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[John Glover, "Reception Claims in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* and the Course of Weird Fiction" published in *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature: The Critical Influence of H. P. Lovecraft*, edited by Sean Moreland, 2018, Palgrave Macmillan reproduced with permission of Springer International Publishing AG, part of Springer Nature.]

Reception Claims in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* and the Course of Weird Fiction

John Glover

The passage of time has been kinder to H. P. Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (*SHL*) than to Lovecraft himself, whose elevation to provisional canonical status in the last decade has been beset with more asterisks, footnotes, and disclaimers than any other such recent rise. Critics have tended to look favorably on the essay, noting variously that it established a structural pattern followed by many subsequent studies of horror fiction, that it dealt well with and answered questions about Poe, or that it simply was, in the words of one of Lovecraft's most notable detractors, "a really able piece of work."¹ Perhaps the most negative view thus far came in L. Sprague de Camp's 1975 *Lovecraft: A Life*, where de Camp lamented Lovecraft's choice to write the essay rather than a novel or another story. While de Camp's biographical study has since been eclipsed by S. T. Joshi's biographies, it continues to fascinate as an exemplar of all that is poorly considered in Lovecraft Studies. As such, it is no surprise that de Camp declared the essay "a compilation of the sort that any professor of English literature could do," though De

Camp is not alone in having questioned Lovecraft's judgment in writing at length for a publication with extremely limited distribution.²

SHL is the product of an outsider who viewed the ability to comprehend the most excellent in supernatural horror as the faculty of a particular sort of reader: sensitive, discerning, and fundamentally apart from society. This claim, that only certain readers—or certain kinds of reading—could provide access to higher spheres of literary appreciation has echoed down through the years among writers and critics of weird fiction. Whether in the publishing history of speculative fiction, or in the ongoing struggle to define contemporary weird fiction, Lovecraft's views on the special nature of weird fiction are still alive and well.

The quest for authenticity—in readership, in fiction—is beset with problems, but a desire for authenticity is hardly unique to weird fiction. The problems associated with such quests have been well studied, from fundamentally colonial desires to trading in authenticity for commercial reasons. That the fiction of a man like Lovecraft should have authentic appeal to an audience increasingly diverse in ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and all other forms of identity is occasionally surprising to some, but it makes sense in light of the alienation—of the *outsideness*—that so thoroughly informs his writings, up to and including the aesthetics embedded in *SHL*. This essay, first published in an amateur magazine and seeing only a tiny fraction of the audience that his stories saw in the pulps, encapsulates the views that Lovecraft held which dictated the terms of weird fiction's reception for more than half a century.

The Soundest Readers

SHL surveys the genre up to Lovecraft's time, with special attention paid to the historical development of the field. Lovecraft treats the rise of the Gothic, the landmark impact of Poe, the mastery he sees in Hodgson, Machen, Blackwood, etc., as well as briefer mentions along the way of scores of other authors and works. All of this is expected in a survey work, as are Lovecraft's repeated critical judgments, identifying those works which he feels stand at the top of the field. The processes of critically judging and of setting the limitations of his study create areas and works that he sees as being of lower quality, outside his remit, or both. His judgments are made on subjective aesthetic grounds, adhering to "cosmic vision."³ Along with all of this, however, come statements about the capacities, tastes, and traits of those readers who can appreciate to the greatest degree the best of supernatural horror: the "true weird tale" (28).⁴

At the outset, Lovecraft is keen to set his genre apart from then-ascendant Modernism and plain-spoken tales of ordinary life, claiming that "the appeal of the spectrally macabre is *generally narrow* because it demands from the reader a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from every-day life" [emphasis added] (25). This is only the first of the essay's claims that weird fiction is a special genre for special readers.⁵ The roots of these claims are not terribly important to the question of reception, whether they lay in Lovecraft's well-documented interest in (cultural, intellectual, racial) elites, a sense of inferiority arising from his social isolation or insufficiency of formal schooling, or the underwhelming compensation he received for his own fiction, whether in the form of payment or favorable critical notice. They serve to identify the traits of the people whom Lovecraft believes are the best audience for "true" weird fiction.

Lovecraft claimed in *SHL* that "[t]he one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown

spheres and powers; 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” (28). The signs by which one can locate the best in supernatural horror are not to be found in the work itself, but in the reader. If the weird is located more clearly among fellow readers than in works, then it would seem that the nature of a work's reception is the final answer to the question of whether a work fits Lovecraft's definition.

