

LOVECRAFT ACROSS TIME:
RESONATION & ADAPTATION IN THE CTHULHU MYTHOS

A Thesis
by
ANDREW R. CANINO

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APPROVED BY:

Craig Fischer, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

Bret Zawilski, Ph.D.
Member, Thesis Committee

Tammy Wahpeconiah, Ph.D.
Member, Thesis Committee

Carl Eby, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Department of English

Max C. Poole, Ph.D.
Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

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Andrew Canino
B.A., University of North Carolina at Greensboro
M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Dr. Craig Fischer, Ph.D.

While the written works of H.P. Lovecraft have been far from universally lauded, the 20th century pulp-fiction writer has grown significantly in popularity since his death in 1937. In addition to his stories being reprinted in many collections of horror and science fiction tales, Lovecraft's work has seen a remarkable afterlife in the area of adaptations. Using Wai Chee Dimock's theory of *resonance*, this master's thesis addresses this lack of critical attention to adaptations and appropriations of Lovecraft by closely examining four different texts: *Bloodborne* by game company FromSoftware, *Why We're Here* by Fred Van Lente and Steve Ellis, *Who Will Be Eaten First?* by Howard Hallis, and *The White Tree: A Tale of Inspector Legrasse* by Sean Branney. Close examination of these text reveals an upsetting trend in adaptations of Lovecraft: many adapted texts often prioritize the fun of Lovecraft's monsters, locales, and forbidden artifacts, but sadly at the expense of erasing most (if not all) of Lovecraft's racism in his stories. While adaptations shouldn't feel that the inclusion of Lovecraft's racism should be a required component if they want to be a "true" adaptation of

Lovecraft's work, such editorial overreaches and omissions cannot go unchecked in the field of Lovecraft studies, as they run the risk of feeling too similar to censorship. Because many new initiates in the H.P. Lovecraft fanbase are being exposed to the writer's work through his adaptations, and not his original works, this master's thesis concludes with arguing that further scrutiny is needed in the area of Lovecraft's adaptations. To ignore the influences that adaptations have on the perception of an authorial persona risks allowing such troubling editorial moves to continue for new generations of readers, and perpetuate a new, "safe" Lovecraft that encourages readers to pretend that Lovecraft's racism never existed in the first place.

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Introduction

Born in 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island, Howard Phillips (H.P.) Lovecraft is best known for his contribution to the genres of horror and science fiction. Although widely published in pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* in the 1920s and 1930s, Lovecraft was unable to garner widespread critical acclaim when he was alive and writing. However, Lovecraft did amass a niche fanbase among the writers and readers of pulp magazines. Aside from this cult fandom, however, much of the general public would not take notice of Lovecraft's work until after his death in 1937.

The larger literary world's notice of Lovecraft's work can largely be attributed to the founding of Arkham House publishing. After Lovecraft's death in 1937, his longtime friends August Derleth and Donald Wandrei founded Arkham House with the (initial) purpose of reprinting Lovecraft's stories in sturdy, hardcover collections so that they would be preserved for readers in years to come. Their first published work was released in 1939, titled *The Outsider and Others*, and contained 37 different stories and essays by H.P. Lovecraft. In later years, Arkham House would strike a deal with Ballantine to continue circulating Lovecraft's work in paperback, which had a massive influence on the proliferation of Lovecraft's works beyond the author's death. Arkham House is still an active publishing company to this very day, and without the initial editorial work of Derleth and Wandrei through their publishing house, it's possible that the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft may have been lost to obscurity when the heyday of the pulp magazine passed.

In addition to the increased circulation of Lovecraft's works, Arkham House made another contribution to the field of Lovecraft studies with the invention of the Cthulhu mythos. Borrowing its name from one of Lovecraft's most popular monsters, Derleth coined

the phrase “Cthulhu mythos” to describe the expanded universe of elder gods, monstrous abominations, and forbidden artifacts that Lovecraft often set his stories in. When Lovecraft died, Derleth began releasing “new” Lovecraft tales that were based on notes and story scraps that Lovecraft left behind. In order to contextualize the release of these new, “co-authored” stories, Derleth found it helpful to release the stories with the caveat that they were part of a “shared mythos” between the two writers. While Lovecraft often encouraged writers to use his locales and monsters, it was Derleth who finally gave this shared universe its name. Since Derleth’s contributions many other horror and sci-fi writers have followed suit in penning their own contributions to the mythos. Noteworthy contributions to the mythos by more recent writers include – but are not limited to – Fred Chappell’s *Dagon*, Neil Gaiman’s “I, Cthulhu” and Stephen King’s “Crouch End.”

In the present day, Lovecraft’s works continue to remain in print, despite the fact that their original publishing medium -- the pulp magazine -- has long since faded from popularity. However, what makes Lovecraft a unique figure in the genres of sci-fi and horror is not that his works continue to be published at all, but that they continue to persist in a myriad of adaptations -- especially in the Cthulhu mythos. Seemingly against all odds, Lovecraft’s shared universe of gods and monsters has not only persisted after the man himself has died, but entered into other genres such as cinematic films, point-and-click video games, and *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns. While such a journey from critical scorn to cult classic is not unheard of, many writers cannot claim to enjoy the same level of posthumous success in adaptations that H.P. Lovecraft can.

Because the genre of the “Lovecraftian” story has proliferated into so many new mediums, many new initiates into the writer’s fanbase are not exposed to Lovecraft via one

of his original stories, but through one of these adaptations. It's surprising, then, that many scholars fail to give the adaptations themselves more critical attention. As the growing genre of Lovecraftian fiction becomes further and further removed from the original stories themselves, a closer consideration of the way that these stories emphasize (or erase) certain characteristics of Lovecraft is in order -- not for the sake of arguing their "fidelity" to the original works, but in the interest of exploring how the transformation or removal of such elements contribute to the bigger picture of Lovecraft as a literary figure.

Aside from the simple issue of distorting Lovecraft's original stories, there are many other pressing issues that make such an examination necessary in the field of Lovecraft studies. In the United States, Lovecraft's country of origin, present day discourses on race continue to become increasingly polarizing. Because the topic is so complex, multi-faceted, and (in some peoples' case) traumatic to confront in fiction, many people who adapt the stories of H.P. Lovecraft find it much easier to simply remove it. However, at this pivotal moment in American history, it's crucial that the field of Lovecraft studies confront Lovecraft's racism head-on. Refusing to do so would mean participating in a sort of cultural amnesia, and to remain complicit in perpetuating a "new" Lovecraft for present day readers that omits the racist elements. These omissions, while well meaning, can no longer be a tenable solution to the staggering tensions surrounding representations of racism in fiction -- in Lovecraft, or in any other author. If it wants to continue interrogating Lovecraft's works with academic rigor, complexity, and nuance, the field of Lovecraft studies must rise above the temptation to participate in this cultural amnesia.

Lovecraft's Reputation, A History of Criticism: Past, Present (and Future?)

During his lifetime, H.P. Lovecraft's works failed to reach a status of mainstream success in the larger literary world of the 1920's and 30's. One factor that may have contributed to this critical neglect of Lovecraft's work was his failure to write more "serious" works of fiction, choosing instead to publish in pulp magazines like *Weird Tales*.

Additionally, when Lovecraft *did* receive critical attention, it was (at times) less than flattering. In 1945, eight years after Lovecraft's death, Edmund Wilson famously wrote in *The New Yorker* that "The only real horror in most of [Lovecraft's] fictions is the horror of bad taste and bad art," dismissing Lovecraft's writings as hack-work (47).

While Wilson's critique of Lovecraft's work is far from a comprehensive view of what every critic thought in the 1940s, Wilson's is one of the most noteworthy. Because Wilson was such a large name in the literary world, it's possible that his poor opinion of Lovecraft's work influenced other critics and academics' view of the cosmic horror writer as well. However, despite the fact that audiences in the present day seem to disagree with Wilson's poor opinion of Lovecraft, Wilson was absolutely correct about one aspect of the pulp fiction writer: "Lovecraft, since his death in 1937, has rapidly been becoming a cult" (47).

This "cult" of Lovecraft would eventually reach the academy in an unpublished master's thesis from Brown University in 1950 entitled *H.P. Lovecraft: A Self-Portrait*, written by James Warren Thomas. This master's thesis is significant because, even though it was unpublished, it earliest piece in the history of work on Lovecraft that was not simply a re-printing of his work. Two years later, in 1952, the first book-length bibliography of Lovecraft's published works was released, *H.P. Lovecraft: A Bibliography*, written by Joseph

Payne Brennan. Although the bibliography contains comparatively little bona fide scholarship, the existence of the bibliography suggests a growing demand for information on the weird fiction author.

Thomas' thesis signifies the first identifiable trend in early Lovecraftian scholarship: most early criticism on Lovecraft was biographical. Many seemed much more interested in studying Lovecraft as an author rather than studying his works. One reason for this trend may have been because the majority of people who published on Lovecraft were personal acquaintances of his, and therefore could speak with more authority on their own lived experience. Another reason may have been that New Criticism – which emerged only a decade previous and discouraged biographical criticism – may not have reached writers like Thomas when he was first publishing his master's thesis in the 1950s. Nevertheless, this trend towards biographical criticism continued into the 70s, when two noteworthy biographies were published: *Lovecraft; A Biography* (1975) by L. Sprague De Camp and *Howard Phillips Lovecraft: Dreamer on the Nightside* (1975) by Frank Belknap Long.

It wasn't until the 1980s that Lovecraft scholarship began to deviate from these biographical readings with the emergence of S.T. Joshi. Joshi, who still produces new scholarship to this day, is the most prolific and authoritative scholar on Lovecraft to ever publish. Joshi helped foster a shift away from biographical criticism by founding of the academic journal *Lovecraft Studies* (1980-2005) along with fellow scholar Marc Michaud. Although *Lovecraft Studies* no longer produces new issues, the existence of such a journal nonetheless furthered the field of Lovecraft scholarship by encouraging readings of Lovecraft's works, as opposed to readings of only Lovecraft's personal history. Notable contributors include Donald Burleson, Robert M. Price, and even S.T. Joshi himself.

This advancement of the field culminated in a 2005 release of Lovecraft's stories entitled *Tales*, which was published by the Library of America Press, which dedicates itself to publishing high-quality authoritative texts from the likes of well-known authors such as Herman Melville, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Because Library of America concerned itself with publishing the works of "great" American authors, Lovecraft's addition to this press was no small achievement. In the years since this 2005 release, the interest in Lovecraft's works has only increased, and more and more works continue to be published on the writer -- either works of criticism, or more works contributing to Lovecraft's expanded mythos. The latter of these publications -- the mythos stories -- are one of the biggest reasons why Lovecraft's works have proliferated into so many adaptations. These newer stories and adaptations have not only kept Lovecraft in circulation far after his death, but also spanned multiple genres. Because of the sheer number of them, it is impossible to address every single facet of these adaptations in any degree of depth. Instead, my master's thesis focuses on one specific area that adaptations of Lovecraft fail to address: the frequent and troublesome absence of Lovecraft's racism whenever he is adapted.

Omissions in Adaptation: The Problem of Racism

Readers sadly need not look very hard to see how racist Lovecraft's stories can sometimes be. Many scholars have addressed the topic, the most recent of which are scholars like Anthony Camara and Gavin Callaghan. One of the earliest and most oft-quoted pieces of Lovecraft's writing which demonstrates this is "On the Creation of Niggers" from 1912. This poem, which I quote in its entirety, reads:

When long ago, the gods created Earth

In Jove's fair image Man was shaped at birth.
 The beasts for lesser parts were next designed;
 Yet they were too remote for humankind.
 To fill the gap, and join the rest to Man,
 Th'Olympian host conceived a clever plan.
 A beast they wrought, in semi-human figure,
 Filled it with vice, and called the thing a Nigger. (393)

The bias towards people of color (specifically African-Americans) is impossible to ignore. While it's tempting to attribute such poorly conceived ideologies to how early this poem was written in Lovecraft's career, later works of Lovecraft also follow this trend. For example, in "The Call of Cthulhu," upon discovering the Cthulhu cultists in a Louisiana swamp, Inspector Legrasse describes them as "infinitely more diabolic than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles" (175). Additionally, when Legrasse finally captures these men, the story mentions how the cultists "all proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type," emphasizing how many were "negroes and mulattoes, largely West Indians or Brave Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands" which "gave a coloring of voodooism to the heterogeneous cult" ("Call" 181).

"The Call of Cthulhu" is not unique in this regard, either, as many of Lovecraft's stories feature moments where people of color are described in racist terms. One character in "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward" is described as having "a very repulsive cast of countenance, probably due to a mixture of negro blood" (222). A deceased person of color in "Herbert West -- Reanimator" is described as a "loathsome, gorilla-like thing, with abnormally long arms which [the protagonist] could not help calling fore legs, and a face that

conjured up thoughts of unspeakable Congo secrets and tom-tom pounding under an eerie moon” (37).

However, nowhere is Lovecraft’s racism more blatant and severe than in “The Horror at Red Hook,” where Lovecraft’s aversion towards African-Americans transforms into full-on xenophobia where nearly every single group of people different from Lovecraft was a source of latent and unimaginable horror. One of the most significant examples of Lovecraft’s xenophobia comes from the description of the doomed locale of Red Hook:

The population is a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another, and fragments of Scandinavian and American belts lying not far distant. It is a babel of sound and filth, and sends out strange cries to answer the lapping of oily waves at its grimy piers and the monstrous organ litanies of the harbour whistles [...] From this tangle of material and spiritual putrescence the blasphemies of an [*sic*] hundred dialects assail the sky. Hordes of prowlers reel shouting and singing along the thoroughfares, occasional furtive hands suddenly extinguish lights and pull down curtains, and swarthy, sin-pitted faces disappear from windows when visitors pack their way through. Policemen despair of order or reform, and seek rather to erect barriers protecting the outside world from the contagion.

(“The Horror at Red Hook” 128-29)

Words like “filth,” “grime,” “blasphemies,” and “putrescence” leave little to the imagination, especially when read in conjunction with the racist sentiments in Lovecraft’s other stories.

While “The Horror of Red Hook” is perhaps Lovecraft at his most xenophobic, and was once

called “Lovecraft’s Most Bigoted Story” by Ruthanna Emrys and Anne M. Pillsworth, it is far from unique when compared to other pieces in Lovecraft’s body of work.

One may be tempted to separate Lovecraft’s fictional works from his own personal views. After all, isn’t it possible that Lovecraft was simply writing racist *characters*, but wasn’t racist himself? Sadly, Lovecraft’s non-fiction writings show that this is not the case. In his self-published journal *The Conservative* which ran from 1915 to 1923, Lovecraft writes the following about his personal feelings on the interaction of Whites and African-Americans:

The negro is fundamentally the biological inferior of all White and even Mongolian races, and the Northern people must occasionally be reminded of the danger which they incur in admitting him too freely to the privileges of society and government. [...] Race prejudice is a gift of nature, intended to preserve in purity the various divisions of mankind which the ages have evolved. (45)

This passage – which was in response to a pamphlet by Charles Isaacson about racial tolerance – makes it very difficult to read the fiction of Lovecraft and ignore the racism of Lovecraft’s characters. Tom Malone, for example, the narrator and hero of “The Horror at Red Hook,” frequently uses racially charged language to characterize the citizens of Red Hook. One can even make the case that Tom Malone is Lovecraft’s most racist character due to the nature of his narration. Therefore, because of how often Lovecraft’s characters shared his own troublesome views of race relations, separating the racism of the author and racism of Lovecraft’s characters becomes a much more laborious task.

