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“Never Fully Realize”: Birth of a Mythos, H. P. Lovecraft’s “Dagon”

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Most Lovecraftian stories begin with a statement by the author, usually an unnamed first person narrator, about his condition and reasons for writing. Typically, the statements seem, though not stated to be, in the form of found manuscripts, as the parenthetical remark in the title of “The Call of Cthulhu” atypically avers, “Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thruston, of Boston” (DH 125). The text of “Dagon,” it becomes clear at the end of the story must have been found in the form of a suicide note, “I am writing this under an appreciable mental strain, since by tonight I shall be no more.” The note of a suicidal intention in this sentence is confirmed at the conclusion of the opening paragraph, “When you have read these hastily scrawled pages you may guess, though never fully realize, why it is that I must have forgetfulness or death” (D 14).

Interesting is the phrase that the horror is something the reader will probably “never fully realize.” Lovecraft is admitting how the horror, here, never fully realizes itself. And in “Dagon,” the horror never does. It remains, arguably, even at times in the mind of the supercargo narrator, induced by madness caused by being left adrift at sea and later augmented by drug addiction. Further, “Dagon” was the beginning of Lovecraft’s mythos and that mythos itself was never fully realized because Lovecraft was not a writer like William Blake, J. R. R. Tolkien

or Isaac Asimov who had the ability or inclination to devise an overall consistency, but Lovecraft wished as Edgar Allan Poe did to create a unique effect in each individual story. Lovecraft did not create a consistent mythology, though he leaned toward it because of his personal inclination in the direction of what he found to be terrifying to imagine. The origins of this terror in Lovecraft's imagination were partially bigotry, partially the fear that his materialism might not be true and partially simple personal dislikes.

“Dagon” marks the beginning of Lovecraft's journey to the solid but problematical place he currently holds in American literature. It is the beginning of the Mythos that has made Lovecraft the most imitated writer in American literature. No writer, not Nathaniel Hawthorne, not Mark Twain, not Edgar Allan Poe, not Ernest Hemingway, nor F. Scott Fitzgerald, has been so widely imitated and influential. Granted, this imitation is mostly in the popular realm, from friends of Lovecraft's adding to his mythos, to Steven King, to the dozens of pastiches of Lovecraftian stories, even to other media such as television, comic books, movies and the computer games and role play games based on his work. These imitations in the popular field are there, partially, because people feel they can be as good as Lovecraft, but more importantly, because Lovecraft inspires.

Of “Dagon,” Lovecraft wrote in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith on January 1, 1923:

I am glad your friend likes *Dagon* – which was written in 1917, & is the second story I wrote that year.... [An] amateur editor & critic named W. Paul Cook ... egged me on to the point of actual production, & *The Tomb* – with all its stiffness – was the result. Next came *Dagon* – & it shagrins me to admit that I've hardly been able to

equal it since. My favorite three tales are *Dagon*, *Randolph Carter*, & *The Cats of Ulthar*. (SL 1.202-03)

Though “The Tomb” was written first, clearly Cook’s praise of these two stories (SL 2. 110) and Lovecraft’s particular faith in “Dagon” gave him the impetus to continue to write. He admits in 1923 how he has yet to equal it and later he writes that “Dagon” was one of his “hell-beaters” (SL 1. 226). He had sent other stories originally to Baird, but when Baird wished them retyped, and Lovecraft loathed typing, he chose “Dagon.” As a result, Lovecraft’s first attempt to be published in professional pulp magazines was “Dagon,” the story he had the most faith in and the one that was not too long to retype. In writing James F. Morton on May 17, 1923, Lovecraft writes about sending a story to Edwin Baird for possible publication, “...I’m so damn hard up I may try *one* [story] as a gamble ... *Dagon*, I guess....And if he doesn’t accept that he knows where he can go!” (SL 1. 229).