In discussing the early Gothic novel, Lovecraft speaks of the hunger for cosmic horror that drove even “the soundest readers” to seek out weak fiction that was the closest thing they could get to the truly weird (34). Here Lovecraft assumes that shared reading experiences sprang from natural affinity and a shared longing for something not yet known to them. While not unreasonable, it would be stretching a point to describe hunger for the truly weird as the driving force for all readers of the Gothic, but that is not actually what Lovecraft does. Instead, he implies that even the best of readers, conditioned to receive the best fiction, would lower themselves as far as necessary to get a taste of what they actually wanted.

Arthur Machen's “The Great God Pan” comes in for the comment by Lovecraft that a “sensitive reader” will reach the work's conclusion with “only an appreciative shudder” and a sensation duplicating that of one of the characters, that the story is too much to believe, else one think the world a nightmare (83). While this is not about the nature of weird fiction per se, it seems to speak to the idea of the discernment of the best readers, coupled with comments about melodrama and excessive coincidence. If nothing else, it suggests that Lovecraft believed the dedicated reader of weird fiction, much as with the Gothic example, seeks out the taste of the truly weird regardless of flaws in the material that nurtures it.

Perhaps fittingly it is at the end of the essay that Lovecraft uses the phrase that most clearly states his feelings about the reader of “the spectral” in literature: it will appeal primarily to those with “keen special sensibilities” (96). The appeal of supernatural horror is strongest for those Lovecraft sees as characterized by unusual perception, all the better to apprehend that profound sense of dread he identified early on as characterizing the truly weird.

What is going on here? Perhaps one might say that Lovecraft’s style was discursive, in every genre in which he wrote, and so one might be tempted to identify these comments as no more than authorial asides. If that were the case, however, why the consistency? Read separately, Lovecraft’s asides are merely that: obiter dicta, rhetorical fillips that can be enjoyed (or not) while following his articulation of the history of supernatural horror. Indeed, presumably this volume would not exist without enduring interest in Lovecraft the critic, whether we concur with his aesthetic judgments or no. These reception claims, however, are not coming from an obscure figure in the history of supernatural horror, but from arguably the most influential U.S. practitioner of weird fiction to date. Further, they are inextricably linked with his most nuanced articulation of his own personal philosophy when it came to his chosen subject matter.

The fact that *SHL* was first published by W. Paul Cook in the first issue of his *The Recluse*, a short-lived magazine that was circulated among amateurs, suggests one possible answer: that Lovecraft is embedding in his discussion of the genre the kind of language commonly associated with fans and fandom. While science fiction fandom was nascent in 1927, the year of the essay's first publication, Sherlock Holmes fandom was many decades old by that point, and certainly Lovecraft had spent time around fans and enthusiasts, whether at amateur journalism conventions or via the letters columns of the pulps, including *Weird Tales*, notable for

the sense of fraternity shared by its readers.⁶ Sam Moskowitz, ur-fan and historian of fandom, summarized the thinking that might lie behind this reading thus:

Followers and glorifiers of the fantastic tale like to think that they are different, that they represent something new on the face of the earth; mutants born with an intelligence and a sense of farseeing appreciation just a bit higher than the norm. They like to believe that their counterpart has never before existed, that they have no predecessors. "No one," they say, "has ever seen our visions, dreamed our dreams. Never before has man's brain reached out so far into the limitless stretches of the cosmos about him."⁷

This sounds not dissimilar from Lovecraft's statements, but he and Moskowitz have different concerns. Moskowitz's work is about the structuring of organized appreciation, communication networks, conventions, and other formal elements of fandom. The closest Lovecraft comes to any of that in *SHL* is his treatment of sub-par examples of the Gothic novel as highly imitative, perhaps bordering on proto-fan fiction (34). That said, *SHL* is not, for lack of a better word, fannish; it is critical, offering penetrating judgment on the range of supernatural horror. Lovecraft's call to special sensitivity comes in tandem with discussions of what makes for the best of supernatural horror, standing head and shoulders above the rest. If these statements are designed in some way to encourage fandom writ large and promote group cohesion, they are curiously elitist, and directed to a distinct subset of the people who might actually be receptive to his claims.