Therefore, when one looks at Lovecraft's adaptations and sees very little of these racist elements (if any at all), it begs the question as to why. While it's easy to understand why adaptors of Lovecraft would remove these elements -- as it would be very hard to justify the "heroes" of Lovecraft's stories espousing such sentiments in the present day -- the omission of Lovecraft's racism runs the risk of feeling far too similar to a "censorship" of Lovecraft's work. In the past (and even the present), the focus on Lovecraft's racism (and how acceptable such ideologies were at the time that he was writing) have been a touchy subject in the field of Lovecraftian scholarship. However, I argue that such attention to this is a necessary evil when it comes to examining adaptations of Lovecraft. While adaptations certainly don't *need* to critique (or include) these racist elements to be "real Lovecraft" (should such a thing even exist now that he has been dead for decades), the abstraction (or sometimes complete removal) of these less-friendly elements of Lovecraft runs the risk of presenting newer readers with a "censored" version of the cosmic horror writer. Such censorship, while well-meaning, cannot (and should not) go unchecked, especially as Lovecraft's work becomes more popular. To ignore such editorial changes (or erasures) would be irresponsible and runs the risk of producing an entire new generation of Lovecraftian texts where both readers and writers pretend that such racism never existed. In an increasingly polarized America, where the current president of the United States uses the "All Lives Matter" slogan to counter the "Black Lives Matter" movement, the literary world can no longer accept editing, omission, or erasure as a tenable solution for reconciling the presence of racism in works of fiction -- in Lovecraft, or in other works. Another approach is necessary, and -- at least in the case of H.P. Lovecraft and his adaptations -- Wai Chee

Dimock's theory of *resonance* may be crucial to conceiving of a new way to approach such issues.

Resonance & Adaptation: A Theoretical Approach to Adaptations of Lovecraft

Whenever one discusses adaptation, one must (inevitably) address the relationship that texts should have with one another. Is the "original" work the most authoritative version when adapting a text? Should the original be disregarded entirely, in favor of the adaptor's new conception of the work? Is there a middle ground that can be reached? And how does one remain "faithful" to the original work?

These kinds of questions consistently surround the adaptation of any work, not just those of Lovecraft, and it's easy to see why. No adaptation exists in a vacuum, and it would be difficult to completely disregard the source material of an adaptation in favor of another writer's unique vision. However, meticulously re-creating a work, moment-for-moment also presents problems to newer audiences; if an "adapted" work is close enough to the original, then why not read the original? These questions of fidelity to a work, while interesting to ponder when examining individual adaptations, do little to contribute to the larger field of Lovecraft studies. Therefore, my master's thesis disregards such issues of "how faithful" a given adaptation is, and instead examines the degrees of *resonance* that a given adaptation has.

In "A Theory of Resonance," Wai Chee Dimock uses the metaphor of aural resonance to argue for the treatment of texts as literary objects -- objects that travel through time and space, picking up new meanings as the passing of days and years further disrupts the way that the text "resonates." Dimock explains this when she writes, "A literary text is a prime

example of an object that is not individuated as a fixed set of attributes within fixed coordinates. Indeed, the continual emergence of interpretive contexts suggests that the attributes of a text also continually emerge” (1064). Because a text cannot be individuated as solely one thing at any given moment in time, Dimock argues against teleological readings of texts (i.e.: the idea that a text can only be read in one, “correct” way). Dimock opposes these types of readings so strongly that she claims that any work of literature can only be so based on its ability to “resonate,” or change:

Since readers past, present and future are not the same reader, a text can remain literature only by not being the same text. Over time, not only does the membership of the literary domain change, but also each text becomes different from itself, suffers a semantic sea change, acquires a new freight of meaning (1064).

This new “freight of meaning” is certainly true for the works of H.P. Lovecraft. Because H.P. Lovecraft has resonated into so many different adaptations, appropriations, parodies and pastiches, it is hard to not see how any given work of Lovecraft will have become “different from itself” as the years have changed it, especially in a post-Civil Rights America. This is especially true when one takes into account the “Cthulhu mythos.” Even when Lovecraft was alive, he encouraged other authors to utilize his monsters, locations, and forbidden books like the *Necronomicon* in their own works, thereby contributing to the “resonance” of his work even before it was adapted by other authors. This mythos, as an open system of texts that weave together and continuously grow, is perhaps one of the sponsors of Lovecraftian adaptations.

Resonance is helpful for examining the way that Lovecraft's texts change because it takes older, more established theories like Mikhail Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* and Julia Kristeva's *intertextuality* and applies them to the study of the way that literary texts (like those of H.P. Lovecraft) change over time. Unlike Kristeva and Bakhtin, who are more interested in the close examination of individual signs and signifiers, Dimock's theory of resonance is useful for examining the works of H.P. Lovecraft because it focuses more on the way that textual meaning shifts and changes across time and space. By closely examining certain trends and features of Lovecraft's work, Dimock's theory will allow me to identify and closely analyze which aspects of Lovecraft have "resonated" the loudest, and which parts of Lovecraft have been lost in the proverbial "background noise." At this moment in Lovecraft studies, where more and more adaptations are allowing Lovecraft's racism to be drowned out in the background, a reading of Lovecraft's racism in adaptations is sorely needed, as many adaptations are content to leave it out entirely. Therefore, my master's thesis examines two key ways that Lovecraft's racism is erased – through the emphasis on cosmic pessimism, and the emphasis on parody – and ends with an adaptation that *does* address Lovecraft's racism.

Cosmic Pessimism & Lovecraft Adaptations

One theme that Lovecraft's original works emphasized quite heavily was his skepticism in religious doctrine. This intense skepticism originated primarily in his own personal views. In a letter to Willis Conover, Lovecraft described how in his boyhood he was "Born amongst orthodox Christians," Lovecraft was "at first a pagan, and later (and still) a scientific sceptick [*sic*]," adding that his own views on religion made him "a queer duck,

altogether” (*Lovecraft At Last*, 203). He later elaborated on his religious skepticism in a letter to Robert E. Howard in 1932, where he wrote:

All I say is that I think it is damned unlikely that anything like a central cosmic will, a spirit world, or an eternal survival of personality exist. They are the most preposterous and unjustified of all the guesses which can be made about the universe, and I am not enough of a hairsplitter to pretend that I don't regard them as arrant and negligible moonshine. In theory, I am an agnostic, but pending the appearance of radical evidence I must be classed, practically and provisionally, as an atheist. (*Against Religion* 38)

This atheistic worldview resulted in much of Lovecraft's stories having themes of cosmic pessimism -- the belief in an empty, uncaring world that was at best indifferent to humanity, and at worst, hostile to it. This cosmic pessimism was usually embodied in the existence of Lovecraft's eldritch horrors like Azathoth or Nyarlathotep: in a world where such terrifying, omnipotent creatures could exist completely unbeknownst to humanity, how could human beings rationalize itself as the center of universe? This question was often the reason that protagonists lost their sanity in Lovecraft's stories -- a character's madness wasn't induced so much by the monster's existence, but more because of what the monster's existence may suggest about the overall hierarchy of the cosmos. In Lovecraft's works, humanity rarely emerged as the dominant species, much to the terror of both the characters and the reader.

To explore how this works in adaptation, my first chapter will be taking a look at *Bloodborne*, a 2015 release from game company FromSoftware. While *Bloodborne* is not technically an adaptation of Lovecraft in the traditional sense (as the game contains no references to any of Lovecraft's monsters, artifacts, or locations), the game does participate

in many Lovecraftian themes, and utilize many Lovecraftian elements that make the game impossible to separate from the cosmic horror writer.

One element that *Bloodborne* makes use of is its setting. Many Lovecraftian tales use some doomed, decrepit locale as its primary setting. “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” uses the decaying fishing hamlet of Innsmouth, Massachusetts, while “The Colour Out Of Space” uses an area north of Arkham known as “The Blasted Heath.” In FromSoftware’s *Bloodborne*, the crumbling locale is none other than Yharnam, a once prosperous city that has succumbed to some shadowy, latent horror connected to a strange organization known as the Healing Church. While no such location exists in any story that Lovecraft wrote himself, the use of this plot element suggests that *Bloodborne* seeks to invoke Lovecraft in everything but name.

Other Lovecraftian story elements that *Bloodborne* utilizes include a mysterious sickness which scourges the town of Yharnam (such as in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”), evidence of a lost civilization of creatures called the Pthumerians (such as the lost city in “At The Mountains of Madness”), and the existence of a mysterious race of beings called the Great Ones, who are strongly analogous to Lovecraft’s mythical race of Great Old Ones. Keeping all of these elements in mind, it is very hard to separate *Bloodborne*’s narrative choices from that of the cosmic horror writer. Therefore, while *Bloodborne* does not technically qualify as an “adaptation” of one of Lovecraft’s actual tales, the game makes up for this lack of references to the stories by utilizing many of his common story elements, the most noteworthy of is cosmic pessimism. Sadly, as will be explored in my first chapter, *Bloodborne* prioritizes its procedural elements to make an argument for cosmic pessimism at the expense of brushing Lovecraft’s racism aside.

Parody & Lovecraft Adaptations

Another common typified approach to adaptations of Lovecraft exist in the form of parodies. Because Lovecraft was often inspired by gothic literature, his own works likewise reflected many of the trappings of the genre: crumbling, decrepit mansions, a yearning for a bygone age, disenchantment with modernity, and the like. However, because Lovecraft's works were so well known for this rather dour tone, newer contributors to Lovecraft's mythos have likewise felt the need to insert a bit of levity into the otherwise-serious-and-scary texts.

This is where the works of Howard Hallis, Fred Van Lente, and Steve Ellis come in, with the two comic strips, *Who Will be Eaten First* (by Hallis), and *Why We're Here* (by Van Lente & Ellis). Hallis, Van Lente, and Ellis, in the early 2000s, participated in a rather curious trend of repurposing the works of Jack T. Chick, a Christian evangelist comic book writer, for the express purpose of parodying both the tropes of fundamentalist Christianity and the works of H.P. Lovecraft. These Lovecraftian "Chick tracts," as they are called, are able to do this through an artistic technique called *détournement*.

Détournement was a politically-motivated strategy that was used by the French Situationists back in the 1960s, wherein already-existing works of art were painted over, written on, repurposed, or in some other way transformed for the purposes of disrupting previously established political and ideological norms. This strategy is useful for examining Hallis, Van Lente and Ellis's work because these three did the same exact thing that the situationists did in the 1960s: take a pre-established art form (the Chick tract), re-purpose it for a new ideological ends (a parody of Lovecraft).

Who Will Be Eaten First and *Why We're Here* deviate from the original French Situationists in their apparent motivation. While the French Situationists often employed an almost Marxist rhetoric to disrupt capitalist ideologies, the two Lovecraftian Chick tracts I have chosen for this chapter have much more humble goals. Rather than destroy capitalism, these Lovecraftian tracts merely seek to suggest a relationship between the apocalyptic rhetoric of the Lovecraftian cults with the suspiciously similar rhetoric of fundamentalist Christianity. By replacing Christ with Cthulhu, *Who Will Be Eaten First* and *Why We're Here* are able to engage with Lovecraft's work not through an outright critique or criticism of Lovecraft's original stories, but through a détourned pastiche.

Xenophobia & Lovecraft Adaptations

In taking an in-depth look at any of H.P. Lovecraft's original works, one inevitably has to confront the problematic descriptions of certain characters. Such blatant racism has aged quite poorly in Lovecraft's original works, and as is the case with *Bloodborne* and the parody Chick tracts, the racism is often completely erased from Lovecraft's works to make him more palatable for audiences in the present day.

However, *The White Tree: A Tale of Inspector Legrasse* takes this issue of xenophobia and brings it to the forefront. *The White Tree*, an audio play by Sean Branney of the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society (HPLHS), functions as a sequel to Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," utilizing one of Lovecraft's own characters: Inspector John Raymond Legrasse. Legrasse, after following a cold case down to the fictional town of Vermilion, Louisiana, slowly uncovers a secret society of well-to-do townspeople who have the rather morbid hobby of ritualistically sacrificing other townspeople to the Great Old Ones for some

grisly, unknown purpose. What makes this text so useful to read in the final chapter of my thesis is that the townspeople being sacrificed are usually African-Americans, and the “well-to-do” townspeople are the Ku Klux Klan.

The significance for such a choice for the “cult” should be fairly self-evident, given Lovecraft’s racism. In the past, Lovecraft has been critiqued for his sympathy for the Ku Klux Klan, once describing them in *The Conservative* as a “noble but much maligned band of Southerners who saved half our country from destruction at the close of the Civil War” (45). In this same article, Lovecraft expanded upon his admiration for the Klan, insisting that they “merely did for the people what the law refused to do” (*The Conservative* 45).

However, *The White Tree* is not without its own set of conflicting resonant meanings as well. Despite *The White Tree* critiquing Lovecraft’s racism by casting the Klan as the villains in this tale, many people-of-color in the story often fall into dangerous and harmful stereotypes. Sarafine Glapion, the voodoo queen of Vermilion, is described “some candle-burning fortune teller” by Inspector Legrasse (Branney 25), and the character of Mr. Dugas at one point shows a great deal of surprise when Legrasse addresses him as “Mister” laughing as he says: “‘Mister’... Like I be de Mayor of Vermilion. ‘Mr. Dugas’” (Branney 34).

From these short examples, it’s clear that *The White Tree* is a far cry from the “safe” version of Lovecraft that readers get from *Bloodborne* or the Lovecraftian Chick tracts. Nevertheless, new resonant meanings in *The White Tree* cause conflict, and force readers into grappling with the inclusion of such stereotyped characters, including multiple moments where characters in the Klan have lines where they complain about “uppity niggers.” Because of this refusal to shy away from representations of racism, *The White Tree* presents readers with an interesting problem. By choosing to include such polarizing representations

of racist characters and characters of color, *The White Tree* presents readers with two diametrically opposed forces: the desire to tell a Lovecraftian story where people of color are better represented, and the impulse to write characters like Mr. Dugas and Sarafine Glapion as stereotypes under the guise of “historical fidelity.” Because of this internal conflict in the representation of the characters of color, my final thesis chapter on *The White Tree* will argue that the audio play’s refusal to fully commit to either of these two forces does not work to its detriment, but instead makes it a prime subject for being read against the entire work of the mythos. Because *The White Tree* includes these stereotyped characters as primary pieces of the narrative, readers actually get a much more complex and nuanced reading of Lovecraft as a literary figure. In this way, *The White Tree* doesn’t just gently encourage the reader to recognize the racist underpinnings of Lovecraft’s literary corpus... it *forces* the reader to do so.

Conclusion, Matters of Focus, and Matters of Scope

The field of Lovecraft studies has (as of now) failed to give a comprehensive look into the complex web of adaptations, appropriations and parodies of Lovecraft that have continued to emerge since his death in 1937. While texts such as Don G. Smith’s *H.P. Lovecraft in Popular Culture: The Works and Their Adaptations in Film, Television, Comics, Music and Games* (2005) does address some of the ways that Lovecraft’s works have travelled outside of their original exigencies, Smith’s text fails to go much further beyond a simple listing of the different texts that exist. A deeper analysis of the way that adaptations remediates the authorial persona of Lovecraft. Because of the proliferation of adaptations of Lovecraft, many people who are exposed to Lovecraft as a figure find themselves doing so

through Lovecraft's contemporaries, and not through the original works. Therefore, what I intend to do is to examine how certain adaptations like FromSoftware's *Bloodborne*, Howard Hallis' *Who Will Be Eaten First*, Fred Van Lente and Steve Ellis' *Why We're Here*, and Sean Branney's *The White Tree* highlight certain elements of Lovecraftian storytelling, while abstracting other elements.

Before this introduction concludes, and the in-depth analysis in my first chapter begins, a matter of clarity and scope needs to be addressed: while I certainly hope that this master's thesis will aid in the study of Lovecraft's adaptations for future scholars, this thesis *will not* be a detailed analysis of each and every adaptation that has ever been written. I have strategically left such ambitious goals outside of the scope of this thesis (as one could easily fill several books with how many Lovecraft adaptations currently exist). What this master's thesis will do, however, is examine *select* adaptations (or appropriations) of Lovecraft's original works, and discuss how they address, comment on, or outright reject certain themes and tropes from other texts in Lovecraft's mythos. In certain instances, the adaptations that I have selected may not necessarily be the most influential or perhaps even well known. Nevertheless, each adaptation has been deliberately chosen not for their popularity or influence, but for the purposes of exploring how these eldritch adaptations from across time and space help different elements of Lovecraft resonate for new readers, players, or listeners.

