

VANCE, G. WARLOCK, Ph.D. Dread and Portent: Reading H. P. Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* as Social Criticism. (2010)  
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This dissertation explores the narratives of the twentieth-century American author H. P. Lovecraft, focusing on those tales which feature his creation of a metafictional spellbook titled the *Necronomicon*. Relying on a close reading of the texts, critical materials, and Lovecraft's letters, I demonstrate how the use of the *Necronomicon* throughout Lovecraft's fiction reflects how clearly the author espouses the faddish ideas and prejudicial fears of his era. Use of the spellbook delineates the breadth of moral decline he perceived in the world, from such causes as miscegenation, physical and spiritual decadence, and incest. Additionally, the project provides evidence of how the *Necronomicon* functions as a tool for chronicling and interpreting scientific facts and discoveries popular in Lovecraft's lifetime, particularly advancements in theoretical physics, by scientists like Albert Einstein, and the exploration of the polar regions by adventurers such as Rear Admiral Richard Byrd. In many of these latter narratives where the *Necronomicon* plays such a role, readers encounter a strange dichotomy: the author's genuine love of and appreciation for the various sciences tempered by a fear of humanity's terrifying use of the knowledge it has gained. This results in the Lovecraft's perception of a universe wholly apathetic to the presence of mankind, a space of limitless dimensions which dwarf human perceptions. My project also discusses the influence of the *Necronomicon* on popular culture and on modern fiction, proving how the spellbook inspires current writers of genre fiction and those in the field of contemporary literature.

DREAD AND PORTENT: READING H. P. LOVECRAFT'S *NECRONOMICON* AS  
SOCIAL CRITICISM

by

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Approved by

Dr. Keith Cushman  
Committee Chair

For Xinyan Shi.  
You know, without doubt, *Wo ai ni*.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## PREFACE

### HPL: A BRIEF BIO

*“[F]ragments of experience . . . & misapprehension” (Selected Letters V 240)*

In his introduction to the fiftieth anniversary definitive edition of William S. Burroughs’ novel *Junky* (2003), Oliver Harris states, “Every book changes to some extent over time and in new contexts” (xiv). The work of H. P. Lovecraft exemplifies this textual transformation, as succeeding generations continue to interpret his work through differing contemporary points-of-view. Other critics (many of whom I will touch upon throughout these pages) have performed close readings and deconstructions of Lovecraft’s texts, have produced annotated versions of his narratives and available letters, and have discussed the originality of his work in relation to the often mundane genre settings of *horror* and *science fiction* literature. From fond remembrances written by Lovecraft’s many friends to modern scholars who have produced authoritative sketches and extensive biographies, one may draw upon a wide range of materials to aid with nearly every conceivable aspect of research. And although the life of Howard Philips Lovecraft has been more than adequately documented elsewhere, I begin by offering a brief synopsis.

Lovecraft was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on August 20, 1890, to ill-fated parents. His father, Winfield Scott Lovecraft, suffered a nervous breakdown in 1893 and died five years later. The cause of death was syphilis. His mother, Sarah Susan Philips Lovecraft, emotionally unstable to begin with, suffered with her own mental health issues

for the next two decades. In 1919, Susie was institutionalized; she died two years later of complications resulting from gallbladder surgery.

Lovecraft's mother coddled him and yet, as S. T. Joshi notes, "kept him at a distance" (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* x). After the death of his father, HPL lived with his maternal grandfather, Whipple Van Buren Phillips, and then later with his aunts, Lillian D. Clark and Annie E. Philips. After an unexpected setback in his grandfather's finances and untimely death soon afterwards, Lovecraft, along with his mother and aunts, was forced to move from the estate to live in modest suburban accommodations.

Lovecraft's weak constitution kept him out of school much of the time, but he utilized every opportunity to expand his knowledge. He taught himself the rudiments of Greek and Latin and read voraciously from the books in his grandfather's enormous library, one of the few things which survived following the move from the larger estate. Having few friends during his childhood (due largely to his mother's overprotectiveness), HPL concentrated on his personal experiments in chemistry and his astute astronomical observations. The scientific rigor which accompanied his astronomy notes impressed the editor of the Providence newspaper *The Pawtuxet Valley Gleaner* and, though only sixteen, Lovecraft began writing a regular column. This love of the sciences would serve him well during his subsequent career as a fiction writer.

Lovecraft experimented with various forms of poetry, fiction, and essays, but it wasn't until 1913, while participating in an ongoing literary debate through the letters column of *Argosy Magazine*, that his talents were seriously noted. Impressed by HPL's negative opinions concerning a favorite, long-time *Argosy* contributor<sup>2</sup>, Edward F. Daas



invited him to join the United Amateur Press Association (UAPA), a venue which inspired Lovecraft to contribute a diverse range of material to various amateur publications. In 1923, *Weird Tales* magazine purchased HPL's story "Dagon" for the October issue, beginning his long association with the publication and the start of professional sales to popular magazines of the era.

During his brief marriage to Sonia H. Greene (1924–26), Lovecraft moved from Providence to New York City, where he tried unsuccessfully to find employment in the publishing field. Financial concerns sent Sonia searching for work in Cleveland, Ohio, and HPL soon returned to Providence to live once again with the aunts who had helped raise him. The couple then separated on amicable terms and the marriage was annulled.

Magazine editor James Grainger comments that, where Lovecraft is concerned, "Sometimes an artist's life is his own greatest literary creation" (*Rue Morgue* 16). HPL believed "that Literature is no proper pursuit for a gentleman" (*Selected Letters I* 238), imagining the idea of writing for a living a gauche activity. Lovecraft maintained this pretense, yet his only source of income came from writing in one form or another, whether fiction, ghost writing, or revision work. Unlike Dashiell Hammett, Tennessee Williams, and Raymond Chandler, whose work, like Lovecraft's, first appeared in the pages of magazines such as *Black Mask* and *Weird Tales*, HPL never broke away from his pulp fiction roots. He lamented that "too much reading of pulp fiction" had resulted in a manner of writing "fatal to genuine expression" (*SL V* 230).

Lovecraft published fewer than one hundred stories and short novels during his lifetime (a figure which includes his ghost writing and revision work). However, his

many published essays and thousands of letters (Joshi 15) demonstrate his genuine love for all forms of writing. Some critics, such as science fiction author L. Sprague de Camp, find in HPL's correspondence a self-made outsider (*Lovecraft: A Biography* 151). Donald R. Burleson refutes this supposition by observing that Lovecraft was not a "sickly recluse with no friends . . . a Poe-like, gloomy figure steeped in morbidity" (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study* 3). S. T. Joshi concurs, pointing out HPL's "avid interest in political, social, and cultural developments" (*H. P. Lovecraft: Collected Essays Volume 5: Philosophy, Autobiography & Miscellany* 7). Lovecraft communicated with hundreds of individuals of all ages, and from various walks of life. He met several of his most lasting correspondents by traveling throughout much of the eastern United States and up into Canada.

HPL had planned to travel as far west as Sauk City, Wisconsin, during the summer of 1937, so that he might meet August Derleth (who, with Donald Wandrei, co-founded Arkham House, a publishing entity—named after one of Lovecraft's imaginary settings—that has kept his fiction, poetry, and letters in print since 1939). Lovecraft also scheduled a side trip to Milwaukee to see his long-time friend Maurice M. Moe and a young Robert Bloch (a member of the "Lovecraft Circle" of correspondents, who would go on to write *Psycho*). Lovecraft had assisted all of these men with their writing and was anxious to meet Derleth and Bloch. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to make the trip. HPL died on March 15, 1937, after a short battle with intestinal cancer.

From his unusual upbringing to his failed marriage, and eventual long-time residence with his surviving elderly aunt, Lovecraft appears incapable of functioning

independently. Yet however strange his habits, one finds difficulty in pigeonholing him. Writer, poet, correspondent, essayist, or critic, HPL remains a greater sum than his disparate parts. While others have accused Lovecraft of being a hermit, a recluse, and a misanthrope, his many travels, his lively correspondence, and his willingness to assist others disprove these misconceptions.

In “Notes on a Nonentity,” Lovecraft states, “I have no illusions concerning the precarious status of my tales, and do not expect to become a serious competitor of my favourite weird authors” (*Miscellaneous Writings* 562). The only hardcover published during his lifetime was the privately printed collection titled *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*<sup>3</sup>. HPL obviously never dreamt his writings would survive or that his fiction would inspire so many other authors, artists, musicians, and filmmakers around the world. In 2005, Lovecraft’s narratives finally entered the ranks of American *belles-lettres* with the publication of *Lovecraft: Tales* by the Library of America. Fittingly, Peter Straub, a novelist known primarily for his work in the horror genre, selected the stories and provided notes for the LoA edition. Many fans and critics felt vindicated by the publication of *Lovecraft: Tales*, but Nick Mamatas notes in his article “Please Kill Me: Lovecraft of America” that HPL actually “entered the canon with the three Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics volumes” (*Fortean Bureau* paragraph 6) published from 1999 to 2004. The Penguin editions feature authoritative introductions concerning Lovecraft’s style and themes and include textual annotations. Similarly, DTP Publications produced *The Annotated Lovecraft* (1997) and *More Annotated Lovecraft* (1999), and the Modern Library published *At the Mountains of Madness: The Definitive*

*Edition* (2005), all of which feature explanatory notes and critical references. But even with this relatively recent spate of scholarly attention on Lovecraft's writing, academia is unlikely ever to accept his work as canonical.

Still, for more than seven decades, HPL's work has remained in print through a continual stream of limited and illustrated editions, annotated volumes, essay collections, inexpensive paperbacks, comic books, audio renditions, and films. Lovecraft's work is not as easily accessible to readers as that of most contemporary writers of macabre fiction, requiring readers to look up such words as "antediluvian," "psychopomp," and "Cyclopean." However, his tales have, as Darrell Schweitzer suggests, "withstood the test of time" (*Discovering H. P. Lovecraft* xi). Although he could not anticipate his role as a "serious competitor" to the majority of the horror writers he admired, HPL's work is far more memorable, acquiring new fans and further critical attention each year.

***"[T]he horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life" (375)***

When readers seek Lovecraft's work, it is generally found under the category of *horror*. Some of his juvenilia and early tales certainly have, as their implicit goal, the evocation of a sense of disgust or physical revulsion. For instance, stories like "The Tomb," "Herbert West: Re-Animator," and "The Hound" all deal with some variation of grave robbing and tomb desecration. HPL sometimes employs supernatural entities, magical rituals, and spells without rational explanation. HPL's more mature fiction utilizes many of the tropes found in traditional *science fiction*, such as one sees in "The Whisperer in Darkness," "The Shadow Out of Time," and *At the Mountains of Madness*,

with their inclusion of extraterrestrial races, advanced technology, alien planets, and descriptions of time and interdimensional travel.

Looking backwards through Lovecraft's *corpus*, one may take into account his materialism, his predilection for antiquarianism, and his cosmic viewpoint to better comprehend the driving forces behind his narratives. Examined in this light, elements in HPL's early stories, which might appear *outré*, can also be seen as logical. The Cthulhu Mythos<sup>4</sup> becomes a scientific scaffold for a supremely advanced race of extraterrestrials known as the Great Old Ones. Their goals, philosophy, and viewpoint are so alien to our own that there can be no common ground between us. Any human being's intellect is too feeble to grasp the tiniest notion in the mind of a Great Old One. Subsequently, a Great Old One has no more interest or curiosity in what a human being experiences or perceives than that individual does the craving of a bacillus.

Implicit in Lovecraft's cosmic horror is the basic assumption that the human mind is necessarily limited in its ability to grasp galactic immensities, whether of space, time, or *otherness*<sup>5</sup>. In his essay "The Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination," science fiction author and communications specialist, Sir Arthur C. Clarke states his Third Law of Prediction, revealing how "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (*Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry Into the Limits of the Possible* 36). Within such a framework, consider such extraordinary concepts as Albert Einstein's ideas on space-time, or Stephen Hawking's theories concerning the origins of black holes. By comparison, HPL's tales are no more extraordinary. In their Faustian paradoxes, Lovecraft's narratives feature milieus where men crave opportunities to

expand their knowledge, but are driven insane by the acquisition of even a hint of universal gnosis.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lovecraft's "The Whisperer in Darkness" (659).

<sup>2</sup> Romantic fiction author Fred Jackson.

<sup>3</sup> Published April 1936 by William Crawford's Visionary Publishing Company.

<sup>4</sup> A term coined by August Derleth, not Lovecraft.

<sup>5</sup> A term from Lovecraft's writing cited by Massimo Berruti in his article "Self, Other, and the Evolution of Lovecraft's Treatment of Outsideness," which the critic sees as a "neologism" for "alterity, otherness, and their manifestations" (*Lovecraft Annual* 3 109).

## INTRODUCTION

### AN EXAMINATION OF LOVECRAFT'S *NECRONOMICON*

***“That is not dead which can eternal lie . . . ” (368)***

This dissertation focuses on what is, with the exception of the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, perhaps the single most significant contribution to macabre literature in the English language: H. P. Lovecraft's imaginary book-within-book, the *Necronomicon*. The *Necronomicon* begins life as a spellbook, but quickly evolves throughout HPL's narratives into the most famous (and notorious) volume of occult wisdom *never* to exist—an intertextual reference known only to the realm of fiction. My analysis investigates the origins of the *Necronomicon*, taking into account Lovecraft's varied sources of inspiration. I also document HPL's use of the *grimoire* (or magical text) to comment on society and to demonstrate his understanding of modern scientific principles, theories, and discoveries. Additionally, the *Necronomicon* provides clues, overtly and covertly, to Lovecraft's varied opinions on these topics.

The *Necronomicon*, Lovecraft's ever-changing invention, can be seen as an intuitive literary leap. Viewed in the simplest of terms, the sinister volume solves the problem of how best to introduce a realistic touch to genre fiction, while still maintaining a sense of otherworldly menace. The *Necronomicon* allows HPL a means of trial-and-error for imagining the unimaginable, because in many ways, the *grimoire* defies explanation. Its very lack of substantive definition reveals it as a tool that, fictionally speaking, can potentially provide an understanding of *everything*, even though the reader



has no clear idea of its contents. The *Necronomicon* functions much like any other literary element in that it may be used beyond the scope of its creator's intentions. This polymorphic role in Lovecraft's fiction makes absolute definition impossible. One best defines the *Necronomicon* by simply accepting that it exists as a symbol for chaos, one that combines a multitude of probabilities: the loss of identity, the realization of humanity's insignificance in the cosmos, the destruction of civilization, and the ultimate collapse of the universe.

Simultaneously, the *Necronomicon* functions as a symbol of the gamut of indefinable *some things* in that universe, things which no human being can fully perceive or comprehend. On an earthly level, the spellbook conveys the horror accompanying the printed page. Contained there is the power of words to incite ill will, to hurt, and to destroy. The reader discovers a strange dichotomy of wisdom and wrath bound in this weighty tome, a representation of the potential found in *all books combined*. By reading its tainted pages, one encounters a nearly infinite amount of knowledge and the dangers such understanding can bring about. Viewed in context with the events of Lovecraft's lifetime, one sees the sweeping range of the *Necronomicon's* prophecies: the mechanized havoc wreaked on society by the Industrial Age, and the far-flung cosmological terrors of a world where Newtonian physics no longer applies.

And while the *Necronomicon* might well contain all knowledge and all *meanings*, the inability of humankind to fully comprehend its content (because to read the book in its entirety results in madness) renders the text virtually *meaningless*. In this regard, the *Necronomicon* seems little more than a semiotic hole in the fabric of Lovecraft's fiction.

This is particularly the case in the tales featuring scientific references and discoveries. Narratives such as *At the Mountains of Madness* and “The Whisperer in Darkness” demonstrate *known* concepts, while accentuating the depth and breadth of that which remains *unknown*. Through the inclusion of details such as Clyde Tombaugh’s discovery of Pluto or Einstein’s theory of Relativity, one glimpses HPL’s erudite mind as he intuits the mysteries innate to human existence in a “ruthless cosmos” (*SL IV* 417). For Lovecraft, such a universe serves only to point out “the ridiculous insignificance & futility of all human actions” (*SL IV* 356).

The spellbook’s binary qualities provide an apt metaphor for Lovecraft’s life: like the *Necronomicon*, HPL’s existence was largely ill-defined and unfulfilled. Lovecraft did not live long enough to reach his full potential, never achieving the critical success that might have launched him into the public eye. Neither did he live what most would consider a conventional existence. And thus the debate continues as to exactly how one defines so complicated an individual and his unusual literary invention.

In addition to all of its other qualities, the *Necronomicon* functions as a cultural artifact. Throughout HPL’s fiction, the spellbook punctuates the existence of entities totally alien to our senses of perception, yet defines them as having both a history and future goals. That we cannot entirely fathom the seeming timelessness of their millennial-long survival nor make sense of the presumed doom they will bring demonstrates not only our continued ignorance, but also our inability to extrapolate, to view states of being free of our innate xenophobia.

Although historically the United States has often exhibited a policy of isolationism (Powaski ix), the entrepreneurial and pioneering spirit are also defining aspects of the American experience. Lovecraft's Anglocentric affectations sometimes belie the point that his writing expresses an American cultural perspective, one focused primarily on the "legend-haunted" (859) New England where he lived for much of his life. The adaptability of his writing style allowed for creations, such as the *Necronomicon*, which could be used in various literary surroundings and fictive situations. The *Necronomicon* functions like no other literary element, exemplifying our society as a conglomeration of ideas, including our remarkable talent for discovery and achievement, as well as our less redeeming qualities, such as our proclivity for separating ourselves from the rest of the world (and from one another) through ideological misunderstandings and racial prejudice.

Lovecraft weaves such traits into his fictions featuring the *Necronomicon*. He sometimes consciously hints at these weightier cultural issues, as the reader sees in "The Festival" with its overt critique of a progress that tears down and rebuilds, eliminating all connection to the past and one's family heritage. Lovecraft's tale lacks the depth exhibited by modernist era writers, such as Robert Frost or T. S. Eliot when they depicted themes of existential and spiritual malaise, yet HPL's vision of cosmicism and its overwhelming sense of being alone in a vast, uncaring universe often coincides with modernists' work. Lovecraft would have nodded assent to the poem by the proto-modernist Stephen Crane in which a man tells the universe that he exists, only to have the universe reply, "The fact has not created in me a sense of obligation" (*The Complete*

*Poems of Stephen Crane* 102). He would have understood the predicament of D. H. Lawrence's Paul Morel, leaning against a stile at the end of *Sons and Lovers*, feeling "the vastness and terror of the immense night." "So much, and himself, infinitesimal, at the core of nothingness . . . ." (*Sons and Lovers* 464).

The protagonist's fate in "The Festival" anticipates the kind of angst experienced by George Webber in Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940). Similar to Webber's acknowledgment that "You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams" (*You Can't Go Back Home* 666), HPL's unnamed narrator realizes too late that, although he was told that he would always be "known and welcomed" in his village "where legend lives long" (263), he will always be "far from home" (262). Just as often, Lovecraft subconsciously injects (or perhaps *infects* through a kind of literary osmosis, reflecting the general attitudes of a his race and class during this time) his texts with his personal prejudices, as in "The Dunwich Horror," where the antagonist is a product not only of incest but also of miscegenation—between a human and an alien species—the real "horror" being that of racial intolerance.

Throughout the tales that employ the spellbook, Lovecraft creates a literary fabric in which the *grimoire* appears as a conjectural flaw amplifying all that is left out; what is *unwritten* is often of the greatest significance. The *Necronomicon*—magical encyclopedia, historical record, prophetic archive—provides a subtler sense of meaning indicative of who we are as a society.

The *Necronomicon* quite literally *haunts* Lovecraft's fiction by reflecting the puritanical ideals of our nation. The *grimoire* carries an almost biblical weight<sup>1</sup> with its far-seeing vision of humankind's intrinsic decline and ultimate downfall. Rather than functioning simply as a spiritual, psychic, or supernatural manifestation, the spellbook exists as an all-too physical reminder of our past. It is a mirror into which the reader may view her/himself and, perhaps, come to terms with its creator's opinion that we are slipping inexorably toward "degeneracy" (635) or as Lovecraft perceived it, embracing a philosophy of "anti-future" which he saw as

differing only in its prescriptions for circumventing or evading and annihilating or denying that future as doped out by commercial and industrial determinism. And the damn funny thing is that this retreat will probably breed a grotesque form of mental hypocrisy more offensive than mechanicalism itself, and almost as bad a type of intellectual illusion as Victorianism was or moral-aesthetic illusions. (*SL III* 53)

Ill-defined as it seems, the *Necronomicon* predicts the "anti-future" of human beings via the coming of the Great Old Ones, yet for all its vagaries, the spellbook clearly exhibits our earthly phobia for all that is *outside* and *unknown* to our understanding. This unusual state of being points out the dismal reality noted in Orson Welles's famous panic-inducing broadcast, that we are bound to a "spinning fragment of solar driftwood which, by chance or design, man has inherited out of the dark mystery of Time and Space" (*The War of the Worlds* 1938). The *Necronomicon* demonstrates that human beings cannot escape from such a world or from themselves.

***“[D]eeply given to occult and forbidden lore” (999)***

Before commencing my examination of Lovecraft’s fiction, I wish to offer readers a brief, personal aside. The remarkable manner in which my life became so deeply entwined with HPL’s—the writer whom Kenneth W. Faig, Jr. considers “the greatest master of the supernatural tale in the twentieth century” (*The Unknown Lovecraft* 5)—reveals much about my development as both a lover of literature and of scholarship.

Whether or not a person enjoys a particular author seems largely a matter of individual taste. I first encountered HPL’s writing when I was thirteen or fourteen years old in the collection *Best Supernatural Stories of H. P. Lovecraft* (1945). Lovecraft was, as Faig points out, “most effective because of [his] careful development of realistic writing and atmosphere to support his central theme” (*TUL* 11) of cosmicism. Perhaps this quality of verisimilitude or the constant sense of looming dread attracted me. Whatever the reason, Lovecraft’s tales spoke to me as no other fiction had done.

Having come upon *Best Supernatural Stories of H. P. Lovecraft* by chance, I could easily chalk up my enjoyment of HPL’s writing to coincidence. But looking back on the thirty years between then and now, my connection to Lovecraft seems *too* coincidental, as if Great Cthulhu or another of HPL’s malevolent deities somehow singled me out to be an acolyte regardless of my personal aspirations. The reprinting of Lovecraft’s stories and novels by Del Rey during the early 1980s and my college friendships with collectors of pulp fiction and limited edition books also helped to fuel my interest in macabre literature and all things Lovecraftian. Throughout the 1980s and

90s, I also wrote genre fiction (often mimicking HPL's style) and articles on how to identify the various editions and reprints of Lovecraft's writing<sup>2</sup>.

As both a reader and collector of Lovecraft's works, I have come to realize the importance of his narratives, essays, and correspondence to genre fiction. As a scholar, I seek to find my own place in the overarching narrative of Lovecraft's existence. Through my personal examinations of his texts I come full circle to the time when I first encountered his writing.

### ***An Outline of "[A]ssociative horror[s]" (683)***

*Chapter One* details Lovecraft's creation of the *Necronomicon* and examines its initial use in his narratives. The chapter also includes Lovecraft's fictional chronology of the book's translation and publication "History of the *Necronomicon*" as well as documentation concerning the probable sources which inspired its creation.

*Chapter Two* delineates the breadth of moral decline Lovecraft perceived in the world: miscegenation, physical and spiritual decadence, and incest. This section demonstrates how HPL's tales employ such themes, and how the narratives featuring the *Necronomicon* reflect the author's opinions as well as those of his society—how clearly he espoused the ideas and fears of his era.

*Chapter Three* focuses on those tales where the sciences play a significant role, with the *Necronomicon* functioning as a means of interpreting scientific facts and discoveries. In many of HPL's narratives, readers encounter a strange dichotomy; on the one hand one sees his genuine love of and appreciation for the various sciences, yet this

appreciation is tempered by a fear of humanity's going too far with the knowledge gained. This theme is so often conjured by Lovecraft's use of brilliant, scholarly characters in search of greater knowledge, particularly those unwilling to cease their research, even when faced with the danger of insanity or loss of life. The chapter also comments on Lovecraft's "pessimistic cosmic views" (*Miscellaneous Writings* 536) and his Nietzschean depiction of the universe as a wholly apathetic space of limitless dimensions which dwarf human perceptions.

The *Conclusion* draws together the contextual lines explored throughout this work, summing up the impact of Lovecraft's narratives on popular culture. I also describe how HPL's many tales influenced the next generation of authors across the various genres, including those one might expect, such as Anne Rice, as well as unlikely contemporary writers such as Pulitzer Prize-winner Michael Chabon, and Bollinger Prize-winner Fred Chappell.

Undoubtedly, some overlap must occur in my examinations for none of Lovecraft's stories dwell singly on any one of the aforementioned criteria. I aim for readers to take away from this dissertation a better appreciation of how all-encompassing these themes were in Lovecraft's tales. I also strive to demonstrate how, in its own macabre manner, the *Necronomicon* exemplifies both the subtle and overt qualities I attribute to it, while it also adds a sense of verisimilitude.

An annotated appendix follows, with notes on those stories featuring the *Necronomicon* solely attributed to Lovecraft. The list provides information on when the narratives were written, when and where they were first published, and what form the



*Necronomicon* takes in each text. The appendix provides a useful tool for future critical explorations into this particular dimension of HPL's fiction.

### ***Style, Citations, Critics, Abbreviations, and Other Textual Peculiarities***

For simplicity's sake, my text follows the style set up by the Modern Language Association (MLA). Citations follow MLA format throughout, with the exception of direct quotations from Lovecraft's fiction. The latter are listed by page number only and refer to *H. P. Lovecraft: The Fiction*, a complete edition edited by S. T. Joshi and published by Barnes & Noble in 2009.

With the exception of obvious textual errors, I have left Lovecraft's writing as-is, which is to say that his affectation of British spellings (such as "colour" for *color*) remains intact.

Unless otherwise noted, I assume that the reader needs no further introduction to the major critics mentioned throughout this work. Donald R. Burleson, Peter Cannon, Kenneth W. Faig, Jr., S. T. Joshi, Maurice Lévy, Dirk W. Mosig, Robert M. Price, and David Schultz are well known to Lovecraft criticism. All have written numerous studies of his life and work for many years.

Another deviation from MLA style appears whenever I quote from the same text (or set of texts) more than once within a single section. Any succeeding quotation is abbreviated so that (*Selected Letters II 27*) is next seen as (*SL II 54*). A list of texts and abbreviations follows:

*At the Mountains of Madness* - *AtMoM*  
*Chariots of the Gods* - *COG*

*Cthulhu 2000* - C 2000  
*FRESCO Spring 1958* - F: 1958  
*Gnosis* - G  
*H. P. Lovecraft* - HPL  
*H. P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study* - HPL: ACS  
*H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* - HPL: AL  
*H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* - HPL: AWAL  
*H. P. Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe* - HPL: DU  
*H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism* - HPL: FDC  
*Literary Symbiosis* - LS  
*Lovecraft: A Study in the Fantastic* - L: ASF  
*Madness & Civilization* - M&C  
*The Necronomicon: The Book of Dead Names* - TN:BDN  
*The Necronomicon Files* - TNF  
*Selected Letters I-V* - SL I-V  
*Supernatural Horror in Literature* - SHL  
*The Unknown Lovecraft* - TUL  
*The Weird Tale* - TWT  
*The Xothic Legend Cycle* - XLC

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Confirmed by Maurice Lévy's estimation that the *Necronomicon* "acts as a veritable bible" (88-89) albeit one far more grim and ancient than that produced by Jews and Christians.

