshipping Pagan gods, they are instead worshipping a creature from “outside” – some being older than earth or time itself. It is not something as new or recent as the devil or a vaguely evil and anthropomorphic eastern god; it is a creature that is older than folklore and humanity, something that lives outside of human understanding. As Martin observes in relation to the isolated groups of human cultists in “The Call of Cthulhu”, they share an “unappreciated servitude to their semi-dormant masters” and Lovecraft notes how “absurd and slavish” this “devotion of humans to the notions of servitude to powerful but uncaring forces” (183) is. It is specifically this inhumanness that makes Lovecraft’s monsters all the more modern and terrifying than previous incarnations in horror and weird fiction, and it is emblematic of Lovecraft’s own ambivalence towards humanity in the twentieth century. In the course of his life and writings, “the defender of Anglo-colonial traditions became an exemplar of hybrid forms and subcultures, a movement that parallels changes in the concept of “tradition” among folklorists” (Evans 100).

Interestingly, we see this also in the Deep Ones in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”. Innsmouth is an example of a standard New England seaport, a port where “New England ships used to have to do with queer ports in Africa, Asia, The South Seas” where stolid, New England folk mix with “queer kinds of people”. Lovecraft mixes the idea of discovery with fact and folklore, mentioning the “Salem man who came home with a Chinese wife (329)” or the historical anecdotes of a town of Fiji islanders near the Vermont border. He writes about the true decline of New England shipping and whaling, and its effect on the economy of other towns just like Innsmouth, but then gives it a sinister twist, blaming “South Sea cannibals and Guinea savages” and a mysterious

“Plague of 1846” that carries away “the best blood in the place” leaving less than “400 people in the whole town” (331). Lovecraft, as Evan wrote:

Combined an antiquarian interest in folklore and historic material culture with the passions of a preservationist and worries about cultural loss and miscegenation. To this agenda he brought the literary traditions of supernatural fiction, travel narrative, and regional local color writing to create a unique body of work that drew its authoritative voice from the use (and invention) of folklore (100).

Lovecraft additionally combined this same antiquarian interest in folklore, historic material culture, and travel narrative with a modernist approach towards geography as well. In both “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”, he mentions Arkham, Massachusetts. Arkham is a fictional town created by Lovecraft to be the seat of his own weird local tales. This geographic fiction is one of the more innovative way in which Lovecraft created his own world. He is by no means the first to create fictional lands for the purposes of his stories, Thomas Hardy’s Wessex for example, but Lovecraft was the first to open his world to – and actively encourage – other writers to add and augment his fictional world. Lovecraft’s Arkham, which was based on Salem, is an ancient town founded in the 1600s and home to the fabled, ivy-covered, and equally as fictitious Miskatonic University. Innsmouth is fictional as well and is, as Lovecraft himself described, a twisted version of Newburyport, Massachusetts (Lovecraft *Lord* 261) that sits at the mouth of the equally fictitious Manuxet River. It is at this “evilly-shadowed seaport of death and blasphemous abnormality” that “the low, black reef “ f Devil’s Island rests “out from Innsmouth Harbour” (326). Amongst these made-up locales, Lovecraft blends fiction with just enough fact to make history and folklore significantly more subjective than it was in previous horror stories. As Evans notes, “Lovecraft also drew on legends about the New England landscape, combining, again,

material he encountered in books and collected from oral circulation. The use of folk narratives and beliefs in his stories served to give them an air of verisimilitude” (118).

Lovecraft was also a great fan of Nathaniel Hawthorne, as well as Hawthorne’s New England. Lovecraft’s own vision of New England, however, is his own and is a modernist warping of Hawthorne’s geography. Lovecraft said that reading Hawthorne’s mythology and antique classic works was life changing. Lovecraft also assiduously read Hawthorne’s short stories and novels, calling “The House of Seven Gables” “New England’s greatest contribution to weird literature (Joshi *I Am...* 42). He also said that Hawthorne was working in an older tradition that “drew upon a dark heritage of New England Puritanism so as to create a universe that has a historical profundity” (Joshi *I am...* 48). Interestingly, in 1923, Lovecraft visited Marblehead, Newburyport, and took a detour into Pascoag. He found all three delightful, writing to Frank Belknap Long, “The scene is magical – it is the early, half-forgotten, beautiful simple America that Poe and Hawthorne knew – a village with narrow winding streets and Colonial facades and a sleepy square” (Joshi *I Am...* 450). Lovecraft was enraptured by Marblehead particularly, writing to Rheinhard Kleiner in 1923, “I have look’d upon Marblehead, and have walk’d waking in the streets of the [eighteenth] century, And he who hath one that, can never more be modern” (Joshi *I Am...* 450-451). He considered Marblehead his second favorite place in the world, behind his beloved Providence, and both his outright and oblique references to Hawthorne’s New England is another way in which Lovecraft subverted old forms. He did so by providing a new, darker and more modern form of folk tale. Lovecraft’s references in the “Shadow Over Innsmouth” to “pirates” (362) and “deals with the devil” (328), are playing off of Hawthorne’s New England, twisting the folklore