Chapter One: “Fear The Old Blood:” The Rhetoric of Cosmic Pessimism in FromSoftware’s*Bloodborne*

One cannot discuss Lovecraft’s expansion into other genres of creative expression without making note of the weird fiction writer’s presence in the medium of games. While short stories and written fiction remain one of the primary ways that Lovecraft’s fictional world is expanded, the mythos continues to see more and more contributions in the form of games, with no sign of slowing down. The pen-and-paper role-playing-game *The Call of Cthulhu: Horror Roleplaying In The Worlds of H.P. Lovecraft* (Chaosium, 1981) was one of the first examples of a Lovecraftian game popularizing the pulp writer’s pantheon of gods and monsters for new audiences, and when the burgeoning genre of video games began picking up momentum, original works like *Call of Cthulhu: Shadow of The Comet* (Infogrames, 1993), *Call of Cthulhu: Prisoner of Ice* (Infogrames, 1995) and *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (Headfirst Productions & Bethesda Softworks, 2005) became available for the PC and select home consoles. More recent years have only increased this trend, with the gaming platform Steam having its own searchable tag of “Lovecraftian” games, with over 100 games which fall into that category. While the transition from story to video game is not unheard of, as many works of horror and science fiction are often adapted into video games, such a move begs the question as to how this change in medium affects the way that certain audiences may see Lovecraft, and what things may be sacrificed in the process. To examine these changes and sacrifices, this essay will look at *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015), one of the most recent and most successful examples of Lovecraft’s presence in the genre of video games. Despite its success at capturing the Lovecraftian aesthetic in everything but name (as the game never mentions any of Lovecraft’s locations or

monsters outright), *Bloodborne* prioritizes the “fun” of Lovecraft’s monsters, madness, and themes of cosmic pessimism through its “Insight” feature. The player-statistic “Insight,” while noteworthy for its ability to make a commentary on the themes of cosmic pessimism in Lovecraft’s original works, gives players a “safe” and “sanitized” version of a Lovecraftian world, and risks the possibility of being perceived as “censored Lovecraft,” due to the absence of any acknowledgement of the more racist or xenophobic aspects of his work.

To demonstrate this, my essay will not be focusing so much on the narrative aspects of *Bloodborne*, but its rhetorical elements. Because *Bloodborne*’s “Insight” feature often functions completely independent of the narrative of the game, it’s unhelpful for this essay to simply compare and contrast the narrative similarities between *Bloodborne* and one of Lovecraft’s stories (although there are several). Instead, my essay will look at *Bloodborne*’s use of Ian Bogost’s *procedural rhetoric*, and the ways *Bloodborne*’s gameplay mechanics emulate the themes of Lovecraft’s original stories -- most notably cosmic pessimism. First, I will delve into the way that the theme of cosmic pessimism is at work in one of Lovecraft’s most popular stories, “The Call of Cthulhu,” and then I will discuss the way that cosmic pessimism has influenced more recent philosophy, such as the philosophical writings of Eugene Thacker. After covering this, I will discuss Ian Bogost’s procedural rhetoric, and how games make rhetorical arguments through their gameplay elements and the procedures that players are asked to perform, as opposed to their narrative elements. Finally, this essay will conclude by applying these elements to *Bloodborne*, and argue how its prioritization of the rhetoric of cosmic pessimism, while significant in its ability to make a case for Lovecraft’s presence in the genre, gives players a sterilized version of Lovecraft’s universe, devoid of any of the racism from Lovecraft’s original works.

Cosmic Pessimism in HPL's "The Call of Cthulhu" and Thacker's *In The Dust of This Planet*

One of the primary themes in Lovecraft's ever-growing mythos is that of cosmic pessimism -- the belief in a vast, empty, uncaring universe that is at best indifferent to humankind, and at worst actively hostile to it. In many of Lovecraft's original texts, the most terrifying monster were not the slimy Deep Ones of Innsmouth, or Cthulhu of R'lyeh, but the monster of human insignificance. Rather than tell stories about human beings existing at the center of a sensical, well-ordered cosmos, Lovecraft often preferred exploring the possibility of absolute, nihilistic chaos at the center of the universe. Many of Lovecraft's stories suggest this, from "The Shadow Out of Time" to "At the Mountains of Madness." However, if one wants to truly understand how Lovecraft's views of cosmic pessimism emerge in his own writings, one need not look any further than the opening sentences of one of his most famous stories, "The Call of Cthulhu":

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. ("Call"167)

According to much of Lovecraft's fiction, the most terrifying revelation of all was not some omnipotent cephalopod from the stars, but the sheer abject pointlessness of human existence.

Monsters, in Lovecraft, were often not the main source of any given character's fear, but a mediator for the realization of humanity's insignificance -- mere shadows on the walls of the cave. If human constructs like God, Hell, and the greater good could be proven illusory beyond a shadow of a doubt through some sort of forbidden knowledge, what might this mean for humanity's position in the universe? In a world where monsters like Cthulhu and Yog-Sothoth are real, how do humans reconcile this with the commonly held assumption that humans were the superior species?

"The Call of Cthulhu" is significant in this regard because Francis Weyland Thurston, the story's protagonist, is forced into this very same quandary. After searching for the reason his grand-uncle, Professor George Gammell Angell, was mysteriously killed, he discovers that Professor Angell was killed due to his knowledge of a mysterious, shadow-laden cult which worshipped the enigmatic, unpronounceable Cthulhu.

This first element demonstrates an oft-used trope by Lovecraft -- namely, that his protagonists usually don't begin the story with a cosmic pessimistic mindset. Thurston, in his initial search, was not seeking to uncover a cult, nor plumb some black abyss for some monstrous, terrifying revelation, but instead simply going through his grand-uncle's papers as the executor of his estate. It was instead through the revelation of some hidden knowledge, or hidden world that drove such characters to feel this way about the universe. One can see this when Thurston -- in reference to the evidence that Professor Angell collected -- writes how he now "can scarcely envisage the callous rationalism with which [he] set [the evidence] aside" ("Call" 174). It's this hidden knowledge then, this unknowable, occulted world that signified such a change in Thurston. After going through all the evidence, Thurston, nearing hysteria, laments his knowledge of such terrible monsters and cults, writing:

Who knows the end? What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men. A time will come -- but I must and cannot think! Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye ("Call" 196)

Here we see one of the other significant elements of Lovecraft's use of cosmic pessimism -- the idea that such hidden knowledge should *stay* hidden. This trope of hidden knowledge is employed in many of Lovecraft's stories, but it is on full display in the above passage, as Thurston prays that his and his grand-uncle's manuscripts meet "no other eye." Instead of seeing such a discovery as a marvel of modern research -- after all, a whole new religious cult has been discovered -- Thurston insists that such knowledge needs to be buried completely; it needs to be destroyed, as it is too terrible for another human soul to bear. Should Cthulhu have risen out of R'lyeh when the *Vigilant* sailed over the city, thus revealing his existence to the entire world, Thurston ensures readers that "the world would by now be screaming with fright and frenzy" ("Call" 196).

This "fright and frenzy" demonstrates yet another characteristic of Lovecraft's use of cosmic pessimism: the inevitability of madness, or possibly death. Thurston, in his final words of the story, uses the word "if" to describe his possibility of surviving the existence of his manuscript, suggesting that he perhaps does not think he will. What it is that may kill him is left to the fringes of a reader's imagination, but the "fright and frenzy" which Thurston describes suggests that his demise may come not in the form of a bullet or some masked intruder, but instead some madness-induced fit, or nervous breakdown of some sort.

Here then, we see the most common popular tropes of cosmic pessimism in Lovecraft's fiction. They are as follows: (1) A hapless protagonist makes an inquiry, not knowing that it will eventually lead them to a secret, hidden knowledge; (2) A hidden knowledge or hidden world is revealed to the protagonist; (3) Upon discovery of this hidden knowledge or hidden world, the protagonist attempts to erase all traces of the hidden knowledge or hidden world, and; (4) the protagonist is driven to madness, suicide, death, or some other terrible, nebulous fate, due to their knowledge of the hidden world. While one can certainly find Lovecraft stories that don't follow this formula exactly, and there are plenty that perhaps do not follow it at all, these tropes more-or-less embody Lovecraft's utilization of cosmic pessimism in his stories. Part of the reason that Lovecraft's themes continue to persist outside of his original works is the popularity of these tropes and formulas. As a matter of fact, Lovecraft's ideas on cosmic pessimism and the "hidden world" become especially useful for certain branches of philosophical thought -- most notably in the works of Eugene Thacker.

In his work *In The Dust of This Planet*, Thacker laments humanity's ability to think about the cosmos only in terms of itself. In other words, humans can only think about the universe through a human-centric lens. Whenever new, non-human phenomena reveal themselves to us, humanity must always compartmentalize such things in relation to our own experience. Thacker explains this phenomenon in his introduction to the book, writing:

When the non-human world manifests itself to us in these ambivalent ways, more often than not our response is to recuperate that non-human world into whatever the dominant, human-centric worldview at the time. After all, being human, how else would we make sense of the world? (Thacker 4)

Such is the central question not only of Thacker's philosophical framework, but also of Lovecraft's original stories: how does someone describe the indescribable? How else, but through language and symbols that describe it in relation to their own selves?

According to Thacker, cosmic pessimism is useful for imagining the indescribable, because it allows humanity to imagine a world which does not exist for the benefit of humans. In his most detailed definition, Thacker articulates cosmic pessimism as

the difficult thought of the world as absolutely unhuman, and indifferent to the hopes, desires, and struggles of human individuals and groups. Its limit-thought is the idea of absolute nothingness, unconsciously represented in the many popular media images of nuclear war, natural disasters, global pandemics, and the cataclysmic effects of climate change [...] Beyond these specters is the impossible thought of extinction, with not even a single human being to think the absence of all human beings, with no thought to think the negation of all thought (Thacker 17)

Cosmic pessimism, then, is useful because it gives human beings a way of imagining nothingness -- of imagining "the negation of all thought." How else would human beings escape their own perspective, unless one considers the total elimination of all human perspective? According to Thacker, this is why horror fiction and cosmic pessimism are necessary concerns for the field of philosophy. "Horror" according to Thacker, "is a non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically" (Thacker 9).

One of the primary ways that cosmic pessimism lets humans do this is in its ability to allow humanity to imagine an occulted or hidden world. The visible world has no use for humanity in this regard, for (as Thacker established before) humanity has no way of

imagining the known, visible world in any other way than as a “world-for-us,” where the entire universe exists for humanity’s benefit. Thacker, on the other hand, claims that conceding the possibility of a hidden, unseen world has many more philosophical affordances:

The hiddenness of the world is not just the world-in-itself, for the world in-itself is, by definition, absolutely cut off from us as human beings in the world (the world-for-us). When the world-in-itself becomes occulted, or “hidden,” a strange and paradoxical movement takes place whereby the world-in-itself presents itself to us, but without ever becoming fully accessible or completely knowable (Thacker 53)

This “hidden world,” and its ability to invoke a cosmic pessimistic worldview is the primary characteristic that elevates *Bloodborne* to such a worthy candidate for rhetorical analysis. As will be discussed later in this chapter, *Bloodborne* often hides certain elements from its players, and reveals that such “hidden elements” (such as enemies, attack patterns, etc) are only a small piece of a much more sinister and terrifying dimension of eldritch horror.

Bloodborne does this by making the town of Yharnam function as (what Thacker calls) a “magic site.” Unlike other occult or fantasy fiction which uses the plot device of the “magic circle” to function as a “doorway” between a hidden world and the human world, Thacker suggests one possible interpretation of the magic circle where it expands exponentially, vanishing into an entire geographic location so that any possible occupant cannot rightly say where it begins, and where it ends. Thacker writes:

The magic site is, simply, where the hiddenness of the world presents itself in its paradoxical way (revealing itself as hidden). In some cases magic sites are

like magic circles, constructed by human beings for specific purposes. This is the case with the mad scientist theme in the Lovecraft story ["From Beyond"]. More often than not, however, the magic site spontaneously happens without any human intervention. [...] Whereas the magic circle involves an active human governance of the boundary between the apparent world and the hidden world, the magic site is its dark inverse: the anonymous, unhuman intrusion of the hidden world into the apparent world, the enigmatic manifesting of the world-without-us into the world-for-us, the intrusion of the Planet into the World. (Thacker 82).

This "intrusion" is what makes most (if not all) of Lovecraft's protagonists doomed from the moment their story begins. In the wake of grappling with humanity's insignificance, Lovecraft's protagonists are often left with no other way to recover from such an "intrusion" on the part of the hidden world. If one accepts the premise that nothing humanity does has any value, how can one find meaning in anything? Lovecraft, in his fiction, gives a fairly straightforward answer to this question: you don't. As discussed earlier with the example of "The Call of Cthulhu," once a character in Lovecraft's stories has accepted the premise of cosmic pessimism, only two options are left available to them: insanity or death.

These aspects of Thacker's philosophy are useful for interrogating *Bloodborne's* rhetoric of cosmic pessimism because *Bloodborne* shares Thacker's same fascination with a "world-without-us." The fictional locale of Yharnam abstracts a "hidden world" which regularly "intrudes" on players; the town itself functions as a "magic site," and by the time the playable story of *Bloodborne* concludes, players are forced to grapple with whether or not the ending (of which there are several) they received was a "happy" one. What sets

Bloodborne apart from its peers is the way that such arguments are made. While narrative elements in *Bloodborne* certainly exist, they are incredibly sparse, and often come more from game menus and paratextual elements. Therefore, *Bloodborne*'s cosmic pessimism isn't being perpetuated by its narrative elements. Instead, *Bloodborne* relies on something called *procedural rhetoric* to mount an argument for cosmic pessimism.

“Born Of The Blood”: Procedural Rhetoric & Hidden Worlds in Bloodborne

While *Bloodborne* has comparatively little to do with Lovecraft's stories, as it shares neither characters nor locations with the cosmic horror writer, it is perhaps the best and most recent example of Lovecraft's presence in the genre due to its use of the rhetoric of cosmic pessimism. *Bloodborne* tells the story of an unnamed hunter (i.e.: the player) who comes to the city of Yharnam in search of “Paleblood.” However, when the hunter arrives in Yharnam, they discover that all of the townsfolk have turned into monstrous beasts, and it is hinted that Yharnam's Healing Church is at the center of it all. To escape the hunt with their life, the hunter must uncover the mysteries behind the Healing Church, Byrgenwerth College, the ancient Pthumerians, and their connection to the worship of mysterious creatures known only as the Great Ones. The similarities to Lovecraft are easy to see: an “outsider” (the player) arrives in a mysterious place filled with monstrous townsfolk, a local church and ancient place of learning hide a forbidden, eldritch truth, and it's suggested that behind the scenes of the plot, a mysterious race of all-powerful, interdimensional beings are the root cause. In short, *Bloodborne* invokes Lovecraft in everything but name, as its plot elements are cut from the same cloth as something like “Shadow Over Innsmouth.” However, what makes *Bloodborne* stand out among the scores of other Lovecraftian games is not its narrative

similarities to Lovecraft's original stories, but the way that the game makes an argument for cosmic pessimism completely through game mechanics alone. This capacity for game mechanics to be capable of meaning-making is something that Ian Bogost calls *procedural rhetoric*, and it's one of the primary features that *Bloodborne* makes use of to highlight the Lovecraftian theme of cosmic pessimism.

Originally proposed as a new rhetorical domain for the study of games specifically, Ian Bogost coined the term *procedural rhetoric* as a way of making arguments "not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior" (Bogost 29). In other words, procedural rhetoric makes arguments not through just the interaction of visual and auditory elements, like in a video, but through *behaviors and procedures* that the game requires the player to perform -- press this button, walk through this door, jump here, use this item, and so forth. Unlike films, which video games are often compared to for their ever-increasing cinematic qualities, the primary way that video games make arguments are not through multimodality, but through procedurality. Therefore, the mechanics of how a video game is played are not separate from the metaphor -- they *are* the metaphor.