<sup>2</sup> Published in *Paperback Parade*, issue 54 (2000) and *Firsts: The Book Collector's Magazine*, March 2006.

## CHAPTER I

### UNLEASHING A “FORBIDDEN” (501) BOOK ON THE LITERARY WORLD

#### *Creating Magical Metafiction*

H. P. Lovecraft often relied on concepts that he lifted from previously published works of fiction. For instance, his story “Herbert West: Re-Animator” (1922) builds upon the theme of regeneration found in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1817), and his longest narrative, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927), features a plot with a similar moralistic duality to that of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). The inclusion of such borrowed texts within a writer’s overarching structure aids in the development of many works of fiction, even to the point of creating what may soon be seen as an entirely new subgenre; the kind of revamping of literary classics one observes where *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) are transformed into *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009) and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009).<sup>1</sup>

But even at the simplest level, such literary referents function as cornerstones for every imaginable type of narrative and in every genre. Robert Stam considers this wealth of intertextuality a “vast reservoir of combinatory possibilities provided by the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of signifying systems within which a single work is situated, and which reach the text not only through recognizable influences but also through a subtle process of dissemination” (*Reflexivity in Film and Literature* 20). Examples of this “combinatory” form of intertextual narrative occur in fiction from

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *Don Quixote*<sup>2</sup> (1605), which borrows details from Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*<sup>3</sup> (1532), to contemporary novels such as *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008) that provides its author, John Updike, an opportunity to revisit previously established characters from an earlier work.<sup>4</sup> These seemingly endless creations (or in some instances *recreations*<sup>5</sup>) of "historiographic metafiction," which Linda Hutcheon describes as the juxtaposing of historical fact with fictive details, provide "equal value to the self-reflexive and the historically grounded: to that which is inward-directed and belongs to the world of art (such as parody) and that which is outward-directed and belongs to 'real life' (such as history)" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 2).

David Cowart describes a similar form of "literary symbiosis" in modern writing, with its "extensive allusions" to past fictional examples. Cowart concurs with the Joycean principle "that storytelling always involves theft," concluding that such "artistic larceny . . . defines the dynamics of intertextuality" (*Literary Symbiosis* 2). This manner of "appropriation" or "recycling," as Cowart indicates, allows the storyteller the opportunity to create "fresh literary work," often from disparate fictive antecedents (*LS* 68). These methods of textual "appropriation" reveal what one might call the *basic state* of metafiction, seen in the previously noted examples, but one might also apply a similar criteria to an intertextual *hyper state*, where writers create fictions-within-fictions through their depiction of invented texts within the fictive confines of their narratives.

Lovecraft's invention of the magical text the *Necronomicon* stands out as a noteworthy example of this hyper state. His inclusion of this literary element in his narratives constitutes a particularly memorable instance of the book-within-book motif in

modern literature. Short of Jorge Luis Borges, and several modern and postmodern authors who incorporate similar metafictional examples<sup>6</sup>, few writers can compete with HPL's extensive and successful inclusion of imaginary texts into his fiction. Lovecraft's mentions the *Necronomicon* by name in fourteen of his stories and short novels. He also inserts the mysterious text into a number of tales that he revised for others,<sup>7</sup> and allowed his friends and fellow writers to make use of the book, as well as his pantheon of invented gods, in their own stories.

HPL relies upon past literary motifs, like those described by Hutcheon and Cowart, by embracing many of the traditional elements of Gothic fiction. However, his incorporation of factual details, and extrapolation of the latter into fiction, engenders a form of metafictional "fabulation" Robert Scholes refers to as "not a turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality" (*Fabulation and Metafiction* 8). In a similar vein, Erik Davis' article "Calling Cthulhu" notes Lovecraft's ability to interweave a "pseudodocumentary style" through his "adopt[ing] the language of journalism, scholarship, and science." Davis, echoing Scholes' theory, considers HPL's *oeuvre* a "tension between fact and fable . . . set in motion by the dynamics of [his] own texts, a set of thematic, stylistic, and intertextual strategies" (*Gnosis* 57). Lovecraft explained this by stating, "I sometimes insert a devil or two of my own in the tales I revise or ghost-write for professional clients. Thus our black pantheon acquires an extensive publicity & pseudo-authoritativeness it would not otherwise get" (*Selected Letters* V 16).

HPL's first attempts at fiction relied heavily on the literary tropes and atmospheric writing he found in tales by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and in the works of his contemporaries in the field of pulp fiction. Even in his later narratives Lovecraft explored a gamut of stereotypical themes: good-versus-evil, such as one encounters in "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926) where a "brave" (378), yet otherwise insignificant, sailor thwarts the resurrection of a demigod; in the malignant hereditary influences of an ancient forebear, who seeks to take the place of his lineal descendant, depicted in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*; and the stale chestnut of time travel demonstrated in "The Shadow Out of Time" (1935). Despite such clichés, Lovecraft's fiction was always, as Brian Lumley notes, quite "original" (*The Eldritch Influence* video interview), exhibiting the triviality of human existence in an uncaring universe<sup>8</sup> while acknowledging the probability that mankind was merely a "mistake—an abnormal growth—a disease in the system of Nature . . . like a wart on the human hand" (*SL I 24*).

Amid Lovecraft's appropriation of these motifs, his originality prevails, from the larger aspects of theme down to the elements of construction and language. In "The Call of Cthulhu," Lovecraft attempts to capture in words something of the essence of the great god Cthulhu, a being unrelated to any earthly conceptualization of life as it is currently understood. He describes an alien "[t]hing" (377) capable of surviving the timeless wheel of the planets and stars through space, an entity so powerful that it might well live forever. Cthulhu stands as an exemplar of that passage in the *Necronomicon* stating how someday "even death may die" (368), in this case, a monster capable of outlasting death itself, an extreme ideal of Lovecraft's cosmic infinitude.<sup>9</sup> HPL renders this concept

plainer still, through Cthulhu's eons-long interment in a watery burial on the sunken island of R'lyeh, from which it will one day rise "when the stars . . . come round again to the right positions in the cycle of eternity" (367), or perhaps when death has finally died. *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* exhibits the unique idea of conjuring forth ancient scholars through their "essential saltes" (490) in order to secure their collective wisdom. Ward and his parasitic ancestor, Joseph Curwen, successfully perform this act later in the narrative. And even "The Shadow Out of Time" provides a new twist to the concept of traveling through time. Lovecraft envisions a method of transportation through the cold reaches of outer space in which the corporeal bodies of humans are left behind, their brains hijacked and their thoughts appropriated by aliens from other dimensions and from other points in the perceived chronology of time.

Lovecraft's work has been pigeonholed as science fiction because, even as he steered his tales in the direction of the macabre, he maintained a rational foothold predicated on his unwavering disbelief in supernaturalism. In other literary examples similarly rooted in science, for instance H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and Jules Verne's *Maître du monde* (1904), the protagonists function as their own agents; characters act upon the world and must come to terms with the results of those actions. HPL's protagonists (if one dares call them that) continually find themselves *acted upon* instead. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Lovecraft did not fill his tales with *heroes*. Instead of creating men of action, like those written about by his friend and fellow writer Robert E. Howard<sup>10</sup>, HPL invented a pantheon of *antiheroic*, alien monstrosities: Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, and Yog-Sothoth. One might easily posit that these demigods, who



regularly appear in his tales, and in the intertextual pages of the *Necronomicon*, are Lovecraft's *real* protagonists since they alone possess the power, momentum, and forward thinking necessary to generate change. HPL's all-too-human characters "function as silent, motionless, utterly powerless, paralyzed observers" notes *avant-garde* French novelist Michel Houellebecq (*H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* 69), as the reader will see in the deconstruction of the stories to follow.

Many of Lovecraft's characters experience paralyzed states resulting from the acquisition of too much or "forbidden" (501) knowledge, which often drives them mad. In general, HPL's narratives present rational, scientifically quantified accounts, with learned investigators who seek answers to those *things which mankind is not prepared to know* (a much-repeated theme throughout his work). While this motif finds its way into a great deal of horror and speculative fiction by other writers, Lovecraft's combination of revelatory narratives with protagonists who lack agency provides a unique twist on this staid Gothic convention.

While Lovecraft's contributions were a boon to the genre, his appropriation of Gothic trappings soon gave way to his own particular point of view. For HPL, "cosmic terror" (*Supernatural Horror in Literature* 17) inspired a far greater sense of menace with its contemplation of humanity's insignificant place in the universe. Lovecraft's lifelong viewpoint of "cosmicism" (Joshi 1) saw human beings as essentially lost "[a]midst this colossal, kaleidoscopic, undying and unbounded drama of infinite time and space" where "everything terrestrial and human . . . shrink[s] away to insignificance" (*SL I* 172). This preoccupation with the astrophysical predominated in the narratives HPL conceived after

his early period. Erik Davis suggests that “Lovecraft abandoned the supernatural and religious underpinnings of the classic horror tale” in order that he might “[turn] instead towards science to provide a framework for his stories” (*G* 58). Influenced by his own amateur scientific researches, and his study of various philosophers (especially Friedrich Nietzsche), HPL’s decidedly chilly and materialistic conception of the universe informed every aspect of his life and work. Lovecraft wrote to Reinhardt Kleiner<sup>11</sup> that he had “been forced to confess that mankind as a whole has no goal or purpose whatsoever, but is a mere superfluous speck in the unfathomable vortices of infinity and eternity” (*SL I* 86). Although his writing is unique, HPL chose to work within the boundaries of the horror, fantasy, and science fiction genres. Lovecraft’s utilization of these elements, combined with his own inspired ideas, eventually culminated in what Davis calls HPL’s “supreme intertextual fetish” (*G* 62), the *Necronomicon*.

***“[A]n air of verisimilitude” (SL III 166)***

The *Necronomicon* takes several forms throughout Lovecraft’s tales. The evil tome evolves throughout his narratives, operating as spellbook, mythological record, and catalogue for all things bizarre, depending on the author’s need and the era in which the story was written. HPL presciently observed, “I think it is rather good fun to have this artificial mythology given an air of verisimilitude by wide circulation” (*SL III* 166). Strangely, though so definitely a part of Lovecraft’s fictional world, the *grimoire* took root in popular culture as a genuine artifact, an unusual instance of a *myth* made *real* by its constant presence in the cultural psyche. The effects of the *Necronomicon* on

Lovecraft's stories and novellas, and its use as a fictive societal and historic indicator, will be examined at greater length in the following chapters. Likewise, the spellbook's influence on postmodern literature, modern films, animation, comic books, music, and video games will be touched on in this work's conclusion.

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To best understand how HPL employs his notorious book-within-book, one must first examine its origins: the influences which preceded its invention, the manner in which Lovecraft brought to life the world's most "hideous and unmentionable work" (*SL III* 166), and how the spellbook crossed beyond the limitations of narrative to become a "real" text.

Beginning with the *presumed* authorship of the *Necronomicon*, that is, Lovecraft's equally fictitious Arab author, the reader must note the birth of HPL's own literary talents. In "The Brief Autobiography of an Inconsequential Scribbler," Lovecraft describes how, at the age of three, he made his first attempts at writing of which, he acknowledges, "no specimen survives" (*Miscellaneous Writings* 527). By the age of five he was reading *The Arabian Nights*, writing his own tales of fantasy, and pretending to be an Arab. A friend of the family<sup>12</sup> suggested the name "Abdul Alhazred," which HPL adopted while acting out Scheherazade's adventures. He continued with his Arabian interests until becoming enchanted with Greek mythology (*MW* 558). In his preadolescent years, he began composing sonnets and writing short stories. Lovecraft consigned most of this juvenilia to the flames, yet later resurrected the character of "the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" (218)

and installed him as the *Necronomicon*'s visionary scribe. Ultimately, Alhazred would become nearly as well-known as the "abhorred" (1005) book he supposedly wrote.

Authorship aside, the *Necronomicon* owes its invention to a variety of sources. Critics such as S. T. Joshi, Robert M. Price, and Donald R. Burleson have suggested catalysts that may have led to its creation, yet each new theory only adds to the speculation. Beginning with a probable source for the name of the spellbook, one sees a marked resemblance in the *Astronomicon*, by the Roman poet Manilius, whom Lovecraft quotes in one of his astronomical articles (Olbrys 33). Lovecraft explained to his correspondents how "[t]he name *Necronomicon* occurred to me in the course of a dream," describing the spellbook's etymology as deriving from the Greek for "nekros" or *corpse*; "nomos" or *law*; and "eikon" or *image*, which he believed became "[a]n Image [or Picture] of the Law of the Dead" (*SL V* 418). Joshi reveals how "wildly inaccurate" was Lovecraft's translation, and points out that "by the rules of Greek etymology the derivation is: *nekros*, corpse; *nemo*, to consider or classify; *-ikon*, neuter adjectival suffix = "[a] Consideration [or Classification] of the Dead" (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* 285), yet the critic concedes that when "interpreting the term . . . one is of course obliged to adhere to Lovecraft's mistaken derivation." Joshi is referring to HPL's bibliographical mythology, "History of the *Necronomicon*," with the implication of errors in the original translation, because of the careless manner in which "a Greek title [was applied] to a work by an Arab in Arabic entitled *Al Azif*" (*HPL: AL* 285).

Daniel Harms introduced the idea that Lovecraft found inspiration in particular volumes from his grandfather Whipple Van Buren Phillips' library (*The Necronomicon*

*Files 4*), indicating a connection between the *Necronomicon* and the 1866 edition of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which featured engravings by Gustave Doré. HPL acknowledged that, from the time of his childhood, he often marveled over the ghoulish illustrations (*SL I* 35). Lovecraft's reading of Edgar Allan Poe at an early age (*SL II* 109) incubated in his subconscious, eventually playing its part in the creation of the *Necronomicon* (*TNF* 5). In his overview of Gothic fiction, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft calls attention to Poe's use of various uncanny trappings such as "mouldy hidden manuscripts" (*SHL* 26) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's future story notations for "weird tales he would have written had he lived longer" (*SHL* 63). These elements made an obvious impression upon HPL. Donald R. Burleson believes one of Hawthorne's notes is a key element in Lovecraft's envisioning of the *Necronomicon*, basing this assumption on Lovecraft's admission that he read Hawthorne's *Passages from the American Notebooks* (1868). In this posthumous publication, Hawthorne describes the plot for a proposed tale revolving around "[a]n old volume in a large library—everyone to be afraid to unclasp and open it, because it was said to be a book of magic," which, as Burleson explains, Lovecraft saw "early enough for it to be the inspiration for his mythical tome" (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study* 220).

The first critics to analyze Lovecraft's writing lacked many of the tools possessed by current researchers—the shelves full of critical materials, the five volumes of his *Selected Letters*, and the many collections of HPL's non-fiction essays. With little except Lovecraft's fiction texts upon which to rely, these original investigators posited another probable catalyst for the *Necronomicon*: Robert W. Chambers' mind-warping,

mythical play, featured in his short story collection *The King in Yellow*<sup>13</sup> (1895). However, Harms points out Lovecraft's admission that he had not read Chambers' work prior to 1927 (*TNF* 25), and since Lovecraft first mentions the *Necronomicon* in "The Hound," written in 1922, Chambers' own magical book-within-book could obviously not have figured in the creation of HPL's spellbook. But *The King in Yellow* certainly inspired Lovecraft's use of the *Necronomicon* after 1927. HPL even incorporates Chambers' conceptions of the god Hastur and the lost realm of Carcosa into his own myth cycles (a coup of intertextual longevity, when one considers the fact that Chambers borrowed these elements from Ambrose Bierce<sup>14</sup>). Robert M. Price described the spellbook's evolution, and its capacity for "embrac[ing] . . . many contradictory allusions" and its ability to act as "a sort of all-purpose source for eerie atmosphere." Price considers the *Necronomicon* "an occult bible, sometimes a demonology like the *Malleus Maleficarum*, sometimes a grimoire, sometimes a book of curiosities" (*H. P. Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos* 143), the distinction depending on the book's apparent role in the story in which it is used (the **Appendix A** elaborates on the function of the *Necronomicon* in its various appearances).

Lovecraft first mentions compiling "some data on the celebrated & unmentionable *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" (*SL* 201) in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith (November 27, 1927). HPL soon consolidated this information into "History of the *Necronomicon*" (1927), reproduced here in its entirety:

Original title *Al Azif*—*azif* being the word used by Arabs to designate that nocturnal sound (made by insects) supposed to be the howling of daemons.

Composed by Abdul Alhazred, a mad poet of Sanaá, in Yemen, who is said to have flourished during the period of the Ommiade caliphs, circa 700 A.D. He visited the ruins of Babylon and the subterranean secrets of Memphis and spent ten years alone in the great southern desert of Arabia—the Roba el Khaliyeh or “Empty Space” of the ancients—and “Dahna” or “Crimson” desert of the modern Arabs, which is held to be inhabited by protective evil spirits and monsters of death. Of this desert many strange and unbelievable marvels are told by those who pretend to have penetrated it. In his last years Alhazred dwelt in Damascus, where the *Necronomicon (Al Azif)* was written, and of his final death or disappearance (738 A.D.) many terrible and conflicting things are told. He is said by Ebn Khallikan (12th cent. biographer) to have been seized by an invisible monster in broad daylight and devoured horribly before a large number of fright-frozen witnesses. Of his madness many things are told. He claimed to have seen fabulous Irem, or City of Pillars, and to have found beneath the ruins of a certain nameless desert town the shocking annals and secrets of a race older than mankind. He was only an indifferent Moslem, worshipping unknown entities whom he called Yog-Sothoth and Cthulhu.

In A.D. 950 the *Azif*, which had gained a considerable tho’ surreptitious circulation amongst the philosophers of the age, was secretly translated into Greek by Theodorus Philetas of Constantinople under the title *Necronomicon*. For a century it impelled certain experimenters to terrible attempts, when it was suppressed and burnt by the patriarch Michael. After this it is only heard of furtively, but (1228) Olaus Wormius made a Latin translation later in the Middle Ages, and the Latin text was printed twice—once in the fifteenth century in black-letter (evidently in Germany) and once in the seventeenth (prob. Spanish)—both editions being without identifying marks, and located as to time and place by internal typographical evidence only. The work both Latin and Greek was banned by Pope Gregory IX in 1232, shortly after its Latin translation, which called attention to it. The Arabic original was lost as early as Wormius’ time, as indicated by his prefatory note; and no sight of the Greek copy—which was printed in Italy between 1500 and 1550—has been reported since the burning of a certain Salem man’s library in 1692. An English translation made by Dr. Dee was never printed, and exists only in fragments recovered from the original manuscript. Of the Latin texts now existing one (15th cent.) is known to be in the British Museum under lock and key, while another (17th cent.) is in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris. A seventeenth-century edition is in the Widener Library at Harvard, and in the library of Miskatonic University at Arkham. Also in the library of the University of Buenos Ayres. Numerous other copies probably exist in secret, and a fifteenth-century one is persistently rumoured to form part of the collection of a celebrated American millionaire. A still vaguer rumour credits the preservation of a sixteenth-century Greek text in the Salem family of Pickman; but if it was so preserved, it vanished with the artist R.U. Pickman, who disappeared early in 1926. The book is rigidly suppressed by the authorities of most countries, and by all branches of organised ecclesiasticism. Reading leads to

terrible consequences. It was from rumours of this book (of which relatively few of the general public know) that R.W. Chambers is said to have derived the idea of his early novel *The King in Yellow*.

### *Chronology*

*Al Azif* written circa 730 A.D. at Damascus by Abdul Alhazred  
Tr. to Greek 950 A.D. as *Necronomicon* by Theodorus Philetas  
Burnt by Patriarch Michael 1050 (i.e., Greek text). Arabic text now lost.  
Olaus translates Gr. to Latin 1228  
1232 Latin ed. (and Gr.) suppr. by Pope Gregory IX  
14... Black-letter printed edition (Germany)  
15... Gr. text printed in Italy  
16... Spanish reprint of Latin text

(621-22)

Because of the detailed, seemingly plausible nature of this bibliography, Lovecraft himself must bear the brunt for the often-printed misconception of *The King in Yellow* as the driving force behind the *Necronomicon*'s creation, especially since he cites Chambers' fictional magic book in his equally fictitious "History." Lovecraft humorously acknowledges his own work as the antecedent for that of Chambers, but those foolhardy enough to take "History of the *Necronomicon*" at face value will understand their error when considering the bibliographical data for Chambers' book. F. Tennyson Neely published *The King in Yellow* at least four times in 1895, nearly thirty years prior to the creation of HPL's spellbook. One sees how Lovecraft's tongue-in-cheek aside in "History of the *Necronomicon*" could easily be misinterpreted, especially when taken out of context by careless researchers or those unable to locate the proper critical materials.

HPL compiled the bibliography so that his friends and correspondents could best comprehend the chronology of the *Necronomicon* as it fit into his many tales, and also as



Joshi suggests, “largely for the purpose of keeping references clear in his own mind” (*Lovecraft: A Life* 436). The document circulated amongst the ranks of the “Lovecraft Circle,”<sup>15</sup> but HPL never intended for it to see publication. Less than a year after Lovecraft’s death, Wilson Shepard produced the first edition of “History of the *Necronomicon*” under his privately owned Rebel Press imprint<sup>16</sup> as an homage to HPL. Since that time, the “History” has been reproduced in many collections of Lovecraft’s fiction and reprinted in chapbook form as well.<sup>17</sup>

One of the greatest testaments to Lovecraft’s literary ingenuity may be seen in the far-reaching effects of the *Necronomicon*’s “History.” Long after HPL’s death, collectors searched for copies of his “dreaded” (859) and yet so highly sought after *grimoire*. Apparently, Lovecraft sold his bill of goods so well that the *hoax* soon became recognized as *truth*. Many fans in on the joke added their own card catalogue listings at various libraries, and several enthusiasts placed false auction advertisements describing copies similar to the editions noted in HPL’s tales, all of which helped to further perpetuate the myth. Yet those individuals who bought into the hoax, believing the *Necronomicon* a genuine spellbook, imagined Lovecraft as “the keeper of some dark and arcane knowledge that he hid in plain sight in his short stories” (LaSusa, 10). In fact, Colin Wilson, known not only for his fiction and for popularizing philosophy, but also for his seminal examination of the supernatural arts, *The Occult* (1971), confessed that he, and occult researchers Kenneth Grant and Robert Turner, had “long been convinced that the Lovecraft mythos [was] not simply a romantic invention, but [actually] based on ancient magical tradition” (*The Necronomicon: The Book of Dead Names* 43). Wilson

claims that Turner felt a “sense of total conviction that HPL knew more about magic than he had been prepared to acknowledge” and “that Lovecraft himself was a practicing adept” (TN 44). Turner’s misguided statement may have arisen not only from reading Lovecraft’s fiction (*sans* criticism), but from a willing misinterpretation of HPL’s own statements. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft’s analysis of “cosmic terror” features a considerable list of references of “elaborate ceremonial magic, with its rituals for the evocation of daemons and specters,” naming such texts as “the Book of Enoch and the Claviculae of Solomon” (17) as well as a who’s who of “Renaissance magicians and alchemists,” such as “Nostradamus, Trithemius, Dr. John Dee, Robert Fludd, and the like” (19).

Such specificity might raise suspicions were the subject some other writer, but a far less prosaic truth prevails: HPL researched innumerable subjects, including those dealing with the occult sciences. Discussing the inclusion of arcane references in his story “The Horror at Red Hook” (1925), Lovecraft informs fellow writer, Clark Ashton Smith, “I bedeck my tale with incantations copied from the ‘Magic’ article in the 9th edition of the *Britannica*” (SL II 28). Yet where religion and/or spiritual beliefs were concerned, Lovecraft acknowledged

that all theism consists mostly of reasoning in circles, and guessing or inventing what we do not know. If God is omnipotent, then why did he pick out this one little period and world for his experiment with mankind? Or if he is local, then why did he select this locality, when he had an infinity of universes and an infinity of eras to choose from? And why should the fundamental tenets of theology hold him to be all-pervasive? These are monstrous uncomfortable questions for a pious man to answer, and yet the orthodox clergy continue to assert a complete understanding of all these things, brushing inquiry aside either by sophistry and mysticism, or by evasion and sanctified horror. Why must men

of sense thus delude themselves with notions of personal and “loving” gods, spirits, and demons? All this sort of thing is good enough for the rabble, but why should rational brains be tormented with such gibberish? (*SL I* 28)

The passage not only confirms HPL’s atheism, but his general contempt for organized religion, of which he concedes only that the varied forms of worship were unsurpassed in the “promotion of virtue” (*SL I* 17).

Colin Wilson added a personal flourish to the supposition that Lovecraft actually *practiced* what he preached. Building upon Turner’s presumably *unintentional*<sup>18</sup> mythmaking, Wilson wrote that, before Lovecraft’s father Winfield died, *pater familias* passed on the secrets of the *Necronomicon*, supposedly entrusted to Winfield by his brothers in the lodge of Egyptian Freemasons (*TN: BDN* 45-48). Joshi, Harms, and other critics point out that while Lovecraft’s grandfather, Whipple Van Buren Phillips, *was* indeed a Freemason, Winfield Scott Lovecraft had no involvement in the fraternal organization. Wilson later admitted that he’d meant his hoax as nothing more than a bit of speculative humor (Harms 4).

However, Wilson’s fabrication of the “facts” gained credence in certain circles. Like other conspiracy theories spun by fringe culture fanatics, many gullible readers were beguiled into believing Lovecraft the inheritor of many “dark and arcane” secrets, presumably concealed in plain sight, much like in Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter.” In this way, it was presumed, HPL overtly displayed through his narratives a wealth of knowledge for the enlightened (not to mention the *credulous*) to find.

Several of Lovecraft’s biographers did their best to exorcise this misconception by pointing out HPL’s many letters confessing to the spellbook’s creation. In one letter,

Lovecraft writes, “[r]egarding the *Necronomicon*—I must confess that this monstrous & abhorred volume is merely a figment of my own imagination! Inventing horrible books is quite a pastime among devotees of the weird,” and goes on to explain how:

many of the regular [*Weird Tales*] contributors have such things to their credit—or discredit. It rather amuses the different writers to use one another’s synthetic demons & imaginary books in their stories—so that Clark Ashton Smith often speaks of my *Necronomicon* while I refer to his *Book of Eibon* . . . & so on. This pooling of resources tends to build up quite a pseudo-convincing background of dark mythology, legendry, & bibliography—though of course none of us has the least wish actually to mislead readers. (*SL IV* 346)

Yet interest in and demand for a “real” *Necronomicon* became so great that several of HPL’s contemporaries suggested that he try to produce some version of it. Lovecraft responded, “[a]s for writing the *Necronomicon*—I wish I had the energy and ingenuity to do it! I fear it would be quite a job in view of the very diverse passages and intimations which I have in the course of time attributed to it!” Keeping in mind how he had already alluded to the book’s extraordinary length in past tales, HPL jokes about how he “might . . . issue an *abridged Necronomicon*—containing such parts as are considered at least reasonably safe for the perusal of mankind!” (*SL IV* 39-40).