and moving them from the lore of the seventeenth and eighteenth century into the new, modern era. His stories nod towards Hawthorne's folklore and geographic histories, but Lovecraft quickly deviates and makes his own unique mythology. Mariconda observed that:

On the most superficial level, Lovecraft joins Hawthorne, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman as a master in using richly detailed New England local color – history, folkways, landscape, and architecture – as a foundation for supernatural incursions (10).

This geographic rewriting – especially in “Shadow Over Innsmouth” – is an attempt at ‘local color’ that also pays homage to a writer whom Lovecraft considered a master of the form. In Innsmouth, we have a town that stopped interacting with the world and isolated itself in the eighteenth century. As a result, the persistence of the old folklore in the tale is appropriate in that it colors the perceptions of the story's outsiders, those characters who live outside of Innsmouth, with that same shared folklore and myth. Lovecraft just uses that belief to completely re-write the new folklore, and imbues it to a geography of his own making.

As he confounds his own geographic reality with the truth, he also roots his ancient and Lovecraftian world with references to the modern. In “The Call of Cthulhu”, Lovecraft makes frequent reference to his own beloved Providence, mentioning Brown University (the basis for Miskatonic University) and the Fleur-De-Lys Building at the Rhode Island School of Design, a building he describes as “a hideous Victorian imitation of seventeenth-century Breton architecture which flaunts its stuccoed front amidst the lovely Colonial houses on the ancient hill” and that rests “under the shadow of the finest Georgian steeple in America” (85). In the same vein, Olmstead, the narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”, takes the old bus run by Innsmouth resident Joe Sargent from

Newburyport to Innsmouth. Essentially, the narrator takes a bus from the real town of Newburyport, to a fictional town modeled on Newburyport, the same town from which he leaves. Olmstead stays at the Gilman Hotel, which is based on the real life Gilman-Garrison House in Exeter, New Hampshire. The church of the Esoteric Order of Dagon, “a debased, quasi-pagan thing imported from the East a century ago” (335) is headquartered in the former “old Masonic Hall on New Church Green” in Innsmouth, and is based on the real life Newburyport Masonic Hall which still stands today on Green Street in Newburyport. The folklore, architecture, location, and place of Lovecraft’s stories are crucial in situating them within a robust, full world rooted in both the historic past, and a modern present. Lovecraft used this mix of old and new, fictitious and factual, to provide a modern context while also observing, commenting on, and subverting the past. As Evans observed, “Lovecraft used folklore and material culture in his stories in two interrelated ways: to create a sense of place and to evoke the past. Setting is so crucial in most of his stories that it cannot be separated from character” (Evans 118); and it is this evocation of past and present that makes his stories modernist in their context.

While he was experimenting with narrative and historical story-telling perspectives, he was also engaging with modernist art and philosophy; Lovecraft showed an acute awareness of it in “The Call of Cthulhu” when he juxtaposed the modern “vagaries of cubism and futurism” (Lovecraft 69) with the “cryptic regularity, which lurks in prehistoric writing”. It further shows itself in his reference to “The Call of Cthulhu” narrator’s avowed “absolute materialism (87)”, a belief that is Modern in that it is post-Darwin and pre-Einstein, and claims “strict mechanical laws determine the universe and rule out the existence of the soul, and hence life after death” (Joshi, *More*