This emphasis on procedural rhetoric has seeped into more modern, informal discourse communities in the video game field as well -- game developers especially. For example, the YouTube channel *Extra Credits* published a two-part series of videos on this very topic, where they emphasize the importance of procedural rhetoric in everything but name:

If we ever want games to be truly powerful experiences, if we really want them to reach their full potential and be able to explore an enormous range of concepts, and if we want more experiences where you just put down the

controller at the end and sit there stunned, then we have to start examining the meaning that appears in the action within our games, rather than just the words themselves. Not doing so would be like denying that films can convey meaning outside the script, like saying the entire narrative in a movie is told only through the words the characters say. (Extra Credits 1:08)

Bloodborne's significance in the genre of "Lovecraftian" video games derives not from the fact that it tells a spooky tale about an old haunted town, but from the fact that its mechanics make similar arguments that Lovecraft's original stories do. For example, while other "Lovecraftian" games like *Call of Cthulhu: Shadow of The Comet* (1993) contain narrative elements borrowed from Lovecraft, its procedural elements are fairly low-intensity because of the game's point-and-click game mechanics. While a game like *Shadow of the Comet* qualifies as a "Lovecraftian" game because of its narrative, *Bloodborne* is a more significant contribution to the mythos because it invokes a *rhetoric* of cosmic pessimism, as opposed to only a narrative of it.

One of the primary ways that *Bloodborne* invokes this rhetoric of cosmic pessimism is through its "Insight" feature. According to the in-game description, the amount of Insight a player has "represents the depth of inhuman knowledge," and that having Insight "induces frenzy" (*Bloodborne*). The more Insight a player has, the more susceptible they are to risking being killed by the various monsters that populate the fictional locale of Yharnam, as many of them cause a player to "frenzy" -- a status effect that reduces a player's health-bar significantly. Players gain Insight by witnessing particularly horrible or shocking events, such as the discovering of a new boss monster to fight, unlocking a new area to explore, or by using the "Madman's Knowledge" item. In this way, *Bloodborne* is very similar to the

Call of Cthulhu game by Chaosium from 1981, as it also has a similar game feature in the form of “sanity points.” Because Insight measures a character’s understanding of “inhuman knowledge,” this knowledge is directly correlated with players’ personal safety in the game-world. Because of this strong correlation between forbidden knowledge and the mortality of the players, the similarities to Lovecraft’s original work are easy to see.

Insight is such a strong example of procedural rhetoric (as opposed to more traditional rhetorical domains) because this element is almost entirely absent from *Bloodborne*’s narrative features. In-game dialogue only refers to the existence of the Insight statistic in passing, but never overtly. References to Insight are all paratextual -- in the games menus, in item descriptions, in on-screen displays for the player’s personal information, and so forth. But the existence of Insight goes relatively unmentioned by many of the characters inside the game. Because of this, the Insight mechanic constructs its meaning rhetorically through something *other* than narrative. This paratextual nature of Insight is noteworthy because it highlights the affordances of this medium to contribute to the Cthulhu mythos in a way that Lovecraft himself never would have been able to.

Another reason that Insight is such a strong example of procedural rhetoric is that -- much like the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG’s “Sanity Points” -- it is impossible to play *Bloodborne* and not have your Insight statistic be affected. In other words, gaining Insight is completely unavoidable. This unavoidable nature of gaining insight is why *Bloodborne* mounts such a strong argument for cosmic pessimism through its gameplay: in the process of obtaining forbidden knowledge, the risk of madness isn’t so much a possibility, but an inevitable side effect. Because of this, as Oliver Langmead writes, “through the mechanic of ‘Insight,’ and

the results of its accumulation, *Bloodborne* is simulating a kind of weird madness for the player” (62).

Bloodborne simulates this “weird madness” in many ways, all of which are examples of procedural rhetoric. For example, should a character have over 15 Insight, the Church Doctor enemies’ lanterns (which were originally uncovered) suddenly become covered with a bulbous mass of eyes. With these new eye-covered lanterns, the Church Doctors gain new, more powerful attacks, and become more difficult for players to defeat. Such a rhetorical move isn’t significant simply because the enemies became harder to fight, but because this game mechanic forces players to consider a rather harrowing possibility: were the eyes on those lanterns simply *there all along*, but players simply *couldn’t see* them?

Other instances of Insight changing the game’s landscape and behavior confirm that



Fig 1. An alien creature (Amygdala) on top of Oedon Chapel.

yes, those eyes *were there* all along, and players simply did not have the inhuman knowledge to recognize them. The most significant instance of this “revealing” of *Bloodborne*’s hidden world happens in Cathedral Ward, where players finally learn the cause of a mysterious instant-death point which was hitherto kept from them. Usually, when players move their character behind a certain gravestone in the courtyard of the Cathedral Ward area, an unseen force picks them up and kill them instantly. However, should a player have 40 Insight or

higher, then it's revealed to them that a spider-like monster (an 'Amygdala' to be exact) which was perched atop Oedon Chapel was that unseen force (Fig 1).

Elements like this are significant to *Bloodborne*'s rhetorical elements because they so accurately emulate Thacker's writings on the "hidden world," and what happens to humanity when such a hidden world is revealed to them. As players navigate their way through the devil-haunted streets of Yharnam, their level of Insight inevitably transforms the entire landscape of the town: the moon hangs low in the sky, red and swollen; an entire new area of Yharnam (appropriately called "The Unseen Village") is open for players to explore; and finally, should a player have enough Insight collected, it's possible that above all of the chaos and destruction in the doomed locale of Yharnam, they can hear the sound of an infant Great One, Mergo, crying from her loft in the Nightmare of Mensis. These elements are initially hidden from players; they have no idea that such horrors await them in the decaying city. It's only after players obtain the "inhuman knowledge" of how truly insignificant humanity is in the face of the Great Ones that Yharnam's monstrous hidden world reveals itself.

"Made Men By The Blood": Inevitable Demises in Bloodborne

Other ways that *Bloodborne* makes arguments for cosmic pessimism have to do with its structural elements -- specifically in its capacity for a "happy" ending. Many games in the Lovecraftian genre often don't afford players an opportunity for players to emerge completely unscathed from the utter terrors they have witnessed. In many instances, there is no way to "win" at these games. One can certainly finish the games, but they usually do not conclude with humanity emerging as the superior victors of some cosmic struggle. In fact, they often conclude with the opposite: with hapless players having gone mad, driven to

suicide, or perhaps an even more sinister, nebulous demise. For example, *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* concludes with the protagonist learning that they, in fact, are not human, and are distantly related to the Great Race of Yith, which prompts them to commit suicide in an insane asylum. In the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, it's quite possible that players may never make it to the conclusion of a game at all, and that all playable characters will have gone insane before they can finish the campaign.

Bloodborne is no exception to this structural element. While it's of course possible for players to finish the game's playable campaign, each possible ending of the game is a far cry from a happy ending where the hunter is victorious. One ending has the hunter being killed by Gehrman, The First Hunter; another ending has players trapped in the Hunter's Dream forever, cursed to guide other hunters after them through the night of the hunt in the doomed town of Yharnam. However, if players fulfill a certain set of tasks, *Bloodborne* expands the madness of cosmic pessimism into areas that Lovecraft himself may have not even imagined.

Bloodborne expands both Lovecraft and Thacker's ideas of cosmic pessimism by offering another option besides destruction or oblivion: *ascension*. Should players obtain (and devour) three fragments of a Great One's umbilical cord, they are given the opportunity not only to slay a Great One, but to *become* a Great One. Should players defeat the 'Moon Presence' enemy and successfully kill a Great One, they are given an ending where a small, squid like creature is discovered in the Hunter's Dream where the hunter (i.e.: the player) once was. It is never made clear whether such a monstrous transformation is meant to be interpreted as horrifying or heavenly, but the existence of such an ending in a "Lovecraftian" game is nonetheless significant because it expands the possibilities for this genre of storytelling. By including ascension as a possible response to Thacker's "world-without-us,"

Bloodborne forges new paths when it comes to Lovecraftian storytelling. Rather than simply recycle the same “inevitable” demises that Lovecraft-esque stories are known for, *Bloodborne* not only transforms the cosmic pessimistic tale into another medium, but expands the possibilities for the continued evolution of the “weird tale.” Perhaps, as the cosmic horror genre continues to evolve, we will see less and less stories which end with Lovecraft’s predictable binary of “insanity or death.”

“Undone By The Blood”: Problematic Erasures and Omissions in Bloodborne

While *Bloodborne*’s use of the rhetoric of cosmic pessimism and its expansion of the genre of cosmic horror is noteworthy, there is one area of Lovecraft that receives no attention in the game: Lovecraft’s prejudicial views on race relations. Readers familiar with the Cthulhu mythos may not be shocked by racist elements in Lovecraft’s stories -- as my introduction has already established, it is tragically far too common in Lovecraft’s work. However, one place that it is not common at all is in FromSoftware’s *Bloodborne*. *Bloodborne*, for all its impressive invocation of the rhetoric of cosmic pessimism, seemingly erases all traces of Lovecraft’s original persona from its narrative and gameplay. While the removal of such elements is not necessarily a bad thing, as it would be fairly hard to justify such racially charged language in a big-budget action game in the year 2015, their erasure suggests that players are being given an altered, “safe” version of Lovecraft’s world to play around in -- a world with all of the “fun” of Lovecraft’s monsters with none of the unpleasant aspects of Lovecraft’s personal views.

One example of this emerges in *Bloodborne*’s character creation system. In *Bloodborne*, characters can make their hunter look any way that they would like. The hunter

can be male, female, a very feminine male, or a very masculine female -- the combination of body types, facial features, and skin tones are near limitless. What makes this character creation feature noteworthy is that non-player-characters (NPCs) do not treat the hunter any differently depending on any of these attributes. Not only do NPCs not react to the player's race or gender, but issues of race and gender seems to be completely absent from *Bloodborne's* overall narrative. Rather than use its unique position in the network of "Lovecraftian" games to put itself into conversation with other Lovecraftian texts, *Bloodborne's* prioritization of the rhetoric of cosmic pessimism erases the possibility of a nuanced critique of Lovecraft's well-documented personal views.

"Our Eyes Are Yet To Open": Conclusion

In his piece on *Bloodborne's* similarities to Gothic literature, Oliver Langmead writes that "*Bloodborne* showcases the genre's potential new frontier: converting conventions into interesting new gameplay mechanics, and letting the player experience the genre through player-led narrative and agency" (63). I would argue that the same is true of *Bloodborne's* rhetoric of cosmic pessimism, albeit with a few drawbacks. On one hand, *Bloodborne's* rhetoric of cosmic pessimism elevates both video games and Lovecraft to new heights: by successfully merging form and content together, *Bloodborne* expands not only the many ways that Lovecraftian short stories can resonate into new genres (and new original stories), but also expands the possibilities for procedural rhetoric as a complex system of meaning making. However, this prioritization of cosmic pessimism comes at the cost of a "sanitized" Lovecraft, where all problematic elements of Lovecraft's original aren't so much critiqued and resolved, so much as they are nullified and omitted from the story outright. As stated

previously, I don't seek to argue that such a move should be immediately interpreted as negative -- many may even argue that the removal of Lovecraft's xenophobic themes is a welcome change in the genre of cosmic horror, and that the genre of video games lends itself to the removal of such morally ambiguous content. It's easy to see why a game company like FromSoftware would choose to remove it. Nevertheless, the removal of these elements suggests that newer iterations of "Lovecraftian" stories (be them video games or not) seek to erase this part of Lovecraft's persona entirely and sweep it under the proverbial rug. Should this truly be the case, these omissions speak volumes about how these larger issues in the Lovecraftian are being negotiated via the production of new works. Such negotiations may even suggest a form of "Lovecraftian" revisionism, where the new stories seek to remove all of Lovecraft's racism to keep the focus on the "fun" elements that are more palatable for mainstream audiences. As Lovecraft continues to grow in popularity more and more, enthusiasts and academics alike will likewise need to grapple with this quandary. I seek not to dispute about the morality of such editorial choices, only argue that such choices do fundamentally change the way that Lovecraft is interpreted across time -- for, as I hope to demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the rhetoric of cosmic pessimism is not the only way that Lovecraft's unpleasant persona is abstracted.

Chapter Two: Eldritch Evangelism: Humor, Horror, and the Lovecraftian “Chick Tract”

In addition to the medium of video games, another genre that has received a lot of attention in the expanded universe of H.P. Lovecraft is the genre of the parody. It's not surprising that newer contributions to Lovecraft's mythos would take the writer's original works and place them into a more humorous context, as Lovecraft's works were sometimes cartoonishly serious in tone – which made them ripe for parody. What is surprising though, is the format that some of these Lovecraft parodies have taken. *Who Will Be Eaten First?* by Howard Hallis and *Why We're Here* by Fred Van Lente and Steve Ellis are two such examples of an unusual format: the evangelist Christian comic book. The most commonly known subgenre of the evangelist comic book is that of the “Chick tract,” a small handheld comic book that's rife with heavy-handed religious doctrine and monstrous depictions of God's wrath should the audience not accept Jesus as their personal savior. Despite their (at times) horrifying depictions of God's wrath, Chick tracts continue to be popular among fundamentalist Christian communities, even after their eponymous creator, Jack T. Chick, died in 2016.

Ordinarily, the “Chick tract” format would be wholly irrelevant to the works of H.P. Lovecraft, as the weird fiction writer was aggressively atheist, and had no interest in spreading the word of Christ, or any religion. However, what makes the works of Hallis, Van Lente, and Ellis stand out from their peers is the way that their parodies of Lovecraft lend themselves so well to the format of a “Chick tract.” Despite Chick and Lovecraft having (for the most part) wildly incongruent views on most issues, the combination of Chick's Judeo-Christian histrionics with Lovecraft's otherworldly horrors seems oddly fitting considering both writers' affinity for the macabre and apocalyptic. One may even make the argument that

such a crossover was inevitable, and wonder what took Hallis, Van Lente, and Ellis so long to produce such a parody.

Timing and appropriateness aside, these Lovecraftian Chick tracts are noteworthy not only for their unique approach to Lovecraftian parody, but also because of how they signify a much larger trend in the genre of parodies in the Cthulhu mythos. By taking the format of a Chick tract and replacing all references to Christ with references to Lovecraftian monsters (like Cthulhu), *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Why We're Here* not only make use of the artistic strategy of *détournement*, but also find themselves guilty of making a similar move as *Bloodborne* did in the previous chapter: in prioritizing the absurdity of Lovecraft's monsters, the possibility for critique of Lovecraft's personal views gets significantly smaller, and in extreme cases, the possibility disappears completely. While the shrinking of these possibilities is not necessarily the fault of the comedic genre at large, it is certainly the case when it comes a number of Lovecraftian parodies, including these two Lovecraftian Chick tracts. Possibilities for meaningful critique disappear in *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Why We're Here* primarily because of how they allow Lovecraft's persona to take refuge in absurdity: by presenting the weird fiction writer as the punchline of a practical joke, these Lovecraftian Chick tracts circulate a version of Lovecraft more palatable for mainstream audiences by removing all references to Lovecraft's racism and therefore making them unable to do any harm to readers in the present day. While one may be tempted to see this inability of Lovecraft's racism to do harm as a welcome change, I argue that such an editorial overreach is a negligible solution to confronting Lovecraft's racism in his texts.

To demonstrate this, the first section of this chapter will establish who Jack T. Chick is, and I will discuss the primary genre features of his eponymous, evangelistic Chick tracts.

After discussing the primary features of these tracts, I will discuss William Van O'Connor's theory of parody, and the way that "when employed intelligently and affirmatively, parody makes more lucid the reader's sense of a style or subject" (248). Then I will establish how Hallis, Van Lente, and Ellis neglect to compose their parodies of Lovecraft in such a way that give readers a better sense of Lovecraft, instead presenting readers with a "safe" and "simple" Lovecraft which prioritizes humor above all else -- much to the detriment of those who may seek a closer and more complicated reading of the author. This reduction of Lovecraft's persona to an "eccentric horror writer" actively discourages readers to dismiss Lovecraft's unseemly personal views on race in favor of treating Lovecraft wholly as some cosmic joke. Even worse: if a reader is being exposed to Lovecraft for the very first time through one of these Chick tracts, readers may be exposed to a "version" of Lovecraft that fails to address the racism at all, hence contributing to the erasure of it from the Lovecraftian literary corpus. While Van Lente and Ellis' *Why We're Here* does this via the blending together of elements of horror and humor, thereby neutralizing any possibility for Lovecraft to be controversial, Hallis' *Who Will Be Eaten First?* takes a much more radical approach by employing the situationist strategy of *détournement*.