More than occasional authorial asides, and more than mere byproducts of fan locution, I believe that together such statements about the reader of weird fiction can be read as a kind of crypto-manifesto, calling out to Lovecraft's perceived compatriots. The identification of traits that might appeal to readers at the more literary end of the supernatural horror spectrum is an implicit acknowledgment of the group's nature as a kind of secret society within the already semi-walled garden of dedicated readers of supernatural horror, a phenomenon James Machin

has explored at length in studying connoisseurship in weird fiction communities.⁸ At the same time, Lovecraft's claims hint at recognition among the elect of something that is already there, waiting to be uncovered in the hands of skilled writers.

Publishing Outsiders

The months and years following Lovecraft's death were ones of grief for the loss of one who had given of himself freely to friends and colleagues. Soon enough, however, some of his associates aspired to publish Lovecraft in the style which they felt he deserved. The story of August Derleth and Donald Wandrei's foundation of Arkham House Press is told elsewhere in many places: the attempts to find a mainstream publisher, a brief period of rejections, the foundation of a specialty press with the express purpose of publishing Lovecraft in hard covers. What is most interesting as it pertains to Lovecraft's views on the special nature of weird fiction is how quickly Derleth and Wandrei turned from mainstream possibilities to the idea of founding their own press. As the first major specialty publisher of genre fiction, Arkham House paved the way for the growth of a market apart from the mainstream and thereby able to focus on works that were, depending on one's perspective, either of less appeal to the general market or best appreciated by those with the necessary inclinations to receive the best of supernatural horror.

Whether the eager championing of Lovecraft's work by his contemporaries in the years after his death was better or worse for his oeuvre is impossible to say, but it *is* possible to trace the perpetuation of the weird tale. Tales were reprinted in anthologies that found broad audiences, and Lovecraft's work saw republication by Panther, Del Rey, etc. However, new publications in the style championed by Lovecraft were most commonly produced by presses

like Arkham House, Donald M. Grant, or Fedogan & Bremer. While fiction having something or other to do with the Weird has spread far beyond these confines, there continues to exist a thriving niche for fiction explicitly written in the Lovecraftian mode, not a small amount of it from publishers with names drawn from Lovecraft's oeuvre, from Innsmouth Free Press to Miskatonic River Press.

At the same time as publication of weird fiction often remained the province of small presses and small magazines, so, too, did the scholarship. Starting in the late 1970s, critics conducted conversation in small journals devoted to Lovecraft or weird fiction apart from the mainstream of U.S. literary criticism, often ignoring trends in the field and confining their bibliographies to primary sources and to secondary material from other similarly focused journals. While there was indeed criticism of weird fiction ongoing, continuing the kind of study Lovecraft carried out in *SHL*, it remained unseen and largely untapped by a wider audience.

Lovecraft Studies, for instance, was indexed by the MLA International Bibliography, but other publications did not receive the same attention. They often were not acquired (or, if acquired, retained) by research libraries, apart from those with substantial holdings associated with Lovecraft, such as Brown University. This has meant that their discourse is currently out of easy reach for many contemporary critics, and has lessened their impact on succeeding generations of scholars, who work in an age when peer-reviewed literary scholarship can be accessed with the click of a button via full-text databases and similar tools.⁹ In recent years, criticism of supernatural horror generally has reached wider audiences and been of interest to a larger number of critics, fueled by everything from the rise of horror in other media to the rise of cultural studies, comparative literature, and so on.

Cracks in the Shell

The 1980s were a busy time for the genre of supernatural horror, as authors like Stephen King and Anne Rice conquered the *New York Times* bestseller lists, and bookstores were full of horror novels, collections, and anthologies. Much of this fiction rode the family-defending, monster-destroying coattails of Stephen King and William Peter Blatty, back to *Dracula* and beyond. Along with the bestsellers and healthy midlist, there was also a thriving small press community. In these began to appear some authors interested in taking the cosmic horror espoused by Lovecraft and minimizing or stripping it of the trappings he used. Perhaps the most notable of this group was Thomas Ligotti. Starting in the very early '80s, he wrote fiction informed by a plethora of authors—Thomas Bernhard, Franz Kafka, Vladimir Nabokov, Bruno Schulz, and others—well outside the stream stretching back through Arkham House to *Weird Tales* and to the sources identified by Lovecraft in *SHL*.¹⁰ Ligotti has in the decades since reached wider audiences through reprint editions and influence on other authors, but he has himself remained something of a niche author, likely due to the heavy streak of undiluted nihilism that runs through his work. As Lovecraft called to weird fiction aficionados through appeals to their sensibilities, so, too, does Ligotti implicitly call to those with narrow sensibilities. His terror of the universe can be called nothing but “cosmic horror,” yet it largely lacks the by now clichéd tentacles, books of lore, and maddened antiquarians that signaled “mainstream” weird fiction for much of the 20th century.