*Annotated*, 202). And, while describing the city of R'lyeh, where Cthulhu sleeps and causes maddening dreams, Lovecraft describes it as bearing marks of "futurism" and having angles and geometry that were "abnormal, non-Euclidian" (94). There is physicality to the objects and material culture in Lovecraft's works that help add to the complex weaving of fact and fiction that Lovecraft so adeptly utilized. In "The Shadow Over Innsmouth", Lovecraft goes to great pains to describe the unnatural and alien quality of the strange jewelry produced in the Innsmouth refinery. Olmstead's initial research intrigues him immensely, and he notes that, while the "fragmentary descriptions of these things were bald and prosaic" they hinted to him "an undercurrent of persistent strangeness" (332-333). These physical items bring to life what was only folklore to this point, and the description of their "strangeness" provides an alien quality in line with Lovecraft's concept of outsidership. The jewelry becomes a real life manifestation of the mythical and otherworldly, and the mythical suddenly intrudes on the modern world.

When Olmstead first encounters one of the actual pieces of jewelry at the Newburyport Historical Society, a "large, queerly-proportioned thing evidently meant for a tiara" (333), he realizes that he has "eyes for nothing but the bizarre object which glistened in a corner cupboard under the electric light" (333). Something alien and of another world, in this case an ancient and degenerate undersea world, becomes a focal point of the narrative, and juxtaposes the strangely modernist, rationale, and scientific fascination of the narrator with the ancient and unknowable. Lovecraft's cosmic horror, as Colavito states, lays bare "the tension between science and superstition, between the known and the unknown, between the quotidian and the infinite" (176). This feeling of tension only builds as Olmstead fully studies the tiara and states "It takes no excessive

sensitiveness to beauty to make me literally gasp at the strange unearthly splendour of alien, opulent phantasy that rested there” (333). Lovecraft highlights the items alien qualities, the way it makes him physically react, and he not so subtly alludes to its cosmic origin. An item allegedly made by human hands in the Insmouth Marsh Refinery, to be worn by what can only be assumed is a human customer, is inexplicably nonhuman in its proportions. The tiara is “very large and curiously irregular” and it appears “as if designed for a head of almost freakishly elliptical outline” (333). In other words, this is not designed for humans, and blatantly so. It appears to be “predominantly gold”, but also appears to be made of “some strange alloy with an equally beautiful and scarcely identifiable metal” (333). The very material of the tiara hints at its otherworldly origins, and Lovecraft adroitly melds an artifact of possible mythological origin, with the cold, rational, and disturbingly inhuman physical characteristics of an alien race. The tiara is something from an as yet undiscovered branch of scientific inquiry, and its very material reflects its outsideness. And, just as the bas-relief and cyclopean hieroglyphics in the sunken city at the climax of “The Call of Cthulhu” hint at unexplained knowledge, the jewelry too hints at deeper scientific and mathematical understanding beyond the ken of mankind. It bears a “puzzlingly untraditional design” that can be read as a puzzlingly non-human design. The “curiously disturbing elements” of the object fill Olmstead with a fascination and unease due to its “queer other-worldly design” (333). Its patterns “all hinted at a remote secrets and unimaginable abysses in time and space” and potent “pictorial and mathematical suggestions” (334). He surmises it is because it is impossible to place as an art object that does not fit into any “known or racial stream” (333). This provides an opportunity to show how Lovecraft was at least conscious of and interacting



with Modernism. He compares what is obviously an ancient and unknown art object to the Modernist art movement and supposes that perhaps it is a “consciously modernistic defiance of every known stream”, (333) although he knows it cannot be and that it “is as if the [jewelry’s] workmanship were that of another planet” (334).

In typical Lovecraftian fashion, Lovecraft’s narrator falls back on the scientific and rationale as he attempts to further analyze his feelings about the artifact. The narrative reads and interprets the tiara archaeologically, or anthropologically. Olmsted falls back on the quasi-scientific and treats its appearance and proportions as one might treat a fossil. He describes the “aquatic nature of the reliefs” and their “sinister” nature (334). He describes the reliefs, noting that they are made up of “fabulous monsters of abhorrent grotesqueness and malignancy – half ichthic and half batrachian ” (333), and how they seem to stir up in the observer “a certain haunting and uncomfortable sense of pseudo-memory, as if they called up some image from deep cells and tissues whose retentive function are wholly primal and awesomely ancestral” (334). In this case, they are triggering a racial memory that, as Zadok Allen ominously hints at, implies a biological affinity with the Deep Ones, that “human folks got a kind o’ relation to sech waterbeasts – that everything alive came aout o’ the water oct, an’ only needs a little change to go back again” (354). The Deep Ones are primordial and we are somehow related to their evil. As the narrator concludes they are “blasphemous fish-frogs overflowing with the ultimate quintessence of unknown and inhuman evil” (334). The narrator uses the language of the modern and scientific to try to explain these strange, alien feelings and encounters. Olmstead uses the unwholesome and ancient countered with scientific zeal and reason as a means of attempting to understand and reconcile what