The Chick Tract: Surrealist Spiritualism in The Works of Jack T. Chick

Jack T. Chick, the creator of the eponymous "Chick tract," has garnered as much success as he has scorn in his lifetime. Despite choosing to live a (relatively) secluded life outside of the public eye, Chick managed to sell hundreds of millions of his eccentric, evangelistic comic books in his sprawling, decades long career as a comic book artist and publisher. Normally, such religious material wouldn't (necessarily) be cause for much

attention -- the adaptation of religious content into new genres, especially genres that are popular with young people (like comics) is not new. However, one of the reasons why Chick's brand of comics has remained in circulation for decades is one of their primary genre features -- their heavy-handed religious doctrine and frequent hyperbole. Once referred to as "the Tijuana bibles of Christianity" by Daniel Raeburn (9), Chick tracts often read more like terrifying, surrealist hallucinations than they do like friendly parables about living a life free of sin.

This heavily evangelistic tone of Chick tracts inevitably informs their real-world function: witnessing, a strategy used by Christians to share the word of God with non-believers. Chick Publications' official website even goes so far as to proudly proclaim on its website banner that Chick tracts are "Witnessing made easy... Chick Tracts GET READ! (Equipping for evangelism for over 50 years)" (*Chick Publications*). This detail is noteworthy because it highlights yet another genre feature of the Chick tract: the seductive (and almost predatory) nature of their stories. Raeburn writes that "Gung-ho Jack [Chick] often invokes Christ's famous line about bringing not peace but a sword" (6), and nowhere is this more on display than in the narrative of the tracts themselves. Raeburn, on Chick's obsession with witnessing and conversion, writes:

Jack's masturbatory obsession with the seduction and humiliation of conversion is so all-consuming that the tracts themselves began to appear in tracts and stimulate the climax. In these comix-within-comix, our man doesn't even show the theology of the seduction to us, only the icon of the tract itself [...] When an object is so strongly associated with an emotional process that the object alone begins to create that emotion, it is a fetish (Raeburn 9)

YOU my choice” (Chick 21). This type of ending isn’t surprising for a work by Chick; most Chick tracts end either with a sinner being saved, or a sinner being punished. Therefore, what’s significant about *The Choice* isn’t the fact that George is persuaded at all, but *how* he is persuaded.

One of the first ways that George’s nameless friend is able to persuade him is his insistence on his inevitable demise should he not heed God’s warning. The primary rhetorical tactic that George’s friend employs is fear -- of the lake of fire, and of being punished by God. George’s friend emphasizes that George has “a horrible

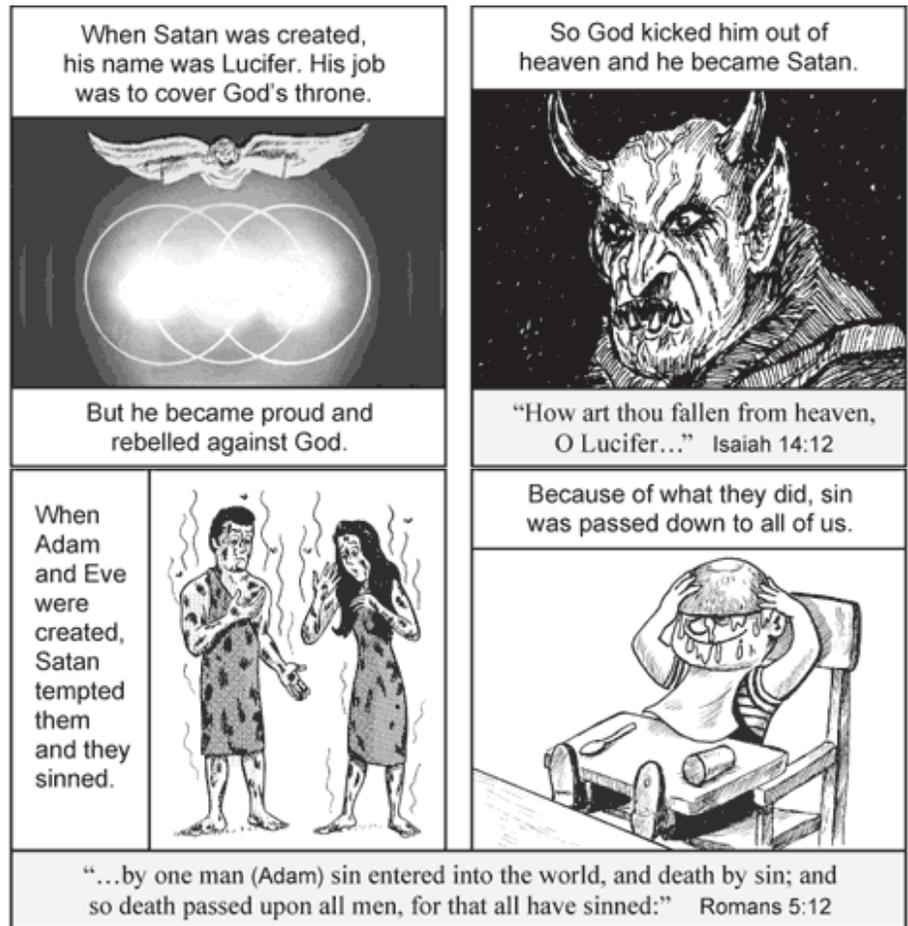


Fig 3. Chick’s extreme, dramatic artwork in *The Choice* inspires fear in readers.

enemy who hates your guts and wants you in hell forever” (Chick 4). Later in the tract, George’s friend continues, explaining that “because of sin, we are all born spiritually dead... and headed for damnation in hell” (Chick 7). This use of phrases like “horrible enemy” and “damnation,” and “spiritually dead” emphasize the existential fear of being forsaken by God, and ultimately prove to be one of the primary motivators for George’s conversion.

Another primary feature of *The Choice* is the way that it uses its visual elements to scare both George and the reader into accepting Jesus as their savior. The

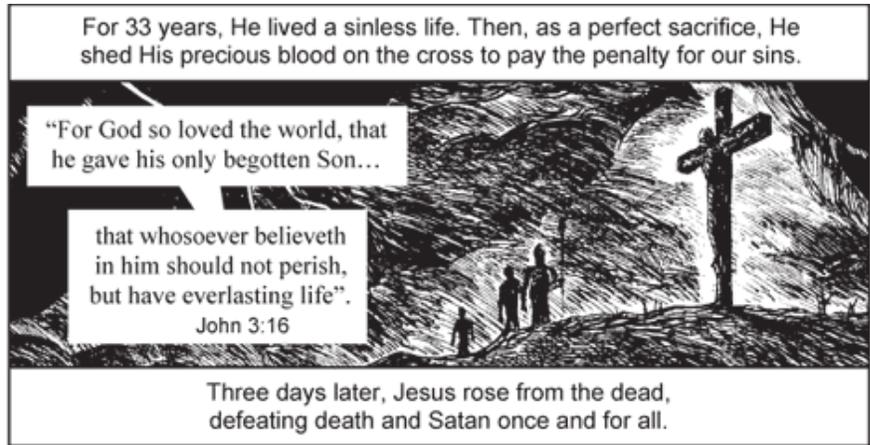


Fig 4. Christ’s crucifixion in *The Choice*.

contrast of Lucifer before and after his fall on page 5 is particularly shocking (Fig 3), and on the very next page *The Choice* uses “stink lines” coming off of Adam and Eve to emphasize just how lowly and distant humanity is from the glory of God, juxtaposing the two of them

next to a toddler pouring food on top of their head (Fig 3).

Even when depicting something incredibly holy, such as Christ’s sacrifice, the image is highly contrasted with stark black and white colors, and very dramatic shading around Christ’s body hanging from the

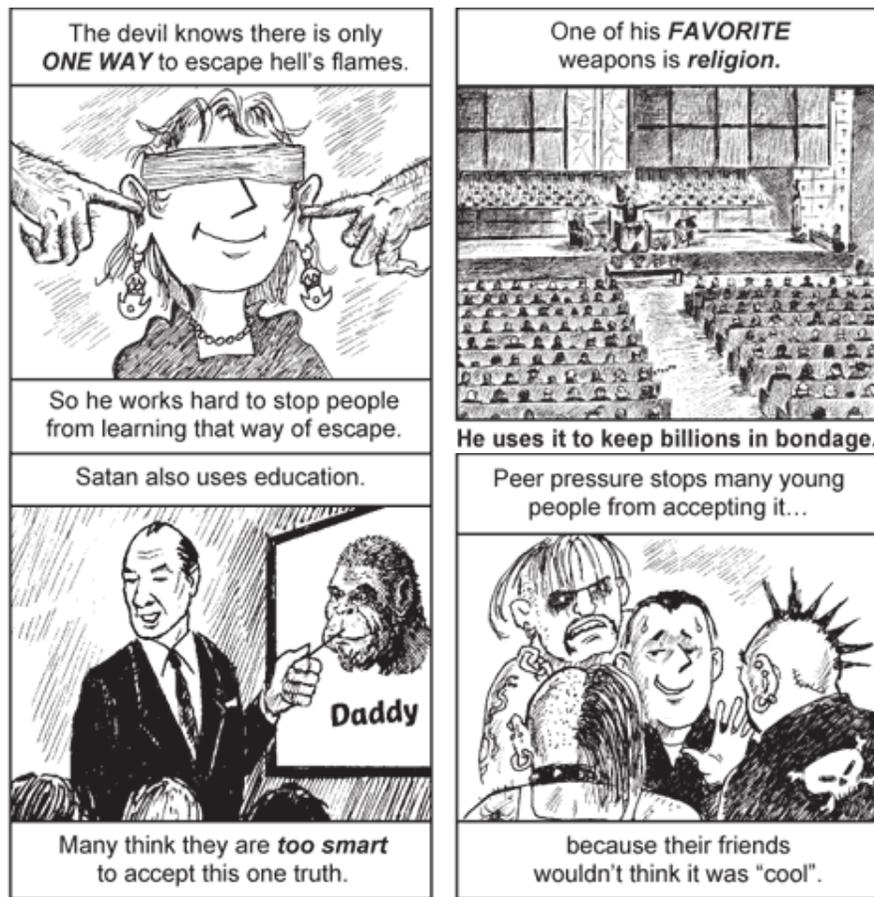


Fig 5. Chick warns readers about the Devil.

cross (Fig 4). These strong visual choices not only serve to “scare” George into repenting for his sins, but also to scare the reader into following a similar course of action.

Other instances of *The Choice* using its visuals to scare George into accepting Jesus as his savior comes in the form of Chick’s scathing critique of modernity. For example, according to Chick, the “tools” of the Devil can be anything from Science, Education, Sports, and even Religion itself. This is evidenced by the eighth page where Chick juxtaposes a blindfolded person next to a religious congregation full of people, writing how the Devil “uses [religion] to keep millions in bondage” (Chick 8, Fig 5). In a different panel, Chick makes a not-too-subtle jab at the institution of education where a distinguished looking educational figure points to a picture of a monkey labelled “Daddy” (Fig 5). On the same page as the critique of Darwin, another panel decries the types of youth who may be dissuaded from accepting the truth of Jesus Christ: one character has their head completely shaved on one side, while another wears a spiked mohawk with a dark-colored jacket with a skull-and-crossbones design on the backside. No group of people in the modern world, it seems, were immune from being “spiritually dead,” according to Chick (Chick 7).

All these elements wind up working quite well when juxtaposed with Lovecraft, because Chick’s vitriol for modernity overlaps with many of Lovecraft’s own views. Prodding scientists (such as in “Dreams of the Witch House”), new advances in technology (such as in “From Beyond”), and social outsiders (such as in “The Horror at Red Hook”) were all sources of vague, latent horror, according to the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. This general mistrust of the modern world marks a strange parallel between the pulp writer and the comic publisher. However, there is one noteworthy exception to this mistrust of modernity: While Chick staunchly believed that the acceptance of Jesus as one’s personal

savior could (and would) save humanity from the devil-controlled modern world, Lovecraft was not so optimistic. Rather than believe in an all-powerful God to save humanity from its own problems, Lovecraft (as established in the chapter previous) believed that humanity was so insignificant that should *any* God exist we would be so inconsequential to them that we may be beyond saving entirely. This binary choice that cosmic pessimism poses -- the choice between insanity and death -- lends itself well to the binary choice that Chick tracts provide to their protagonists: Heaven or Hell.

Another element that juxtaposes well with Lovecraft is the inevitability of the protagonist's fate in Chick tracts. The penultimate emotional breakdown of the protagonist -- either by accepting or denying Christ -- is one of the primary features that makes it such a fitting match for a Lovecraft parody. In the surreal, topsy-turvy world of Jack T. Chick, when sinners realize the "hidden truth" of Christ's love for humanity, readers are forced into a grotesque voyeurism as the sinner either viciously rebukes the wicked, material world, cowers in fear at their own destruction at the hands of the angry Christian God, or both. Such a simplistic, apocalyptic binary is similar to the binary discussed in the previous chapter: if a Lovecraft character is given infallible proof that a hidden world -- a world which harbors occulted horrors like Yog-Sothoth and Cthulhu -- truly exists, and cares not for the will of humanity, then the only two options which are available to such a character is death at the hands of the Great Old Ones, or acceptance of humanity's insignificance. While the cosmology of Jack T. Chick offers salvation and shelter from the apocalypse in the form of Jesus Christ, both Lovecraft and Chick are similar in the fact they reveal a "hidden truth" to viewers, much to their dismay if they have not been good followers of their respective Gods.

Horror, Humor & Parody

When looking at parodies of any author, it's tempting to interpret them as a condemnation any given work -- as a piece that seeks only to highlight the negative aspects. After all, if parodies are meant to "make fun" of a certain work, then why interpret them as anything else? However, William Van O'Connor disagrees with such a dismissive assessment with how parody functions, writing:

Parody is a form of irony, of simulation, saying one thing and partly intending another. It deserves a place in the categories of irony arranged by I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and others. It is serio-comic, and praises while it condemns. As with other devices or forms of irony, when employed intelligently and affirmatively, parody makes more lucid the reader's sense of a style or subject. It can be a valuable form of criticism. (O'Connor 248)

One can certainly see this in the works of Hallis, Van Lente, and Ellis, as the irony in replacing all references to Christ and the *Holy Bible* with Cthulhu and the *Necronomicon* are fairly self-evident; most Christians would not take kindly to their lord and savior being likened to a monstrous underwater cephalopod, and therein lies the humor. However, while the argument can be made that *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Why We're Here* are "praising while they condemn" (as O'Connor would say), what these two Lovecraftian Chick tracts fail to do is make readers more lucid on the style and subject of Lovecraft. In fact, closer examination of the two tracts reveals that they often do the opposite: readers emerge from the works of Hallis, Van Lente, and Ellis with a far less accurate awareness of Lovecraft's style, and who Lovecraft is as an authorial persona.

Who Will Be Eaten First? and *Why We're Here* do this because of the way that they blend the genres of horror and humor. In addition to being a clever way of engaging in what Noel Carroll calls “incongruity” humor, it also participates in a long standing tradition of blending the terrifying with the comedic. In “Horror and Humor,” Carroll reflects on this phenomenon:

It may appear initially implausible that such broadly opposite affects [horror and humor] can attach to the same stimulus. And yet, the evidence from contemporary films, television shows, comic strips, and novels indicate that they can [...] From earlier movie cycles, one recalls *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, and before that there was the naughty humor of James Whale’s *The Invisible Man*, and, even more hilariously, his *Old Dark House*. (Carroll 145)

Carroll later expands on this, insisting that “unavoidable” conclusion is that “there is some intimate relation of affinity between horror and humor” (146). *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Why We're Here* certainly exemplify this affinity between the two genres, and likewise follow in the tradition that Carroll highlights. It’s difficult to read the two tracts in their entirety and take them at face value, as their farcical tone is impossible to ignore. However, while Hallis, Van Lente and Ellis’ blending of elements of horror and humor work much to the benefit of how well they work as pieces of comedy, this blending of horror and humor does comparatively little to give readers a better understanding of Lovecraft as an authorial persona. *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Why We're Here* fail to do this because of the way that a blending of humor and horror inevitably functions:

Horror requires fearsomeness in addition to category jamming. So, where the fearsomeness of the monster is convincingly in place, horror will not drift over into into incongruity humor. But where the fearsomeness of the monster is compromised or deflected by either neutralizing it or at least drawing attention away from it, the monster can become an appropriate object for incongruity humor. (Carroll 157)

As will be explored in the paragraphs to follow, *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Why We're Here* present readers with a world where all the fearsomeness of Lovecraft's monsters are neutralized, as they exist in the proverbial safety net of the parodic genre. Therefore, because Lovecraft's monsters are robbed of all of their fearsomeness, the same is true of Lovecraft's authorial persona overall-- it goes unchecked, un-critiqued, and overall treated as more of a "gag" than anything else. While it's tempting to perhaps blame the overall genre of the parody itself for this glossing of Lovecraft's personal views, I would like to make a distinction: the glossing over and removal is not the fault of the genre of parody, but rather how Hallis, Van Lente, and Ellis are using it. By prioritizing humor above all else, Hallis, Van Lente and Ellis sacrifice any possible opportunity to engage in a meaningful critique of Lovecraft as they lampoon his works. Van Lente and Ellis do this primarily through the blending of humor and horror that Carroll describes, though Hallis takes a more radical approach by engaging in the situationist practice of *détournement*.