It should not be overlooked that the tropes of Lovecraft’s fiction were reflections of his ideas about the world, and the associations he had, in particular his intellectual championing of Anglo-American tradition, education, aristocracy, and whiteness. While these elements do not come in for discussion as merits unto themselves in *SHL*, it is difficult to read it and think other

than that Lovecraft's envisioned reader looked as he imagined the world should look. It seems worth pointing out in this context that, as the U.S. has changed, so, too, has the U.S. readership for weird fiction. The critics, filmmakers, editors, anthologists, writers, and readers who work in the genre represent a diverse spectrum of humanity, from race to class to gender and beyond. As Nick Mamatas, a U.S. author, editor, and anthologist of Greek descent, wrote in a pertinent essay, "[w]e read Lovecraft's work and write Lovecraftian fiction, but we don't side with his sallow protagonists and their nervous fits—we see ourselves in the glory of the Outsider Things."¹¹ This stripe of weird fiction, transposing insider and outsider, shows no sign in fading in popularity, and it appears to appeal to readers of many kinds. Perhaps, as Kurt Fawver has argued, it is precisely the fluid boundaries between self and other, perennially in flux in weird fiction, that attract a globalized, interconnected readership to contemporary weird fiction.¹²

At the same time as weird fiction was finding new and ever more diverse champions, it was also sidling slowly but surely into the ivory tower. Much academic study of weird fiction has been carried out according to the conventions that obtain elsewhere in literary studies, from postcolonial studies to Marxist analysis, and comment on the strangeness of Lovecraft's transition into respectability as an object of study has been louder in the news or in the online scrum of conversations among fans and readers than among academics. Lovecraft's entry into the mainstream of U.S. literature is marked as clearly as anything by the 2005 publication of the Library of America edition of his works, *H. P. Lovecraft: Tales*, an honor bestowed on no other writer of weird fiction aside from Shirley Jackson. This canonization at once replicates the exclusivity that Lovecraft propagated with regard to weird fiction and utterly demolishes it. Even given the flexibility of the postmodern canon, and specifically the opening of the Library of America in the mid-'00s to authors and genres historically ignored by the academic literary

establishment, canonization marks universal importance and applicability like nothing else.¹³ Far from work reserved for those with “keen special sensibilities,” the stories of America’s premier author of weird fiction have received the stamp of the ultimate insider.

The Troubling of Consensus

Despite the above-discussed strains, it would still have been possible in the early years of the new millennium to claim that weird fiction generally looked a certain way, and that Lovecraft's formulations still held sway in how readers, writers, and critics approached the genre. The much-discussed movement/moment of the late 1990s and early 2000s known as the “New Weird” could be written off as a blip in the development of the field, perhaps more broadly about fantasy than specifically the tradition of weird fiction, and even participants in the movement questioned whether it actually existed.¹⁴ Academic consideration of Lovecraft, to say nothing of lesser-known authors of weird fiction, could be ignored by the majority of readers and writers in the field. Most of the work of newer writers in the tradition, from Thomas Ligotti to Caitlín R. Kiernan, could still be squeezed fitfully into a box of the approximate dimensions described by Lovecraft.

All of this was to change with the 2011 publication of Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's *The Weird*, an anthology treating weird fiction at previously unseen breadth and depth. Importantly for the kind of reception that Lovecraft deemed essential to weird fiction, *The Weird* was in essence an argument against the idea of the weird tale as a subset of supernatural horror, but rather as a manifold tradition in its own right that could be found in literatures around the world.