he does not understand. Using modern techniques and modernist language, Lovecraft attempts to alter the traditional horror story and provide a new means of producing terror in his readers and, when confronted with an alien piece of jewelry, everything that warns the narrator to stay away only further pushes him to explore it. It is as if his scientific zeal is too strong to make the connection between the odd fish monsters depicted on the relic tiara, and the fact that the tiara is undoubtedly made for *just such a creature*. Despite all of these warnings, Olmstead decides to go to Innsmouth anyway, explaining his fascination and that, “To my architectural and historical anticipations was now added an acutely anthropological zeal” (335). He can’t help himself, he must further explore this horror.

Interestingly, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” is also unique in that we have fragments of an earlier draft by Lovecraft. Lovecraft, notoriously, destroyed most early drafts of his story because he felt that after revision, the final story itself was the only version worth keeping. In that early draft, found on [HPLovecraft.com](http://HPLovecraft.com), Lovecraft describes the jewelry as “a special kind of fancy jewellery” made out of a “secret alloy that nobody can analyse very well”. Olmstead, instead of visiting the Newburyport Historical Society, visits the Marsh Refining Company’s retail office under the guise of being a jewelry buyer from Cleveland. Olmstead sees several versions of the jewelry, include rings, armlets, and tiaras, but the earlier draft lacks the specificity of details that the completed draft does. He only describes the pieces as producing an “especial feeling of awe and unrest” and that “these singular grotesques and arabesques did not seem to be the product of any earthly handiwork—least of all a factory only a stone’s throw away”. Lovecraft’s original focus was less on the “outsideness” of the material artifacts, and

more on the draw and inexorable, almost genetic pull of them on the corrupted, Innsmouth-tainted blood of the narrator. Lovecraft, rightly, adjusted the story to embrace the otherworldly qualities of the jewelry and, in so doing, helped move the narrative into a more modern perspective. The jewelry signifies something older, much as artifacts from Ancient Egypt, or Rome, or Ancient Macedonia might; however, the providence of this particular jewelry predates humanity, and, as such, represents the cosmic. This rejection of humanity, the rejection of our importance in the grand scheme of things, and the implied rejection of religion, is uniquely modernist in its implications. The jewelry acts as a catalyst and signifier of ‘outsideness’ and, as Mariconda observed, Lovecraft’s stories – and especially the objects like the jewelry in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth and the idol in “The Call of Cthulhu” – “impound the perception of other races in a form that enables us to *know*; they force us to confront the universe anew through a physiology and psychology which humans have mercifully denied” (109). It is a uniquely modern take on a decidedly modern theme. Furthermore, this awareness of the modern illustrated something many of Lovecraft’s modernist contemporaries struggled with as well; namely, an uneasy melding of the modern, scientific, and rationale with the horrors of the ancient and mythic. In other words, Lovecraft took what was old, liberally mixed it with the modern, and, to paraphrase Ezra Pound, made it new.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the question becomes how and why is it important to find a place for Lovecraft within a modernist perspective? My positioning of horror of weird fiction within the larger modernist movement isn't being done to somehow give it legitimacy. In his own way, Lovecraft has found that legitimacy on his own merits within the sub genre of weird horror and science fiction literature. However, just as the modernist movement significantly changed literature – so did Lovecraft. Lovecraft's use of his rational worldview and scientific modernism, combined with the way in which he subverted myth and fable, created a new form of horror literature vastly different than prior pastiches of horror and myth. He did so in much the same way in which his modernist contemporaries did with more traditional literary forms. It is less of historical context, and more an argument of form and content. Caroline Hovanec argues, correctly, that:

to reclassify a text as “modernist” is always a fraught critical move, because the term is so often used evaluatively rather than descriptively. That is, works called “modernist” are tacitly understood to be aesthetically sophisticated, while this prestige is denied to modernism's others—realist novels, mass culture, et cetera” (459).