***Why We're Here* by Fred Van Lente and Steve Ellis**

Why We're Here by Van Lente and Ellis was created in 2000 for the Small Press Expo in Bethesda, Maryland. In this tract, the protagonist, John, verbalizes how his wonderful wife, children, and house somehow are leaving him unfulfilled. However, once his eccentric neighbor Mr. Whatley tells John to take comfort in the fact that

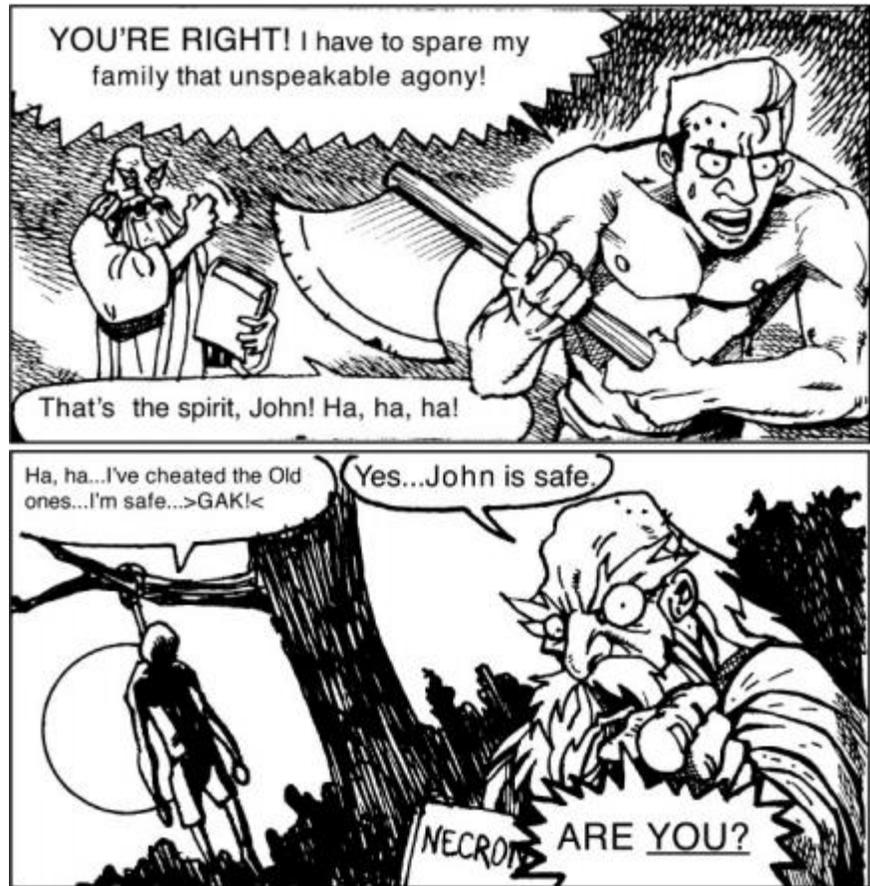


Fig 6. John kills his family, and then himself in *Why We're Here*.

everything in his life pales in comparison to the uncaring, all-powerful Great Old Ones, John does the (seemingly) sensible thing by “sparing [his] family that unspeakable agony,” by first killing his family with an axe, and then killing himself via hanging (Van Lente & Ellis 16-17). In the comic’s conclusion, John proclaims victory as he hangs himself from a tree, saying “Ha ha... I’ve cheated the Old ones... I’m safe... >GAK<” (Van Lente & Ellis 17). In the tract’s penultimate moment, Mr. Whatley offers the readers a warning, emphasizing the terror of the Great Old Ones, saying, “Yes, John is safe... ARE YOU?” (Van Lente & Ellis 17, Fig 6).

The blending of Lovecraftian elements with those of Chick are easy to see, as well as the blending of Lovecraft's horror elements with Chick's evangelism to humorous effects. One of the first ways that readers can see this is through the materiality of Van Lente and Ellis' work. Despite being somewhat far-removed (in content, at least) from the works of Jack T. Chick, the physical pages of the book retain the rectangular shape from the original Chick tracts. Even when the book was released online as a freely-distributed PDF, each page was recreated with the format and panel-shape which adheres to the original comic strip format that Chick popularized. This material element is important to keep in mind because although *Why We're Here* is an original work, the material elements of the comic make clear their intention to blend the works of Chick with Lovecraft's monsters.

One can see this bleeding in other areas as well. For example, the Chick-esque stock character of the Christian proselytizer is détourned by having this character be named "Mister Whatley" (Van Lente & Ellis 2). To the uninitiated reader, such a choice may seem fairly innocuous, but upon closer inspection of Lovecraft's original work, it appears that such a character may likely share a connection with the infamous Whatley family from H.P. Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror." This detail is important because it suggests that the stock character of the "kind-hearted Christian" in this version of a Chick tract actually has far more sinister intentions for the unassuming John. In this way, this substitution of Chick's stock character suggests that a Christian proselytizer may have just as sinister intentions as a happy, unassuming Christian wanting to be a witness for Christ.

Other elements from *Why We're Here* are blended together in a similar fashion. When Mr. Whatley reveals his "holy book" to John, it is none other than the *Necronomicon*. This book of hidden knowledge and unholy knowledge appears both in original Lovecraft stories

proper and a large number of post-Lovecraft contributions to the Cthulhu mythos. *Why We're Here's* replacement of the *Holy Bible* with the *Necronomicon* once again suggests an association for their quality to be hide sinister motivations for the unassuming protagonist.

While many other similar moments happen, their effect is more or less the same as the two aforementioned, and the tropes of the Chick tract are easy to identify in this parody: a disillusioned protagonist verbalizes their doubt in the almighty God, a hidden religious secret is revealed (or “witnessed”) to them, and the protagonist is given a choice: accept the holy truth of Jesus Christ, or accept their own inevitable demise in Hell. However, *Why We're Here* deviates from Chick's work in one noteworthy way: John is given no such option for redemption through Jesus Christ. In fact, when John asks for reassurance that he will get to Heaven, Whatley laughs in his face and says “I bet you believe in Santa Claus too! There's no afterlife, and this universe is worse than a living hell!” (Van Lente & Ellis 11). Instead of waiting on Heaven, Whatley assures John that he only needs to accept that “no merciful, paternalistic ‘god’ looks down on [him] from the heavens -- just an endless, frozen void that cares nothing about the fate of a collection of insignificant bipedal microbes” (Van Lente & Ellis 12). Not only does this harken back to Lovecraft's themes of cosmic pessimism, but it also pokes fun at the fear tactics that Christian proselytization often makes use of by substituting the fear of God's wrath with the fear of the abominable Great Old Ones.

This proselytization by Whatley -- this insistence on a godless universe filled with beings that humanity's “puny minds cannot even comprehend” (Van Lente & Ellis 12) -- feels right out of the beginnings of “The Call of Cthulhu.” It's easy to see why these Lovecraftian Chick tracts were passed around all over the Internet -- the two genres certainly

appear to share a lot of overlap, especially when it comes to their capacity for apocalyptic hyperbole.

However, this hyperbolic humor does come at a cost. As mentioned in the introduction, Lovecraft is a rather problematic figure when one takes into account his personal views on race. Aside from this, Lovecraft was also a very vocal critic of religion, while Jack Chick's religious fervor is at best guilty of overdoing it, while at worst, is severe enough to have his works banned in Canada for being considered "hate literature" (Raeburn 6). One may be tempted to think that combining the two author's personalities together would emphasize the worst parts of who they are, but that is not what has happened with Van Lente and Ellis' work. Rather than highlight the problematic areas of their respective personas, these elements are practically erased due to the fact that *Why We're Here* is primarily a work of parody. While the genre of parody itself is not (necessarily) to blame for such an erasure, *Why We're Here* is nonetheless guilty of using parody to take Lovecraft and put him into a more "user friendly" format via the erasure of all the elements that made him so polarizing in the first place. By allowing such a polarizing figure to take refuge in absurdity via the blending of horror elements with the genre of the Chick tract, Van Lente and Ellis discourage readers from engaging with Lovecraft in any way other than surface level humor. By turning the works of Lovecraft into nothing more than a farce, *Why We're Here* engages in the same sorts of problematic erasures that *Bloodborne* does.

***Who Will Be Eaten First?* by Howard Hallis & Détournement**

In 2003, Howard Hallis created the Lovecraftian Chick tract *Who Will Be Eaten First?* by taking select panels of Jack Chick's *The Choice* (which has been discussed earlier

in this chapter) and replacing all references to Jesus and his love for humanity with the Great Old Ones and their utter indifference (or hostility) to humanity. While the changing of Chick's original work was "done in fun" according to Hallis (para 31), it landed him in a bit of hot water when legal representatives of Chick contacted Hallis's server managers and called for the comic's removal. Hallis, in compliance with the representatives, took down the comic, explaining how he completely understood the rationale for Chick's representatives to want the comic removed in a (now deleted) blog post from 2008: "Now, everyone's opinions of what is evil and not evil or funny and not funny are subjective, but when they own the copyright to those images, they are fully within their rights to ask me to remove it from view" (Hallis 30). This removal should have been the end of such a blatant violation of copyright on Hallis' part. However, this legal outcry on Chick's part couldn't have anticipated the way it would eventually be distributed. In 2003, the very same year that Hallis made the parody, *Armed and Dangerous* redistributed the comic in full on their website. Later, in the early 2010s, websites like *iO9* and *The Comics Journal* reposted the comic again and gave the comic a new surge in popularity.

While Van Lente and Ellis' work grounds itself more in the substitution of religious elements of Jack Chick's work, Howard Hallis' *Who Will Be Eaten First?* makes use of an artistic strategy called *détournement* to parody Lovecraft. Used by the Situationist International (SI) movement of 1960s France and coming from the minds of noteworthy thinkers like Guy Debord and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio the very first journal of the movement in 1958 defined *détournement* as "The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction or milieu" (qtd in Knabb 199). Because of this integration of past productions, "there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of

those means” (qtd in Sussman 199). In the years to follow, scholars like Elizabeth Sussman would come to define *détournement* as

A theoretical, political, and artistic avant-garde that articulated the status of the art work in what has been termed the age of capitalist alienation and technological mediation. Lived experience, [the SI] argued, had been transformed into spectacle, desire into consumption. By means of brash, artistic practice and sustained theoretical innovations intended to subvert this condition, the Situationists proposed to transform what Guy Debord, in a prescient formulation, called “the society of the spectacle.” (Sussman 3-4)

In order to bring about this “brash, artistic practice,” the SI movement was faced with a problem: in a world that had gone mad with the alienating forces of capitalism and technology, the only way to make true change was to disrupt the spectacle, but how? If all lived experience, according to the SI, was part of the nightmarish spectacle of capitalism, then how could one disrupt the spectacle without participating in it?

The SI found their solution to this problem with *détournement*. *Détournement*, a French word meaning “diversion” (Sussman 8), was a way of disrupting this “society of the spectacle” by attacking its very artifacts. This attack on the spectacle usually involved the repurposing (or theft) of a piece of artwork, and fundamentally destabilizing it in some way - painting over it, reconfiguring it, or perhaps even destroying it entirely and putting it back together in a completely different order. *Détournement* was the reclaiming of signs and the un-making (or re-making) of their meaning, an un-making of meaning that forced the artifacts of the spectacle to be self-destroying. As Greil Marcus writes, “Making meaning --

or unmaking meaning -- went hand in hand with making history” (168). This destabilization, then, was a way to turn the spectacle against itself. In *Lipstick Traces*, Marcus emphasizes the significance of this disruption of signs, writing that

Détournement was a politics of subversive quotation, of cutting the vocal cords of every empowered speaker, social symbols yanked through the looking glass, misappropriated words and pictures

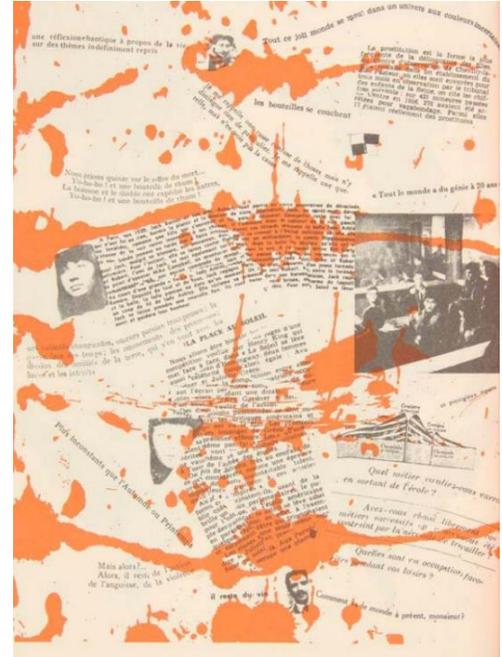


Fig 7. Page from *Memoires*.



Fig 8. Situationist comics from Andre Bertrand (left) and Gerard Johannes (right)

diverted into familiar scripts and blowing them up. [...] The détournement of the right sign, in the right place at the right time, could spark a mass reversal of perspective (168)

One noteworthy example of this “mass reversal” of perspective was Asger Jorn and Guy Debord’s *Memoires* (Fig 7). Originally appearing to be nothing more than an ordinary book, readers find something much different upon attempting to “read” the text. In composing *Memoires*, Debord “cut scores of paragraphs, sentences, phrases, or sometimes single words out of books, magazines, and newspapers” (Marcus 153). After doing so, Debord had Jorn smear pages “with colored lines, blotches, spots and drips” (Marcus 153). Any pictures that exist in *Memoires* were likewise “scavenged from libraries and newsstands, each piece as mute, all as estranged from any informing context, the whole as much as glossolalia, as the spectral text” (Marcus 153). Therefore, any meaning that may have existed in the original texts that Debord stole from is either rerouted, or destroyed completely when they are put into *Memoires*. The orderly, closed system of a book opens up, and swallows all possibility for meaning -- at least the in the case of the words that Debord stole originally. Additionally, Debord and Jorn took this transformation and destruction of meaning one step further by binding the book “in heavy sandpaper, so that when placed on a shelf it would destroy other books” (Marcus 153). Therefore, the very materiality of the book reflected its overall message -- a destruction of meaning from the inside out via the use of the signs of the spectacle.