Decades after Lovecraft’s death, various artists and a few less scrupulous individuals took up the challenge of creating volumes purporting to be the *true* magical text. Several different editions saw print from the mid-1970s to the present.<sup>19</sup> HPL may not have meant for his great literary hoax “History of the *Necronomicon*” to move beyond the reach of his inner circle of friends and correspondents, yet in similar fashion to the rest of his “fiction,”<sup>20</sup> the *Necronomicon* lives on like some interdimensional entity

(though in this instance a metafictional one) from one of his own stories; the spellbook resembling a kind of “ancient and unwholesome wonder” (311) which has torn through the fragile veil between the realms of make-believe and reality.

### ***Facts of the Fiction***

Having seen much of the reality behind Lovecraft’s sinister work “which most sane people have never even heard of” (1005), one must examine the make-believe itself for a better understanding of how the *Necronomicon* came into being. HPL’s terrible *grimoire* first appears in “The Hound” (1922), but Lovecraft’s earlier tales “The Statement of Randolph Carter” (1919) and “The Nameless City” (1921) also offer clues to the spellbook’s creation and later use. The object here is to understand how the *Necronomicon* took shape in the mind of its author and in the early stories that either hint at or include the ancient tome.

“The Statement of Randolph Carter” is discussed in full here (instead of in later chapters) because of its tenuous connection and its generic essence as a conventional horror story. More comprehensive explications of both “The Hound” and “The Nameless City” follow in Chapter Two, where the tales are deconstructed in relation to their respective themes of immorality and racial degeneracy.

#### “The Statement of Randolph Carter” (1919)

In “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” the title character provides testimony during a presumed murder investigation after the police find him wandering through an

area of Florida swampland. Carter is suffering from shock and can remember very little of what occurred after his arrival at an ancient cemetery located somewhere in the swamp.

Carter recalls his previous visits to his friend, Harley Warren, an antiquarian and student of the occult. Warren has recently purchased a book of arcane lore and seeks Carter's aid to establish its authenticity. Carter next describes their preparations for the adventure and his trepidation as they find their way to the cemetery and begin their operation.

Warren has procured what he believes to be the necessary equipment for fulfilling his mission: digging tools, spools of electrical cable, and a portable telephone system. Their plan is to remove the slab from a particular crypt noted in Warren's book and descend into the earth in order to observe the wonders described in the text. After some minor protests by Carter, who wants to accompany his friend into the vault, Warren convinces Carter it will take a person with more physical stamina and mental reserves than Carter possesses to fulfill the task.

Warren enters the tomb. As Carter and Warren maintain a running dialogue the phone line is played out. When Warren at last comes to a series of catacombs, he informs his friend that the sights which await him are far more terrible than anything he could have imagined. He screams into the phone for Carter to run and then apparently dies by unknown (yet painful) means.

Carter continues to yell into the phone, beseeching Warren to speak. Eventually an ancient and evil voice does come on the line. Carter is told that his friend is dead, a

fact that, accompanied by the malevolent presence, drives Carter out of his mind, causing him to flee into the darkness.

“The Statement of Randolph Carter” features one of Lovecraft’s earliest uses of a collection of magical texts dealing with occult wisdom and forbidden knowledge. The story has no direct association with the *Necronomicon*, but the fate of the narrator, Randolph Carter (whom HPL would use again in many other narratives) and his friend, occultist Harley Warren, rest upon the “vast collection of strange, rare books on forbidden subjects” (76) owned by Warren.

The revelation that some of Warren’s collection of magical references were printed “in Arabic” has led some to believe that the “fiend-inspired book which brought on the end—the book which [Warren] carried in his pocket out of the world” (77) might well have been a transcription of the *Necronomicon* from its original form, the *Al Azif*. However, S. T. Joshi argues against this supposition. He acknowledges that while “Many have believed this . . . to be the *Necronomicon* . . . it is very unlikely that this is the book in question.” Joshi notes Carter’s declaration “that he has read every book in Warren’s library in the languages known to him . . . mention[ing] that some . . . were in Arabic.” The critic then reminds the reader of Carter’s observation that Warren’s book was not written in any language he recognized, suggesting that “the book was *not* in Arabic or any other common language” (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* 231). Carter mentions the fact that the book in question “came from India” (77), prompting Joshi’s statement that, “according to Lovecraft’s later testimony, the *Necronomicon* exists only in Arabic, Greek, Latin, and English,” with the implication that “Warren’s book cannot be that volume”

(*HPL: AL 232*). Conceding to the literal (and *literary*) correctness of Joshi's commentary, one must at least consider the collection of magical texts owned by Harley Warren and their connection to texts printed in Arabic language, as direct antecedents, if not actual catalysts, for the creation of the *Necronomicon*.

By comparison, "The Nameless City" provides a far more obvious connection. It contains Lovecraft's first mention of "Abdul Alhazred the mad poet" (141), whom HPL later "identifies" as the author of the *Necronomicon*. "The Nameless City" also features the first appearance of the famous couplet:

That is not dead which can eternal lie  
And with strange aeons even death may die. (141)

Lovecraft later acknowledges the connection between this bit of verse and the *Necronomicon*, but its use in "The Nameless City" serves merely as a tonal element for inducing an atmosphere of dread. Even Alhazred's appearance in the story can only be seen as tangential, for although the "mad poet" is repeatedly mentioned throughout the rest of Lovecraft's *oeuvre*, the reader learns nothing more about his fate in the pages of this particular narrative. The only other clues to Alhazred's life and terrible death come from the meager notes recorded in "History of the *Necronomicon*." Lovecraft frequently mentions "the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" throughout other narratives featuring the spellbook. Thus, in the fictive world of HPL's tales, the *Necronomicon* lives on, lining the capacious shelves of many a macabre library, yet the fate of Alhazred and his reasons for writing the evil spellbook remain as hidden, and "forbidden," as the knowledge contained within it.



A year after writing “The Nameless City,” Lovecraft features the *Necronomicon* in “The Hound,” where it makes a less than grand debut. The *Necronomicon* comes into play as part of a collection of decadent art and literature hoarded by two of Lovecraft’s most unusual and morbid characters, a pair of would-be mavens of all things horrible, but HPL mentions nothing of the book’s magical properties. Instead, the spellbook functions merely as a kind of biographical record of others who have used the occult for their pleasure (or doom).

Questioning the *Necronomicon*’s purpose in Lovecraft’s fiction, Robert Price asks whether HPL’s malevolent creation evolves from being solely “a metaphor for threatening knowledge of the chaos beyond our world” into something far greater than a mere literary trope. Price suggests that in Lovecraft’s later stories “the reader, no longer shielded by metaphors, could look . . . horror full in the face” (*Twilight Zone* 62). Such dramatic transition of the *Necronomicon* from clumsy trope to symbol of evil, demonstrates HPL’s literary growth and his maturity as a chronicler of societal conditions and of scientific understanding. Throughout his later stories, Lovecraft employs the *Necronomicon* as a means of revealing iniquity and as a kind of signpost reading DANGER AHEAD.

It is no exaggeration to say that the *Necronomicon* presents limitless literary possibilities, not only in the context of its existence as a spellbook, but also in its use as a gateway to alternative realities. Lovecraft makes many references to the volume, yet he provides few concrete citations. As HPL’s style and level of sophistication increased, his conception of the *grimoire* continued to change. One might assume the reader could

ascertain a rough outline of the *Necronomicon*'s overall content. However, although the spellbook appears in fourteen narratives, one must rely on the brief quotations found in "The Festival" and "The Dunwich Horror" for definitive information. Apart from these few hints and vague ideas noted in several of his other tales, HPL leaves the reader wondering exactly what the book describes and what powers it might possess.

Yet understanding *why* Lovecraft created the *Necronomicon* requires some speculation since none of his extant notes, letters, or essays overtly discuss the spellbook's purpose. Apart from using the *Necronomicon* as a device for creating a weird mood or as a decorative occult trapping (as one sees in Lovecraft's earliest tales which feature the tome), there appears no obvious reason for the spellbook's creation and its inclusion in so much of HPL's fiction. One may safely assume that the *Necronomicon* provided Lovecraft with a means of reimagining the boring mundanity of everyday existence, even perhaps a means of recreating the magic of Scheherazade's many stories he'd thrilled to during his early years. One need only consider the book's oriental history and its author, "the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" (218), to see a direct correlation between Lovecraft's childhood love of the *Arabian Nights* (a work which possesses its own intertextual construction). Despite its dynamic presence as a book-within-book, the *Necronomicon* never achieves its full potential as a source for the story-within-story set-up, such as one encounters in the *Arabian Nights* adventures. Whether or not Lovecraft ever intended the *Necronomicon* to become a catalyst for future stories in and of itself, many others have interpreted the *grimoire* in this fashion, using it as a kind of horror

anthology or springboard for tales of terror with the rest of Lovecraft's mythology as their common theme.<sup>21</sup>

If for no other purpose, Lovecraft's Mythos tales (at least the ones which employ his panoply of invented gods and feature the *Necronomicon*) do reveal a growing sense of the "cosmic fear" (*SHL* 15) he so appreciated in the works of others. HPL's accomplishment in creating a mood of "undimensioned" (645) dread takes horror literature into previously unexplored territory. Because of his stark materialism and lack of belief in all forms of spirituality, Lovecraft realized his inability to frighten readers via the standard clichés: religious iconography say, to frighten off a vampire, and prayer and ritual to exorcise evil spirits. Lovecraft understood the discomfort experienced by most individuals, regardless of religious faith or lack of one, who must face what she/he does not understand or as HPL stated: "[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (*SHL* 12). Lovecraft's brand of genre fiction departs from that of his predecessors and peers in the realization that very little can be known, that the world as we interpret it is actually but a random combination of mostly unrelated occurrences without meaning: a far more frightening concept than a fear of supernatural forces, all of which can be labeled, categorized, and then duly dealt with.

Beyond these stereotypical confines, Lovecraft's horror stories more closely resemble science fiction, especially when the threats to humanity come to earth not only from outside accepted channels of understanding (folklore and legend), but also from what is unknowable or incomprehensible to mankind (the universe, for instance, which is

vast beyond our means of experience). The *Necronomicon* seemingly “haunts” much of HPL’s work, and particular quotes from the “monstrous book” (726) hint at aspects of its *outré* manifestations, which are featured in those tales. These bits and pieces of Lovecraft’s invented, ancient lore reveal only enough to entice the reader to ask for more, even when the narrator warns that further knowledge will, most assuredly, lead to devastating consequences.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith; *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009) by Jane Austen and Ben H. Winters.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Frank Belknap Long (13 February 1930) Lovecraft cites *Don Quixote* as a means of poking fun at literary studies, noting “the shabby pretence that something *is* so when it *isn't* so” (*SL III* 291).

<sup>3</sup> See *Don Quixote*, Cantos 18 and 43.

<sup>4</sup> See John Updike’s *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984).

<sup>5</sup> Consider, for instance, contemporary novels like Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote* (1986) or Andrei Codrescu’s *Wakefield* (2004) as examples of intertextual reimaginings, the cited precursors being Cervantes and Hawthorne, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Such writers as James Branch Cabell, Virginia Woolf, Paul Auster, Michael Chabon, J. K. Rowling, and Mark Z. Danielewski to name only a few.

<sup>7</sup> Although Lovecraft collected small sums for his revision and editing work, only recently has he received recognition for his contributions to these stories. In some instances, such as Zelia Bishop’s “The Curse of Yig” and Hazel Heald’s “The Horror in the Museum,” the writing is predominantly that of HPL. At least one story, “Imprisoned with the Pharaohs,” was completely ghostwritten by Lovecraft, the tale having been commissioned by magician and escape artist Harry Houdini.

<sup>8</sup> See Lovecraft’s round-robin letter to “Kleicomolo” (Rheinart Kleiner, Ira A. Cole, Maurice W. Moe and Lovecraft), dated 8 August 1916. HPL describes humanity as “a trivial incident in the history of creation” (*SL I* 24).

<sup>9</sup> This concept is more fully explored in Chapter Three.

<sup>10</sup> Robert E. Howard created numerous heroic protagonists. Howard’s success with characters such as Conan, Kull, and Soloman Kane stand as a testament to the longevity of his creations and to his style of action adventure writing.

<sup>11</sup> Letter dated August 21, 1919.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Baker, the family’s lawyer (*The Neconomicon Files* 5).

<sup>13</sup> Novice investigators into Robert W. Chambers’ *The King in Yellow* encounter some confusion with the title of the book. *The King in Yellow* is a collection of short stories,

none of which share this title. However, many of the tales feature a fictitious play titled *The King in Yellow*, which, when read in its entirety, induces madness and death.

<sup>14</sup> See Bierce's "An Inhabitant of Carcosa" (1891).

<sup>15</sup> Members of the Lovecraft Circle included such notable horror and science fiction writers of the time, as Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Donald Wandrei, August W. Derleth, and Robert Bloch.

<sup>16</sup> See S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz's entry on Shepard in *An H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia* (241).

<sup>17</sup> Several versions of "History of the *Necronomicon*" were published by Necronomicon Press throughout the late 1970s, 80s and 90s. The most current editions include annotations by S. T. Joshi.

<sup>18</sup> One must question the veracity of Robert Turner's statements in light of Colin Wilson's later admission to a bit of Barnumesque humbuggery concerning Lovecraft's history.

<sup>19</sup> See the extensive analyses of this phenomenon compiled in *The Necronomicon Files* by Daniel Harms and John Wisdom Gonce III.

<sup>20</sup> See S. T. Joshi's introductory notes to "History of the *Necronomicon*" in *H. P. Lovecraft: The Fiction* where he points out that one must view the "History" itself as a work of fiction since Lovecraft based his monograph on a made-up literary device (*H. P. Lovecraft: The Fiction* 621).

<sup>21</sup> For example Brian Yuzna's film *Necronomicon* (1993).

## CHAPTER II

### A SOCIAL BAROMETER FOR EVIL

#### *Lovecraft—a Life of Virtual Reality*

The *Necronomicon* first appeared in Lovecraft's fictional writings at approximately the same time as his professional career began. The fourteen tales in which HPL refers to the magical text by name share what Dirk W. Mosig in his article "H. P. Lovecraft: Myth-Maker" calls "pseudomythological elements" (*H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism* 111). These narratives are as follows: "The Hound" (1922), "The Festival" (1923), "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926), *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927), "The Descendant" (1927), "The History of the *Necronomicon*" (1927), "The Dunwich Horror" (1928), "The Whisperer in Darkness" (1930), *At the Mountains of Madness* (1932), "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1932), "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" (1933), "The Thing on the Doorstep" (1933), "The Shadow Out of Time" (1935), and "The Haunter of the Dark" (1935).

Lovecraft's "hideous and unmentionable" spellbook occupies a remarkable place in his small canon. Without taking into account the additional references to the *Necronomicon* found in his many poems and the numerous times it is discussed throughout his huge correspondence, this notorious text can be found in nearly a quarter of his narratives. As noted in Chapter One, Lovecraft also included the metatextual volume in additional stories which he either edited or ghost-wrote for others.<sup>1</sup> I have

omitted these from this dissertation in order to focus on concepts particular to Lovecraft's solo efforts.

Michel Houellebecq explains that for most authors, “[t]o create a great popular myth is to create a ritual that the reader awaits impatiently and to which he can return with mounting pleasure, seduced each time by a different repetition of terms, ever so imperceptibly altered to allow him to reach a new depth of experience” (*H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* 37). Houellebecq compares the sheer potency and lasting impression of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories with that of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos tales. He sees Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* as a fictive element distinguishably independent and as equally recognizable as the most memorable of characters, and one that provides a similar “founding mythology” (35) throughout HPL's *oeuvre*. Lovecraft's grimmest of *grimoires* seems, as the author (in jest) and his acolytes (both literary and occult) would have it, to possess a life of its own. Writers in nearly every genre have hinted at or overtly referred to the *Necronomicon*'s existence in their generally less than successful attempts at pastiche. An iconic symbol of evil, the *Necronomicon* has been used, but more often *abused*, by writers from HPL's time to the present. The *grimoire* has become so ubiquitous to the pages of horror fiction, as well as to cinematic features, comic books, and video games, that it is employed in every hackneyed narrative wherever an ancient tome of magical lore takes center stage. In this capacity, the *Necronomicon* has become the modern embodiment of all things dark and mysterious, although Robert M. Price humorously notes that “[t]here are only supposed to be a handful in existence, and most are under lock and key, yet the *Necronomicon*



appears in so many stories that one might almost expect to find the book in Barnes & Noble” (*Twilight Zone Magazine* 62).<sup>2</sup>

Several stories, including “The Hound” and even lengthier narratives, such as “The Hunter of the Dark,” mention the *Necronomicon* in passing, yet do not capitalize on its ability to act as a medium for social commentary such as one sees in “The Festival,” *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, and “The Dunwich Horror.” My purpose here will be to introduce relevant cultural themes as they appear in Lovecraft’s fiction where the inclusion of the *Necronomicon* produces the greatest reflection of what HPL saw as the moral, physical, and spiritual erosion of society. To that end, only the most relevant stories featuring the *Necronomicon* will be examined here.

### ***Opening the Gateway***

Many literary critics and biographers relegate Lovecraft’s work into the often spurious category of *genre* fiction, in his case either *science fiction* or *horror*. However, Michel Houellebecq asserts that Lovecraft’s fantastical themes introduce “materialism into the heart of fear and fantasy”: “HPL created a new genre,” a peculiar, existential territory, without the hope one associates with spirituality. Lovecraft’s tales feature plot dynamics in which analytical reasoning and scientific discovery unveil secrets which humanity is woefully unprepared and ill-equipped to comprehend (*HPL: AWAL* 46). Each narrative highlights the fact that no amount of knowledge can lift society from its degeneracy and catastrophic decline.

Throughout Lovecraft's fiction, discrete details, each innocuous in its own right, multiply into a horrifying occult cobweb underpinning the veneer of reality, forcing the protagonist (who is invariably male and who often cannot convey what he has learned to others) over the edge of madness. This challenge to sanity is a common theme in Lovecraft's narratives, and, setting aside the idea of specific genre classification, few authors have succeeded in recreating or incorporating HPL's unusual and unique fictional formulae of "cosmic fear" (*Supernatural Horror in Literature* 15).

With the exception of the *Necronomicon*, Lovecraft's horrors are not wholly unique. His plots often follow the stereotypical tropes found in science fiction and Gothic literature, such as interplanetary beings visiting the earth with "scientific and mechanical knowledge far surpass[ing] man's today" (771); of human beings who mix blood with entities from other dimensions in order to beget "teratologically fabulous" (648) mutations; and of long-dead ancestors resurrected through "*accursed magic*" (592). Where Lovecraft reinvents and in many cases subverts these standard forms is by introducing the nihilistic notion that "all mankind is but a superfluous atom" (*Selected Letters I* 48) in a universe totally oblivious to our existence. Houellebecq notes how this cosmic perspective removes the protagonist's need for "believing or not believing" as one often sees in genre fiction where characters ponder the existence of ghosts, demonic influences, or the more common Gothic archetypes (such as the "vampire or werewolf" as the critic points out). In Lovecraft's bleak narratives, the universe is unaware of our struggles, thus creating a dynamic where "there is no possible reinterpretation, there is no escape." For Houellebecq, "[t]here exists no horror less psychological, less *debatable*"

(*HPL: AWAL* 46). In purely Nietzschean terms, HPL observes that “mankind as a whole has no goal or purpose . . . in the unfathomable vortices of infinity and eternity” (*SL I* 86). This lack of human importance lends his tales their power—to frighten readers on a less superficial and far more existential plane—the *Necronomicon* acting as a focal point for such bleak revelations.

Michel Foucault describes civilization as “constitut[ing] a milieu favorable to the development of madness” and notes how “the progress of knowledge dissipates error, [yet] also has the effect of propagating a taste and even a mania for study.” Foucault points out that “the life of the library, abstract speculation, the perpetual agitation of the mind without the exercise of the body, can have the most disastrous effects” (*Madness & Civilization* 217). The formation of what Peter Cannon calls Lovecraft’s stylistic “underworld” (*H. P. Lovecraft* 1) derives in part from his mistrust of the madness of industrialism, which he saw as “destroy[ing] beautiful things” (*SL I* 315), but largely from his particular and peculiar upbringing. And, like other writers who exhibit the various foibles of their time, HPL epitomizes Foucault’s model with researches that culminate in examples his own personal “mania.”

Lovecraft’s narratives and correspondence contain socially relevant material to his era, such as the fear of *miscegenation*, the perceived danger of *cultural disintegration*, the societal stigma of *unknown* or *unwholesome heredity*, and a range of *taboo practices*. These are prominent themes in his many stories, particularly those featuring the *Necronomicon*, and offer key insights into the dichotomous nature of Lovecraft’s odd beliefs and sometimes contradictory opinions. This chapter focuses on these themes by

correlating similar elements found in HPL's letters to friends, relatives, and associates; through a selection of critical responses to his life and work; and through detailed analyses of his fiction.

How Lovecraft evolved into what S. T. Joshi calls a "gentleman-author" (189) appears directly related to his formative years. In 1904, the death of Whipple Van Buren Phillips precipitated the move of HPL, his mother Sarah, and his two aunts, to the smaller home on the same street<sup>3</sup>. The new abode was, as S. T. Joshi notes, "chosen because of its propinquity" (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* 59), yet Lovecraft describes the house as one far less grand than he and his family were used to. Whipple Phillips's death had cut the family off from the income that had allowed them to live in relative comfort. Donald R. Burleson suggests that even after this period, when Lovecraft was already in his teens, his mother continually "[i]ndulged" him; a custom that was continued by her sisters (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study* 5). Although severely reduced in their financial standing, HPL's mother and aunts instilled in him an upper class sensibility. Burleson discloses Lovecraft's refusal "to seek employment or enter much into the world around him for the first five years after his leaving high school" (*HPL: ACS* 5).<sup>4</sup> At first glance, HPL's sedentary lifestyle may seem cavalier considering his family's obvious need for additional income. However one must point most of blame at those who raised him. Intending that Lovecraft should live a life similar to that of his forefathers (most of whom had been wealthy landed gentry), Sarah Lovecraft and her sisters considered the idea of his pursuing a genuine occupation an absurdity.

Even after his mother's death in 1921 (when Lovecraft was thirty years old), his aunts, Lillian and Annie, maintained their upper class attitude. Some years later, the aunts' high-minded opinions placed a considerable strain on Lovecraft's brief marriage to Sonia H. Greene. When Sonia's New York City business prospects tapered off, Burleson notes that "[she] came to Providence hoping to live with her husband and carry on a millinery business," but "Lovecraft's aunts . . . with an exaggeratedly proud sense of the status of their family in Providence, refused to have Lovecraft thus supported by his wife." Burleson also describes how Lovecraft "quietly acquiesced in the refusal" (*HPL: ACS* 7-8). HPL's fiction and letters abound with this elevated sense of pride in his ancestry<sup>5</sup> and with his imagined level of social status.

One also finds examples of Lovecraft's nearly puritanical propriety, as well as a myriad of less-welcome beliefs, on full display throughout the pages of his fiction. In discussing the many instances of racism in Lovecraft's writings, Joshi suggests that one must consider the writer's opinions "in the context of the prevailing intellectual currents of the time" (*HPL: AL* 70). Sadly, being a product of his particular era meant that Lovecraft exhibited all of the class and racial prejudice of the period. No defense shall be offered for his penchant to malign blacks or his propensity to consider the vast majority of foreigners as "a bastard mess of stewing mongrel flesh without intellect, repellent to eye, nose, and imagination" (*Letters From New York: H. P. Lovecraft* 14). But as is the case in any investigation of individuals of artistic temperament, one must attempt to judge the work and the creator on separate terms, even while understanding the obvious fact that an artist's past must always influence her/his work.

And yet, concurrent with such repellent notions, Lovecraft also contemplated many of the troubling issues of his era by regarding them through the cool and largely emotionless lens of his narratives, the *Necronomicon* a means which provided him the greatest magnification. Alterations in HPL's point of view sometimes occurred when he encountered new ideas while reading philosophical, psychological, or scientific texts or through his personal experiences.<sup>6</sup> Such paradigm shifts account, at least in part, for the documentary-like style of his prose whenever these previously unknown or unacknowledged concepts find their way into his work. Yet one sees a tempering of Lovecraft's harsh criticism of *outsiders* (a theme discussed by S. T. Joshi, Massimo Berruti, and several other critics) as he matured. The evolution of HPL's opinions manifests itself in his later tales, such as *At the Mountains of Madness*, where the author recognizes a connection between humanity and the *other*, although the latter is exclusively acknowledged throughout his narratives as "alien" (741). Such a view seems less an alteration in thinking and more of a coming to terms with the conditions of modernity.

The common thread that runs throughout Lovecraft's tales is the acquisition of knowledge and its consequences: beneficent or malevolent (mostly malevolent). Those narratives which feature "the forbidden *Necronomicon*, of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" (218), crystallize this point by demonstrating how knowledge is power, and that, however amazing and diverse the aspects of such understanding might seem, there remain certain intellectual spheres of which humanity would best remain ignorant. Examples of occult or hidden wisdom, particularly as it relates to one's own past (and that of one's

progenitors), may have factored into Lovecraft's life and proved to be the most haunting of inspirations for his odd, terrifying works of fiction. In his article "Shadows Over Lovecraft," psychiatrist, literary critic, and genre fiction writer Dr. David H. Keller concludes that by taking into account the deaths of both HPL's father and mother in mental institutions, one quickly understands how "[h]ereditry is an important factor in many Lovecraft stories, and is always of a degenerative type" (*FRESCO: Spring 1958* 17). In such instances, learning of one's past can possibly injure the psyche, and perhaps one's standing in society.

While much of Lovecraft's work includes commentary on some inherited degeneracy or a more general cultural degradation, his stories which utilize the *Necronomicon* achieve a metatextual semantic holism. The spellbook equates to all that is unholy, and summarily mirrors the various wrongs of society. In combination with HPL's documentary style, descriptions of this menacing, yet realistic, intertextual relic provides a verisimilitude which bears a genuine weight of prophecy—the preordained downfall of humankind. Here, the *Necronomicon* stories also exhibit an existential quality, lending Lovecraft's fiction a sense of the inescapable and of an unlamented destiny; the cosmic ambivalence he so often noted in his correspondence. Where some authors write about the processes of day-to-day life, featuring goal-oriented characters working towards some positive end, Lovecraft eschews these conventional narrative structures in favor of protagonists who strive to gain insight into the inner workings of their world and its many esoteric dimensions (metaphorical, terrestrial, and extraterrestrial). Most often, their researches lead them to such traumatizing conclusions

that madness soon ensues. Along with many instances of physical degeneration, his tales convey a repetition of mental “breakdown” or what Keller refers to as a continued reference to the “taint [of] original ancestors” (*F:1958* 17). Whether “myth” or reality, Lovecraft’s personal angst concerning his ancestry continuously reappears; the *Necronomicon* magnifying these fears to mythical proportions.