As important as this is, more important is the place “Dagon” has in the Cthulhu Mythos. (I will use the most accepted term for the mythos for want of better terms.) Thought written at the onset of his career, “Dagon” plants the seed for not only the nature of his mythos creatures, modes of narration as in the epic journeys and telling of pre-history via archeological remains, but “Dagon” even hints at the cosmic view which underlines the later developments in the mythos and which has been averred to be true nature of the nebulous link between what are known as the mythos stories.

“Dagon” was written in July of 1917 (Joshi, *Life*, 152) while Lovecraft was living at 598 Angell St. in Providence, Rhode Island. It was first published in *The Vagrant*, Cook’s amateur journal, in November of 1919, reprinted in *Weird Tales* in October of 1923 then again there in

January of 1938. “Dagon” was first collected in *The Outsider and Others* in 1939 (Joshi, *Encyclopedia*, 57).

“Dagon” was, according to Lovecraft, inspired by a dream. As Joshi has pointed out (*Encyclopedia*, 58), Lovecraft’s *In Defense of Dagon* defended his story’s plot as follows: “...the hero-victim is half-sucked into the mire, yet he *does* crawl! He pulls himself along in the detestable ooze, tenaciously though it cling to him. I know, for I dreamed that whole hideous crawl, and can yet feel the ooze sucking me down!” (MW 150). Joshi also remarks that William Fulwiler sees in “Dagon” an influence of Irvin S. Cobb’s story “Fishhead,” “a tale of a fishlike human being who haunts an isolated lake and a tale that HPL praised in a letter to the editor when it appeared in the *Argosy* on January 11, 1913” (*Encyclopedia*, 58).

Lovecraft reworked “Dagon” in the third part of “The Call of Cthulhu,” (DH 125–154) there as part of a much more elaborate story. The Dagon episode may have been rewritten because in his later readings of “Dagon,” Lovecraft found it “stilted & artificial (SL 2. 253) and later still to have “obvious crudities” (SL 4. 34), but more probably because the events in “Dagon” were originally presented in a way more open to a rational explanation than to the outside explanation which would fit into the Cthulhu Mythos Lovecraft developed in years far later than 1917.

“Dagon” begins with what becomes standard in Lovecraft’s fiction, an introduction that describes the narrator’s current state, outlines his reason for writing and foreshadows the ending. In “Dagon,” it is a single paragraph:

I am writing this under an appreciable mental strain, since by tonight I shall be no more. Penniless, and at the end of my supply of the drug which alone, makes life endurable, I can bear the torture

no longer; and shall cast myself from this garret window into the squalid street below. Do not think from my slavery to morphine that I am a weakling or a degenerate. When you have read these hastily scrawled pages you may guess, though never fully realize, why it is that I must have forgetfulness or death. (D 14)

The nameless narrator explains his current situation as being impecunious and without the drug he needs. The text is partly written as a suicide note, partly as an explanation for the narrator's addiction to morphine, how it is not the result of being a "weakling or a degenerate." The paragraph predicts the end as the narrator will commit suicide, but not just because of the lack of morphine, but for his final horror, which proves to be a hallucination. The opening paragraph, though predicting the ending, leaves the surprise there.

Burleson underlines how the handling of the narrator here begins what will be standard with Lovecraft: "Lovecraft is already beginning to practice a fictional technique that he will wield with ever-increasing effectiveness throughout his career" (22). The techniques Burleson points to include calling into question the veracity of the narrator, something Burleson is quick to say comes from Poe, and by calling the narrator's sanity into question making the reader want to believe his tale.

After the initial paragraph, which leaves the reader with questions and anticipations of otherworldly content, the story begins from the beginning in a prosaic manner till the narrator falls asleep. This portion adds the realism Lovecraft will insist, in his letters, must be included in a successful weird tale. "Only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities. *These* must be handled with unsparing *realism*" (SL 2. 150). For the fabulous to have an effect on the reader, reality must be established. Lovecraft's fiction was reader-reaction centered, not author-expression centered.