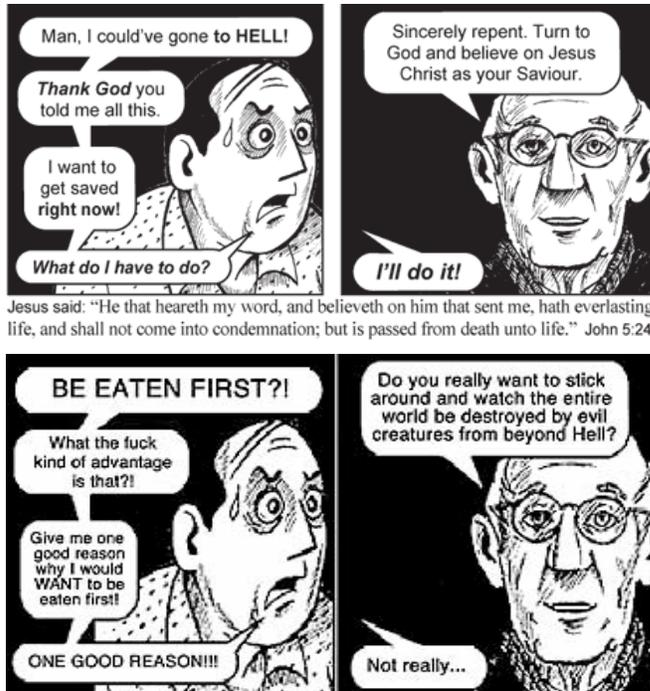


Fig 9. Chick's original panels in *The Choice* (above) and Hallis' *détournement* (below)

one by Gerard Johannes (Fig 8). These pictures, in addition to being another strong example of *détournement*, offer a direct connection to the methodologies that Howard Hallis would use years later in *Who Will Be Eaten First?* While Debord and other members of the SI had motivations that were far more political and social in nature, Hallis' goals appear to be much more narrowly focused in nature. Instead of using *détournement* to collapse the very foundations of the "society of the spectacle," Hallis uses *détournement* to collapse the genres of the Chick tract and the Lovecraftian "weird tale" to rechannel their meaning into something much more safe and palatable for a modern audience. By using *détournement* in this way, Hallis combines Lovecraft with the Chick tract genre to turn both authors against themselves; by lampooning both the "Chick tract" and the "weird tale," the original meaning of Lovecraft is rechanneled into something far less nuanced and complex; readers do not

What makes the SI movement and Memoires so relevant to Hallis' *Who Will Be Eaten First?* is the fact that many instances of *détournement* were made using comic strips. When the 11th publication of the official journal of the SI movement (the *Internationale Situationniste*) was released, two noteworthy pieces of *détournement* were created to advertise it -- one piece by Andre Bertrand, and

leave *Who Will Be Eaten First?* with a better understanding of Lovecraft as an author, as O'Connor says parody should do, but something much more watered down and reductive.

The primary way that Hallis utilizes détournement is in the outright theft of Jack Chick's art (Fig 9). Instead of creating his own artwork, as Van Lente and Ellis did, Hallis chooses to take the the actual drawings of Chick himself and simply paste new words on them. However, while this détournement works well in regards to comedy, as it neutralizes the elements of horror for the sake of incongruity humor, as Carroll described in "Horror and Humor," it sadly comes at a cost. Because Hallis' détournement of Chick's artwork focuses so much more on the form of the Chick tract itself (as so much of the visual arguments are done by Chick), *Who Will Be Eaten First?* has comparatively little to say about Lovecraft in the larger scheme of things.

While the détournement in Hallis' work certainly creates an association between Lovecraft and Chick, because Hallis uses détournement to substitute Chick's words, and nothing else, this choice suggests that *Who Will Be Eaten First?* had no interest in calling attention to Lovecraft's racism. In fact, one could even argue that Hallis' use of détournement does a better job at lampooning the works of Chick than it does the works of Lovecraft. Therefore, while Hallis' use of détournement is useful for comedic purposes, it poses a very similar problem that *Why We're Here* does. Using the drawings of Jack T. Chick to associate fundamentalist Christianity with the hyperbolic

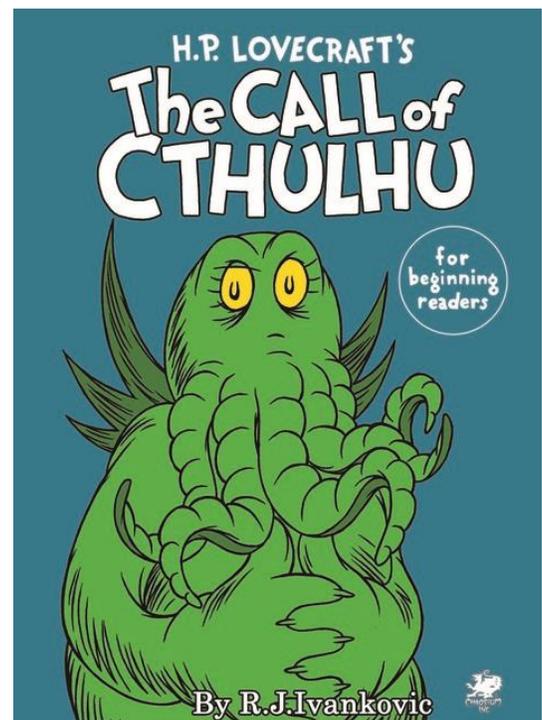


Fig 10. *The Call of Cthulhu For Beginning Readers* by R. J. Ivankovic.

nihilism of Lovecraft's cosmic terrors sadly detracts from the rather upsetting personal views of Lovecraft, as well as the upsetting views of Jack Chick.

Conclusion

Parodies of Lovecraft's works continue to increase in number as the original stories become more and more popular. Other examples include an episode from *The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy* called "The Prank Call of Cthulhu" (2005), the hit videogame *Cthulhu Saves The World* (2011) for the Xbox 360 and PC, and the Dr. Seuss inspired *The Call of Cthulhu For Beginning Readers* (2017, Fig 10). No author is immune to such a phenomenon, and one may argue that it was only a matter of time before H.P. Lovecraft got the "parody" treatment that so many other popular writers have received before him. However, if one takes into account Dimock's theory of resonance when examining the works of Van Lente, Ellis, and Hallis, it becomes clear that certain aspects of Lovecraft are resonating louder than others. While the "fun" and "humor" of Lovecraft's eldritch horrors are resonating the loudest in these strange, hybridic Chick tracts via the SI strategy of détournement, all other aspects of Lovecraft's persona are drowned out in the background noise. This "drowning out" of Lovecraft's more problematic characteristics not only discourages a nuanced, complex reading of the weird fiction writer -- it forces the reader into not doing so. Not only is this problematic in the abstract sense, but it speaks to a larger problem that adaptations like *Bloodborne* likewise suffer from: the problem of a new, "safe" Lovecraft being circulated to new readers -- a Lovecraft free of any complexity or nuance for readers to interrogate. This abstraction of Lovecraft's racism sadly feels too similar to censorship, and in an increasingly polarized age in the United States, creative works of

fiction – including those of H.P. Lovecraft – cannot be content to shy away from such controversies. This is especially important in Lovecraft's case, seeing as how well-documented his racism was, both in his tales, and in his non-fiction writings. To shy away from such unpleasant topics in the present day runs the risk of perpetuating an image of Lovecraft free of all his racist trappings, and therefore encouraging readers to act as if his racism never existed in the first place.

Chapter Three: “The Darkness of Man”: Critiques of Racism in Sean Branney’s *The White Tree: A Tale of Inspector Legrasse*

Lovecraft’s unfortunate personal views on race are not new to most Lovecraft scholars. In fact, some may insist that making the simple claim that “Lovecraft is racist” is an unoriginal and reductive argument, as it contributes little to the field of Lovecraft studies. This is certainly the position of S.T. Joshi, perhaps the most authoritative scholar in the field. When writing on his personal blog on the topic of Lovecraft’s racism, Joshi writes:

Of course he was a racist; everyone knows that. But I fail to see what good it does to attack him for this admitted failing at this late date. He has been dead for nearly three quarters of a century; what is more, his views had no influence on the culture of his own time, or even on his small cadre of his friends, colleagues, and correspondents [...] I regard Lovecraft’s racism not as a cudgel with which to beat him over the head, but as something to be considered with nuance and a full understanding of the historical, cultural, social, and intellectual circumstances surrounding this immensely complex issue (Joshi para 3)

While it can (perhaps) be argued whether or not Lovecraft’s racism “had no influence” on the culture of his own time, or whether or not problematizing Lovecraft’s racism “accomplishes nothing,” Joshi and I do agree on one point: publishing criticism whose main idea boils down to “Lovecraft was racist,” and nothing else, is no longer a satisfactory answer for addressing “the race problem” in Lovecraft’s stories. Calling Lovecraft racist -- while an undeniably true statement -- does nothing to reconcile how the field can approach this issue moving forward. The removal of such problematic elements likewise does nothing to reconcile their presence

in Lovecraft's fiction either, as my first two chapters have demonstrated with *Bloodborne* and the Lovecraftian Chick tracts. So, what is to be done about reconciling such a blatant issue in Lovecraft's texts whenever they are adapted?

One possible answer exists in the form of *The White Tree: A Tale of Inspector Legrasse*, an original audio play written by Sean Branney of the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society (HPLHS). Rejecting the idea that Lovecraft's racism needs to be avoided, *The White Tree* takes Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," and functions as a sequel via one of the story's side characters: Inspector John Raymond Legrasse of the New Orleans police department. Legrasse, in this new story, happens upon the case file of a drunk man, rambling about a group of people killing townsfolk in the swamps of the fictional town of Vermilion, Louisiana. Sensing that this case may have a connection to the case of the Cthulhu swamp cult that he took on earlier in his career, Legrasse sets out to Vermilion to investigate. Once there, he realizes that a far more sinister plot may be at work in Vermilion -- a plot that reveals a secret society being at work in the parish, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

It's easy to see how *The White Tree* grapples with Lovecraft's racism in a way that other adaptations do not. Adaptations such as *Bloodborne*, *Why We're Here* and *Who Will Be Eaten First?* -- despite being noteworthy for the engagement with other aspects of Lovecraft -- remain silent when it comes to addressing the racism in Lovecraft's work. Contrastingly, *The White Tree* tackles Lovecraft's racism head on with its choice of villain. By composing a story where the typical "Lovecraftian cult" is replaced with the KKK, a historically racist, real-world organization, *The White Tree* forces readers to grapple with Lovecraft's racism in a way that many other adaptations fail to do. This is exacerbated by the fact that many characters in *The White Tree* behave in outwardly racist ways, much to their vilification, such

as: characters committing hate crimes, characters-of-color being stereotyped by white characters, and last (but certainly not least), multiple uses of the word “nigger.” The use of this word in particular is noteworthy because of how recent this play was written; because it was written and performed in 2015, it’s highly unlikely that *The White Tree* would choose to include such language without understanding the history behind it -- both in American history, and in the context of Lovecraft’s personal views.

When audiences hear the racial epithets, stereotyped characters, and portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan, it’s tempting to call “foul,” and condemn *The White Tree* as a racist play that shouldn’t be listened to. However, these responses -- while well-meaning -- do not lend themselves to complex, nuanced readings of *The White Tree*, or any other problematic text for that matter. Therefore, despite containing racist elements, characters, and plot structures, *The White Tree* moves mythos tales forward by allowing non-white-characters to take more prominent roles in the story and directly contribute to Legrasse’s success in his Vermilion investigation. Branney himself, along with Andrew Leman, the co-founder of the HPLHS, directly addresses this in the liner notes for *The White Tree*, writing how “Though we cannot change who Lovecraft was, or how we felt, it seemed like it might be worthwhile to attempt something HPL himself never did [...] This episode nevertheless contains language that some may find offensive. We didn’t see how it could be avoided, and didn’t think it should be” (Branney and Leman). This final sentiment, about the disbelief that Lovecraft’s racism should be avoided, is what differentiates *The White Tree* from other works in the genre of the Lovecraftian tale. Unlike *Bloodborne*, *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Why We’re Here*, *The White Tree* refuses to shy away from Lovecraft’s racist tendencies and attempts to reconcile

the way that Lovecraft's racism can be confronted in the future without feeling too similar to censorship.

Therefore, *The White Tree* ultimately encourages audiences to be of two minds about its content. While *The White Tree* contains many racist elements, the play also makes it clear that such racism is meant to be viewed negatively by the audience. By making this choice to include racist language and characters, *The White Tree* critiques Lovecraft racism, while simultaneously participating in it. While it's tempting to argue that this strategy ultimately hinders the play, I argue that this "both sides" approach to race in Lovecraft actually works to *The White Tree's* benefit; with the inclusion of racist stereotypes in the text, *The White Tree* encourages a much more nuanced and complex reading of Lovecraft as a literary figure, and more directly tackles the race problem in Lovecraft's fiction than other adaptations do.

"Otherhood" in Science Fiction & *The White Tree*

The reading of racial elements in works of science fiction is not a new phenomenon; it is easy to see how the alien "other" and the racial "other" can be analogous. Isiah Lavender observes this in *Race in American Science Fiction*, writing that "Science fiction often talks about race by not talking about race" (7). This is certainly true of the adaptations of Lovecraft this thesis has covered thus far: *Bloodborne*, *Who Will Be Eaten First?*, and *Why We're Here* include many elements that discuss a fear of the other, of the outside, and of the unknown. But as I've discussed, these adaptations often don't tackle racism directly, despite it being common knowledge how racist and xenophobic Lovecraft could be. However, as previously mentioned, *The White Tree* leans into Lovecraft's racism, and instead of using aliens and monsters to talk about racism (like Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth"),

The *White Tree* emphasizes racial otherhood with the black/white binary between certain characters. Because “otherhood” is such a complex, multi-faceted concept, my discussion of *The White Tree* will make use of Lavender’s conception of otherhood in *Race in American Science Fiction*:

While otherhood is not exactly a new term, its meaning for sf [science fiction] is innovative because it attempts to change how racial difference is viewed by exposing the history and practice of discrimination operating inside and outside the genre simultaneously while also studying ways writers have used sf to expose and combat racism. [...] For instance, alien “others” stand in for racial “others” and vice versa. These archetypes are seemingly transposable. It would seem, then, that continual encounters and struggles with the “other” are the hallmark of true Western experience. In my estimation there is nowhere better than sf to examine the fear and excitement generated through alien encounters with race and racism. As a part of the background [*sic*] of science fiction, otherhood itself maps this dark territory (Lavender 8)

These encounters and struggles with “the other” are certainly on display in Lovecraft’s original fictions such as “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Shadow Out of Time,” but what differentiates *The White Tree* from those tales is that it directly confronts and problematizes the racial other. The cult of “outsiders” in *The White Tree* is not a swarm of non-whites, but a group of upstanding citizens in Vermilion simply trying to punish “moral crimes” that the long arm of the law cannot touch. Additionally, the group of people who are trying to take down the cult in Vermilion is not a group of heavily armed policemen, as it was in “The Call of Cthulhu,” but a singular policeman (Legrasse) and a handful of marginalized African

Americans in the town. While far from an ideal portrayal of race relations in the 1920s Louisiana bayou, *The White Tree* does attempt to negotiate science fiction's reliance on the encounter of "otherhood" in its narrative, even if this does mean that it must be guilty of perpetuating certain myths of "the racial other."

Perpetuations of Racial Otherhood in *The White Tree*

One of the first and most unavoidable perpetuations of racial otherhood in *The White Tree* has to be its inclusion of racist language, most notably the repeated use of the word "nigger." Despite the fact that *The White Tree* seems to make use of this racial epithet in order to make the villains more reprehensible to audience members, the audioplay nonetheless falls into the trap of critiquing racism while being guilty of participating in it. While I would argue that *The White Tree* participates in this racism for well-meaning reasons, it is also crucial to keep in mind that this rationale does not allow *The White Tree* to escape all responsibility for its use of this contentious language.

This language has especially detrimental effects to scenes involving Emerson. When the Vermilion KKK comes to his house, The Klexter -- in full view of Morpain -- remarks that Emerson's house is "one sorry nigger shack" (Branney 49). In the same scenes, many characters, including Morpain, call Emerson "boy," and before leaving, the Klexter warns Emerson to remember his place, saying, "Don't you go getting all uppity. I can't stand no uppity nigger" before punching Emerson in the stomach unprovoked (Branney 50). Such upsetting moments of racism in the story are difficult to reconcile in the present day, and while this is part of the reason for their inclusion, scenes like this nonetheless open *The White Tree* up for criticism for being racially insensitive.