***“He stumbled on things no mortal ought ever to know” (590)***

For over half a century, critics have conjectured what effects, if any, the death of Winfield Lovecraft from syphilis might have had on HPL’s work. To fully assess this debate, the reader should understand the facts, as well as the theories, so as to draw a more informed conclusion. Although seemingly unimportant to a more general examination of Lovecraft’s fiction, the matter is extremely relevant as a way to demonstrate the author’s mindset where narratives like *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and “The Dunwich Horror” are concerned.

From the early days of his correspondence, Lovecraft insisted that his father “was seized with a complete paralytic stroke” (*SL I* 6), which he claims resulted “from a brain overtaxed with study & business cares.” HPL confides that Winfield Lovecraft “lived for five years at a hospital, but was never again able to move hand or foot, or to utter a sound” (*SL I* 33). S. T. Joshi considers the most “critical issue” here to be “what—if anything—Lovecraft himself knew of the nature and extent of his father’s illness.” Joshi contends that “[i]t is obvious from Lovecraft’s remarks about his father’s illness that he was



intentionally kept in the dark about its specific nature,” yet the critic remains doubtful about HPL’s comments.

It need hardly be said at this point that nearly every part of this utterance is false. When Lovecraft refers to a “complete paralytic stroke”, he is either remembering some deliberate falsehood he was told (i.e., that his father was paralysed [sic]), or he is making a false inference from the medical record (“General Paralysis”) of some account of it that he heard. (*HPL: AL 15*)

Some biographers argue on behalf of Lovecraft’s total ignorance, by suggesting that, at the time of Winfield Lovecraft’s death, a diagnosis of “paresis” was synonymous with “paralysis,” yet anyone who has read through even a little of the Lovecraft’s fiction and correspondence will understand how easily he could have ascertained the truth for himself. In letters dating as early as 1921, he comments on Freud’s “limitations” (*SL I 134*). Lovecraft also mentions reading Adler, and, in later years, C. G. Jung, thus he obviously possessed a more than adequate understanding of psychology and psychoanalysis. From such facts, one can determine that HPL had not only the wherewithal, but the intelligence to pursue the research necessary to determine the true cause of his father’s illness and death if he had felt inclined to investigate the matter.<sup>7</sup> Others point out additional factors that may have led HPL to ponder the diagnosis and search more deeply for a cause. In “H. P. Lovecraft: The House and the Shadows,” Lovecraft’s longtime correspondent, J. Vernon Shea, expresses his opinion on “the effects of [HPL’s] tainted heredity,” focusing on a definite “key to Lovecraft’s personality” in Sarah Phillips Lovecraft, whom he calls “a monster.” Shea writes,

Very possibly she wished well of her son, but her own influence could scarcely have been more deleterious. There is evidence that she was psychoneurotic and ended her days, like her husband, in a madhouse. It is very probable that she recoiled from her husband, whom she must have regarded from her puritanical background as an incorrigible lecher, for whom paresis (the final stage of syphilis) was a fitting end. Her behavior toward the young Howard was possibly motivated by an unconscious feeling of revenge toward her husband and a determination that her son would not follow in his footsteps. (*Fantasy & Science Fiction* 83)

Joshi concedes that one may wonder whether or not Sarah Lovecraft ever knew “all [the] particulars” (*HPL: AL* 15) of her husband’s illness, but in “The Parents of Howard Phillips Lovecraft,” Kenneth W. Faig, Jr. notes her “nervous temperament and overprotectiveness toward her child” (*An Epicure in the Terrible* 47), the latter attitude predating Winfield Lovecraft’s collapse and her subsequent rejection of her son following the onset of her husband’s illness in 1893.

But to some of HPL’s friends, and devotees, the most injurious of speculations was David H. Keller’s article.<sup>8</sup> Relying solely on his psychiatric training rather than any personal connection to Lovecraft, Keller maintains that “the conflict of man against terrible and unconquerable powers” in Lovecraft’s stories leads his protagonists to become “mentally shattered” by their experiences. Such a state invariably renders them “helplessly psychotic” or leads them to consider suicide. After briefly noting such instances in Lovecraft’s fiction, Keller then compares the writer to other creative individuals who died as a result of syphilis (Beardsley, Gautier, Maupassant, and

Nietzsche,). Keller theorizes that such “toxins” somehow enable aspects of artistic merit to rise to the foreground and bids one “consider such factors in the development of Lovecraft’s genius,” (*F:1958* 20).

Keller documents the death of Winfield Lovecraft from syphilis, presuming the man in a “communicable stage” when he married and fathered HPL. He confirms the diagnosis of Sarah Lovecraft as a “neurasthenic,” then suggests

There is, however, ample evidence that she feared the hereditary influence of her husband’s mental condition on her son and was obsessed with the idea that he was destined to a life of invalidism . . . . Just when or how he learned that this maternal fear was created by the circumstances surrounding his father’s illness and death is not known, but the constant references in Lovecraft’s stories to the unfortunate influences of heredity shows positively that he had some idea of the relationship between his father’s illness and his own invalidism. (*F:1958* 20-21)

Kenneth Sterling, a friend and collaborator of Lovecraft’s, vehemently refuted Keller’s conclusions in a published rebuttal that pointed out the many “rusty links” in the psychiatrist’s “chain of argumentation,” such as: the (then) gray area concerning Winfield Lovecraft’s cause of death (which assumed “paresis” was not always synonymous with “syphilis”); the assumption that most brain disease in men of forty or younger was the result of syphilis; the spouse of one with syphilis will naturally carry the disease, and that the child of one with syphilis will always inherit the illness (*F:1958* 27-29).

Joshi’s account of Lovecraft’s physical examination, which occurred in 1917 when he applied for the Rhode Island National Guard, disproves the idea of Lovecraft acquiring his father’s syphilis (*HPL: AL* 142). Whether or not Lovecraft knew other facts than those he related to friends concerning his father’s illness will remain an area for

conjecture until new documents come to light which provide a definitive answer. In his story “Facts in the Case of the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family,” Lovecraft combines his xenophobia and fear of ancestral evil. The narrator proclaims that “[l]ife is a hideous thing, and from the background, behind what we know of it peer daemonic hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous” (102). Knowing something of Lovecraft’s background, and viewing these facts in conjunction with his fictional themes, one quickly understands the real probability that HPL possessed more knowledge concerning his father’s death than he revealed to others. His correspondence tells one side of the story, while the abundant incidences of “tainted” blood, and perverse inheritance, which Lovecraft repeatedly writes into most of his fiction, tells another far “more hideous.”

***“Confronted by Forbidden Things” (634) in Lovecraft’s Fiction***

“The Nameless City” (1921)

This tale features the most common of Lovecraft’s protagonists, a highly educated first-person narrator who remains nameless throughout the narrative. As is generally the case, the chronicler is a man of academic training; here he is an archaeologist who journeys into an Arabian desert in search of the ruins of an ancient city older than “those immeasurably later civilisations of Egypt and Chaldaea” (147). The scientist acknowledges his purpose as little more than to see something “no man else had ever dared to see” (141). Thus with no other backstory, the details unfold of the adventurer’s

long wait until sundown, and of how he later finds an entrance into the Nameless City's sand-strewn ruins.

Proceeding down a narrow shaft, the scientist descends into what appears at first to be a nearly endless tunnel. When he attains level footing, it is inside a low-ceilinged chamber with only room enough for him to kneel. Once inside, he sees the remains of bas-reliefs and frescoes on the walls of, what he eventually determines to be, the tombs of the original inhabitants—a race of small, alligator-like bipeds, remarkably well-preserved in glass-paneled coffins. When a tremendous gust of wind rips through the tomb, the narrator is nearly sucked through an enormous bronze doorway which soon exudes a phantasmal procession of “howling wind-wraiths” (150), presumably the ghostly revenants of the Nameless City's former inhabitants. The narrator barely escapes with his life and writes his account as a cautionary tale to others who might be foolhardy enough to ignore the sage advice of the Arabs who shun the place.

Like many of HPL's narratives, “The Nameless City” proves an admirable starting point for a psychological examination of its author. Additionally, the tale introduces the social critique which Lovecraft would later write about with clearer insight and more biting commentary. S. T. Joshi notes how, some ten years after writing “The Nameless City,” Lovecraft re-imagined “its basic scenario—a scientist investigating a millennia-abandoned city and deciphering historical bas-reliefs on the walls—and [making] it not only plausible but immensely powerful . . . [in] *At the Mountains of Madness*” (*The Weird Tale* 251). In this regard, “The Nameless City” acts as a kind of precursor for the more in-depth social criticism found in that novel (covered in Chapter

Three), where in a similar fashion Lovecraft reconstructs much of a dead civilization's history from an examination of its artwork. Both "The Nameless City" and *At the Mountains of Madness* feature lengthy accounts of a first-person narrator's transcription of the sweeping history of a lost race—beings who predate humankind's eventual usurpation of the planet—and how their racial and cultural decay leads to their demise.

"The Nameless City" also exemplifies the kind of racial degradation or "slow decadence" (147) Lovecraft repeatedly cites in his tales. The narrator vainly attempts to convince himself that the frescoed history of the reptilian race illustrates a period of human pre-history. He imagines the malformed images as indicative of priests dressed in ceremonial vestments, similar to the animal-headed deities of ancient Egypt, lowering themselves into postures reminiscent of the reptiles they worshipped. Here Lovecraft adds a subtle touch to an otherwise heavy-handed creation when the magnificence of his narrator's ekphrastic rendering breaks down. He refers to "paintings . . . less skilful [*sic*], and much more bizarre than even the wildest of earlier scenes" (147), demonstrating how, as the race and its society decline, its art forms succumb to a similar fate.

Lovecraft makes no mention of any literary achievements or inscriptions for the lost race, nor does the *Necronomicon* make a formal appearance in "The Nameless City," but in deference to Joshi's opinion that the piece "is really one of the worst of [HPL's] purely weird efforts" (*TWT* 249), the story's significance, for the Cthulhu Mythos and for the purposes of this investigation, stems from Lovecraft's introduction of both "Abdul Alhazred, the mad poet" (141) and his disturbing and "unexplainable couplet" (150):

That is not dead which can eternal lie  
And with strange aeons even death may die (141)

Lovecraft later attributed this poetical reference to the *Necronomicon* in “The Call of Cthulhu” and repeats the couplet in many of his later stories that include the evil book.

Donald R. Burleson’s linguistic interpretation of the couplet suggests a metaphorical nirvana of eschatological significance where,

In the textuality of “death may die,” we may say that there is a “subject-death” and a “predicate-death.” The subject-death is associated with the cessation of life, and the predicate-death is associated with cessation more generally on a metaphoric plane. With this view we note that the predicate-death amounts to cessation of the subject-death, that is, to cessation of cessation of life, which one would suppose to be a continuation of life—not only nonidentical with the subject-death, but tantamount to its polar opposite. Lovecraft’s Arab poet has said that “even death may die” (emphasis added), suggesting that everything comes to cessation, even cessation. (*H. P. Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe* 52-53)

Such a “cessation of cessation” or end of *the end* undoubtedly appealed to Lovecraft’s pragmatic sense of cosmicism, and his vision of a universe with “no values in all infinity.” After all HPL considered “All the cosmos . . . a jest, and fit to be treated as a jest [where] one thing is as true as another” (*SL I* 231).

One might also detect a more personal connection to the writer, presuming Lovecraft equated the “unexplainable couplet” with the details of his own life. This is a logical supposition when one imagines how “That is not dead which can eternal lie” rather ominously suggests the very sort of hereditary curse which commonly haunts HPL’s protagonists. If one agrees with Keller’s suggestion that whatever “taint the original ancestors had becomes greatly magnified in a very few generations” (*F:1958* 17),

then one may detect an ulterior purpose in Lovecraft's invention of the passage, of covertly revealing those personal matters about which he could not, otherwise, openly write. HPL would never have realized the great significance his admirers would place upon the couplet<sup>9</sup> when examined in conjunction with his correspondence, fiction, and expository efforts; however one must also consider the possibility that he knowingly created the verse as a way of stating his feelings concerning his upbringing and birthright; a means of confessing his fears without openly revealing them.

Writing to his protégé, Frank Belknap Long, Lovecraft explained how painstakingly he wrote "The Nameless City," describing how he destroyed two beginnings before finding "the right atmosphere" which "aim[ed] at a cumulative succession of horrors—thrill upon thrill and each one worse!" (*SL I* 122). With this in mind, the "unexplainable couplet" must have been given the same attention as the rest of the narrative, and may serve as a directional marker to the deep well of Lovecraft's inmost fear—that he had inherited the family madness, and that he might ultimately end up in an asylum, confused and paralytic, suffering from the syphilis his father brought upon them all. From even a casual perusal of HPL's correspondence, one can see how unpalatable any admission of personally revealing details might have been to his stolid Yankee ideals of decorum—particularly if such a statement painted a disparaging image of his family lineage. The only hopeful outcome here, from Lovecraft's covert (or possibly subconscious) point of view, is that "with strange aeons even death may die," and how time would eventually bring an end to the ever-present living-death coursing through his veins.



If Keller's theory of Lovecraft's "fear of heredity" (*F:1958 18*) and its impact upon his fiction is correct then the "The Nameless City" yields additional clues to HPL's ancestral dread. The narrator's descent down a dark, constricting passage may be seen by some as overtly Freudian<sup>10</sup>—a return to the womb—yet the questing nature of his actions implies more than mere sexual allusion. The desire to seek out the unknown, which is without doubt the most common theme in Lovecraft's writing, bears such a wealth of terrible knowledge for the narrator that, rather than conveying sexual angst, one more easily interprets the journey through darkness to find illumination as indicative of *rebirth*—the commonest of tropes for all quest narratives. Yet the conclusion of "The Nameless City" cannot be seen as the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. HPL's chronicler experiences a horror so great its "reverberations swelled out to the distant world" (150), presumably echoing forever—at least in the mind of the narrator—as inescapable as Lovecraft's own "tainted" destiny.

#### "The Hound" (1922)

"The Hound" conveys almost nothing of the broader social that one sees in HPL's later fiction, nor does he employ his wicked grimoire here as anything more than a catalyst for mood. However, the story does present the reader with a catalogue of taboo elements, inspired, at least in part, by the *Necronomicon*. There is seemingly a kind of cultural immorality in the living arrangements of the tale's protagonists. Some find it unlikely that two young men, with abundant financial resources, would choose to cohabitate in conditions of abject squalor, an arrangement which some critics view as

overtly homosexual. There is also the odd twist in the protagonists' abhorrent natures (even considering literary progenitors like J. K. Huysmans' *Jean Des Esseintes* and Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*). Among most fictional decadents, the pursuit of carnal pleasures takes precedent over so categorically ghoulish a hobby as grave robbing. Weirder still, the narrator relates the details of his home's interior decoration, hellishly realized with inhuman nonchalance as a place with cases of antique mummies alternating with comely, life-like bodies perfectly stuffed and cured by the taxidermist's art, and with headstones snatched from the oldest churchyards of the world. Niches here and there contained skulls of all shapes, and heads preserved in various stages of dissolution. There one might find the rotting, bald pates of famous noblemen, and the fresh and radiantly golden heads of new-buried children. (217)

The revelation denotes one of the more repellent forms of thievery—the acquisition and display of tomb loot—conjuring images of depravities (à la Huysmans's *Au rebours*) specific to a limited number of the general populace whom Lovecraft deems “neurotic virtuosos” (216).<sup>11</sup>

For all of this, S. T. Joshi believes the tale a work of parody, pointing out HPL's “overheated prose” and “obvious literary allusions” (*HPL: AL* 285), including those mentioned here as well as to Ambrose Bierce, whom Lovecraft cited for his “sardonic comedy” and “his dark intimations” (*SHL* 67-69). Simultaneously an odd spirit of nihilism threads its way through the protagonists' actions—a ruthlessness of purpose and callous inattention to the horrors which surround them—similar in tone to “Herbert West: Re-Animator” (1922), Lovecraft's serialized novella written earlier the same year. HPL

seems to have found just as much inspiration in the senseless destruction of life and the resulting gallows humor of World War I as he did from the various decadent authors.<sup>12</sup> “Herbert West: Re-Animator” features a character so coldly scientific that his greatest obstacle (apart from death itself, which he presumes to conquer) is the veritable plague of “insufficiently fresh” (198) bodies upon which he must perform his experiments. West, like his bodysnatching counterparts in “The Hound,” relentlessly pursues the arcane truths deemed taboo by most cultures, but the decadence in each of these works centers on individual aberration, not that of the greater society.

The nominal presence of the *Necronomicon* in “The Hound” cannot sustain the lasting impressions necessary to reveal the social woes which Lovecraft relates with more vivid and lingering detail in later stories. Still, “The Hound” provides the author yet another opportunity, to warn individuals too curious for their own good, by demonstrating the ultimate price one pays for the “forbidden knowledge” gained from such curiosity—the very sort of wisdom which the narrator and his comrade “read . . . in Alhazred’s *Necronomicon*” only to be so “disturbed by what [they] read” they soon wish for a means to forget. The narrator confides finally that “terror came” and describes how his partner is torn to pieces. He concludes that he will soon shoot himself (reifying Dr. Keller’s examples concerning the fate of Lovecraft’s characters), thus reemphasizing the idea of individual perversion and the sad end to which such acts must lead—even with the presumed advanced understanding of occult wisdom one acquires from arcane volumes like the *Necronomicon* or perhaps because of them (219).

### “The Festival” (1923)

The tale features another unnamed narrator. The protagonist returns to his hometown of Kingsport to celebrate a Yuletide ritual with his relatives. Lovecraft sets the tone with his protagonist’s repulsion at the thought that a New England town he once knew as home “should be so aged and maggoty with subterranean evil” (266). The seemingly innocuous plot quickly devolves into mystery when the narrator’s relations prevail upon him to attend their curious religious services, and it is not long until he learns that all is not as it appears. While he waits to accompany them, he casually investigates the books on the shelf only to find a horrific treasure trove of occult titles, including the *Necronomicon*.

The narrator reads several passages from the *Necronomicon*, a text which is in part familiar to him from some previous examination, then descends with his relations into the subterranean bowels of the church (a motif repeated from “The Nameless City” and used again in later tales). In these “Tartarean” depths, he witnesses a virtual parade of monstrosities, “a horde of tame, trained, hybrid winged things . . . not altogether crows, nor moles, nor buzzards, nor ants, nor vampire bats, nor decomposed human beings; but something [he] cannot and must not recall” (267). The comparison aligns itself in the narrator’s mind with things he has read about in the evil *grimoire*. The narrator acknowledges that he “dare quote only one paragraph” from the *Necronomicon* and concludes his tale with a bastardized translation into English, providing the reader with this pertinent and provocative glimpse of the unholy text-within-text. Apart from

the “unexplainable couplet” featured in “The Nameless City,” this quotation is HPL’s first verbatim example from the spellbook. In it, the narrator learns that

The nethermost caverns . . . are not for the fathoming of eyes that see; for their marvels are strange and terrific. Cursed the ground where dead thoughts live new and oddly bodied, and evil the mind that is held by no head. Wisely did Ibn Schacabao say, that happy is the tomb where no wizard hath lain, and happy the town at night whose wizards are all ashes. For it is of old rumour that the soul of the devil-bought hastes not from his charnel clay, but fests and instructs the very worm that gnaws; till out of corruption horrid life springs, and the dull scavengers of earth wax crafty to vex it and swell monstrous to plague it. Great holes secretly are digged where earth’s pores ought to suffice, and things have learnt to walk that ought to crawl. (268-69)

From this the reader may infer a connection between the narrator and his terrifying ancestry. Peter Cannon describes this as “a hideous revelation” with the protagonist “discovering not that he belongs to a fallen brotherhood of man but that his own ancestors are evil, reanimated corpses” (*HPL* 43). Donald R. Burluson interprets the conclusion of “The Festival” as referring to HPL’s personal fear of “the buried but undead horrors in a family’s past [which] seem to have been much in Lovecraft’s thoughts” (*HPL: ACS* 91).

In “Dystopia as Utopia: Howard Philips Lovecraft and the Unknown Content of American Horror Literature,” Paul Buhle calls Lovecraft “a direct descendant of the local colour of Mary Wilkins Freeman and other New England artists” and notes that, in many ways HPL embraced his native New England as a “locus of horror,” finding there “fables of incest and degeneration.” Buhle observes that “Lovecraft saw the horrors of the New England centres of commerce as well,” pointing out “the Puritan hubris” as it relates

specifically to the terrible consequences experienced by the narrator of “The Festival” (*HPL: FDC* 200).

Peter Cannon says that “The Festival” reveals “Lovecraft’s first and most literal attempt to recapture in fiction the ecstasy prompted by the sight of a well-preserved New England town of colonial vintage,” in this case the city of Marblehead, which becomes “Kingsport” in this story and appears as such in several of HPL’s other tales (*HPL* 42). A decade after writing the story, Lovecraft confided to fellow author Robert E. Howard that “The Festival” was “strained and over-coloured.” He believes that the “[a]djectives and descriptive touches [are] laid on too thickly” while exhibiting “a pervasive extravagance about the whole thing” (*SL IV* 297). Donald R. Burleson considers HPL’s frank assessment “rather too harsh,” conceding that the “narration has a poetic and tastefully alliterative quality and a sustaining of mood that decidedly show progress in Lovecraft’s gradually maturing style” (*HPL: ACS* 89).

While not on a par with HPL’s later work, “The Festival” compels the reader to think more deeply about the potential dangers of unknown heredity. In a letter to Robert E. Howard, Lovecraft confides that “[i]n intimating an alien race I had in mind the survival of some clan of pre-Aryan sorcerers who preserved primitive rites like those of the witch-cult . . .” (*SL IV* 297). HPL and Howard (to a lesser extent) shared similar beliefs about the superiority of whites to other races; S. T. Joshi notes Lovecraft’s preoccupation with his own “racial purity” (*HPL: AL* 7), his tirades against blacks from his early teens onward, and his later obsession with “Teutonic superiority” (*HPL: AL* 133). One may theorize that HPL felt more than a little affinity toward his characters

who, like the narrator of “The Festival,” see their own lives as an “unwholesome continuity with the past, [and with] . . . things unsuspected or long thought to be dead and forgotten—here again a sort of family cult, but of an “extended” family” (Burlison 91).

The death of Lovecraft’s father from syphilis seems a likely inspiration for much of his continued hereditary worries concerning, what Maurice M. Lévy called, “the depths of his familial past” (*Lovecraft: A Study in the Fantastic* 75), a feeling exemplified by many of the HPL’s protagonists. Kenneth Hite equates the narrator of “The Festival” with “eels, who migrate, transform, and die when it’s time. Like the eel, our narrator feels an ‘ancestral call’ to gather at a specific spot” where he will “undergo a metamorphosis that will change him forever and” from which he will be “unable to return to his normal life.” Hite’s comparison to sea life seems an apt metaphor in relation to Lovecraft’s literary penchant (and physical revulsion<sup>13</sup>) toward fish in any form (see “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1931), and, to some extent, *At the Mountains of Madness*). For Hite, the narrator is “the eel who woke up and saw himself trapped in his ancestry, trapped in an immense pattern he didn’t create, and one that will easily survive his insignificant defection from it.” Hite sees “The Festival” as an example of “Lovecraft’s cosmic fatalism in miniature: all humanity is trapped in the patterns of entropy, evolution, and geology, to be destroyed by sudden unknowable catastrophe or erased in slow grinding erosion.” And as one of the lesser life-forms in the cosmic scheme of things, the narrator becomes the prescient observer or as Hite says “the eel who woke up” and in awakening from unknowing into a heightened state of

consciousness “separates him[self] from the rest of society” (*Tour de Lovecraft: The Tales* 45-46).

*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927)

In his analysis of Lovecraft’s fiction, Donald R. Burleson discerns numerous themes including “unthinkable survivals from a past either thought long dead or not suspected to exist” and of “masked” appearances, which hide “deeper and more terrible realities” (*HPL: DU* 157). The hapless young antiquarian investigating his ancestry in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* discovers exactly how “terrible” such “unthinkable survivals” can be and how unprepared an individual might find himself when confronted with the sum of his unknown genetic inheritance.

The novella begins, tellingly, in “a private hospital for the insane” (490) where a man who looks like Charles Dexter Ward is being treated for what the alienists perceive is “a dark mania involving both a possibility of murderous tendencies and a profound and peculiar change in the apparent contents of the mind” (490). By contemporary standards, Ward has presumably suffered a psychotic break, reverting into a pattern of speech and mannerisms of the late seventeenth-century.

A flashback reveals Ward as an adequate student, wandering in a Coleridgesque state of “dreamy meditation” (495) in hopes of finding “vivid and connected picture[s] of the centuries before” (494), and to scenes that will draw him closer to the subject of his antiquarian and genealogical obsession. Dr. Willett, a friend of the Wards and a mentor of sorts to Charles, confirms that the young man’s pursuits were “free from every trace of



the morbid” (497). Dr. Willett also confirms that apart from their “historic value,” Charles Dexter Ward had no particular affinity for cemeteries—a trait which later manifests itself to very “morbid” ends when through “one of his genealogical triumphs of the year before . . . he had discovered among his maternal ancestors a certain very long-lived man named Joseph Curwen, who had come from Salem in March of 1692, and about whom a whispered series of highly peculiar and disquieting stories clustered” (497). Ward’s general obsession with the past suddenly becomes a monomania as he endeavors to find out everything he can about this most unusual of lineal progenitors.

Most of the public records Ward consults seem, almost conspiratorially, to have expunged Joseph Curwen from their pages, as if “to blot him from memory” (497), yet Ward persists until he unearths the fact that his great-great-great-grandfather was rumored to have been an “*alchemist*” (499).

After obtaining access to diaries and correspondence from Joseph Curwen’s time, Ward compiles a record of the extraordinary level of erudition which his ancestor had achieved and learns of the fear generated by Curwen’s ability to maintain his youth—changing little in the span of fifty years, even as his neighbors grew old and died—and the numerous instances of his experimentation with “doubtful realms of alchemy and astrology.” One observer maintained “admiration for his host’s ample shelves, which besides the Greek, Latin, and English classics were equipped with a remarkable battery of philosophical, mathematical, and scientific works.” These books, while indicative of Curwen’s intellectual acumen, pale beside that of his “special library of thaumaturgical, alchemical, and theological subjects.” The latter “bizarre collection” encompassed

“nearly all the cabbalists, daemonologists, and magicians known to man,” and was “a treasure-house of lore” which included the works of Hermes Trismegistus, Albertus Magnus, Robert Fludd, and “the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred” (501).

Accompanying the many notes and papers acquired by Ward is a transcription from Borellus noticed by one of Curwen’s guests when he sees the book lying open, the person’s attention drawn to marginalia in Curwen’s hand concerning the entry. The essential Saltes of Animals may be so prepared and preserved, that an ingenious Man may have the whole Ark of Noah in his own Studie, and raise the fine Shape of an Animal out of its Ashes at his Pleasure; and by the lyke Method from the essential Saltes of humane Dust, a Philosopher may, without any criminal Necromancy, call up the Shape of any dead Ancestor from the Dust whereinto his Bodie has been incinerated. (502)

Several chapters detail equally interesting passages from Curwen’s private correspondence and his experiments that lead him down the murky byways of the Black Arts, until he is eventually killed during a raid by local militia from Salem. Later, Ward discovers an old house once owned by Curwen and a painting of his ancestor, which soon leads to, what is presumed to be, his mental decline.