In their introduction, the VanderMeers offer a definition that attempts to bridge some of the gaps between the wide varieties of works that they assembled:

Because The Weird often exists in the interstices, because it can occupy different territories simultaneously, an impulse exists among the more rigid taxonomists to find The Weird suspect, to argue it should not, cannot be, separated out from other traditions. Because the Weird is as much a *sensation* as it is a mode of writing, the most keenly attuned amongst us will say 'I know it when I see it,' by which they mean 'I know it when I *feel* it'—and this, too, the more rigorous of categorizing taxidermists will take to mean The Weird does not exist when, in fact, this is one of the more compelling arguments for its existence.¹⁵

The idea of defining weird fiction as something far-ranging, known by feel, and living interstitially should make sense to any reader, and it seems an excellent rubric for assembling an anthology. If elements like diction, structure, plot, characterization, etc. are not the important criteria for identifying weird fiction, though, then what is? For Lovecraft, the true test was “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” (28). From one definition that can only be checked internally by the reader we pass to another that can likewise only be checked internally by the reader—either of which renders taxonomical discussion difficult, if not impossible. As such, I offer the suggestion that weird fiction is an *emergent mode* of fiction-writing, identifiable purely by the sense of cosmic uncertainty that it evokes in the reader. The causes of this uncertainty necessarily must shift from reader to reader, culture to culture, and age to age, rendering ultimately futile any attempt to define weird fiction as a genre based in objective criteria. If it *can* be pinned to an objective criterion, from Lovecraft onward it comes down to an inherently unstable one: “[a]tmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation” (28).

The argument for breadth that the VanderMeers made in *The Weird* about the nature of weird fiction did not emerge from nowhere. Between the two of them, they have an extensive background in writing, reviewing, publishing, editing, or anthologizing fiction across the spectrum of the fantastic. As Jeff VanderMeer's participation in the New Weird linked his own fiction to the larger tradition, so did Ann VanderMeer's editorial history lay the groundwork for her view of weird fiction. From 1989 to 2002 she published *The Silver Web*, known as *The Sterling Web* for its first six issues, which its tagline described as “A Magazine of the Surreal.” She published there a broad range of fantastic fiction from authors of diverse backgrounds and styles, long before that was widely considered an ideal in the speculative fiction community. Her editorial work has continued in various venues and anthologies, and is ongoing, but perhaps most interesting for this study is her time at *Weird Tales*.

From 2007 to 2011, Ann VanderMeer served as *Weird Tales*' fiction editor, selecting works that were largely in a new direction stylistically from those chosen by (in various combinations) George Scithers, John Gregory Betancourt, and Darrell Schweitzer, who ran the publication from the start of the revival that began in 1988 and has not yet officially ended as of this writing. Her approach was not consistently welcomed by all readers, some of whom found her taste radical, or too far afield from the fictions of Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Sheridan Le Fanu, and other authors from the magazine's heyday, but the winds of change were evident in 2009 when she, together with editorial and creative director Stephen Segal, won the Hugo Award for Best Semiprozine for their *Weird Tales* work. Two years later the publisher sold the magazine, setting in motion many changes, with VanderMeer ultimately resigning due to “major artistic and philosophical differences with the existing editors.”¹⁶

Ann VanderMeer's editorship at *Weird Tales* was revolutionary. She directed attention toward figures often wholly outside the realm of traditional weird fiction as identified by Lovecraft. Likewise, it is difficult to see the publisher's stated intent of making their first post-VanderMeer issue "Cthulhu-themed" as anything other than a counter-revolutionary action intended to shore up the identity of a magazine core to "traditional" weird fiction, which had published much of the by-now-antiquarian stripe of weird fiction for the preponderance of its revival run. The distinction here is stark: Ann VanderMeer chose stories that fit her ethos, aiming to publish fiction that would genuinely disquiet. Her successors chose to return to fiction characterized by tropes that have been commodified to the point of losing meaningful association with the cosmic horror actually espoused by Lovecraft. At this point, some authors who regularly or occasionally publish work that could be classified as weird fiction actually avoid the label, or labels generally, and many are content to leave taxonomy to the critics.¹⁷

An even more recent iteration in the conflict between visions of the best in supernatural horror—who should enjoy it, who should write it, who should read it—came to a head on November 8, 2015. At the World Fantasy Awards ceremony held in Saratoga Springs, New York, it was announced after a year of debate that the form of the World Fantasy Award was to change from that of a statuette bearing Lovecraft's visage to another subject, yet to be determined as of this writing, and debate on the issue is ongoing. To consider the design of an award in the context of an analysis of Lovecraft's greatest work of non-fiction may seem beside the point, but consider that the World Fantasy Awards are given in association with the World Fantasy Convention, the first of which was held in Providence in 1975 with the intention of reviving interest in Lovecraft and other authors of his generation. The award was founded in one spirit, but it has since been changed in order to accommodate the broader field of fantastic endeavor,

for which Lovecraft was no longer felt to be a suitable representative, which inevitably raises various specters. The most notable objections arose on account of Lovecraft's well-documented racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, which became subjects of increasingly acrimonious debate in many venues before and after the award change.¹⁸