The narrator, a supercargo on a merchant ship during World War I, is captured along with his shipmates by a German sea-raider. The Germans, however, were so liberal with their prisoners that the narrator was able to escape in a small boat and he finds himself at sea in the vast ocean. Not being “a competent navigator,” he had but a vague idea as to where he was. Eventually, he “began to despair in [his] solitude upon the heaving vastness of unbroken blue” (D 15). He mentions the “scorching sun” and hoping for sight of a ship or being cast up on land, but not gaining either. Remarkable here is the lack of great distress expressed by the narrator. He seems optimistic in fact, speaking of the weather being fair. Even the liberality of the German captors makes existence seem easy, despite being surrounded by the Great War.

The change comes swiftly, “The change happened whilst I slept.” And from this point till the end, the narrator and the reader are placed in fantastic circumstances. The next sentence is significant, “Its details I shall never know; for my slumber, though troubled and dream-infested, was continuous” (D 15). “It” refers to the change, but the nature of that change is not clear. Is “the change” only the condition of the bottom of the ocean coming up, or is the change in the narrator’s sanity? The narrator mentions “slumber” as “dream-infested” and “continuous.” Is he then drawn into a dream state that could explain all till the last word of the story?

The paragraph describing the time on the sea is filled with language calling into question the narrator’s sanity: “Never ... competent,” “I could only guess,” “vaguely,” “I knew nothing.” The descriptions of the time with “no island or coast-line,” moving “aimlessly,” the “heaving vastness,” and “unbroken blue” (D 15) all suggest the possibility of impending madness for the figure adrift in the tiny boat.

At this point, after the narrator awakes in the muck that has risen

from the bottom of the sea, the narration slows down. The opening three paragraphs cover quite some time with little detailed description. Now a prosaic detailed description ensues. Perhaps this indicates that this period remains vivid in the narrator's memory. Further, sanity on the part of the narrator seems to continue, though what he describes is fabulous. The monotonous expanse of the ocean is mysteriously transformed into the "monotonous undulations" of black mire. The reaction to his circumstance is not so much surprise but horror engendered by the stench, slime, rotten fish, and "less describable" (D 15) dead creatures he sees buried in the mud along with himself. The nature of this horror Lovecraft will return to again and again.

What follows is the earliest of Lovecraft's narrators many epic journeys. These journeys occur in both Mythos tales and Dunsany tales, many tales being journeys in themselves as is "The White Ship" (D 36 – 42) and "Dream Quest of the Unknown Katath," (MM 306–407) both Dunsany tales. In "Rats in The Walls" (DH 26 – 45), the journey takes the narrator deep in the ground under his estate. In "The Shadow out of Time" (DH 368 – 433), the quest is also underground into the realm of the Great Race. The last story Lovecraft wrote fully by himself, "Haunter of the Dark" (DH 92 – 115), contains a voyage from College Hill on the East side of Providences, down through the city itself, up to Federal Hill, meandering through the mazes there, finally finding the dark church the narrator sought. But the journey does not end there, the narrator, Blake, continues breaching the fences, climbing down into the cellar through a window, working his way up into the nave and vestry, and finally high into the bell-less bell tower (DH 96 – 102).

The narrator's journey in "Dagon" begins with his getting though the muddy muck to his stranded boat under a curious "sky which seemed ... almost black in its cloudless cruelty" (D 15). Arriving at the

boat, the narrator realizes what must have happened:

As I crawled into the stranded boat I realized that only one theory could explain my position. Through some unprecedented volcanic upheaval, a portion of the ocean floor must have been thrown to the surface, exposing regions which for innumerable millions of years had lain hidden under unfathomable watery depths. (D 15)

This rising of the bottom of the sea is used in Lovecraft's masterpiece, "The Call of the Cthulhu." In "The Call," the upheaval is only one of several sources of horror happening simultaneously all over the globe. In "Dagon," it is an isolated incident, the narrator being the sole unfortunate witness to. His first day on the risen seabed is spent avoiding the sun in the "slight shade" afforded by the boat "which lay upon its side." As the day progressed, the sun dries the muck and the idea of traveling becomes practicable. On the third morning, the narrator, having packed provisions, heads off to search for "the vanished sea and possible rescue" (D 16).