Ward enters the home, currently occupied by “negro inhabitants [who] were known to him,” and after being shown around the “crumbling” mansion, discovers the painting. His antiquarian nature makes it difficult for him to resist the urge to see the portrait returned to its former state. Ward commissions a restoration be performed in the home, reimbursing the residents “for this invasion of their domestic hearth” (527). The

restorer's skill reveals an image bearing Ward's "own living features." The young man brings his parents to view the piece, which "despite an appearance of rather greater age, was marvelous; and it could be seen that through some trick of atavism the physical contours of Joseph Curwen had found precise duplication after a century and a half" (529) in young Charles.

Ward's mother believes the image "unwholesome" and asks her husband to have it burned. Ward senior, described as "a practical man of power" (529), purchases the panel from the family so that it may be installed in his son's study. Charles oversees the removal of the image, and a hole is found in the masonry behind the portrait. The hiding place reveals a journal and small cache of papers that once belonged to his ancestor.

Ward's deciphering of the documents and subsequent reading of Curwen's treatise, "*To Him Who Shal Come After, & How He May Gett Beyonde Time & y<sup>e</sup> Spheres*" (530), compel him to correspond with the *descendants* of Curwen's associates (who turn out to be the very men with whom Curwen originally communicated—ancient now, yet better than Ward's ancestor at cheating death) and to seek them out during travels to England and several European destinations. After returning home to America, Ward continues his secretive experiments, relying on the documents and copies of magical texts, such as the *Necronomicon*, to guide him. The servants and Ward's own parents hear what sounds like a "dialogue" (542) coming from his suite of rooms and begin to fear that the young man's studies and journeys have overtaxed his mind.

Charles Dexter Ward uses the texts to formulate the proper spells necessary to return Joseph Curwen to life. The revelation that Ward has *not* been taken over by his

ancestor, but essentially *destroyed*, and his identity assumed by the wizard, comes as little surprise. Much of the narrative's later chapters follows Dr. Willett's pursuit of Ward/Curwen in order to prove to himself the incredible truth of the resurrection of Ward's evil kinsman through alchemical means. Dr. Willett eventually finds a counter spell that will return Curwen to the "essential Saltes" from whence he came. The narrative concludes with a clash of wills between the doctor and Curwen, but Dr. Willett's spell is more powerful. Soon the ancient wizard's remains lay "scattered on the floor as a thin coating of fine bluish-grey dust" (593).

S. T. Joshi considers *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* "among the most carefully wrought fictions in Lovecraft's entire corpus." He points out the subtlety of the narrative structure, HPL's careful use of flashbacks, which advance the plot instead of bogging it down, and how the tale "mingles history and fiction in an inextricable union, breathing vivid life into the dry facts . . . and insidiously inserting the imaginary, the fantastic, and the weird into the known historical record" (*A Subtler Magick* 123). Agreeably, the novel exemplifies Lovecraft at the height of his literary complexity, yet at its core, the narrative communicates what Barton L. St. Armand in his article "Facts in the Case of H. P. Lovecraft" calls a "simple moral." This "simple moral" can be found in HPL's fictions where "it is dangerous to know too much, especially about one's own ancestors" (*HPL: FDC* 178).

Lovecraft's candid depiction of scenes from his own life, revealed in Charles Dexter Ward's passive attitude toward his formal education and his indefatigable pursuit of his personal interests (as well as the doting, overprotective mother) confirm the

author's ability to draw upon his upbringing in his attempt to capture a sense of realism in his fiction. Perhaps even the more sordid details offer a window upon the dark side of HPL's heritage. Erik Davis acknowledges Lovecraft's penchant to build up his narratives "with his own nightmares" (*Gnosis* 62), perhaps as a means of covertly revealing the kind of damning ancestral secrets he may have uncovered during his genealogical researches. Davis also points out how Lovecraft's careful juxtaposition of factual history with fictive elements "constructs and then collapses a number of intense polarities between realism and fantasy" (*G* 57), adding further to the writer's documentary-like style.

The author's embellishing of recorded history and his inclusion of so many personal touches conspire to form what seems to be a genuine biographical sketch, immersing the reader in the narrative's verisimilitude. The *Necronomicon* plays an instrumental role in summoning monsters better left dead, buried, and unremembered, and adding a realistic flair by the spellbook being ranked alongside existing (and genuine) alchemical texts. Its placement in the narrative seems also to exaggerate, even *elevate*, the attention given to the past and its depravities. "In order to invade this plane," remarks Davis, "Lovecraft's entities need a portal, an interface between the worlds." Davis emphasizes HPL's use of "books and dreams" to achieve this goal and points out how, through both of these devices, many characters fall victim to "psychic possession" (*G* 62).

The red herring of Ward's "transformation" (542) misleads the reader into believing the youth's mind is taken over by Curwen, either because of Ward's own disconnect from reality or through a "psychic possession" similar to that performed on the protagonist of "The Thing on the Doorstep" (1933) via a similar kind of wizardry.

When one learns of Curwen's apparent "vampirism" (547) relating to his diet of rare meats and blood, the indication is *not* that Curwen has possessed Ward's mind, but the more likely scenario, that he has completely devoured his young relation.

This absorption of Ward differs from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, to which Lovecraft's novel is often compared. Although Dr. Willett proclaims to Curwen "[i]t is no business of mine if any man seeks duality" (591), one sees through Lovecraft's text that human nature is not a question of "duality" so much as *choice*. Henry Jekyll makes a conscious decision to *become* Edward Hyde in an admittedly noble quest to free himself from his evil impulses. Ward, on the other hand,

was never a fiend or even truly a madman, but only an eager, studious, and curious boy whose love of mystery and of the past was his undoing. He stumbled on things no mortal ought ever to know, and reached back through the years as no one ever should reach; and something came out of those years to engulf him. (590)

Lovecraft may have felt his own past coming back to haunt him as he grew to a lonely adulthood with no future prospects and with the stain of madness associated with his very name. His feelings about his familial connections vacillate from emotionally ardent to clinically detached, depending on the time period and with whom he corresponded. In 1924 Lovecraft claimed to Edwin Baird that he had descended from "unmixed English gentry" (*SL I* 296). In a letter to Robert E. Howard, dated 1931, HPL told a more complex story of his lineage:

When we consider the vast *number* of our distant ancestors—the almost *infinite* extent to which our heredity is divided and subdivided as it recedes in time—we can see how slight an effect on us is exerted by any one ancestor or even by any especial group of ancestors—in the ages behind recorded history. Nothing of a

personal or individual nature is likely to be inherited through many generations—for what happened to any *one* progenitor simply fades into relative nothingness amidst the vast bulk of experiences inherited through the geometrically multiplying array of other lines. A grandparent is only a fourth of us—a great-grandparent an eighth, a great-great-grandparent a sixteenth, a great-great-great-grandparent a thirty-second, and so on. It makes me laugh to hear of a person boasting of a remote forbear, as if he inherited anything more from that forbear than do the thousands or perhaps millions of others who also descend from the same source even though they do not bear the same name. Heredity counts only when one has behind one a *very larger proportion* of the same kind of blood—blood which represents a certain definite type of experience or natural selection. (*SL III* 392-93)

These later thoughts came several years after his writing of *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. This revelation demonstrates that Lovecraft was cynical of his own *atavistic* plot creation, while subconsciously (or covertly) transcribing his personal dread concerning his family's "forbidden secrets" (593). One may speculate widely as to *what* secrets Lovecraft may have uncovered, but the probable scandal connected to the family's name by his father's death from syphilis seems a logical source for the type of inherited shame one associates with Joseph Curwen in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, who, like Winfield Lovecraft, was "an outcast, suspected of vague horrors and daemoniac alliances" (502).

#### "The Dunwich Horror" (1928)

In Kálmán Matolcsy's "Knowledge in the Void: Anomaly, Observation, and the Incomplete Paradigm Shift in H. P. Lovecraft's Fiction," the critic considers "The Dunwich Horror" a story "*of scholars outside the field of natural science*" (*Lovecraft Annual No. 2* 170). While there is no denying the many links to the sciences found in

Lovecraft's narrative, the tale is primarily one of miscegenation or, as S. T. Joshi points out, "the sexual union of a 'god' or monster with a human woman" (*HPL: AL* 450). Lovecraft used this theme of "mixture" (499) between human with *inhuman* as the focal point in "The Dunwich Horror," as well as in "Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family" and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," and hinted at similar combinations in many other stories. Because of his tendency to populate his narratives with interdimensional entities, some categorize HPL's work as science fiction, but Carl Freedman asks if "The Dunwich Horror," like so many of Lovecraft's other stories, "earn[s] the title of science fiction because [the] monstrosities have their origin not in the admitted supernatural but in vulgar pseudo-Darwinian notions of racial degeneration" (*Critical Theory and Science Fiction* 17). Lovecraft's darkly fanciful use of genre-specific tropes (science fiction, horror, and elements that fall somewhere in between) combine in "The Dunwich Horror" to reveal a morass of moral ambiguity and cultural depravity.

Setting the stage for the "racial degeneration" to follow, Lovecraft's rare, third-person narration, leads the reader down a lonely path into, what Joshi determined, "a seedy area" (*HPL: AL* 448) of Massachusetts backwoods. Here the terrain and environs are depicted in the coarsest terms as "forest belts . . . too large . . . [with] wild weeds, brambles, and grasses [of] a luxuriance not often found in settled regions" continuing the descent into decadence with a description of "the sparsely scattered houses wear[ing] uniform aspect[s] of age, squalor, and dilapidation" and how "[w]ithout knowing why, one hesitates to ask directions from the gnarled, solitary figures spied now and then on



crumbling doorsteps or on the sloping, rock-strown [*sic*] meadows” (633-34). More telling details appear in the “silent” and “furtive” farmers who compel travelers into feeling as if they have been “confronted by forbidden things, with which it would be better to have nothing to do.” Should one survive the journey through this eerie landscape, “one sometimes learns that one has been through Dunwich” (634). From this point until its climactic end, “The Dunwich Horror” weaves a tale of general social decay through the implication of “[i]nbreeding” (646), probable incest, and the resultant punishment for “iniquities” (662) brought on by “human blasphemy” (667).

The narrative proper begins with the birth of “the monstrous being known to the human world as Wilbur Whateley” (647), a child begotten upon the “half-deformed albino” (643), Lavinia Whateley, through intercourse with one of the Great Old Ones: an amorphous, interdimensional god named Yog-Sothoth. But Wilbur is only one half of an antagonistic set of *twins*. Unknown to the residents of Dunwich, Lavinia gave birth to *two* children—Wilbur, and another entity, kept locked in the upstairs of their farmhouse, unseen by anyone outside the oddly secretive family. Old Wizard Whateley, Lavinia’s half-crazed father (who, one suspects may have stood in as Yog-Sothoth’s avatar during Lavinia’s impregnation), proudly proclaims to the few townsfolk, “*some day yew folks’ll hear a child o’ Lavinnny’s a-callin’ its father’s name on the top o’ Sentinel Hill!*” (637). The reader is told “a child,” just not *which one*. Wilbur grows so freakishly quickly that by the time he is thirteen, he is already over seven feet tall. His grandfather teaches him the numerous spells and prodigious lore found in the family’s trove of occult books,<sup>14</sup> including an incomplete copy of the *Necronomicon* copied out into English by the

medieval court astrologer, Dr. John Dee. Old Whateley eventually, dies but he has the foresight to pass on last minute instructions to Wilbur that he must seek out a better copy of the *Necronomicon* so as to complete the hellish work the two have already begun.

Wilbur soon makes his first trip out of Dunwich to another of Lovecraft's invented locales—Arkham, Massachusetts (HPL's exaggeratedly haunted version of Salem)—where he finds a Latin edition of the dark spellbook, in the Special Collections section of Miskatonic University's library (another of Lovecraft's often-used inventions). He asks the head of the collection, Dr. Henry Armitage (the story's protagonist<sup>15</sup>) if he may borrow the book in order to experiment with the information lacking in his own copy. But after seeing the librarian's reaction he declares that he will try his luck elsewhere.

Noting the passages in the *Necronomicon* which Whateley had read, Dr. Armitage sees the danger in providing the youth with any further information and warns the other institutions holding the *grimoire* to reject Whateley's attempts to examine it. This forces Whateley to attempt to steal Miskatonic's edition, during which he is attacked by a guard dog and soon dies from his wounds. Armitage and several other professors witness the nearly spontaneous dissolution of Wilbur's body and understand how truly unnatural he was, questioning even the subtle traces of Wilbur's tenuous ties to humanity by reducing him to a "thing" (648). The dying body is described as only "partly human," with convincingly "man-like" hands and head—the latter bearing still the animalistic stigma of a "goatish . . . face" so perfectly resembling that of the Whateley line. The rest of Wilbur's physiognomy inspires the viewers to gasp in abject terror at the sight of its

abnormality and to remark that “only generous clothing could ever have enabled it to walk on earth unchallenged or uneradicated” (648). For the rest of the body “all human resemblance left off and sheer phantasy began” (648).

Unbeknownst to the people of Dunwich, Wilbur had been regularly feeding his brother, an invisible beast the size of a house, and performing spells from the *Necronomicon* to keep it in check until the proper time when the gateway between this dimension and that of Yog-Sothoth’s might be opened. Ravenous and unfettered by spells, the “horror” (647) breaks loose and destroys several farmhouses and kills many of the townsfolk. Dr. Armitage is given the task of translating Wilbur Whateley’s diary, which, with the aid of counter spells he finds in the *Necronomicon*, provides the necessary information needed to banish the entity to the other dimension from whence it came, even as it cries out for its “*FATHER! FATHER! YOG-SOTHOTH!*” (666).

Michel Houellebecq interprets the invisible entity’s entreaties as “a faithful echo of “*Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani*” noting that “[h]ere, Lovecraft goes back to a very ancient source of horror where Evil is the product of a carnal union against nature. This idea fits his obsessive racism perfectly, for, to him, as to all racists, it is not one particular race that represents true horror, but the notion of the half-breed” (*HPL: AWAL* 112).

Lovecraft assumes that the concept of miscegenation should disgust and appall his reader, yet his overt racism far more readily accomplishes this goal. The real “horror” then of “The Dunwich Horror” as Lovecraft would have the reader believe, isn’t Wilbur Whately, his otherworldly sibling, or his eerie family, but what the Whateleys represent: a commingling of bloods between whites (even obvious white trash like Lavinia Whateley)

and that of an *other*<sup>16</sup> or “thing.” Wilbur Whateley embraces his otherness, delighting in the possibility that he may be “transfigured” (656) to more closely resemble the being that spawned him, but the description of Wilbur’s form as “follow[ing] symmetries of some cosmic geometry unknown to earth or the solar system” (649) gives away Lovecraft’s disgust at his origins. HPL’s sadly priggish superiority concerning purity of bloodlines, as one also sees in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” do not coincide with his seemingly, more open-minded, philosophy of cosmicism.

In this way, “The Dunwich Horror” demonstrates another of Lovecraft’s attempts to convince the reader of his view of the universe as what David A. Oakes considers HPL’s depiction of “an amoral place where there is neither good nor evil” (*Science and Destabilization in the Modern American Gothic* 33). According to the world-view Lovecraft presents in his various tales, the anthropomorphizing of the greater cosmos with a banal neutrality toward humanity does not preclude the earth itself of harboring genuine evil. Even if the universe does not care about the plight of humankind, the existence of books like the *Necronomicon*, and the disastrous forces upon which one might call by using it, lends evil a face—a means of solidly denoting varied fears—which cannot be said of the existential dread one presumably experiences from the realization of the cosmos’s amorality and humanity’s insignificant place within it.

In such a context, one may consider Lovecraft’s conception of a book of “forbidden” wisdom<sup>17</sup> a conscious intention to pander to his audience, to produce a cheap thrill through the use of a colorful prop. However, HPL believed such forms of fiction “manifestly inartistic” and a “violation of all that spontaneity and singleness of

impression which should characterize short story work” (*SL I* 158). Thus Lovecraft’s *Necronomicon* functions in some larger symbolic capacity. To Lovecraft, the prevalence of an uncaring universe must have seemed terrifying enough, having no need of being labeled “good” or “evil.” Consequently, the *Necronomicon* represents all manner of social, cultural, and historical evils, while still conveying the existential angst described by cosmicism.

HPL wrote of “the harmless little devices whereby we may trick ourselves into believing we are happy” such as religion, an appreciation for the arts, and even the “mere pleasure of being alive; the *Joi de Vivre*,” which all seems quite lighthearted on the surface, yet antithetical compared to his more candid response that he “cannot conceive how any thoughtful man can really be happy” and how “[t]here is really nothing in the universe to live for” (*SL I* 26). The coldly pointless reality spelled out by the *Necronomicon* often mirrors Lovecraft’s feelings about life. In “The Dunwich Horror,” Wilbur Whateley’s purpose in consulting the book for that time “when the earth is cleared off and there are no more earth-beings on it” (656) shows another of the real dangers in the acquisition of knowledge, even in a neutral universe. Such a philosophy provides an even weightier anchor to the argument for the insignificance of human beings in the universe.

Like “The Festival,” written five years earlier, “The Dunwich Horror” allows readers another rare glimpse into the *Necronomicon*, with a passage far more menacing than the first, and filled with revelations as to what was and what is yet to be—the fatality of the human race written in the broad strokes of a larger, cosmic, interpretation.

Nor is it to be thought . . . that man is either the oldest or the last of earth's masters, or that the common bulk of life and substance walks alone. The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be. Not in the spaces we know, but *between* them, They walk serene and primal, undimensioned and to us unseen. *Yog-Sothoth* knows the gate. *Yog-Sothoth* is the gate. *Yog-Sothoth* is the key and guardian of the gate. Past, present, future, all are one in *Yog-Sothoth*. He knows where the Old Ones broke through of old, and where They shall break through again. He knows where They have trod earth's fields, and where They still tread them, and why no one can behold Them as They tread. By Their smell can men sometimes know Them near, but of Their semblance can no man know, *saving only in the features of those They have begotten on mankind*; and of those are there many sorts, differing in likeness from man's truest eidolon to that shape without sight or substance which is *Them*. They walk unseen and foul in lonely places where the Words have been spoken and the Rites howled through at their Seasons. The wind gibbers with Their voices, and the earth mutters with Their consciousness. They bend the forest and crush the city, yet may not forest or city behold the hand that smites. Kadath in the cold waste hath known Them, and what man knows Kadath? The ice desert of the South and the sunken isles of Ocean hold stones whereon Their seal is engaven, but who hath seen the deep frozen city or the sealed tower long garlanded with seaweed and barnacles? Great Cthulhu is Their cousin, yet can he spy Them only dimly. Iä! *Shub-Niggurath!* As a foulness shall ye know Them. Their hand is at your throats, yet ye see Them not; and Their habitation is even one with your guarded threshold. *Yog-Sothoth* is the key to the gate, whereby the spheres meet. Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where Man rules now. After summer is winter, and after winter summer. They wait patient and potent, for here shall They reign again. (645)

For all its heavy-handed biblical tone, this quotation represents the cyclic rise and fall of humanity in a manner that, at first glance, appears one of Lovecraft's fairest, most unbiased appraisals. Upon closer inspection, the racial tension observable in so much of his work and readily apparent throughout the rest of "The Dunwich Horror" comes through with the insistence on knowing the outsider/other "*in the features of those They have begotten on mankind.*" This single line, perhaps, more than any other in the narrative, demonstrates HPL's insistence of the inferiority of the kind of "half-breed"

Houellebecq mentions or “mongrel flesh,” as Lovecraft himself would say. Also, the line, “They walk serene and primal, unseen to us . . . ,” shows the profundity of difference between humankind and those beings which seek to make the earth their own, representative of the waves of immigrants entering the United States. Joshi notes Lovecraft’s inability to accept that this “influx of foreigners” could “maintain the cultural standards [HPL] valued” (*HPL: AL* 177-78). Similarly, in “The Dunwich Horror,” the “unseen” or *invisible* alien walks unchallenged and ignored until it is nearly too late to eradicate its evil menace and perverted influence, an insidious presence which, as Lovecraft confides, leaves “legitimate natives of a place feeling like strangers on their own hereditary sod” (*SL II* 71).

***“Your own evil will undo you” (592)***

One cannot deny the overwhelming, lingering sense of dread that runs throughout Lovecraft’s entire canon. His tales continually convey a sense of powers beyond human understanding, unseen forces at work outside the known dimensions, and of “madness out of time and . . . horror from beyond the spheres” (592). His protagonists learn of such anomalous factions and are driven mad by whatever wisdom they gain.

Michel Foucault describes how the cost of knowledge increases the more one learns. The critic notes how knowledge “detaches man from feeling” and “a sensibility that is no longer controlled by the movements of nature, but by all the habits, all the demands of social life” (*Madness & Civilization* 218). Lovecraft exemplified such detachment in his cosmicism views, in his relationships with others, and in his narratives.

One finds details in HPL's work which result from his "strange erudition" (1010), revealing his fear of the past and the probable control over his thoughts that such lingering and forbidden "habits" might represent.

Lovecraft routinely mined his dreams and nightmares for suitable material for his ghoulish narratives, even going so far as to transcribe several of them, from inspiration to prose, nearly verbatim.<sup>18</sup> One finds little difficulty then in imagining the additional influence of the societal and personal degeneration explored in the previous analyses. Maurice Lévy acknowledges Lovecraft for teaching one "that the best fantasy is that which is rooted in folklore, tradition, and myth" (*L: ASF* 119). What better source for all three than one's own dark heritage, of "a fate that cannot be escaped" (Oakes 38)?



## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See works such as Zealia Bishop's "The Curse of Yig" (1928), and Hazel Heald's "The Mound" (1930). These tales are noted as co-authored stories, but Lovecraft acknowledged having written the majority of each text.

<sup>2</sup> In one sense, the joke is on Price because with the creation of various faked editions, one actually *can* buy the *Necronomicon* in Barnes & Noble. Some of these books anthologize fiction, others critical articles, while the purported spellbooks generally combine ancient mythology with bits of ceremonial magic to create a nearly unreadable hodgepodge of nonsense unworthy of Lovecraft's original vision.

<sup>3</sup> Moving from the larger residence at 454, to the smaller one at 598 Angell Street.

<sup>4</sup> S. T. Joshi notes that Lovecraft never actually matriculated from high school due to medical issues (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* 63). HPL described the latter as "near breakdowns" (*Selected Letters IV* 26).

<sup>5</sup> After conducting an extensive search into Lovecraft's background, S. T. Joshi claims that HPL was misinformed about many of the facts concerning his heritage (*HPL: AL* 1-7).

<sup>6</sup> Note here Lovecraft's confirmed anti-Semitism in relation to the fact that he eventually married a Jew.

<sup>7</sup> Consider too Lovecraft's proximity to Brown University's John Hay Library (literally next door) and the New York Public Library, which he frequented during the two years he lived there.

<sup>8</sup> Originally published in the semi-pro magazine, *Fantasy Commentator* (Winter/Summer 1948). Reprinted in the University of Detroit Quarterly *FRESCO* journal (Spring 1958), with a rebuttal by Kenneth Sterling, who was a friend and collaborator of Lovecraft's.

<sup>9</sup> Lovecraft's "Notes on a Non-Entity" reveal his sincere belief that little, if any, of his work would ever be read or remembered by future readers.

<sup>10</sup> See Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny," (1919).

<sup>11</sup> From a modern perspective, individuals such as Lovecraft describes would be considered criminally insane, with a mentality akin to serial killers.

<sup>12</sup> Lovecraft's early letters often note the tremendous loss of life suffered throughout the Great War and his desire to do his part for the war effort. His mother's overprotective

meddling interfered with his application to sign up for active duty. See S. T. Joshi's *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, pages 140-42, and Lovecraft's five volumes of *Selected Letters*.

<sup>13</sup> Noted at various times throughout Lovecraft's correspondence.

<sup>14</sup> Lovecraft's personal nod to his own library, inherited from his grandfather, Whipple Van Buren Phillips.

<sup>15</sup> Despite Dr. Armitage's heroic role in dispatching Dunwich's "horror," one might argue that both Wilbur Whateley and the god Yog-Sothoth function as the tale's real protagonists since they act as agents of change. In his attempts to maintain the status quo, Armitage seems more antagonistic to the cyclic dynamic of true evolution, even if his actions spare humanity from such "horror."

<sup>16</sup> The designation of *other* here refers to not only "monster" as one perceives it in "The Dunwich Horror," but also the "other" as racial outsider, discussed by critics such as Edward Said and Ania Loomba.

<sup>17</sup> The *Necronomicon* in particular, but also other occult references, such as the Pnakotic Manuscripts (which for some reason Lovecraft never italicizes), and such works as the *The Book of Eibon*, *De Vermis Mysteriis*, and the *Unausprechlichen Kulten*, which HPL borrows from his literary associates.

<sup>18</sup> See "The Statement of Randolph Carter" and "Nyarlathotep" (1920) for examples.

### CHAPTER III

#### “STARRY WISDOM” (1000): HPL’S SCIENTIFIC EXPLORATIONS

##### *Lovecraft—Gothic Fiction’s Quantum Mechanic*

Lovecraft’s ever-changing concept of the *Necronomicon*’s purpose and how the mythical book operates in his fiction allows readers to scrutinize his literary attentions. Moving far beyond the explorations of the social taboos detailed in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and “The Dunwich Horror,” his later works exhibit his world view of humanity’s aloneness and unimportance in the cosmos, a similarly pessimistic theme as that found in the works of many modernist writers. Lovecraft’s opinions of modernism varied. He admired T. S. Eliot as a philosopher and intellectual but did not appreciate him as an artist (*Selected Letters I* 230). Likewise, he saw the works of James Joyce as possessing “theoretical significance rather than actual aesthetic value . . . represent[ing] the intensive development . . . of a literary principle which will greatly effect future writing, but which defeats its own ends of normally-proportioned portrayal when isolated & intensified to its extreme degree” (*SL IV* 14). HPL saw Archibald MacLeish as “politically radical” (*SL V* 405) in relation to his own conservatism, yet found him to be a “naturally gifted” (*SL V* 399) writer. Lovecraft’s protagonists do not introspectively measure out their lives “with coffee spoons” like Eliot’s “Prufrock,” but they often “dare / Disturb the universe” by challenging the limits of humanity to come to terms with its insignificance and to contemplate the kind of soulless emptiness MacLeish describes in

his poem “The End of the World” as “the black pall / Of nothing, nothing, nothing—  
nothing at all.”

From a modernist perspective, the *Necronomicon* provides Lovecraft’s characters with the means to confront such emptiness, albeit at their own peril. The *grimoire* contains secret wisdom that so overwhelms its readers none can interpret its message or fully harness its power. Yet as cautious as HPL’s characters are in their contact with the occult, they embrace every opportunity to expand their knowledge. The pessimism of the modernists, mirrored by Lovecraft’s vision of cosmic indifference, is seemingly at odds with his attitude toward learning. The reader experiences this excitement through HPL’s examination of physical and theoretical concepts which reflect the spirit of scientific discovery popular during his lifetime. In works like “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Whisperer in Darkness,” and *At the Mountains of Madness*, the *Necronomicon* takes on the added roles of historical record and oracular chronicle, *predicting* the latest astronomical findings and mathematical models. The spellbook also proposes new ideas concerning the origins of life on earth.