Whether qualms about Lovecraft's face representing a major award in the genre of fantasy are well-founded or not,¹⁹ whatever the intentions of those who campaigned for a change in the award and however much they may respect the works of Lovecraft, it is impossible to read this change as other than a rebuke to Lovecraft. Whether this is aimed at "traditional" weird fiction or at Lovecraft's ideas about it, there is no evidence that the kind of vitriolic fights that arose in this debate occurred within the fraternity of weird fiction in Lovecraft's lifetime. The field was more demographically homogeneous then, and the same shared outlook on and experiences of reading supernatural horror built a camaraderie that more easily overruled disagreements.

Despite or because of these shifts in weird fiction, there is enough interest in it at this point to support an annual summation anthology, in the style of other genres' "year's bests," with rotating volume editors. The first volume of Undertow Publications' *Year's Best Weird Fiction* appeared in 2014, with the series edited by publisher Michael Kelly and the initial volume edited by author Laird Barron. True to the genre's origins, the stories included are drawn largely from fantasy and horror publications, with a smattering from markets closer to the literary mainstream. Even so, both editors acknowledge explicitly the situation of the weird at this time, and the multiplicity of visions that now are identified as belonging to the tradition. Barron's introduction, full of mentions of supernatural horror icons like Blackwood and Jackson, dilates on this, acknowledging that the weird is inherently difficult to define, and perhaps as a result reading for

the anthology was a formidable task that covered a broad territory, even with Kelly having taken a first pass through submissions to pre-screen contents.²⁰ This is a far cry from the decades when weird fiction was thought to live primarily in specialty publications conforming to Lovecraft's rubric, and was identified almost exclusively with supernatural horror.

Commodification, Slippage, and the Erosion of Meaning

Even as Lovecraft's passage into the canon has practically guaranteed dissemination of his work beyond the dedicated readership of weird fiction, the interconnected stories that he wrote have been repurposed and commodified by authors, artists, game designers, musicians, and movie-makers, diluting the very qualities that Lovecraft valued most and tried to embed in his work. There is no need to trace this in much detail, given the careful attention that Mark Jones has paid to the process,²¹ and the subject has called to scholars to the extent that a number of monographs have treated the legacy of Lovecraft and his work, from Joshi's 2008 *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos* (revised, expanded, and retitled for 2015 publication) to W. Scott Poole's 2016 *In the Mountains of Madness: The Life and Extraordinary Afterlife of H. P. Lovecraft*.²²

The spreading impact of Lovecraft and his creations has been noted in recent press coverage of ongoing debates over Lovecraft's legacy, along with the extent to which the trappings of his stories have been grafted onto all manner of consumer goods, including “[b]oard Games. Coins. Corsets. Christmas wreaths. Dice. Dresses. Keychains. License-plate frames. Mugs. Phone cases. Plush toys. Posters. Ties.”²³ While these commodities have little or nothing to do with Lovecraft's vision for a rarified version of supernatural horror, and everything to do

with the discrete trappings of the “Cthulhu Mythos,” one does not exist without the other. As Joshi observed in *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, the course of Lovecraft's early cultural and literary afterlife was determined largely by August Derleth, and that meant “Mythos” above all.²⁴