The trek, "guided by a far-away hummock," seems longer than first imagined. After a day of traveling and a night encamped, he reaches the base of the hummock. Sleep for the narrator is troubled with "wild" dreams that wake him in a "cold perspiration [and he] determined to sleep no more" (D 16). Upon retrospect, the wild dreams were the end of the narrator's peace of mind. His explanation for not returning to sleep follows: "Such visions as I had experienced were too much for me to endure again" (D 16). But just after averring that he determined not to go back to sleep to avoid further visions, he gives a most prosaic, logical reason for climbing the hummock in the midst of the night.

And in the glow of the moon I saw how unwise I had been to travel by day. Without the glare of the parching sun, my journey would have cost me less energy; indeed, I now felt quite able to perform the ascent which had deterred me at sunset. Picking up my pack, I started for the crest of the eminence. (D 16)

After insisting he would not sleep because of the dreams, the narrator devises a logical reason for making the night ascent to the top of the hummock. After reaching the top of the hill, the remainder of his journey is downward to sea level. The supercargo likens his descent to Satan's "hideous climb through the unfashioned realms of darkness" in *Paradise Lost* (D 16). The analogy identifies the narrator with Satan, though ironically, his journey brings him to the sight of what becomes his devil.

The sun light "scorching" during his time adrift at sea and later so oppressive on the risen seabed is replaced with the gibbous moon light, a source of light the supercargo comes to prefer. The narrator writes, "...in the glow of the moon I saw how unwise I had been to travel by day" (D 16). The moon now accompanies and will accompany the narrator till the end. The narrator wakes from the "wild" dream to the light of the "fantastically gibbous moon [that] had risen far above the eastern plain" (D 16). And, as we shall see, after his decent, the moon will illuminate Dagon.

The narrator does not describe his ascent of the hummock but does express his horror at finding atop it the high opening to an abyss.

I have said that the unbroken monotony of the rolling plain was a source of vague horror to me; but I think my horror was greater when I gained the summit of the mound and looked down the other side into an immeasurable pit or canyon, whose black recesses the

moon had not yet soared high enough to illumine. I felt myself on the edge of the world, peering over the rim into a fathomless chaos of eternal night. (D 16)

The “unbroken monotony” of the plain was of “vague horror” to the narrator. Ironically, as Timo Airaksinen observes, “What he originally perceives as being the ground above sea level turns out to be the sea bottom” (183). The supercargo does not realize the horror till he reaches the heights of the hummock and looks down at the black abyss. The chasm is “immeasurable” and the narrator’s comforting moon “had not yet soared high enough to illumine” the depths. The world “illumine” has the dual meaning of “giving light to” and “to give knowledge of.” Both meanings here are underlined with the narrators descriptions of feeling “on the edge of the world, peering over the rim into a fathomless chaos of eternal night.” “Fathomless” too contains the dual meaning of “inability to see” and “inability to comprehend.” Lovecraft here mingles the idea of unseeable with unknowable. Later, what is seen will be unknowable and indescribable.

The rise of the moon brings comfort now to the narrator. The moon rising in the sky brings comfort and encouragement to descend into the pit. “As the moon climbed higher” the “pit” or “canyon” becomes a “valley” that is “not quite so perpendicular” (D 16 – 17). The moon shows “easy footholds and the “declivity became very gradual.” Though the climb down was “with difficulty,” the narrator arrived on a “gentler slope.” Still what the moon has yet to illuminate is a “Stygian deeps where no light had yet penetrated” (D 17). It is as if the moon, looking over the shoulder of the narrator as it rises, eases his way into the depths, but the yet to be illuminated depths still are a hell.