Other instances of this occur with the presentation of specific characters. Mr. Dugas in particular, is one character whose representation does not hold up well to scrutiny. In addition to being described as “a crusty ol’ Cajun” in the stage directions of the final performance script, Mr. Dugas’s lines are also one of the only characters which are written with a phonetic accent (Branney 34). While Legrasse’s lines, for the most part, are written in standard American English, the difference in Dugas’s lines are easy to see. Some choice examples are “I ain’t never had no’un wannoo come back dis way”; “You gonna find tings is different hereabouts”; and “Dis da biggest island in de’bayou” (Branney 34-35). Nearly each of Dugas’ lines are written in such a way, and sadly mark a huge difference between the two men. The presence of such a difference creates a certain hierarchy between Legrasse and Dugas on a textual level, where Legrasse speaks in the “proper” way, where Dugas’ speech is much more informal and grammatically erratic. Because the difference in speech patterns are spelled in the script in this way, the performance script of *The White Tree* suggests that such an accent was not the performer’s choice, but the text’s intention.

This difference between Mr. Dugas and Legrasse is further emphasized when Dugas shows surprise at how Legrasse speaks to him. When Legrasse asks “There an island in that bayou, Mr. Dugas?”, Dugas laughs incredulously. When Legrasse asks what Dugas is laughing at, Dugas clarifies: “What you call me dat for? [...] ‘Mister’... Like I be de Mayor of Vermilion. ‘Mr. Dugas.’” (Branney 34). Dugas’ surprise at being called “mister” suggests a certain degree of self-imposed inferiority on Dugas’ part -- as if he expects Legrasse to not address him formally. While historically, such interactions may have happened between White Americans and African-Americans, the inclusion of such an interaction in *The White Tree* does not lend itself to the positive representation of African Americans in the play.

Sarafine Glapion is another character who is poorly represented in *The White Tree*. Although she contributes to Legrasse's investigation in a meaningful way, she is also poorly stereotyped. Legrasse hesitates to accept her help when Morpain drives him to Glapion's church, incredulously asking Morpain whether or not she is "some candle-burning fortune teller," comparing her to Marie Levaux (Branney 25). Upon meeting Legrasse in person, Glapion prays in multiple languages, to multiple gods, and is positioned as having a certain "spiritual knowledge" that Legrasse cannot access. This association with the spiritual is a way of "othering" Glapion, and portraying her character as a mystic interpreter of signs and symbols. While this role that Glapion plays is ultimately helpful to Legrasse's investigation, and he is grateful for her assistance, it sadly contributes negatively to the way that characters-of-color are represented in *The White Tree*.

This is exacerbated in Glapion's possession scene, where her portrayal borders on demonic. After calling on the spirits to tell Legrasse of the White Tree in the Vermilion swamp, the spirit of Castro, from "The Call of Cthulhu," possesses her body to taunt Legrasse. Castro, through Glapion, repeats a sentiment similar to what he told Legrasse many years ago in "The Call of Cthulhu:" "We are everywhere. We are nowhere. We call to the Great Old Ones and they answer. We come for you. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu--" (Branney 32). She speaks in tongues, calls on invisible spirits, and it is only after Legrasse, a white man, calls out to her to break her concentration that Glapion is able to snap out of her spiritual possession. This transformation scene once again contributes to the poor representation of African Americans in the story. In addition to relying on a white man to save her, Glapion's representation falls into a troublesome binary. At best, Glapion is

represented as a “candle burning fortune teller,” in Legrasse’s words (Branney 25), and at worst, a spirit-possessed monster that Legrasse and the audience should fear.

Even Emerson, the most prominently featured character of color in the latter half of *The White Tree* cannot avoid falling into dangerous stereotypes or poor representation. These stereotypes and poor representation are especially troublesome when one takes into consideration that many of them come from outside forces, and not Emerson himself. One such example occurs when Legrasse, in narration, describes the second time Emerson saves his life from the Klan: “I couldn’t save myself, but the good lord, or maybe Le Grand Zombi... someone sent me an avenging angel. A black one” (Branney 65). This characterization of Emerson as a “black angel,” despite being a positive stereotype, is a stereotype nonetheless. Unlike Dugas and Glapion, who are portrayed as a comedic simpleton and a spiritual soothsayer respectively, Emerson’s portrayal as a “black angel” runs the risk of portraying him as a “noble savage” -- a character who demonstrates almost divine-like virtue in spite of their “otherness.” This suggestion that Emerson should be idealized for his ability to remain virtuous in spite of his otherness as an African American once again suggests that *The White Tree* buys into certain structural elements that may have resonated with Lovecraft.

Another aspect of Emerson’s character that cannot go unmentioned is the fact that Emerson, despite being Legrasse’s savior, fails to survive the story. As Legrasse pilots their boat through the Louisiana swamps back to Vermilion after he and Emerson escape the KKK a second time, Emerson dies from gunshot wound by a KKK member. Despite all of its progressive strides in other areas, *The White Tree* more-or-less concludes with a hate crime. Emerson, despite being a “black angel,” must be punished for his Blackness, and therefore

erased from the story by the conclusion. What's even more troubling is that listeners never find out what happens to Emerson after he dies -- listeners hear about no burial, no mourning on Legrasse's part, and no closure for his departure from the story.

This disposability of Emerson's character is also true of Dugas and Glapion. Dugas -- who is also shot by a KKK member -- is never heard from again in *The White Tree* as soon as his narrative function has been fulfilled. Glapion, after being saved from her possession by Legrasse, becomes scared of him, pleading, "No. Do not touch me. Go. Now. Go!" (Branney 32), as if to further emphasize the separation between her and Legrasse now that she has served her role in the plot. The fact that almost all characters of color in the plot are treated in this way does little justice to their representation as fully developed, three-dimensional characters in the story, instead treating them as expendable, only existing to aid the white male in his quest, and having no other motivations of their own. Bearing all these examples in mind, it's easy to dismiss *The White Tree* as a failed deconstruction of racial otherhood in Lovecraft. However, there are a number of areas where *The White Tree* does engage in some critiques of Lovecraft's racism.

Critiques of Racial Otherhood in *The White Tree*

While far from a perfect representation of race relations in Lovecraft's work, *The White Tree* does make many encouraging changes to the "Lovecraftian tale," the most notable of which is the way that the racism is portrayed. Unlike in "The Horror at Red Hook" the racist elements in *The White Tree* are not presented as something that contributes to the listener's fear, but something that the listener is meant to condemn. When disclosing the identity of the "secret society" at work in Vermilion (the KKK), Miss Sheryl Huberdeau

details the “moral crimes” that the society fights against -- moral crimes that include, but are not limited to, immigrants, bootleggers, and “uppity negroes” (Branney 21). On a separate occasion at a Klan rally, the Kladd -- in the presence of Gerry Morpain, the sheriff of Vermilion -- shares this same sentiment, telling a character-of-color to their face that he “can’t stand no uppity nigger” (Branney 50). Moments like this force listeners into criticizing Morpain and Huberdeau because they are undoubtedly the villains of the story; later in his investigation, Legrasse learns that Huberdeau is the Exalted Cyclops of the Vermilion chapter of the KKK, while Morpain is the Klexter. Therefore, Caucasian characters like Morpain and Huberdeau -- characters that Lovecraft may have perhaps seen as fine, upstanding people in his own time -- are marked by a certain “otherness” in *The White Tree*. However, the otherness that marks characters like Morpain and Huberdeau as evil is not that of a racial contagion, but a moral one. It is racism itself that makes them monstrous.

Another way that *The White Tree* critiques Lovecraft’s racism is in its characterization of Huberdeau as the villain. Although her wickedness is eventually exposed when she is revealed to be the Exalted Cyclops of the Vermilion KKK, Huberdeau is initially portrayed as a model citizen of Vermilion. She lives in the extravagant plantation house of Mont Blanc, and is a widower to a scholar who used to “lecture up at Tulane [University]” about occult subjects and fringe religious groups in Vermilion (Branney 15). Her library is extravagant, and Huberdeau claims that her husband was “what you’d call a bibliophile” (Branney 18). In many ways, Huberdeau is an embodiment of everything Lovecraft valued: she is well-read and educated, law abiding, interested in the occult and antiquarian, and is Caucasian. Many characters from Lovecraft’s stories fit this description, such as Francis Wayland Thurston from “The Call of Cthulhu” and Henry Armitage from “The Dunwich

Horror”; Lovecraft had a habit of casting intellectual, socially established Caucasian characters as the protagonists of his tales. Therefore, the fact that Huberdeau, an intellectual, socially established Caucasian, serves as the villain of this tale directly critiques not only Lovecraft’s characterizations of his protagonists, but also his personal values.

Another way that *The White Tree* critiques Lovecraft’s racism is through Legrasse’s character. When Morpain interrogates Legrasse after his dinner with Huberdeau, he accuses Legrasse of not being “entirely on board with the actions of the Ku Klux Klan” (Branney 23). Although Legrasse insists that he has no problem working with officers who happen to be in the Klan, as those officers would be “half of the lawmen in Louisiana. Maybe more,” Legrasse makes it clear that he does not want the help of the Vermilion KKK in solving his case, stating that he wants to solve his case “by the Louisiana Code of Criminal Procedure” (Branney 23). Legrasse’s refusal of the KKK’s assistance emphasizes the critique of Lovecraft’s racism, for as established in my introductory chapter, Lovecraft at one time held a certain degree of admiration for the Ku Klux Klan. Therefore, the fact that *The White Tree* uses Legrasse, one of Lovecraft’s own characters, to condemn the actions of the Klan signifies just how strongly *The White Tree* wishes to differentiate itself from the other xenophobic sentiments in Lovecraft’s original stories such as “The Horror at Red Hook.”

However, one of the most significant departures in *The White Tree* is the role that the non-white characters play in the story. Rather than just being a source of latent horror -- as they are in stories like “Red Hook” -- characters-of-color play many prominent roles in *The White Tree*. For example, without Mr. Dugas, a Cajun guide in Vermilion, Legrasse would have never been able to locate the swamp of “Black Heart,” where the Vermilion KKK sacrifices its victims to the spirit in the titular white tree at the center of a particular island.

Sarafine Glapion, the voodoo queen of Vermilion, likewise helps Legrasse in his investigation by giving him a lead on where he can find his connection to the Cthulhu cult in Vermilion, saying: “In the Black Heart there is an island and on the island is the White Tree. Seek it and know the darkness of man. This is evil that lives and grows” (Branney 31). This clue from Glapion is crucial to Legrasse’s investigation, as he would have never been able to discover the horrible truth behind the Vermilion KKK otherwise.

One character, however, stands out among all the rest as the best example of diverse representation in *The White Tree*: Emerson, Ms Huberdeau’s servant at Mont Blanc. In addition to putting a *gris-gris*, a voodoo charm meant to help somebody, on Legrasse, Emerson saves Legrasse from being killed twice. Near the play’s conclusion, Legrasse takes note of this, asking Emerson “What’s a black man doing saving a white policeman at a Klan rally? Twice!” (Branney 69). In response, Emerson simply responds that he “didn’t do nothing but what any man ought to do” (Branney 69). This response firmly positions Emerson on a superior moral high ground than all of the other “well-to-do” characters in Vermilion like Sheriff Morpain or Ms. Huberdeau. Therefore, as the play concludes, it is the character that Lovecraft likely would have *least identified with* that garners the most sympathy from the audience, and from Legrasse. This sympathy for Emerson as a character, and the respect Legrasse has for him, carries into the play’s final lines, as well. When discussing the possibility of “men out there that we should be afraid of” with his grandson Claude, Legrasse agrees, but with an important caveat: “But you’ll never know which ones they are just by looking at them” (Branney 71). This caveat on Legrasse’s part ends *The White Tree* with an overall message of withholding judgement of people just based on what they look like. While one may be tempted to condemn this message for being overly

simplistic, and perhaps even a bit overwrought and cliché, this line nonetheless reaches into sentiments and themes of tolerance that Lovecraft himself never reached in his own tales.

Conclusion

Tackling racial otherhood in Lovecraft's works will never be a completely clean affair for those who wish to adapt him -- there will always be messy elements that need to be addressed. However, those who wish to address Lovecraft's racism are always given a choice when they adapt his works: they can either erase all elements of race entirely, essentially "whitewashing" the adaptation (as is the case with *Bloodborne* and the Lovecraftian Chick tracts), or they can take a different approach like *The White Tree* does. While *The White Tree* perpetuates a troublesome amount of racial stereotypes, the fact that such stereotypes are called into question is a much needed step in an encouraging direction for the Cthulhu mythos.

Conclusion & Implications Moving Forward

After having closely examined these adaptations, it's clear that certain parts of Lovecraft are resonating much louder in adaptation than in others. Elements like Lovecraft's eldritch monsters, forbidden artifacts, haunted gothic locales, and the fear of cosmic pessimism have resonated the loudest with adaptations like *Bloodborne*. Another trend that has resonated in the wake of Lovecraft's death is the tendency to lampoon and parody Lovecraft's overly serious tone with adaptations like *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Why We're Here*. Only a few adaptations such as *The White Tree: A Tale of Inspector Legrasse* address the racist elements of Lovecraft's fiction directly. Such direct critique of Lovecraft is sorely needed as his works continue to get popular.

This critique of Lovecraft's adaptations is especially needed because this master's thesis is far from an exhaustive look at all Lovecraft adaptations, nor do I wish to suggest that *The White Tree* is somehow the only adaptation in existence that addresses race. For example, Victor LeValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* also critiques Lovecraft's racism by positioning his story as a re-telling of Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook" where the main character is an African-American named Tommy Tester. Nevertheless, *The White Tree* and *The Ballad of Black Tom* are sadly in the minority of contributions to the mythos, as many other adaptations are content to simply remove all elements of race from Lovecraftian tales when they are adapted.

The implications of this removal are far-reaching and crucial to progression of Lovecraft studies moving forward. Because of the sheer number of adaptations in existence, it's likely that many new readers of Lovecraft are not coming to his works for the first time, but because they were previously exposed to some sort of adaptation or appropriation, such

as the widely popular *Bloodborne*. It is perhaps for this reason that there has been an increase in the number of people criticizing Lovecraft's racism in recent scholarship -- new readers are simply unaware of such deeply racist sentiments in the original stories, as the adaptations do little (if anything) to address them.

Some may argue that this abstraction of Lovecraft's racism is a welcome change. After all, as time goes on, it becomes harder and harder to justify such blatant representations of racism in Lovecraft's work. Therefore, it's tempting to want to remove all elements of it, as they clash so strongly with the values of the present day. Nevertheless, I argue that the removal of these elements abstract the author in a problematic way. Not only does the erasure of these elements discourage complex, nuanced readings of Lovecraft's texts, but they actively encourage a kind of cultural amnesia. In other words, the removal of Lovecraft's racism makes both adaptors and their readers complicit in the treatment of Lovecraft's awful views as non-existent. Enthusiasts and academics alike must address this issue in Lovecraft's work, and the most troubling aspect of many adaptations is that they either fail to fully do so (such as in *The White Tree*) or they flat out refuse to, and prioritize other elements (such as in *Bloodborne*, *Why We're Here*, and *Who Will Be Eaten First?*). The latter of these adaptations demonstrates that the erasure of Lovecraft's racism in his original text is no longer a tenable solution to reconciling it. Although *Bloodborne*, *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Why We're Here* remain serviceable and valuable contribution to Lovecraft's expanded mythos, the simple erasure of Lovecraft's unsavory personal views discourages new readers from reading Lovecraft as anything but a macabre eccentric with a penchant for creating imaginative, ghoulish monsters.

Failure to recognize how adaptations can contribute to the way an authorial persona resonates across time and space will inevitably lead to certain elements being lost in the background noise indefinitely. In the present day and age, when countries all around the world are at increasingly polarized odds about racism and race relations, the field of Lovecraft studies (and literary criticism as a whole) needs a better answer to how the “modern world” approaches the presence of racism in any text, Lovecraft or not. As a field, scholars need to expect more from our adaptations than simple editorial overreach and removal of upsetting elements, lest these representations of racism -- awful as though they may be -- cease to resonate, therefore encouraging readers to forget that the racial elements ever existed in the first place.

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Vita

Andrew Rocco Canino was born in upstate New York to Christopher and Patricia Canino. He graduated from Wake Forest-Rolesville High School in 2008. The following autumn, he began attending the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and received a Bachelor of Arts in English Education in 2013. In the fall of 2016, he accepted an assistantship at Appalachian State University and began working toward a Master of Arts degree. The M.A. was awarded in May 2018, with a certificate in Rhetoric and Composition. In August of 2018, Mr. Canino began work towards his Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition at Florida State University.