To position H. P. Lovecraft, and especially his stories “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”, within the broader modernist framework is perhaps made more difficult by the fact that weird fiction and the fiction of the pulps continue to be perceived as a ‘lower’ genre form of fiction, or even perhaps what Deleuze and Guattari might classify as a minor literature in that it “produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism” (17). It is, however, not too difficult a argument to make that, at the time when weird fiction was growing and becoming a literary sub-genre on its own, Lovecraft was redefining both it and what had come before within a modernist perspective. Even S.T. Joshi acknowledges that:

[Lovecraft] never embraced Modernism (he always despised Eliot as an obscurantist and didn’t even make the effort to read Joyce, although he did have a high regard for Yeats); but he thought of himself as a “prose realist,” and his work—aside from its supernaturalism—bears striking affinities with regionalists or social realists such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Sinclair Lewis. He even made modest use of stream-of-consciousness and other Modernist techniques (Michalkow).

Conversely, Mariconda argued that, “attracted by Modernism’s Anti- Victorianism but repelled by the formal Chaos of the ‘Advanced Moderns’, Lovecraft exhibited a deep ambivalence toward Modernism (25)”. He further argues that Lovecraft was modernist in his interactions with art and artists from the period, but that he was a reluctant modernist; Sean Martin argues that Lovecraft exhibited a variation of modernism, which he termed the Modernist Grotesque, and argued that Lovecraft combined eighteenth century Gothicism with a peripheral and only incidental modernism; and Gatford argued that Lovecraft interacted with modernists as a bystander or a quiet observer who read modernists, interacted with modernists, but never fully embraced modernism *per se*. These widely divergent and disparate ways of looking at Lovecraft’s work show how

difficult it is, even for leading critical scholars, to examine and place Lovecraft's works within a modernist framework. These arguments, in point of fact, do not go far enough, or look closely enough at what was happening *within* the stories of Lovecraft. It is by looking closely at the content of Lovecraft's stories, and the way in which he melded his own modern sensibilities and rationalism, his understanding of older forms of horror and weird fiction, and his penchant for modern science combined with a healthy rejection of human religion and folklore that we can move closer to an understanding of where Lovecraft fit within early twentieth century literature as a whole. The concerns of modernist writers were rooted in new forms and new content that reflected the uniquely disruptive forces of the early twentieth century and the Modernist period. Lovecraft, just as his modernist contemporaries did, was reacting to those same pressures and, while his contributions weren't as popular, traditionally literary, or mainstream, his works have been emulated, copied, and acted as examples of a larger literary movement that, as Paul Halpern and Michael C. Labossiere describe, "weave the scientific and philosophical discourse of the age into riveting narratives of horror lurking beyond" (513)

While he may not have meant to do so, Lovecraft established a new, modernist way of looking at science fiction and horror. He may have been simply trying to tell a spooky story, but his encyclopedic knowledge of classic literature, folklore, geography, and his love for New England combined with his understanding of modern cultural, literary, and social discourse was such that he developed a hybrid of Modernist and genre fiction. Subverting the legacy of romanticized horror, folklore, and mythology; and by positing mankind's meaninglessness when compared to the vastness of a cold universe, Lovecraft found a way to a liminal position between weird fiction and the more

mainstream and commercially viable Modernist movement, and his exploration of the fringes of early twentieth century literature showed that he did indeed have modernist tendencies; especially around alienation, the impulse to de-centralize notions of reality, experimentation with form, and the integration of modern scientific and philosophical thought. As Johansen observed, “We recognize in [Lovecraft’s] stories an overall cultural pessimism, similar to what many representatives of modernism demonstrate in their works; writers such as T.S. Eliot, Georg Trakl, Franz Kafka, Gottfried Benn, and William Faulkner” (299). As Lovecraft himself said in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*:

The one test of the really weird [story] 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; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim (16).

This very same “beating of black wings” and “scratching of outside shapes” were a mimeses for the whisperings of modernity that were at the doorstep of Lovecraft’s own world and, in writing about them, he stood at the threshold of the old and the new.

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