The supercargo suddenly develops the interests of an archeologist as his attention is suddenly “captured” by the sights in the abyss. This

fascination is “bestowed [by the] rays of the ascending moon.” The object sparking this interest and making him seem more a scientist than a survivor trying to find rescue is a “gigantic piece of stone,” the “contour and position [of which] were not altogether the work of Nature.” The fascination the monolith has for the narrator is in its antiquity as it dates from when the “world was young” and that it was “the workmanship and perhaps the worship of living and thinking creatures” (D 17). This transformation of a supercargo into a scientifically minded individual marks the birth of the typical Lovecraft narrator, intelligent, curious, and tending to practical explanations of fabulous objects and events till convinced that only outer worldly explanations are possible.

The narrator now begins to examine his surroundings carefully. “The moon, now near the zenith, shown weirdly and vividly above the towering steeps that hemmed the chasm, and revealed” all to the supercargo. He sees water below and a rising opposite him, and becomes transfixed by the monolith there. The monolith has both “inscriptions and crude sculptures.” Curiously, the supercargo seems to have knowledge of ancient hieroglyphics: “The writing was in a system of hieroglyphics unknown to me, and unlike anything I had ever seen in books” (D 17). The comment that the hieroglyphics were “unknown to me, and unlike anything I have ever seen in the books” sounds like the statement of someone expert in this subject, not the domain of a supercargo.

The hieroglyphics consists of “aquatic symbols such as fishes, eels, octopi, crustaceans, mollusks, whales and the like.” Lovecraft’s well known disgust of aquatic creatures here becomes his most common horror motif. Some of the symbols remind the supercargo of the creatures he saw in the mud of the risen seabed, creatures “unknown to the modern world” (D 17). This should have immediately convinced the narrator that the carvings he will soon scrutinize carefully were rooted

in reality, but as we will shortly see, he, like the majority of Lovecraft's narrators to come, clings to a worldly solution till the final shock.

Prelude to the major shock is the supercargo's examination of a spellbinding "pictorial carving," "an array of bas-reliefs whose subjects would have excited the envy of a Doré" (D 18). Another Lovecraft motif is born here, archeological findings revealing a pre-human horror on Earth. The narrator, typically, examines the curious bas-relief or other artifacts and at first determines the oddities in them are imaginative. But subsequent experience forces the narrator to conclude they depict what did exist and still may or certainly does still exist.

The narrator now begins the examination of an artistic horror that he found risen from the sea, as the reader is examining the horror embedded in the suicide note, itself a found artistic horror. To begin, the bar-relief on the monolith could be the "envy of a Doré," suggesting its artistic quality and the intelligence of its creator. The relief depicts men "or at least a sort of men." The first disturbing quality of these men is they are "disporting like fishes" or "paying homage to some monolithic shrine" under water. Further, their faces which the supercargo is disinclined to describe in detail as it make him "grow faint" were "damnably human in general outline despite webbed hands and feet, shockingly wide and flabby lips, glassy, [and] bulging eyes." Even more, they seemed to the narrator to be out of proportion to their surroundings, whales being little larger than these "men." Typical of Lovecraft narrators, the supercargo explains the oddities as being the product of artistic license. "In a moment, [he] decided that they were merely the imaginary gods of some primitive fishing or seafaring tribe" of ancient origin, predating the "Pitdown or Neanderthal Man" (D 18). This explaining away of the art carved in stone only temporarily soothes the narrator.

Again the moon directs the attention of the narrator to the next horror. “I stood musing whilst the moon cast queer reflections on the silent channel before me” (D 18). The climax comes quickly.

Then suddenly I saw it. With only a slight churning to mark its rise to the surface, the thing slid into view above the dark waters. Vast, Polyphemus-like, and loathsome, it darted like a stupendous monster of nightmares to the monolith, about which it flung its gigantic scaly arms, the while it bowed its hideous head and gave vent to certain measured sounds. I think I went mad then. (D 18)

The only description of the monster is that it is huge, has scaly arms and produces measured sounds, suggesting intelligence. This is from when the narrator dates his insanity.