For these tales, Lovecraft drew upon numerous sources of inspiration, including the books in his personal library. He often described his collection as containing an “ample scientific department” with references on “astronomy, chemistry, physics, [and] anthropology” (*Selected Letters III* 211), providing crucial material for his science-heavy narratives.<sup>1</sup> S. T. Joshi’s comprehensive biography, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, documents the writer’s early love of chemistry and astronomy, and it is worth recounting the seriousness with which HPL conducted his own experiments and noted his observations.<sup>2</sup>

Lovecraft's letters convey the diligence with which he exhausted the meager limits of his chemistry set and how his interests were, soon after, captured by the stars (*SL I 8*). In fact, HPL's career as a writer began during his teenage years with his early newspaper articles on astronomy, describing the movements of planets. He also produced elaborate refutations of astrology, which he considered a "pseudo-science" (*SL I 4*).

One sees in Lovecraft's literary endeavors (essays, letters, and fiction alike) a deep comprehension of various scientific topics, including surprisingly complex analyses of the latest conceptual mathematical models, such as Einstein's theory of relativity and Planck's ideas on quantum mechanics. Although HPL was never formally trained in physics, he benefited from his friendship with Professor Upton, who was in charge of the Ladd Observatory at Brown University. He also gained considerable insight into the newer scientific theories of the period by attending lectures at Brown which were open to the public (*SL I 38*). Lovecraft read Einstein's work with great interest and believed the physicist's concepts "solidly founded," going so far as to presciently conclude that "(w)hatever future mathematicians & physicists may discover regarding the . . . working out of [Einstein's] principles, it seems certain that the general facts of relativity & curved space are unshakable realities, without considering which it will be impossible to form any sort of true conception of the cosmos" (*SL III 241*).

This combination of Lovecraft's scientific knowledge with his usual first-person, documentary style, lent his supernatural tales an immediacy lacking in the mostly stereotypical writings of his fellow authors of pulp fiction. Many of his contemporaries attempted to incorporate similar theories into futuristic space operas without success.

HPL's more precise understanding of these principles allowed him to utilize the material in a manner that distinguished his work from other writers of supernatural literature and science fiction before and after his time. Although Lovecraft's tales are not always realistic or plausible, each contains a distinct sense of literary *verité*. This is doubly true for those narratives where the *Necronomicon* integrates intellectual reasoning with occultism, the magical text acting as a nexus which binds the disparate concepts of physics and witchcraft.

HPL's incorporation of the *Necronomicon* into a great number of his tales (and into stories he ghost wrote for others) aids in the synthesis of horror and science fiction into a distinct narrative style. Michel Houellebecq's description of this "new genre" (*H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* 46) concludes that Lovecraft's "precise, minutely detailed content, dense and theoretical, encyclopedic in its perspective, produces a hallucinatory and thrilling effect" (*HPL: AWAL* 74). HPL's writing style links past and present literary forms, particularly that of Gothic with contemporary literature.<sup>3</sup> The *Necronomicon* provides a literary bridge between Lovecraft's desire to terrify his readers with tales that still rely largely on the macabre atmospherics found in most supernatural fiction, and to enlighten them by the inclusion of the latest scientific theories and discoveries and daring explorations of the era. The spellbook's presence in fictive venues, where magic is examined and ultimately explained through the lens of current scientific reasoning, propels HPL's narratives beyond traditional Gothic models surfeited with vampires, werewolves, and phantasms who lurk in haunted houses, while maintaining a connection to the gloomy supernatural aesthetic established by Horace

Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Edgar Allan Poe, et al. From these antecedents, Donald R. Burleson contends that Lovecraft “derives . . . a lasting concern with tenebrous themes and a psychological frame of reference in which the fictive protagonist is tragically alone with overwhelming private horrors” (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study* 229), all of which culminates in HPL’s dismal concept of cosmicism, rendering the whole of mankind adrift and alone in an uncaring universe.

### ***“The Dark Universe” (999) of HPL***

In Lovecraft’s world, mankind exists in a precarious state, with various interdimensional monsters held at bay, yet never completely vanquished; the *Necronomicon* provides a key or barrier to their admittance to the earthly plane. Unlike the sort of science fiction, horror, or mystery stories where the narrative comes to a satisfactory conclusion, HPL’s tales leave readers in a heightened state of expectancy. Stories such as “The Dunwich Horror” and “The Call of Cthulhu” demonstrate this continuous Yin/Yang balance between good and evil. Lovecraft’s fiction illustrates a seemingly inevitable cosmic system of cyclic status quo. The last line of most HPL stories (often italicized) reveals the tale’s ultimate horror, and yet the reader is left assuming that this is but a temporary respite, that the *real* terror is yet to come. Even the most modern technological advances cannot save humanity.

Noting Lovecraft’s dichotomous style, Carl Freedman describes HPL as a writer of both “science fiction” and “horror fantasy” (*Critical Theory and Science Fiction* 17). Freedman concedes that Lovecraft’s brand of science fiction is “atypical” of the genre’s

more conventional definitions (*CTSF* 19), yet he concludes that stories like “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” “The Dunwich Horror,” and several others “earn the title of science fiction because their monstrosities have their origin not in the admitted supernatural but in vulgar pseudo-Darwinian notions of racial degeneration” (*CTSF* 17). In deference to Freedman, it is true that HPL’s concept of science fiction more closely resembles the work of Mary Shelley than that of Jules Verne. However, one must concede that Lovecraft’s horrors are generally based on complex principles exceeding that “vulgar” level Freedman describes, which the critic sees as little more than an inclusion of a scientific principle, not the gadgetry one normally associates with the genre. In the stories mentioned above, the standard science fiction tropes of rocket ships and bug-eyed monsters are cast aside in the interest of presenting the reader with the horrors engendered by *real* science. No matter how HPL’s protagonists attempt to comprehend the *outré* elements of their world, their ability to *reason* more often overwhelms their ability to interpolate and absorb such incomprehensible facts, driving them into a state of *unreason*.

There is much that is unreasonable in Lovecraft’s fiction. The positive law of human endeavor and accomplishment is superseded by a “natural law” (699) which produces incomprehensible forces. In this context of continuous opposition, the *Necronomicon* is emblematic of a modernity haunted by antiquity, allowing the past to intrude upon the present and to impinge upon mankind’s future. The concept is reflected in previously examined narratives like “The Dunwich Horror” and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, which feature a commingling of “science fiction” with the theme of “racial



degeneration” as Freedman notes. However this perfunctory appraisal of Lovecraft’s *oeuvre* circumvents the remarkable debt which science fiction owes to the creator of the *Necronomicon* and the Cthulhu Mythos.

In a very practical sense, the *Necronomicon* demonstrates how science is plagued by the superstitions of the past, representing a potential Pandora’s Box of horrors recognizable to early twentieth-century readers. Lovecraft’s narratives insist that within the wormy pages of the *Necronomicon* one may find unfathomable scientific and philosophical wisdom, bound up with the sweeping span of interdimensional conflict; a literal war between mankind and beings from “outside” (667) our limited scope of experience. Deconstructing these ideas, one might easily equate the spellbook’s contents with contextual modalities, such as political unrest, social inequality, and the types of inhuman suffering experienced during World War I and the Great Depression. The *Necronomicon* also reveals the limits of the djinni’s magic. The promises of a time or state of being where “death may die” (368) cannot overcome the cosmic indifference of Lovecraft’s austere, uncaring universe.

But understanding the limitations of the *grimoire*’s dark enchantments does little to quell the fears which *can* be known, that the terrors bound inside this prosaic object may be evoked to wipe out all life on this world. In this capacity, the *Necronomicon* becomes an historical relic with the ability to erase future generations who might foolishly use it. The spellbook operates in Lovecraft’s fiction as a prime example of the terrible and “forbidden” (218) knowledge stored in the text. The abominations conjured by such occult wisdom move from inward to outward as HPL’s tales progress; his later

stories focus less on heredity and social degeneration, concentrating instead on a larger, cosmic vision of humankind's utter insignificance. These narratives convey a horror which takes form as an almost inconceivable existential quotient—a Conrad-like division of darkness and light representing not good and evil, but an acknowledgment of humanity's fear of change, and the frightening anticipation of what may be learned through the further unveiling of scientific knowledge.

The following examination of “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Whisperer in Darkness,” and *At the Mountains of Madness* presents the reader with pertinent examples of Lovecraft's utilization of scientific knowledge and related historical material in his fiction. In particular, these tales reveal a dramatic shift in the fictive purpose of the *Necronomicon*, as if the author finally realized the futility of limiting the book to a collection of magical recipes. Although still prominently mentioned throughout each of these narratives, the literary element becomes an epistolary Cassandra predicting the far-reaching manifestations of scientific enquiry and scientific discovery, eventually evolving into an encyclopedic handbook for envisioning the downfall of civilization and humankind.

***“[T]he piecing together of disassociated knowledge” (355): Lovecraft's Science Fiction***

“The Call of Cthulhu” (1926)

Similar in construction to many of Lovecraft's other journalistically-structured narratives, “The Call of Cthulhu” features three separately titled, diary-like entries. Once again, a nameless, first-person narrator relates the events leading to the story's (and his

own) grim conclusion. “The Call of Cthulhu” is sometimes anthologized with the additional subtitle “found among the papers of the late Francis Wayland Thurston, of New York” (355), providing a semblance of authorial presence.

Thurston provides a detailed analysis of the items willed to him by his late granduncle, Professor George Gammell Angell, consisting of a collection of notes, photographs, and *objets d’art*. Angell died under mysterious circumstances, leaving instructions to destroy his research, but Thurston decides to investigate the validity of the professor’s strange claims. This leads to the tearing down of the narrator’s narrowly logical point of view, which is gradually replaced by a subtle paranoia inspired by a world unseen by the general public.

The narrative opens with *The Horror in Clay*, concerning a bas-relief sculpture, the most striking and significant of the items found among Professor Angell’s estate. The piece plays upon the “extravagant imagination” of grandnephew Thurston, reminding him of “an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature” complete with what appears to be a “pulpy, tentacled head surmount[ing] a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings” (357).

The sculpture was created by Henry Anthony Wilcox, an art student whom Thurston suspects of playing upon his granduncle’s peculiar interests. An interview with Wilcox proves otherwise. The artist informs Thurston of how he approached Professor Angell for advice with a translation of unusual words which came to him in a dream. Wilcox claims he heard the words “Cthulhu” and “R’lyeh” (359) and saw many weird images which he associated with those sounds. He carved examples of the images into

the bas-relief left with the professor. Wilcox recounts a dream of “great Cyclopean cities of titan blocks and sky-flung monoliths, all dripping with green ooze and sinister with latent horror” (359).

Thurston realizes that Professor Angell’s notes reached a pinnacle shortly before his granduncle’s death in March of 1925. During this period, Angell became interested in the dreams of “psychically hypersensitive” (357) individuals, several of whom he asked to record their observations. Thurston acknowledges finding various newspaper clippings from this time among the materials. These articles feature stories of unusual seismic activity throughout New England and tsunami conditions in the Pacific Ocean. Thurston fails to see a connection. The notes indicate a particular focus on the dreams of Wilcox in the days between 23 March and 2 April, during which time the artist fell into a delirious state. Simultaneously, Angell discovered a veritable outbreak of “outré [*sic*] mental illnesses” culminating in what appears to be similar cases of “group folly or mania” (357) around the world.

The second segment, titled *The Tale of Inspector Legrasse*, reveals Angell's growing concerns with the odd dream phenomenon, and his obsession with the word “Cthulhu.” Angell’s notes recall a particular meeting of the American Archaeological Society in 1908, where he met Inspector John Raymond Legrasse of the New Orleans Police Department. The inspector had asked for assistance in identifying a unique statue “captured some months before in the wooded swamps south of New Orleans during a raid on a supposed voodoo meeting” (361). Angell says that the object “represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head,” its face “a mass of

feelers,” and with “a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind.” The statue, like the similar bas relief carved decades later by Wilcox, exuded a “fearsome and unnatural malignancy” (362).

Another participant in the 1908 meeting tells Inspector Legrasse about his encounter with “a singular tribe or cult of degenerate Esquimaux [*sic*] whose religion, a curious form of devil-worship” had shocked him because of its “deliberate bloodthirstiness and repulsiveness.” The scientist claims that the tribe spoke the same phrase as the cult in Louisiana and worshipped a similar “fetish” (363).

Legrasse described his mission into the bayou, where he and his men found a group of individuals of “mixed-blood[s], and mentally aberrant type[s] . . . braying, bellowing, and writhing” while repeatedly chanting the phrase “*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*” (363). Legrasse interrogated several of the cultists and learned “the central idea of their loathsome faith.” He confides to the assembled scientists that the odd folk

worshipped . . . the Great Old Ones who lived ages before there were any men, and who came to the young world out of the sky. Those Old Ones were gone now, inside the earth and under the sea; but their dead bodies had told their secrets in dreams to the first men, who formed a cult which had never died . . . hidden in distant wastes and dark places all over the world until the time when the great priest Cthulhu, from his dark house in the mighty city of R'lyeh under the waters, should rise and bring the earth again beneath his sway. Some day he would call, when the stars were ready, and the secret cult would always be waiting to liberate him. (366)

From what he could ascertain, the inspector believed the statue to be the image of the cultists' god, “Cthulhu,” and the mysterious chant to mean something like “In his house

at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming” (366). Legrasse also discusses his interrogation of a cultist named “old Castro” (367), who revealed to him a particular passage from the *Necronomicon*:

That is not dead which can eternal lie,  
And with strange aeons even death may die. (368)

The inspector says he was told “the initiated might read [this] as they chose” (368), yet he offers no conjecture as to the phrase’s meaning.

Thurston interjects his thoughts on Angell’s notes, stating that when his investigation began, his skeptical nature had been “one of absolute materialism,” and that he wishes “*it still were*” (370) as he has come to suspect the validity of his granduncle’s wildest claims.

In the last section, *The Madness from the Sea*, Thurston opens the scope of his investigation into the so-called “Cthulhu Cult” (371). He locates a disturbing piece of news from the April 18, 1925, edition of the *Sydney Bulletin*, which tells of the lone survivor of a derelict ship found adrift in the Pacific Ocean near the coordinates 47° 9' S, 126° 43' W. The survivor is a Norwegian sailor named Gustaf Johansen. Johansen admits to having killed several men from a pirate vessel that attacked his ship, but refuses to comment on the fate of the other men aboard. Likewise, he will not speak of the weirdly shaped statue found clasped in his hands when he was rescued. The item is identical to the one Legrasse showed the scientists at the conference in 1908.

Thurston sees the obvious similarities between his granduncle’s research and the accompanying newspaper photo, depicting a “hideous stone image almost identical with

that which Legrasse had found” (371). He then travels to Oslo in the hope of interviewing Johansen, only to learn that the man has died under suspicious circumstances precisely matching the manner of Professor Angell’s death. Johansen’s widow provides Thurston with a manuscript her husband left behind. The sailor wrote the document in English (which his wife cannot understand) in order to protect her from the truth. Thurston reads the notes and learns that Johansen and his mates discovered a newly risen island in the Pacific—thrust up by seismic activity—which the Norwegian describes as “abnormal, non-Euclidian, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours” (376). The narrator interprets the location to be “the nightmare corpse-city of R’lyeh” (375). During an exploration of the island, several of the men discover a gigantic structure with a “monstrously carved portal” which they inadvertently open. From within wells up a “gelatinous green immensity” (377): the god Cthulhu.

Johansen’s manuscript reveals that the monster “cannot be described,” but the sailor’s recollection of “the green, sticky spawn of the stars” with its “flabby claws” and “awful squid-head” of “writhing feelers” allows Thurston to connect the man’s experience to the sculptural images he has seen. The terrified sailor’s best analogy for Cthulhu is of a “mountain” that “walked or stumbled” (377), from which most of the men could not escape. He indicates how he fled with one other man, and how they managed to power up their vessel and ram it into the monster. Cthulhu burst open with the “slushy nastiness as of a cloven sunfish,” then re-formed, seemingly unharmed. The sailor’s mate

died in a fit of madness brought on by the experience, and the Norwegian managed as best he could to navigate the ship back into normal trade channels.

Thurston's last entry states that "Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men." He fears he will eventually die just as his granduncle did, and proclaims "I know too much, and the cult still lives" (379). The only hopeful note to the fatal ending is that Cthulhu has, once more, been entombed in his watery grave, until the stars can again align in his favor.

The introductory paragraph of "The Call of Cthulhu" presents the reader with Francis Wayland Thurston's cautionary message concerning the fragile and temporary existence of humankind, in relation to the vastness of the universe. This message is a condensed, yet eloquent version of Lovecraft's concept of cosmicism:

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. (355)

The passage demonstrates how the various sciences could, potentially, jeopardize humanity's tenuous existence by revealing information more harmful than beneficial. The statement exemplifies HPL's continuing theme of *things mankind should not know*, a point equally well reflected by the kind of forbidden knowledge found in the *Necronomicon*.



HPL presents “The Call of Cthulhu” as a scholarly record of Francis Thurston’s research. The tale’s erudite tone quickly informs the reader not only of the narrator’s level of scholarship but also of his firsthand experience with scientific reasoning. By “piecing together” what at first seems a series of disparate facts, Thurston gains insight into the peculiar philosophical viewpoint shared by the followers of the Great Old Ones, depicted in the *Necronomicon* as infinitely wise, yet unconcerned with the plight of human beings. Such enlightenment does little to negate the fact that, like everyone else, Thurston is doomed and perilously adrift on the “black seas of infinity.”

Stripped of its imaginative trappings, “The Call of Cthulhu” depicts the overthrow of the mundane concepts of conventional existence, where Newtonian physics fall to the alternative theoretical models of the early twentieth century. Einstein biographer Walter Isaacson describes such a model as “a cosmos without strict causality or certainty,” an interpretation of reality which actually “spook[ed]” Einstein (*Einstein: His Life and Universe* 1). The *Necronomicon* exemplifies these dramatic shifts as clashes in scientific reasoning, philosophy, and ideologies. While maintaining a clinical tone throughout much of his fiction, Lovecraft takes no comfort in the changes wrought by such advances. He realizes that the curse of technological progress brings with it “an inevitable sequel of scientific and mechanical discovery,” but admits that he is “none the less sorry that it exists.” HPL believed that industrialism “destroyed beautiful things.” He saw this occur when the Georgian architecture he cherished was torn down, to be replaced with more factories and neighborhoods filled with examples of late Victorian and bland modernism. Lovecraft admitted that he “hate[d] it all” (*SL I* 315).

This eschewing of modernization comes through in “The Call of Cthulhu” with Thurston’s realization that no amount of knowledge of the physical world can save mankind from the “terrifying vistas of reality” (355), a point inspired by Lovecraft’s existential determination of humanity’s utter insignificance in the colossal scope of an ever-expanding universe.<sup>4</sup> The *Necronomicon* reifies this message by functioning as the conduit between an horrific present and the more terrifying world to come, should the Great Old Ones reestablish their foothold.

HPL remarked to one correspondent just how early in life he had determined the basis of his personal philosophy:

By my thirteenth birthday I was thoroughly impressed with man’s impermanence and insignificance, and by my seventeenth . . . had formed in all essential particulars my present pessimistic cosmic views. The futility of all existence began to impress and oppress me; and my references to human progress, formerly hopeful, began to decline in enthusiasm. (*SL I* 302)

Throughout Lovecraft’s fictions, one finds narrators who share his pessimism. Even an admitted materialist like Thurston understands that the average person would probably “flee” from the greatest of scientific insights or “go mad from the revelation.” The *Necronomicon* foretells these facts—it inspires madness simply by reading its pages—demonstrating HPL’s low opinion of the general intelligence of his fellow citizens, who existed, as he perceives them through his narrator, on a “placid island of ignorance” (355), blissfully unaware of “the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and in space” (375). Lovecraft repeatedly depicts such a reality, one filled with chaotic forces (like

those which may be evoked by the *Necronomicon*) beyond the control or comprehension of the average individual.

“The Call of Cthulhu” abounds with similar forces, both natural and supernatural. Lovecraft turns genuine occurrences, such as the earthquake felt throughout New England on 28 February, 1925<sup>5</sup>, into the “earth tremors of March 1st” (373) mentioned in his narrative. Including such factual details about natural phenomena (often documented in his narratives via newspaper and magazine articles) vouchsafes HPL’s hoax-like ideals for his fictional creations, leading the reader to seriously consider the other, more far-fetched aspects of his tales. The seismic activity, tsunamis, and mass hysteria mentioned in the story are provable facts, so why not the heaving up of the lost realm of “R’lyeh” (359), foreseen in the pages of the *Necronomicon*, or the worship of the proto-human god “Cthulhu” (358), mentioned in its fabled pages?

Robert M. Price sees Lovecraft’s use of notes, clippings, and current events as a means of “buttress[ing]” the fear “that the world is coming to an end,” which generates an “apocalyptic” (*H. P. Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos* 47) tone. This eschatological motif echoes through the various warnings found in the *Necronomicon*, predicting the eventual return of Cthulhu and his interstellar cousins, the Great Old Ones, “who lived ages before there were any men, and who came to the young world out of the sky” (366). Critics like Jason Colavito believe Lovecraft’s fiction responsible for inspiring the concept of ancient astronauts (more fully discussed later in this chapter). The idea that mankind was visited by beings from *beyond* (as in *from outer space* or simply *from outside the limits of human experience*) make up a large portion of what constitutes the

religions, legends, and myth cycles of nearly every culture, and HPL adds similar elements among his multifaceted conception of the *Necronomicon*. In the *Necronomicon*, Lovecraft establishes a point of equilibrium between the coming of such “gods.” Whether Cthulhu, Christ, or Quetzalcoatl, each one represents an extraterrestrial visitation, i.e., having arrived on earth from *out of the sky*. And like many other deities destined to return to life, the *Necronomicon* describes Cthulhu as lying in a death-like sleep while awaiting resurrection. This is a potential “second coming” more terrifying than even William Butler Yeats imagined.

In all fairness to the poet, Lovecraft acknowledges that his own “rough beast” simply “cannot be described,” that “there is no language for such abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order” (377). Critics like Edmund Wilson describe HPL’s stilted literary mannerisms as “second-rate” writing (*Classics and Commercials* 289), and believe “[t]he only real horror in most of [his] fictions is the horror of bad taste” (*C and C* 288). Peter Cannon argues that Lovecraft “does find the language to do Cthulhu justice, invoking classical myth and modern painting” (*H. P. Lovecraft* 66) to connote to the reader what the human mind cannot, otherwise, readily comprehend. S. T. Joshi compliments the story’s “rich texture” and “its complexity of structure and multitude of narrative voices,” describing how “the absolute perfection of its style—sober and clinical at the outset, but reaching at the end heights of prose-poetic horror that attain an almost epic grandeur” conveys “an assurance and maturity lacking in much of [HPL’s] early work” (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* 399).

What Joshi and others have perceived as a lack of maturity comes from Lovecraft's tendency to focus more on formal construction, even when such narratorial rigidity jeopardizes the fictive outcome. HPL's penchant for trying to describe the indescribable, as in "The Dunwich Horror," where the dying body of Wilbur Whateley is depicted as "teratologically fabulous," a thing of "sheer phantasy" resembling "prehistoric . . . saurians" (648-49) or "The Call of Cthulhu" when Wilcox, and other dreamers, convey the nightmare image of a "gigantic nameless thing" (360). This failure of *telling* instead of *showing* apparently derives from Lovecraft's compulsion to explain every aspect of his characters' encounters with the horrific, rendered in a verbose, yet clinical manner. Where other writers, relying less on formula, instill greater fear through mood (sometimes merely hinting at what *might* be lurking in the shadows), HPL's checklists of monstrous details, including the colossal predictions found in the forbidden lore of the *Necronomicon*, produce an interesting sense of *What if?* but little in the way of real frights.

Still, this ability to explain what should not be known, stemming from Lovecraft's cosmic philosophy and scientific principles, provides his writing with its lasting power. For instance, connecting the famous couplet quoted from the *Necronomicon*,

That is not dead which can eternal lie,  
And with strange aeons even death may die (368)

with the passage "In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming" (363), produces an understanding of great Cthulhu's dualistic state of being. Both the verse and descriptive passage provide a subtle, yet significant symbol for a physical condition

understandable only through quantum mechanics. Joshi comments on how “profoundly we have Einstein, Planck, and Heisenberg recurring in significant fashion in [Lovecraft’s] later fiction” (*An Epicure in the Terrible* 22). Consider the paradoxical bipolarity of the strange couplet’s message—of being alive or dead, known and unknown—in relation to a theoretical model such as that of Schrödinger’s Cat.<sup>6</sup> The instability of reality prevails, based on the simple fact that one can only gauge an object’s state of existence during any given moment in time, through observation. One sees the true complexity of Lovecraft’s vision via his understanding of the *relative* aspects of theoretical reality and in his criticism of such ideas:

This hypocrisy, of course, has to do with the new mysticism or neo-metaphysics bred of the advertised uncertainties of recent science—Einstein, the quantum theory, and the resolution of matter into force. Although these new turns of science don’t really mean a thing in relation to the myth of cosmic consciousness and teleology, a new brood of despairing and horrified moderns is seizing on the doubt of all positive knowledge which they imply; and is deducing therefrom that, *since nothing is true, therefore anything can be true.* (*SL III* 53)

The motif of shattering preexisting scientific concepts runs throughout HPL’s fiction. If newly invented physical models can cast down Newton’s laws, then *probability* dictates infinite possibilities—even the improbable return of an interstellar god, and the existence of a spellbook whose words can make such resurrections possible.

In Lovecraft’s later fiction, the purpose of the *Necronomicon* is more fully realized. The spellbook seemingly reveals future events. The *grimoire* also functions as a means for interpreting the motives of the extraterrestrial beings that colonized the earth as well as those entities continuously attempting to break through the barrier between

their dimension and that of mankind. Lengthier narratives, such as “The Whisperer in Darkness” and *At the Mountains of Madness*, show the ultimate phase of the *Necronomicon* as chronicle and encyclopedia. Although the few direct quotations from the *Necronomicon* exacerbate the “lack of overt clarity” and “disguise [its] esoteric truth from outsiders by veiling it in symbolism” (Price 145), what Lovecraft does reveal, through his protagonists’ erudition and suppositions, provides useful clues for interpretation. The spellbook allows the reader to comprehend the author’s inspirations in an historical context, as well as providing a lens through which to observe the continuing theme of scientific reasoning and discovery so important to Lovecraft’s more mature efforts.

#### “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1930)

Lovecraft’s epistolary narrative, “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1931), features a professor of literature who tries to put to rest local legends concerning a “hidden race of monstrous beings” (670) from outer space, called the “*Mi-Go*” (672), and a reclusive scholar confronted with an infestation of such aliens on his property in rural Vermont. The *Mi-Go* function, much like Great Cthulhu in “The Call of Cthulhu” and the Elder Race mentioned in *At the Mountains of Madness*, as a species of “voyagers from other worlds” (673) whose existence predates the advent of *homo sapiens*.