The shifting of the definition of “weird fiction,” sometimes moving quite far away from Lovecraft's vision of cosmic horror, has proven an attraction for authors, publishers, and readers who see the descriptor as a useful tool. This appeal has led in some quarters to a slippage that threatens to remove entirely any descriptive value the term may hold, even when it comes to describing the fictions that, at this particular time and place, evoke cosmic uncertainty. On Goodreads, for instance, a website that allows readers to review, catalogue, and discuss books, “weird fiction” is used as a descriptor for many authors traditionally included in the definition, from Lovecraft to Algernon Blackwood, as well as newer entries into the field, like China Miéville or Caitlín R. Kiernan. It is also used to identify a wide range of works by authors who do not self-describe as writers of weird fiction, are not published by publishers who identify as publishing weird fiction, and who do not seem to pass either the most generous kinds of definitions, as offered by the VanderMeers in their introduction to *The Weird*, or to resemble formally, thematically, or otherwise the bulk of other novels and stories that have up until recently constituted the field of weird fiction. While the internet is nothing if not anarchic, the range of material currently described as “weird fiction” has transitioned from the confines of Lovecraft's description, through the catholic range of *New Weird* and *The Weird*, into something that seems less coherent, or even meaningful. As publications, publishers, and reviewers are coming to use the phrase “weird fiction” to describe works resting practically anyplace on the border between realistic and fantastical modes of writing, it is easy to imagine a range of futures for the signifier after its complete separation from the (formerly) signified.

It should come as no surprise, then, after all of this evolution, that there even exists a genre of online mashup blending Lovecraftian motifs with characters from Charles Schulz's internationally beloved *Peanuts* comic strips. (To call this kind of combination utterly tone deaf would perhaps seem too harsh, insofar as Schulz's comic strip often delved into the depths of the human soul, particularly in the earlier decades of its run, but this tenor softened as Schulz aged.²⁵) This is, however, something so far outside the scope of anything Lovecraft would consider the remit of weird fiction that it beggars the imagination, particularly given Lovecraft's view that humor undercuts the "true sense of the morbidly unnatural" (28).

Despite the well-known commodification of Schulz' intellectual property, he repeatedly asserted its (and his) fundamental integrity, springing from his control over the comics, regardless of developments in other iterations of his work.²⁶ Lovecraft, while generous in life and allowing others to make free use of his concepts and mythos, cordially detested commercialism, and it seems unlikely that he would have countenanced use of his work in ways that so clearly run counter to his philosophy, intentions in creating it, or ideas about what is appropriate in the best of supernatural horror. That the murky legal status of his works, many unquestionably public domain and the identity of potential rights-holders unclear for others, enables such combinations is irony stretched to the breaking point, as is the idea that a greater number of people are now more familiar with the derivative, transmediated ghosts of weird fiction than their potent source material. Far from a cloistered subgenre of supernatural horror appreciated only by those with elevated sensibilities, weird fiction now encompasses a profusion of different aesthetics and narrative modes, from retiring New Englanders driven mad by knowledge of humanity's cosmic irrelevance to the antics of America's laughable, lovable loser, with tentacles.

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Notes

¹ Carroll, Noël, *The Philosophy of Horror, Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 239; Joshi, S. T., *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1996), 383; Wilson, Edmund, *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s & 40s*, (New York: Library of America, 2007), 702.

² De Camp, L. Sprague, *Lovecraft: A Biography*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 247; Bleiler, E. F., “Introduction to the Dover Edition,” *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, by H. P. Lovecraft (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), iii.

³ Bleiler, E. F., “Introduction to the Dover Edition,” *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, by H. P. Lovecraft (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), vi.

⁴ Page numbers references are to Lovecraft, H. P. *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, commentary by S. T. Joshi, 2nd ed. (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2012).

⁵ For discussion of Lovecraft’s repudiation of mundanity, see Nyikos, Dániel, “The Lovecraft Circle and the ‘Weird Class’: ‘Against the Complacency of an Orthodox Sun-Dweller,’” in *The Unique Legacy of Weird Tales: The Evolution of Modern Fantasy and Horror*, ed. Justin Everett and Jeffrey H. Shanks (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 36-37. Readers’ receptivity to this idea is less important for Nyikos than their overall rejection of daily life and consequent openness to Lovecraft’s “truly weird.”

⁶ Bleiler, E. F., “Introduction to the Dover Edition,” *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, by H. P. Lovecraft (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), vii.

⁷ Moskowitz, Sam, *The Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom* (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1974), 1.

⁸ Machin, James, “Weird Fiction and the Virtues of Obscurity: Machen, Stenbock, and the Weird Connoisseurs,” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 6 (October 2017): 1065 and *passim*, doi: 10.1080/0950236X.2017.1358692.

⁹ Those interested in accessing the full history of Lovecraft publication and criticism, including works from this period, should seek out Joshi, S. T., *H. P. Lovecraft: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (Tampa, FL: University of Tampa Press, 2009).

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