Airaksinen argues against the sight of Dagon as the onset of the supercargo’s insanity: “...no one goes mad seeing something strange.... We go mad when we see Dagon only if we cannot explain it away by, for instance, thinking it as an hallucination, dream, or misperception of something familiar” (185). Airaksinen is incorrect about the reader’s interpretation, however. The reader is expected to date the supercargo’s insanity at the point when he himself dates it. It is the sight of Dagon that has made the supercargo mad in the suggested response of the text itself up to this point. Here, the reader is given the supercargo’s hallucination to share. Lovecraft is giving the reader the same hallucination the narrator believes. This is Lovecraft’s genius in his weird fiction. By making the reader believe in the same hallucination as the narrator, the reader shares the horror. As a whole, the text will suggest the narrator’s sojourn on the high seas caused the narrator to hallucinate the entire ordeal. This is not evident, however, till the conclusion.

A quick retreat from the horror occurs here as it does in many of

the other Lovecraftian stories. Compare, for instance, the quick rush Blake makes from the tower of the dark church and back home after he hears the shifting in the chamber above him and senses a presence with him in the darkening room (DH 105).

In “Dagon,” the moon is suddenly gone and the narrator emerges “out of the shadows.” An American ship has brought the supercargo to San Francisco where he wakes in a hospital. He recalls his “delirium” after seeing Dagon and all he says suggests madness, “I remember little. I believe I sang a great deal, and laughed oddly when I was unable to sing.” He does aver he recalled “a great storm” and “peals of thunder which Nature utters only in her wildest moods” (D 18).

What happened to the supercargo after rescue is quickly told. Simply, no one he spoke to of his ordeal believed him. He had “said much” in his “delirium” but his “words had been given scant attention” on the American ship because of the “land upheaval in the Pacific” his “rescuers knew nothing.” And the supercargo did not insist on what he thought “they could not believe.” His confiding in “a celebrated ethnologist” yielded only amusement as the expert was “hopelessly conventional” (D 18 – 19).

The supercargo sought out the ethnologist to seek knowledge about “Dagon, The Fish-God.” This is the first naming of the creature within the text and Dagon is mentioned once more in “The Shadow over Innsmouth.” Further, there is some relationship between Dagon and Cthulhu as described in “The Call of Cthulhu.” Finally, there is a Biblical Dagon. The relationship between the creatures the supercargo saw and the Dagon the Fish-God is unclear and unexplored by Lovecraft. The same is true about the relationship between the creature in “Dagon” and the Esoteric Order of Dagon mentioned in “The Shadow over Innsmouth” (DH 312). Will Murray avers that the Esoteric Order

is not directly connected to Dagon and Murray quotes “Innsmouth” how the Order “was undoubtedly a debased, quasi-pagan thing imported from the East a century before....” Mentions of Dagon in *The Bible* (Judges 16:23; 1 Samuel 5:2-7; 1 Chronicles 10:10; 1 Macc. 10, 83, 11. 4) seem more related to this Order than too the creature at the bottom of the Pacific because the Biblical Dagon is a deity worshiped as it is by the cult in “Innsmouth,” whereas the creature of “Dagon” is a worshiper not the object of worship. Daniel Harms summarized the nature of Dagon in *The Bible* as follows:

Dagon or Dagan was originally a Semitic fertility god worshiped by the Sumerians, Akkadians, Canaanites, and Philistines. Samson knocked down a temple of Dagon upon his tormentors (Judges 16: 23). Later, when the Ark of the Covenant was left in the temple of Dagon, the statue of that deity was mutilated (1 Samuel 5:2). While in the past it was thought that Dagon was a fish-god, this seems to have been a misinterpretation of his name, which means “grain.” (73)

Judges describes the worship of Dagon: “The lords of the Philistines assembled together to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon and to rejoice before him” (Judges 16:23), while Samuel shows the idol of Dagon falling before the symbols of the Christian God: “When the people of Ashdod rose next morning, there was Dagon fallen face downward before the Ark of the Lord” (1 Samuel 5:3). On the surface, there seems little relationship with the hallucination the narrator of “Dagon” sees on the Pacific upheaval and “the god of grain worshipped in Palestine,” as the Biblical Dagon is described in the note of *The New English Bible* (288). Still, in the mind of Lovecraft, there could be closer relationships, but Lovecraft never systemizes any clear relationship, preferring to leave mysterious what is from the outside.