Albert Wilmarth, the literature professor, reads newspaper accounts of anomalous forms seen in the “Vermont floods” (668) resulting from a violent series of storms during the spring of 1927. A dialogue is soon established between individuals who have seen

the creatures or who are familiar with the “ancient folklore” (669) surrounding them. The Mi-Go are vividly described as “pinkish things about five feet long; with crustaceous bodies bearing vast pairs of dorsal fins or membraneous [*sic*] wings and several sets of articulated limbs, and with a sort of convoluted ellipsoid, covered with multitudes of very short antennae, where a head would ordinarily be” (669). The letter columns soon establish conjectural evidence of a long-standing suspicion that an otherworldly presence exists in the farthest reaches of Vermont. Wilmarth interprets the information as a “cycle of whispered legend” (669), and enters the dialogue initially as a folklore expert attempting to assuage the writers’ collective fears. He assures them “that all the myths were of a well-known pattern common to most of mankind and determined by early phases of imaginative experience which always produced the same type of delusion” (672). But subsequent events demonstrate otherwise.

Wilmarth continues to deconstruct the local folklore in his editorials. In time, Henry Wentworth Akeley, a reclusive Vermont farmer and amateur anthropologist, joins the debate, and later contacts Wilmarth privately. Akeley admits that he has not seen the bodies of the creatures caught in the flood waters, yet proclaims that he has “*certain evidence*” (675) that proves their existence, noting places in the surrounding countryside where he has encountered signs of their habitation. He offers to loan Wilmarth a wax cylinder recording that seems to capture “buzzing voices in imitation of human speech” (671) made by the Mi-Go. Akeley demonstrates the depths of his peculiar knowledge to Wilmarth by drawing a connection between their academic pursuits: “I suppose you know all about the fearful myths antedating the coming of man to the earth—the Yog-



Sothoth and Cthulhu cycles—which are hinted at in the *Necronomicon*” (677). The *Necronomicon* enters the narrative, initially, as a tool for interpreting the “unknown hieroglyphics” (676) on a peculiar black stone in Akeley’s possession—an item of great ritual importance to the Mi-Go.

The correspondence between Akeley and Wilmarth continues as the recluse attempts to convince the professor of the veracity of his suspicions concerning the true purpose of the space beings. Further sightings ensue, and Akeley eventually includes photographs of strange footprints bordering his land. Wilmarth next receives and listens to the strange recording of the buzzing voices. Akeley also sends Wilmarth the black stone, but the latter item never arrives, apparently intercepted in transit by agents of the Mi-Go. Soon Akeley writes to say that his mountain homestead has become the focus of attacks by both aliens and their human helpers. He informs Wilmarth that the Mi-Go “will either kill me *or take me off the earth to where they come from*” (676). The attacks increase in intensity until Wilmarth fears for his Akeley’s life.

Wilmarth unexpectedly receives a typed letter from Akeley (a significant clue since all of his previous letters have been handwritten) that reveals a change of heart. Akeley confides significant new details concerning the Mi-Go’s strange agenda, including their desire to establish “an exchange of knowledge” whereby they might achieve “a satisfactory *modus vivendi*,” and most importantly that the idea of the creatures’ wish “to *enslave or degrade* mankind is ridiculous” (695). Akeley asks Wilmarth to visit him in person and to bring with him all record of their correspondence,

opining that “to come close to the nighted and abysmal secrets of the infinite and the ultimate—surely such a thing [is] worth the risk of one’s life, soul, and sanity!” (699).

With mounting trepidation, Wilmarth agrees to visit Akeley. He journeys to Vermont, where he is met by a friend of Akeley’s named Mr. Noyes, who is in reality under the Mi-Go’s control. Noyes explains that the old man has taken ill and could not come in person. During the drive from the train station, Wilmarth realizes just how remote Akeley’s home is. Simultaneously he experiences a “sense of constraint and foreboding” caused by “a vague quality in the hill-crowded countryside with its towering, threatening, close-pressing green and granite slopes hint[ing] at obscure secrets and immemorial survivals which might or might not be hostile to mankind” (701). Shortly after his arrival, Wilmarth enters the farmhouse and finds Akeley in a darkened room, where the old man’s asthma confines him to a chair. Akeley can only speak in a rasping whisper. Wilmarth is shocked to see his host’s condition. The folklorist perceives in Akeley’s face “something more than asthma behind [his] strained, rigid, immobile expression and unwinking glassy stare” (706). After a long night of discussion, Akeley confides that “Einstein is wrong, and that certain objects and forces *can* move with a velocity greater than that of light,” and he appears thrilled at the prospect of going “backward and forward in time” where he will “actually *see* and *feel* the earth of remote past and future epochs” (707).

Reeling from Akeley’s comments concerning how badly modern physicists have misinterpreted their observations and the old man’s revelations about the Mi-Go’s dark work of “nighted Yuggoth” (716), Wilmarth cannot sleep. His newly acquired wisdom

makes him apprehensive, and he decides to leave the house and make his way back to civilization. On his way down the stairs, Wilmarth overhears voices which sound like those on the wax recording. The fragmented pieces of conversation cause him to fear for his life and Akeley's. He enters the old man's study, but Akeley is gone. Wilmarth finds only a pile of discarded clothing, a mask, and a pair of gloves. The latter items were "perfect to the last, subtle detail of microscopic resemblance—or identity . . . the face and hands of Henry Wentworth Akeley" (722). Wilmarth realizes he has not been speaking to Henry Wentworth Akeley, but to his disembodied consciousness, Akeley's brain having been surgically removed and placed in a special cylinder so that it may be transported to "Yuggoth." Wilmarth steals Akeley's car and flees.

Like many of Lovecraft's longer, more mature narratives, "The Whisperer in Darkness" presents a series of informational exchanges in the form of articles, letters, photographs, and recordings, similar to the materials inherited by the narrator in "The Call of Cthulhu." Part of the unsettling nature of HPL's work derives from the reader's interpretation of the varied sources of information, and the uncertainty of deciding if what she/he reads is fact or fiction. In Lovecraft's tales, one usually finds both in equal measure. The incorporation of scientific discoveries, theories, and historical events, alongside HPL's own invented ancient civilizations, strange gods, and book of arcane wisdom, reverberate throughout his texts, challenging the reader to determine the veracity of each story, independently from every other in his *oeuvre*.

Lovecraft's "bookish" (Davis 57) protagonists "find any risks worth running for the sake of knowledge" (677). They almost always encounter material (textual or

otherwise) which they assume to be misinterpreted legends or folklore, only to discover that even myths can have a scientific basis, although such knowledge is often “too much for sanity to bear” (709). In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” these information systems—books, letters, et al—transmit knowledge as well as distort it. In particular the exchange of letters between Wilmarth and Akeley devolve from an open sharing of information to a state of subterfuge as the beings controlling the old recluse attempt to lure Wilmarth away from the city, where he is relatively safe from their machinations. The documentation, and its connection to the *Necronomicon*, highlights the disproportionate sense of Lovecraft’s cosmic horror, which he sees as continually threatening mankind. The dread of that horror’s revelation perpetuates a need to limit one’s understanding of the greater reality, of the unvarnished truth about the existence of “ancient and elaborate alliances” (685) between certain peoples and “outside entities” (700). Otherwise, humanity could potentially be destroyed by the hideous significance of the paranoia-inspiring knowledge that “*there are non-human creatures watching us all the time*” (676).

“The Whisperer in Darkness” posits a wide range of conspiratorial and paranoiac ideas capable of unhinging the mind of its protagonist. Behind each separate element, be it the New England folktales of haunted woodlands, the extraterrestrial beings which inspired such legends, or the understanding of exactly *what* those creatures are and *where* they come from, lurks a single source: the *Necronomicon*.

Robert M. Price (evoking Jacques Derrida) believes one might as easily interpret the name *Necronomicon* to mean the “death of the book” instead of “the book of the dead” as other critics have defined it.<sup>7</sup> Price sees the *Necronomicon* as an intertextual artifact,

“[t]he Book which is said to be the anti-Book, the book that brings oblivion and madness in the name of a knowledge that is knowledge of Nothing, and thus no knowledge at all, is, ironically, the paradigm case of all books, the most bookish of books, the most textual of texts” (*The Necronomicon* vii). In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” the *Necronomicon* extols Price’s observation, existing in the unusual state of being present in name, yet minus the lengthy quotations found in “The Dunwich Horror” and “The Festival.” Once again, HPL transforms the malevolent tome from spellbook, to scientific reference, and then to cultural artifact, where it draws together human history with that of an alien species “not native to this earth” (671).

Through one of Akeley’s letters, Wilmarth reads the “cosmic narrative” of “unutterable horror” containing a list of the Mi-Go’s words, overheard by the farmer, including “Yuggoth, Great Cthulhu, Tsathoggua,” and other gods and place names associated with the Cthulhu Mythos. Wilmarth knows these names from his previous research and is “drawn back through nameless aeons and inconceivable dimensions to worlds of elder, outer entity at which the crazed author of the *Necronomicon* had only guessed in the vaguest way” (680). In this passage, Lovecraft seems to indicate that the author of the *Necronomicon*, Abdul Alhazred, wrote of things which he could not fully comprehend, the implication being that only through an understanding of modern science can one correctly interpret the secrets rendered onto the spellbook’s ancient pages.

Since previous tales such as “The Dunwich Horror” and “The Call of Cthulhu” indicate the existence of entities from “far outside even the Einsteinian space-time continuum or greater known cosmos” (685), and of human cults who also worship

Cthulhu (and the other deities in Lovecraft's pantheon), one may draw an historical connection between the two. "The Whisperer in Darkness" demonstrates how the existence of the colonizing Mi-Go is "entangled with the destinies of our own earth." As in many of HPL's other narratives, the *Necronomicon* reveals "secrets deeper . . . than any formerly known to man" (681), that the development of human beings on earth coincides with that of a totally alien, yet incomparably intelligent, race from another world, in a "parallel evolution" (696).

Akeley describes the Mi-Go as "things com[ing] from another planet" with the ability "to live in interstellar space and fly through it" (676), a trait which some critics maintain Lovecraft borrowed from H. G. Wells<sup>8</sup>. Akeley identifies this far-off world as the "dark planet Yuggoth, at the rim of the solar system" (685), associated in the story with "Pluto" (716). The Mi-Go's home is a forbidding place, originally mentioned in the *Necronomicon* and known to Alhazred *before* modern astronomers found evidence of the planet's existence. Lovecraft's incorporation of the discovery of Pluto (discovered in 1930 by Clyde Tombaugh), lends his narrative an additional level of verisimilitude. Such inclusions help prop up claims that reading the *Necronomicon* reveals unprecedented knowledge of occult wisdom. It is little wonder that HPL was often asked if the shadowy text was indeed genuine, or perhaps based on some antique magical reference<sup>9</sup>.

David A. Oakes discusses Lovecraft's ability to "change the consensus reality" in his fiction, specifically in "The Whisperer in Darkness" where the characters must use the strongest rhetorical evidence in order to establish a sense of "credulity and reliability" (*Science and Destabilization in the Modern American Gothic* 47). The continually

mounting weight of irrefutable scientific evidence, the Vermont floods, the genuine folklore, the discovery of Pluto, and the subtle mention of the “new-fangled daylight time schemes” (700), and Lovecraft’s rational presentation of that evidence, create a milieu that is, at least, probable if not always believable.

This use of an evidentiary style, mixed with current events and scientific exploration, while generally a part of all HPL’s fiction, is most tightly focused in his novel *At the Mountains of Madness*.

*At the Mountains of Madness* (1931)

The novel employs a structure like that of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902), told in the present tense but referring to past events. Lovecraft described *At the Mountains of Madness* as “a hellish legacy from elder aeons amidst the eternal icy peaks of the polar waste” (*Lord of a Visible World* 261). Its twelve chapters chronicle an Antarctic research expedition, documenting the various scientific techniques used by the team and their amazing discovery of a race of ancient beings from another world—the Elder Things—literally *frozen* in suspended animation. The narrator hints at a greater, more frightening evil connected to myths mentioned in the *Necronomicon* that still lurks in “that treacherous and sinister white immensity of tempests and unfathomed mysteries” (731). Thus the tale also serves as a warning against future Antarctic exploration.

The narrator, a geologist named Dyer, begins with a plea that “men of science” (723) reconsider their plans for further exploration of the Antarctic continent. Dyer offers “hitherto withheld” photographs, but fears others will see the evidence as “clever

fakery” (723). To provide the most convincing argument, he recounts his leadership of a previously ill-fated expedition, sponsored by various departments of Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts.

Dyer identifies the members of his team, including engineer Professor Frank H. Pabodie, the creator of a special drilling apparatus; Lake, a biologist; Atwood, a physicist *cum* meteorologist, and several graduate students. Of the latter contingent, Danforth and Gedney provided the most useful skills as they could also pilot aircraft and operate the radio equipment.

Dyer compiles a detailed inventory of the expedition’s equipment and personnel, noting such things as the four “Dornier aëroplanes”<sup>10</sup> (724) constructed to withstand the Antarctic’s stultifying cold, and the plethora of other necessities such as special tents, clothing, communications and cooking gear, sledges, dogs, and more.

The expedition set sail on September 2, 1930, with two ships: the *Arkham* and the *Miskatonic*. After crossing through the Panama Canal, the vessels made their way toward the Antarctic Circle, where they observed the first icebergs and the tell-tale “land blink” (726), indicating their relative proximity to the Antarctic continent. Dyer recalls the “vivid and fancy-stirring” scene as the various ice shelves and snow-covered peaks were revealed. The images reminded him “of the strange and disturbing . . . paintings of Nicholas Roerich, and of the stranger and more disturbing descriptions of the evilly fabled plateau of Leng which occur in the dreaded *Necronomicon*.” The scientist lamented that he had “ever looked into that monstrous book at the college library” (726).



On November 9, 1930, the ships anchored in the Ross Sea. By the 21st the men completed their assembly of the aircraft and began the first stages of the expedition with flights to the Beardmore Glacier. Pabodie's drilling equipment proved successful. The first experimental boreholes brought up fossil evidence of prehistoric plant life and the remains of ancient gastropods. Lake made much of odd patterns he found in pieces of sedimentary rock, believing them to be evidence of "the region's primordial history" (729). The fossils seemed to hint at a formerly unknown species. Dyer thought the markings were a natural phenomenon created during the formation of that particular geological layer. Lake, however, insisted that the striations indicated a more highly evolved type of animal, going so far as to postulate that the markings resembled a kind of footprint.

Lake and Dyer disagreed over the probability of such a creature's existence and over the purpose of the expedition as a whole. This schism led to Lake dividing the team and setting out on his own. He took with him several of the scientists and students who were willing to accompany him in search of definitive proof that might support his supposition.

Dyer and the rest of the team continued with the original plan, until they received a series of radio transmissions from Lake's party: the transmissions altered the scope of the expedition. While moving from one site to another, Lake and his men located better fossil evidence proving his claim, and they glimpsed a phenomenal mountain range in the distance which could potentially "equal [the] Himalayas." He described the peaks as

“black and bare of snow” (731), which indicated their enormous height, and the incredibly torrential atmospheric conditions that surrounded their uppermost reaches.

One of the planes used by Lake’s party crashed in the foothills of the gigantic mountain range, but he reported no casualties. Lake’s team used this location as a base camp. Regular radio reports reiterated the amazing size of the mountains. Lake claimed that “Everest [was] out of the running” (732). He emptied the remaining plane of equipment and attempted to find a pass through the perilous range. Poor weather conditions interfered with the mission. His reports mentioned a similarity between odd geological structures attached to the highest peaks, which appeared to be “low square blocks with exactly vertical sides, and rectangular lines of low vertical ramparts” (732), reminding Dyer of the same Roerich paintings.

Excited over Lake’s discovery, Dyer and Pabodie acknowledged their intent to scrap the original plan and join Lake’s group, as soon as weather conditions permitted. Dyer made arrangements for the best possible dispersal of supplies, then released an edited version of the news to the general public via radio by the ships still anchored off the coast.

Communications with Lake and his men continued as Dyer and Pabodie hurried to complete their preparations. Later, new radio messages arrived telling of a very unusual discovery. Using Padodie’s drilling apparatus, Lake and his men located a cave. After using dynamite to widen the entrance, the team made their way inside where they found what appeared to be the broken pieces of fossilized plants and gastropods. Included amid the detritus were odd bits of soapstone, measuring “six inches across and

an inch and a half thick, wholly unlike any visible local formation.” Lake observed that these objects were “[s]haped like five-pointed stars with tips broken off” (737), but he assumed the damage due to natural, geological forces.

Already excited by such extraordinary discoveries, Dyer and Pabodie were astounded by Lake’s next transmission. The geologist radioed back a report of the “most significant find,” which he described as a

barrel-shaped fossil of wholly unknown nature; probably vegetable unless overgrown specimen of unknown marine radiata. Tissue evidently preserved by mineral salts. Tough as leather, but astonishing flexibility retained in places. . . . Six feet end to end, 3,5 feet central diameter, tapering to 1 foot at each end. Like a barrel with five bulging ridges in place of staves. . . . In furrows between ridges are curious growths. Combs or wings that fold up and spread out like fans. . . . Arrangement reminds one of certain monsters of primal myth, especially fabled Elder Things in *Necronomicon*. (737)

Lake continued his examination of the “monsters” and concluded that even as ridiculously ancient as the creatures must be, it was their ancestors who had made the striated markings found in the original rock samples.

More of Lake’s messages arrived at regular intervals, describing how he and his men had located additional examples of the barrel-shaped “Elder Things.” Eventually, Lake dissected one of the more damaged specimens and noted the “anomalous tissue.” The find confirmed his suspicions that

[e]xisting biology would have to be wholly revised, for this thing was no product of any cell-growth science knows about. . . . and despite an age of perhaps forty million years the internal organs were wholly intact. The leathery, underteriorative, and almost indestructible quality was an inherent attribute of the thing’s form of organisation; and pertained to some palaeogeon cycle of invertebrate evolution utterly beyond our powers of speculation. (741)

Dyer congratulated Lake on his discoveries and on the latter's intuitive assumptions concerning the importance of the initial find. Lake set his men to fortifying the camp against another fierce storm, and both teams broke radio contact, intending to rest, then combine forces the next day.

The storm seemingly knocked out communication between the two teams. When no further word arrived from Lake or his men, Dyer became concerned and, accompanied by his graduate student Danforth, flew to Lake's location. Both men were stunned by what they saw. The camp had been totally destroyed. Dyer and Danforth found the torn bodies of men and dogs, accounting for all except Gedney. They also located several of the barrel-shaped Elder Things buried in the snow, but none of the completely formed specimens described by Lake. Dyer notes that some of the sledges and other equipment seemed to be missing but assumed that the items had been blown away during the storm. Neither of the men understood how such a catastrophe occurred nor why the men would have taken the time to rebury the monstrous beings while a storm raged around them.

Dyer and Danforth took their plane up in an effort to locate Gedney but saw no sign except a line of tracks, possibly made by one of the windblown sledges. Danforth piloted the craft further into the incredible mountain range which Lake had described. Here they perceived a pass. They soon landed on a high plateau where they saw the odd rock formations Lake had mentioned in one of his radio transmissions. Inconceivably, the men realized they had found the remains of an ancient city. An impromptu exploration ensued, and Dyer and Danforth found their way down into a tunnel complex

which had been carved into the mountains millennia ago—a network of streets communicating with the varied areas of the elaborate metropolis.

Observing the vestiges of bas-reliefs, sculptures, and barely visible painted images, Dyer and Danforth deciphered a rough history of the city's former inhabitants, the Elder Things, and a slave race of malevolent, protoplasmic creatures called "shoggoths" (771), known to Dyer and Danforth from their reading of the *Necronomicon*. From what they could interpret, the shoggoths had rebelled against the Elder Things and sent them fleeing into the sea.

Dyer and Danforth eventually located one of the missing sledges and observed that it had been dragged into the ruined complex. They found the body of Gedney tied to the sledge, along with an array of books, writing utensils, manuals, and canned foodstuffs. They surmised that Lake had inadvertently awakened several of the creatures from their frozen sleep, and that the Elder Things, working in a similar manner as Lake and his team, had attempted to dissect several of the men and dogs out of scientific curiosity. The beings then made their way to the ruined city, dragging the sledge, which they had filled with necessary supplies.

Although consumed by their fear that they might encounter the Elder Things, Dyer and Danforth pushed on with their explorations—their desire to learn outweighing their mounting sense of dread. In their further search of the city, the pair came upon the beheaded bodies of the Elder Things whom Lake and his party had accidentally reanimated. They guessed that the creatures had been killed by the shoggoths, whose "work ought not to be seen by human beings or portrayed by any beings" (797). Dyer

describes how he and Danforth saw the evil, rushing mass of the protoplasmic jelly which had killed the Elder beings and realized that the shoggoths continued to haunt the ruined structures.

The explorers escaped to their plane, and flew away from their horrific discoveries. Danforth was badly shaken by something else he saw—something so terrible he refused to describe it to Dyer. The novel concludes with Dyer’s earnest appeal to stop the next scheduled Antarctic venture—the Starkweather-Moore expedition—from ever again approaching those “mountains of madness” (723).

S. T. Joshi calls *At the Mountains of Madness* the “greatest of [Lovecraft’s] attempts to fuse weird fiction and science fiction” (*HPL: AL* 489), and considers it the “best of Lovecraft’s short novels” (723). Joshi’s thorough analyses of HPL’s life and works provides a comprehensive understanding of the writer’s varied passions and influences, including his boyhood love for Antarctic conquest and continued fascination with scientific discoveries. Lovecraft described to several correspondents how he kept “treatises” (*SL I* 37) on several such expeditions. The documents stood HPL in good stead as research materials, while helping him create the novel’s introductory passages and technical descriptions, detailing the progress of his explorers’ attempts to reach the interior of the sub-polar region. *At the Mountains of Madness* conveys the magnitude and wonder of such accomplishments and helps set the stage for the scientific discoveries and horrific details soon to follow.

In the *Necronomicon*, Lovecraft depicts a “pre-terrestrial life” (770) possessing a “keen sensitiveness” (741), as highly developed as that of human beings. His conception

of a more sophisticated form of alien anticipates the shape-shifting *Thing*<sup>11</sup> of John W. Campbell's short story, "Who Goes There?" (1938). Campbell's tale features an interstellar monster, buried in the Antarctic ice, unwittingly brought to life by a team of scientists. While some argue for Campbell's ingenuity, "Who Goes There?" is undoubtedly a riff on Lovecraft's novel. At the time "Who Goes There?" was published in *Astounding Science Fiction*, Campbell himself was the editor. *Astounding* first published *At the Mountains of Madness* in 1936 as a three-issue serialization, and Campbell's story (written under the pen name Don A. Stuart) appeared two years later. The theme has continued into modern fictive venues, often employed by comic artists, filmmakers, and novelists.

The epic scope of *At the Mountains of Madness* reveals the extensive range of Lovecraft's historical and scientific knowledge, specifically his grasp of polar exploration, geology, archaeology, and anthropology. HPL's inclusion of the names of "Shackleton, Amundsen, Scott, and Byrd" (724) and his notation of areas they explored seems a stereotypical ploy for adventure tales. But the author demonstrates his serious understanding of the topic in his treatment of conceptual ideas concerning such expeditions. Lovecraft's narrator mentions the theory of "continental drift"<sup>12</sup> (774), which remained unverified until 1958, describes specialized drilling techniques for boring through ice and rock, and includes the use of "aëroplanes" (724) instead of sled teams to set up supply camps. Such detail creates an immediacy relevant to the times and a sense of impressive accuracy. Horrors aside, one cannot help but note the novel's heroic sense of adventure. The narrative's combination of scientifically-minded

inquisitiveness with the creeping dread found in the best horror fiction continuously builds throughout its twelve chapters. The novel culminates, as do so many of Lovecraft's fictions, with a cautionary reflection that human beings have good reason to fear what they do not understand (and what they shall never comprehend)—the “utter objective embodiment of [a]. . . ‘thing that should not be’” (802).

But beyond HPL's obvious reliance upon previous modes of story construction in *At the Mountains of Madness*, he envisions a vista of extremes: of comfort and cold, of light and darkness, of rationality and insanity. In this realm where “madness” defines not only the aberrant thoughts of men, but also the irrefutable evidence that the world is not as it seems, that so-called scientific understanding has misunderstood reality. *At the Mountains of Madness*, like “The Call of Cthulhu,” and “The Whisperer in Darkness,” presents a systematized investigation of science's erroneous conclusions, imagining in the Antarctic continent the hopeful possibility of a land of “untrodden wonder” (732), only to find “a hideously amplified world of lurking horrors” (744), a place fully predicted by the *Necronomicon*, where “something—chronology, scientific theory, or our consciousness—[is] woefully awry” (759).

Lovecraft's rational protagonists value their ability to reason, deduce, infer, and produce logical assumptions, even when interpreting subjective materials like spellbooks and folklore. As these abilities break down, the characters face challenging dichotomies like those David A. Oakes calls “conflicting models of the universe: order and chaos” (*Science and Destabilization in the Modern American Gothic* 50), which, consequently, fill them with dread. In “H. P. Lovecraft and the anatomy of the nothingness: The



Cthulhu Mythos,” Massimo Berruti points out that HPL “does not fear madness as the result of man’s mere *obtaining knowledge of the truth*, rather as the outcome on the characters’ psychology both of the acquisition of that knowledge, and of the *bringing up to date of the horror* that knowledge carries in itself” (*Semiotica* 375). In the narrative, Dyer’s remark concerning the “primal myths about Great Old Ones who filtered down from the stars” (742) builds upon the types of “myth-cycles” (723) established in tales featuring the *Necronomicon*. These “myth[s]” reveal the kind of “*truth*” Berruti speaks of, the maddening conclusion that the Elder Things “concocted earth-life as a joke or mistake” (742), the kind of contradictory understanding of reality which Dyer insists “we dared not tell” (747).

The reader learns that the *Necronomicon* documents dark, ancient secrets, such as the existence of the otherworldly Elder Things seen in *At the Mountains of Madness* and the mind-stealing Mi-Go mentioned in “The Whisperer in Darkness.” The spellbook also hints at the lurking presence of hitherto unknown monstrosities, such as “surviving elder horrors” (754) like the shoggoths encountered in the Antarctic waste. Donald R. Burleson notes this “continuity between the present and a past which should be dead” (*H. P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study* 170) as one of Lovecraft’s central themes. Here again, HPL employs the *Necronomicon* as an historical document that conveys occult wisdom of a nearly forgotten time. The protagonists of *At the Mountains of Madness* are as equally terrified of the terrifying revelation of “surviving” evil as those of any other of Lovecraft’s narratives. But Dyer and Danforth differ with their interpretation of the

*grimoire*'s predictions and its supposed myths and legends through a more current understanding of scientific models.