The narrator's end comes with thoughts again of the moon. The paragraph before the end summarizes the narrator's time in San Francisco and his horror. He sees "the thing" mostly at night, especially "when the moon is gibbous and waning." His morphine had given "only transient surcease" and has made him a morphine addict. He reminds us that he is writing a suicide note, "So now I am to end it all, having written a full account for the information or the contemptuous amusement of my fellow-men." Remarkable in "Dagon" is the ending of the penultimate paragraph, "I dream of a day when they may rise above the billows to drag down in their reeking talons the remnants of puny, war-exhausted mankind – of a day when the land shall sink, and the dark ocean floor shall ascend amidst universal pandemonium" (D 18). Is this dream a hope, a wish, or a horror? This was written in July 1917, when the Great War was being waged in Europe, just three months after the US declared war on Germany. Did Lovecraft mean that the horror under the sea rising was preferable to the horror of what man was doing? I feel this is a question not posed in Lovecraft criticism and needs attention. Here we are speaking of "Dagon" and for this supercargo this is a political statement about the war he was affected by, having been captured by and escaped from a German man-of-war. After making this statement his death comes swiftly and cryptically.

The end is anticipated by the supercargo, even before the final horror. "The end is near. I hear a noise at the door, as of some immense slippery body lumbering against it. It shall not find me. God, *that hand!* The window! The window!" (D 18). Vagueness abounds in this sudden and brief conclusion. First, the narrator knows the end is near even before the disturbance at his door sounds. Then the sound is "as of some slippery body;" the word "as" calling into question the nature of the sound. The horror that comes to the narrator in the end is

the hand, but what hand is it. Robert H. Waugh asks, "...we may wonder, reconsidering the imagery at the end of 'Dagon', what is it that the protagonist in fact sees: '*That hand!* The window'!" (23). The hand prompts the mention of the window. Is the hand at the door breaking it open or is it Dagon's hand (not mentioned before) or his own hand reaching for the window to open it, or is there a hand outside the window? The vagueness, of course, engenders the final horror as most will believe the supercargo has taken his own life.

Joshi makes the point that this body slithering to the narrator's door must be a hallucination. He writes, "Some critics have believed that the monster actually appears at the end of the story; but the notion of a hideous creature shambling down the streets of San Francisco is preposterous, and we are surely to believe that the narrator's growing mania has induced the hallucination" (*Encyclopedia*, 58). I see no "growing mania" and see the possibility of the mania having begun when the supercargo was on the seas alone in the small boat. Joshi quotes Lovecraft as writing, "Both ['The Tomb' and 'Dagon'] are analyses of strange monomania, involving hallucinations of the most hideous sort" (*Encyclopedia*, 58). The question becomes what were the hallucinations in "Dagon." The one of greatest hideousness would be the original vision of Dagon, the head of whom is described as "hideous" (D 18), not that of the final crisis. What later convinces the supercargo that Dagon is real is the recurrence of the "hideously vivid vision" (D 19). The narrator uses the adjective "hideous" twice referring to the original hallucination of Dagon. My argument is then, that the vision of Dagon in the midst of the Pacific is the hallucination "of the most hideous sort" that drives the supercargo mad. The narrator too often speculates that Dagon was a hallucination, "Often I ask myself if it could not all have been a pure phantasm – a mere freak of fever as I lay sun-stricken

and raving in the open boat after my escape from the German man-of-war” (19). In the end, he simply hears a sound “as of some immense slippery body” against his door driving him to the window. This concluding horror is a sound not a vision. And the absurdity of it convinces the reader that the first was, indeed “a mere freak of fever ... and raving” (D19).

“Dagon” is unique in the Lovecraft canon in that the reasonable explanation for the horror is more compelling than the weird outer worldly one. Before any mysterious occurrences are described, the narrator falls asleep, and all could be part of a dream and eventual madness brought about by exposure on a lifeboat out at sea. The question Joshi bring out about the impossibility of Dagon himself crawling up to the narrator’s San Francisco garret apartment emphasizes that the horror is rooted in the mind of the narrator and not an external reality. The horror then becomes not the possibility of an existence of a Dagon in his underwater realm and what that means for pre-human and the post-human history, but the horror is in the ravages that madness can inflict on a mind causing hallucinations that bring on madness and death through suicide.

For Lovecraft, however, the germ of the idea of the creature Dagon, his nature and history, becomes more of a horror to contemplate than that of the horror engendered by hallucinations believed. As the mythos grew in Lovecraft’s work, it is the kind of creature and the pre-human history that Dagon represents for Lovecraft that becomes the most prominent disturbing element in his weird fiction. Still the relationship between Dagon and Cthulhu, Lovecraft’s most striking creature, however is not clear. Robert Price (under the pseudonym of Harold Hadley Copeland) speculates that Dagon may be a proto-Cthulhu or simply another name for the creature Lovecraft later fashioned. Further, born in “Dagon” were several plot elements that would become

Lovecraftian, the character of the narrator, the plot design, the use of archaeological finds to tell the history of the past, the epic journey and more as focused on by Burleson:

[In “Dagon”] Lovecraft [is] even approaching the full development of his narrative powers, clearly foreshadows the later efforts and gives us an early glimpse of some of his fictional techniques and devices – the isolated character, the narrator of tantalizing questionable trustworthiness, the careful linguistic manipulation of mood, the suggestive vagueness of description and the impressionistic emphasis of narrator response to the horror – devices that would come to shape Lovecraft’s work increasingly in years. (24)

But more than establishing narrative techniques, “Dagon” suggests to Lovecraft what will become the basis of his weird fiction horror.

Not fully realized in “Dagon” is spawned Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos which in itself is not fully realized in the Lovecraft canon. The nature of Dagon himself, as an entity, is not fully drawn in Lovecraft. He begins as a worshiper of a mysterious monolith at the bottom of the Pacific, and there is a suggestion he is related to Dagon the Fish-God, though nothing is made of this. There seems little relationship between Dagon and the god mentioned in *The Bible*. Further, the Esoteric Order of Dagon in “The Shadow over Innsmouth” seems yet another manifestation of Dagon, and finally, whether Dagon is a proto-Cthulhu or simply another name for the entity portrayed in “The Call of Cthulhu” is not clear. Dagon, the creature, is perhaps one of the best examples of how Lovecraft uses his mythological creatures as he sees fit in each story, vagueness due to the problematical nature of human contact with the outside and the variety of human reactions to it. The argument could be made that when the supercargo sees Dagon, albeit in a halluci-

nation, he is driven mad; whereas when another sees Dagon, he creates an Esoteric Order of Dagon to worship the hallucination.

Lovecraft never made an attempt at creating a systemized mythology nor to account for all the various human reactions to the entities of his fiction. Perhaps, he was disinclined to do so. Perhaps, he never imagined his stories would be read and studied as a whole. Perhaps, he felt each narrator's confrontation with the outside would be unique and each would have a different take on what was encountered and, therefore, the relationships between contacts with the outer worldly would never be fully understood. Lovecraft did, however, lean toward some consistencies in what we now call the Cthulhu Mythos. The Mythos is not a pantheon of entities, demons, or gods, or a mapped Arkham or Kingsport, or even a consistently presented prehistory or future. It is, instead, a series of stories that came from the imagination of Lovecraft, meant to horrify by presenting what he found horrifying. What we know now as the Cthulhu Mythos is a piecing together of the imaginative creations of H. P. Lovecraft that many so much wish to emulate, many wish to codify, many wish to simply enjoy, but what was not nor ever will be fully realized.

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