One finds among the *Necronomicon*'s relevant predictions several descriptions of the Elder Things' fabulous city, displaying "perversions of geometrical laws" (746) noted by Dyer as a "Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or to human imagination" (746). These non-Euclidean constructions mirror similar ruins mentioned in "The Call of Cthulhu," and they tie in with episodes of "prehistoric folklore" (739) that match several theories in vogue during HPL's lifetime. Joshi draws the connection between Lovecraft's inclusion of references to "Atlantis and Lemuria"<sup>13</sup> (759), and the theosophical writings of Helena Blavatsky (*HPL:AL* 400). Dyer's narrative also recounts the establishment of a "blasphemous link with forgotten aeons normally closed to our species" (761) to which the *Necronomicon* alludes. The mural art of the Elder Things confirms this forbidden knowledge, and HPL includes the conjectural ideas of Carl Jung concerning the inherited "racial memory of man" (745), which adds to the threat of terrors from the past running through so many of his narratives.

Lovecraft persistently strives for a sense of genuineness and verisimilitude in his fiction. The journalistic quality of HPL's writing allows him to keenly mimic the style of the early newspaper reports of Antarctic expeditions, while playing upon the reader's ability to suspend disbelief. Novelist China Miéville describes *At the Mountains of Madness* as an "initially sedate unfolding of [narrative], in its careful scientific tone." Miéville describes HPL's novel as "not a fiction of carefully structured plot so much as of ineluctable unfolding: it is a literature of the inevitability of weird" (*At the Mountains*

*of Madness* xii). Lovecraft artfully brings together a range of “weird” elements in the novel as well as in stories like “The Call of Cthulhu,” and “The Whisperer in Darkness” in order to produce a sense of what is known and unknown, creating moments of dread and of *frisson*. Miéville notes that

[t]raditionally, genre horror is concerned with the irruption of dreadful forces into a comforting status quo—one which the protagonists frantically scramble to preserve. By contrast, Lovecraft’s horror is not one of intrusion but of realization. The world has always been implacably bleak, the horror lies in our acknowledging that fact. . . . All we can do—as the narrator and Danforth do in the Antarctic mountains—is turn and run. (*At the Mountains of Madness* xiii)

Miéville believes *At the Mountains of Madness* functions more as a “taxonomy of horror” with its intricate descriptions of Elder Things and shoggoths, and notes Lovecraft’s peculiar talent for “deploy[ing] [a] childish passion for making up monsters to depict a scientific methodology presiding over the collapse of its own predicates” (*AtMoM* xiii). *At the Mountains of Madness* concentrates HPL’s attempts to prove the existence of the impossible through a clinical investigation of the real and unreal, suggesting the “ineffable . . . ethereal *beyondness*” (745) in the most pragmatic and reasonable of terms. Surprisingly, Lovecraft’s combining of *science* with *fiction* removes the stereotypical equilibrium found in similar tales, upsetting the tenuous balance noted by Miéville as a hallmark of most genre fiction.

Horror writer Thomas Ligotti believes the “revelation that we are not what we think we are” (*Weird Tales* 16) to be one of the strongest factors of such instability in Lovecraft’s work. Dyer’s “rule of strict censorship” (744) suppresses this type of knowledge by temporarily protecting mankind from a most “destabilizing element”

(Oakes 46) regarding humanity's origins—how the “Elder Things . . . created all earth-life as jest or mistake” (739). And while such details are mirrored by similar arcane statements found in the *Necronomicon*, presumably few have read the mysterious volume, and fewer still possess the ability to correlate those dreadful facts as Dyer and Danforth have done.

Today one sometimes encounters modern scientific conjecture concerning the probability that life on earth evolved via extraterrestrial means: transferred via meteor, asteroid, or comet impact, or purposely brought to earth or sent here by a more advanced race. The NASA researcher David McKay believes that certain meteorites (such as ALH84001, found, appropriately enough, in Antarctica) reveal traces of microbial life, which might have taken hold in its new environment and spawned earth's amazing range of species. This theory flies in the face of both Creationists and Darwinian Evolutionists. However such an idea coincides with Lovecraft's destabilizing ideas that the origin of life on earth is entirely accidental.

Self-professed “xenoarchaeologist” Jason Colavito is convinced that Lovecraft's readers enjoy “being misled” (*The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture* 81) by believing in the existence of forbidden books like the *Necronomicon*, the strange cults that worship Cthulhu, and the various extraterrestrial creatures HPL envisioned. Colavito proposes the theory that Lovecraft's narratives, particularly “The Call of Cthulhu” and *At the Mountains of Madness*, inspired the idea of “ancient-astronauts” through HPL's “fictional conceit that aliens were mistaken for gods” (*TCAG* 30). Lovecraft's conception of a “pre-terrestrial life” that arrived here via

“interstellar travel” (776) accurately presages the “[s]pace travelers [from] the gray mists of time” (*Chariots of the Gods* 34) discussed by Swiss author Erich von Däniken, and the “colonists or . . . shipwrecked space mariners” (*Spaceships in Pre-history* 236) described by the Italian UFO researcher Peter Kolosimo. Von Däniken, who gained notoriety in the late 1960s for his radical query “Was God an astronaut?” (*COG* back cover), notes that “[t]here is something inconsistent about our archaeology!” (*COG* 9) and that the

[k]nowledge that was hidden in the libraries of secret societies is being rediscovered. The age of space travel is no longer an age of secrets. We have now landed on the moon. Space travel, which aspires to suns and stars, also plumbs the abysses of our past for us. Gods and priests, kings and heroes, emerge from the dark chasms. We must challenge them to deliver up their secrets, for we have the means to find out all about our past, without leaving any gaps, if we really want to. (*Chariots of the Gods* 10)

Lovecraft’s stories posit the same question about this “monstrous chapter of pre-human life” (769): *Do we really want to know?* When Dyer and Danforth ponder “the prospect of . . . entering primordial walls reared by conscious beings perhaps millions of years ago—before any known race of men could have existed,” they experience a confused moment of doubt, considering the “awesome” yet “potentially terrible . . . implications of cosmic abnormality” (761) they might discover. What drives them on, even in the face of “madness,” is the “scientific curiosity” (799) from which no Lovecraft protagonist may free himself.

The “abnormality,” that an intelligent race of beings, possessing the skills to construct cities, produce art, and create alternative forms of life, might have existed on earth prior to human beings, deflates mankind’s self-perceived image as the superior

species. The *Necronomicon* says as much, negating Dyer's presumption that "such things did not happen in any normal world" (785). For Dyer, the very notion that these "ancient-astronauts" desired to leave behind some permanent indication of their existence on earth seems inconceivably human. The narrator's own egotism interferes with his ability to relate to an alien mind where the "human-centered point of view [has been] cast aside" (Burlison 168).

Colavito believes that the *Necronomicon*, like many of Lovecraft's narratives, contains many personal horrors; this forbidden history "provides the mythology that helps us to understand the barbaric monsters whose visages peer at us from the tattered fabric of our society" (*TCAG* 339) more than the stereotypical terrors depicted in other horror and science fiction. Thus, the amazing journeys, discoveries, creations, wars, and downfall of HPL's monsters present a record of that prehistoric alien culture's fate, as well as a striving to be remembered by future generations. This activity mirrors that of present-day humanity in its constant quest for knowledge and immortality. Dyer reveals a similar conclusion, that the Elder Things were "scientists to the last," seeking to understand the true nature of existence by creating an endlessly reproducible life form which eventually killed them. The Elder Things leave a record of their doom for an unknown (and, in fact, *unforeseeable*) posterity. Through his examination of that chronicle, Dyer realizes the similarity of the Elder Race to human beings: "radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn—whatever they had been, they were men!" (798). Compare the last with Lovecraft's observation that "Although meaning nothing *in the cosmos as a whole*, mankind obviously means a good deal *to itself*" (*SL V* 240-41), then

substitute the words *alien civilization* into the statement and Colavito's dynamic of "monsters" that are "us" becomes apparent.

### ***The "menacing symbolism" (746) of the Necronomicon***

Lovecraft's philosophy of cosmicism, so coldly analytical regarding mankind's unknown or unacknowledged place in the universe, informs every aspect of his writing. His fiction suggests that the extraterrestrial beings he describes (gods like Cthulhu and lesser races such as the Elder Things and the Mi-Go) stoically regard their places in the greater cosmos with an existential pragmatism born of long experience. Their clinical attitudes and belief that scientific research and discovery should outweigh all other concerns communicate HPL's atheistic outlook as well. When the narrator in *At the Mountains of Madness* reflects on the dangers inherent in "scientific curiosity" (799), he calls to mind the horrors such discoveries sometimes bring.

And whether that odd curiosity comes about through Lovecraft's anomalous interpretation of "mathematical principles" (767) revealing "complex gulfs of time, space, and ultradimensionality" (745), through the invention of alien societies whose *science* and *history* human beings interpret as *magic*, or through a general "pursuit of the unknown" (750), the reader can divine aspects of the writer's varied education. For example, when the protagonist of *At the Mountains of Madness* fervently wishes he had never "read the abhorred *Necronomicon*" (745), the reader instantly comprehends the obvious trade-off represented by the spellbook and by HPL's fiction: that "[i]t is better not to seek the underlying truths of life" whose "repellent realities of sordid existence"

(*SL I 43*) are graphically foretold within the “abhorred” pages of the *actual* narrative and the *intertextual* one.

The *Necronomicon*'s presence in Lovecraft's narratives provides a crucial point of reference, one that becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the more one observes it throughout his writing. The slow evolution of the *Necronomicon*, from stage prop to theoretical primer, inspires the reader to entertain the possibility of magical operations which may open dimensional doors, of spells to awaken sleeping gods, of the existence of an ancient race of space travelers, and of an alternative history for the earth and other planets. Amid HPL's myriad purposes, the spellbook operates as a symbolic reflection of “that which may end the world we know” (750), pointing to society's abhorrence of science and its utter dependence upon the technology it inspires. This shaky status quo is just as frightening as that depicted by any of Lovecraft's gods and monsters, who are conjured or held in place by something as unreasonable, as seemingly unscientific and insubstantial as a collection of words printed on a fragile page.



## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also S. T. Joshi's *Lovecraft's Library: A Catalogue* for a complete list of the titles in Lovecraft's collection at the time of his death, including many other science-related texts and reference books.

<sup>2</sup> In *An H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia*, S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz detail the "numerous . . . periodicals and treatises on chemistry, astronomy, and other subjects" (134) which HPL wrote about during his youth. Joshi edited this material for a collection of Lovecraft's scientific writings, titled *Collected Essays Volume 3: Science*, published by Hippocampus Press, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See the conclusion for a discussion of this phenomenon.

<sup>4</sup> The Big Bang Theory (derived from the astronomical observations of Vesto Slipher in 1912, Alexander Friedman's calculations in 1922—inspired in part by Albert Einstein's writings on *Relativity*, Edwin Hubble's observations and photographic evidence in 1924, and Georges Lemaître's independent realization of Friedman's calculations in 1927). The theory proved that other galaxies were moving away from the earth and from one another, indicative of expansion.

<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Robert E. Howard, 12 September, 1931, Lovecraft describes the event as "the shock . . . which I use in my story *Cthulhu*" (*SL III* 412).

<sup>6</sup> Erwin Schrödinger's thought experiment described how

A cat is penned up in a steel chamber, along with the following device (which must be secured against direct interference by the cat): in a Geiger counter, there is a tiny bit of radioactive substance, so small that perhaps in the course of the hour, one of the atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none; if it happens, the counter tube discharges, and through a relay releases a hammer that shatters a small flask of hydrocyanic acid. If one has left this entire system to itself for an hour, one would say that the cat still lives if meanwhile no atom has decayed. The psi-function of the entire system would express this by having in it the living and dead cat (pardon the expression) mixed or smeared out in equal parts. It is typical of these cases that an indeterminacy originally restricted to the atomic domain becomes transformed into macroscopic indeterminacy, which can then be resolved by direct observation. (*The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics*, 1935).

<sup>7</sup> See S. T. Joshi's *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (285) for a more exacting translation of the word "Necronomicon" and its etymology.

<sup>8</sup> Unlike H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), which shows the devastating consequences of mankind's first meeting with beings from Mars and is universally

interpreted as social critique, Lovecraft's concept of weird "things" from outer space, which colonized the planet *before homo sapiens* arose, was relegated to the pages of the cheap, pulp magazine where it first appeared. While *The War of the Worlds* possesses a bona fide literary cachet, HPL's fiction has garnered a place in popular culture, and, quite possibly, inspired the modern UFO craze (covered in detail in the discussion on *At the Mountains of Madness*).

<sup>9</sup> Lovecraft's letter to Margaret Sylvester, 13 January, 1934, where he acknowledges the *Necronomicon* "a figment of my own imagination!" (*SL IV* 346), is but one example.

<sup>10</sup> A reference to aircraft created by Dr. Claudius Dornier.

<sup>11</sup> The creature in Campbell's story is referred to throughout as a "thing," a term used for its scare-potential in the work's two cinematic treatments; Howard Hawks' *The Thing From Another World* (1951) and John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982).

<sup>12</sup> Proposed by Flemish cartographer, Abraham Ortelius as early as 1596, but explained in relation to the earth's geological activity by the German geophysicist Alfred Wegener in 1912. In 1958, Samuel Warren Carey proposed the concept of plate tectonics to explain continental drift.

<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly influenced by his reading of W. Scott-Elliot's *The Secrets of Atlantis and the Lost Lemuria* (1925).

## CONCLUSION

### BRIEF THOUGHTS “TO HIM WHO SHALL COME AFTER” (530)

#### ***“Dreaded Repositories of Equivocal Secrets” (1005)***

Of all the available elements in H. P. Lovecraft’s invented myth cycle, including towns (*Arkham*, *Dunwich*, and *Innsmouth*), gods (*Cthulhu*, *Yog-Sothoth*, and *Azathoth*), and interstellar species (*Mi-Go*, the *Elder Things*, and the *Great Race of Yith*), the most popular by far is the *Necronomicon*. The role of the *Necronomicon* as fictive element and cultural artifact did not end with the death of its creator; the influence of the *grimoire* continues to be felt in our popular culture and in various forms of contemporary literature. My previous analyses of the invention of the spellbook and its literary evolution provide clues to the *Necronomicon*’s use as a societal and historical lens throughout Lovecraft’s narratives and touch upon how the author’s attitudes sometimes coincided with the modernist writers of his era.

The multiplicity of purposes in the *Necronomicon*’s incarnations produces a sense of its physicality. In particular Lovecraft’s tales present the book as a genuine element of the real world. Much like Mary Shelley’s monster in *Frankenstein* (1818) or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, HPL’s *grimoire* exists outside the fictional world of its creator. Shelley’s hideous creation and Doyle’s “consulting detective” (*The Sign of Four* 5) still encourage literary pastiches. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos (which includes the *Necronomicon*) also inspires much imitation.

Cristopher Nash interprets the use of the *Necronomicon* (and creations like it) as a means for achieving verisimilitude in fiction. Nash states that “In a story by Tolkien, Lovecraft, Borges, Calvino, Lem or O’Brien we’ll be told of people informed or governed by the rules of some ‘real book’ whose existence seems free of the fictionality of the story itself, a text not merely of their world but one to be found – if we trouble to search – in our own” (*Word-Games* 190). Chapter One demonstrated how the *Necronomicon* really *does* exist, albeit not as HPL intended. From versions purporting to be, what Simon<sup>1</sup> calls, “the reluctant committing to paper of the traditions that had survived orally for millennia” (*Dead Names: The Dark History of the Necronomicon* 205) to artistic renditions meant to capture the essence of the spellbook’s appearance, the *Necronomicon* has haunted the religion, spirituality, and occult sections of major bookstore chains since the 1970s. Likewise, the *Necronomicon* appears as a prop in films, novels, comic books, video games, and even children’s cartoons. There are also films and animated features titled *Necronomicon*, a Canadian death metal band which calls itself *Necronomicon*, and several other bands that have used the name as a title for songs and albums. Online blogs devoted to Lovecraft and his fiction, and to the occult in general discuss the *Necronomicon*. HPL’s admirers actually continue to debate whether or not the spellbook and its historical author Abdul Alhazred are/were real or fictitious.

One can only imagine what Lovecraft would think about the commercialization of his creations. I suspect he would be appalled by the recent spate of Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep plush toys, yet bemused to see his likeness on t-shirts. For a self-proclaimed “Non-Entity,” HPL would certainly be surprised to learn that what he

considered his “homely” (*SL I 138*) face is one of the most recognizable among fans of genre fiction. Lovecraft’s writings (specifically his fiction) are now part of the public domain. They have remained in print these many years, and new generations of readers—and even scholars—have connected with his work.



(Cthulhu plush by Toy Vault, © 2000)



(Lovecraft t-shirt by Negativity Records, © 2010)

Lovecraft’s narratives appear in major anthologies of horror and science fiction. Robert Bloch, who wrote several short stories and a novel, titled *Strange Eons* (1978), based on Lovecraft’s concepts, describes all forms of creativity, particularly writing, as “the product of individual imagination, colored by personal viewpoint” (*The Best of H. P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre* 3). Yet many writers defer their own point of view via acts of literary homage, especially when they utilize elements from Lovecraft’s *oeuvre*. HPL’s protégés August Derleth and Frank Belknap Long appropriated various elements from Lovecraft’s fiction and mimicked his somewhat stilted language, but their stories lack any sense of cosmic dread. Derleth tried to add to the Mythos but succeeded only in badly misinterpreting the gods Lovecraft had created. S. T. Joshi notes Derleth’s “errors” as falling under three headings: “1) that Lovecraft’s

‘gods’ were elementals; 2) that the ‘gods’ can be differentiated between ‘Elder Gods’, who represent the forces of good, and the ‘Old Ones’, who represent the forces of evil; and 3) that the Mythos as a whole is philosophically akin to Christianity” (*HPL: AL* 403).

Unlike those who simply tried to imitate Lovecraft’s style, writers like T. E. D. Klein and Roger Zelazny borrow from the Mythos in a more original, effective fashion. Klein and Zelazny do so with little more than a nod and a wink, incorporating the name of a particular god, such as Cthulhu, or a town, such as Arkham or Innsmouth (a tendency which has prevailed from Lovecraft’s time to the present). Others, such as J. G. Ballard and Lawrence Watt-Evans, envision Lovecraftian horrors from a post-modern perspective, translating them into cyberspace and beyond. Few of Lovecraft’s “followers” are able to reproduce the mood and existential dread conveyed by the master.

***“[U]nholy marks taken from . . . the Necronomicon” (SL II 44)***

The many general examples of Lovecraft’s influence on genre literature are not surprising; the adaptation of theme is common enough in all forms of artistic expression. George Zebrowski’s science fiction adventure, *Stranger Suns* (1989), borrows from *At the Mountains of Madness* the theme of an ancient civilization buried under the Antarctic ice; Anne Rice’s *A Tale of the Body Thief* (1993) lifts its plot directly from “The Thing on the Doorstep” with its depiction of soul transference; and Nick Mamatas’s *Move Under Ground* (2004) features Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Neal Cassady on the ultimate road trip as they fight to save the world from a strange cult of Lovecraft’s followers, a tale resembling “The Call of Cthulhu” in construction.

More specifically, Lovecraft has directly inspired authors of horror fiction worldwide. Don G. Smith remarks that “[i]t would be difficult, even if possible, to read every Cthulhu Mythos story ever written” (*H. P. Lovecraft in Popular Culture* 26), noting the sheer volume of tales that owe their conception to HPL’s macabre inventions. The list of only those tales that feature the *Necronomicon* is extremely lengthy. For the sake of clarity, I provide the reader with only a few examples.

“Demons of Cthulhu” (1959) by Robert Silverberg

Robert Silverberg, known primarily for his science fiction novels, draws heavily on Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos, as the title of “Demons of Cthulhu” implies. The tale features a young man named Marty, a library employee at Miskatonic University, who is more interested in girls and cars than in books. His direct superior, a graduate student named Vorys, persuades him to assist in the theft of a book from the library’s Special Collections. Once Marty has the book, he decides he can probably sell it to a rare book dealer for far more than Vorys offered him to help steal it. Trying to comprehend why Vorys wanted this text, Marty skims through the book. Unable to understand the odd language, he eventually locates a passage which provides a simple means to conjure a being that can provide him with wealth. Marty’s incantation brings forth “Narrathoth” (*The Necronomicon* 66), and all seems well until the time comes to send the entity back to its own dimension. Marty accidentally reads from an entirely different spell (one designed to bring forth Yog-Sothoth) and is eventually torn to pieces.

Silverberg's early story attempts to capture a sense of Lovecraft's eerie mood through liberal use of the HPL's fictive elements, but simply setting the story at Miskatonic University is not enough. Not even the use of the *Necronomicon* and Lovecraft's gods can help the narrative to achieve the kind of effect that even the weakest of HPL's fiction manifests. Silverberg's invention of "Narrathoth" is original to the Mythos. The rest of the narrative is derivative of the cheapest of horror stories. From the title alone, one sees that Silverberg did not fully understand the philosophy behind HPL's mythology—that the Great Old Ones had nothing to do with any Christian conception of heaven or hell—that the monsters associated with Cthulhu were not "demons" but rather beings totally apart from human conception.

"Zoth-Ommog" (1976) by Lin Carter

This near novella-length narrative, like many of Lovecraft's stories, relies on varied sources of documentation in order to provide the reader with a sense of verisimilitude. The bulk of the tale consists of the police deposition of Arthur Wilcox Hodgkins, accused of killing a night watchman at the museum where he is employed. Hodgkins recounts the mental collapse of one of his colleagues, a curator named Blaine, who was working on a collection of Polynesian artifacts tied to the "Xothic Legend Cycle" (*The Xothic Legend Cycle* 51). The centerpiece of the collection is a statue of the ancient god, Zoth-Ommog, noted to be one of the legendary descendants of the Great Old One, Cthulhu. During the final days of Blaine's nervous breakdown, he warns Hodgkins that



he must destroy the statue. Blaine informs Hodgkins that “[t]he *Necronomicon* has the secret” (*XLC* 55).

Hodgkins’ regular duties prevent him from investigating the matter until the collection is due for exhibition. This forces him to review Blaine’s notes and to examine the collection of artifacts. Here, Hodgkins learns about the Xothic legends and the coming to earth of the various Great Old Ones and their offspring. Terrified by what he reads, Hodgkins begins searching for a copy of the *Necronomicon* and consults other occult references in his quest to destroy the mysterious idol. He soon makes contact with Dr. Henry Armitage, at the Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts, who will allow him to see the forbidden tome if Hodgkins will make the trip to Arkham.

The journey to view the *Necronomicon* bears fruit, and Hodgkins acquires the means to destroy the statue. He returns to the museum, but the artifacts are already on display. In the gallery, he finds the body of the night watchmen and observes what appears to be a deformed Polynesian man kneeling before the statue of Zoth-Ommog. Hodgkins hurls a magical stone at the statue, sending it back to the dimension from whence it came, and is rendered unconscious from shock. He is later found next to the dead body of the watchman and accused of murder. The body of the other man, killed by the destruction of the idol, is not found. The police find only a sticky pool of foul liquid. The narrative ends with appended notes stating that Hodgkins is to be committed to a sanitarium for the criminally insane.

Known primarily for his fantasy and sword and sorcery novels, Lin Carter also produced one of the first overviews of Lovecraft’s writing titled *H. P. Lovecraft: A Look*

*Behind the Cthulhu Mythos* (1972). Carter's overwhelming use of references from the Cthulhu Mythos in "Zoth-Ammog" weighs on the narrative, detracting rather than adding to the plot. The author borrows not only the place names, gods, magical texts, and characters from Lovecraft's writings but also elements found in the writing of other members of the original "Lovecraft Circle." Carter does succeed beyond other fictional disciples in his personal additions to HPL's mythology. He portrays an entirely new range of deities and beings related to Lovecraft's Mythos. Carter wrote a variety of stories and novels which tie in with his "Xothic Legend Cycle." While each one relies heavily on HPL's tales, the works stand on their own as solid examples of fantasy fiction.

"The Adder" (1989) by Fred Chappell

The term "Adder" is Chappell's personal addition to the Cthulhu Mythos as a nickname for the *Necronomicon*. In his narrative, a copy of the "*Al-Azif*" [*sic*] (*The Necronomicon* 109), which is the *Necronomicon* in its original Arabic version, possesses the ability to absorb power from any text kept in close proximity. An unwitting bookstore owner places the book next to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which is quickly corrupted (not only the various copies inside his shop, but every edition around the world). The book also infects the minds of those who have read Milton, replacing what they remember. A ritual for recovering original works is performed. A fly lands on the *Al-Azif*, nibbles at the ink, and flies away before the full transformation can occur. Too late to stop it, the fly escapes, presumably to spread the *Necronomicon*'s evil through other means.

Fred Chappell is of course no stranger to Lovecraftian pastiche. His third novel, *Dagon* (1968), combines the elements of incestuous family heritage and inter-species miscegenation found in Lovecraft's stories "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth." In *Dagon*, Chappell created a wonderfully strange new version of Southern Gothic. "The Adder" builds upon HPL's "History of the *Necronomicon*" while also inscribing the importance of family connections found in Chappell's contemporary work.

More than any other story mentioned in this section, Chappell's tale exceeds the generally clumsy efforts of the many writers who borrow elements from Lovecraft. He does so by playing fair with the reader. Others often make the mistake of trying to prove the existence of the *Necronomicon* and the dark gods the text can conjure or attempt to inject Lovecraft himself into the narratological structure of their stories. Chappell simply assumes the *Necronomicon* is a real book—and one with very special properties. He makes no mention of HPL (or any other element of the Cthulhu Mythos), nor does he need to do so since it is the book, not its creator, which is the focus of his story.

"H. P. L." (1990) by Gahan Wilson

A young writer named Edward ventures to Providence so that he can meet his literary hero, H. P. Lovecraft. It turns out that Lovecraft did *not* die in 1937 as most believe, but was granted a reprieve by the Great Old Ones. To his astonishment and delight, Edward soon learns that not only Lovecraft was spared, but also another of the pulp era writers, Clark Ashton Smith, who was resurrected by HPL (à la Joseph Curwen

in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*) and has moved in with Lovecraft to act as a kind of servant. Lovecraft explains how, lying on his deathbed, he called out to the gods he had invented and somehow made contact. By sacrificing “[a]rrogant or obtuse book critics” and “those responsible for the cruder pastiches of [his] writing” (*Cthulhu 2000* 191), he is granted mastery over many of the forces from beyond this dimension and his essence preserved.

Eager to introduce Edward to the gods, Lovecraft takes the writer outside where he performs a ritual that will conjure the monstrous entities to the earthly plane. HPL calls out Edward’s name. The god answers the cry with Lovecraft’s own initials “AAAAAAAY-CHaaa PEEEEEEEEEE ELLLLLLLLLLLLL” (*C 2000* 195). The god embraces Lovecraft, and Edward returns indoors and remains with Smith. Edward loves the feel of the *Necronomicon* in his hands whenever he conducts rituals, having thus inherited the role of servitor of the Great Old Ones from his literary idol.

Gahan Wilson, known more for his darkly humorous cartoon illustrations in *Playboy*, *The New Yorker*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and other publications, has a long association with Lovecraft. Wilson’s stories, illustrations, and critical reviews have often focused on HPL and the Cthulhu Mythos. Although the tone of “H. P. L.” is tongue-in-cheek, one finds the tale’s style and attention to detail (to both Lovecraft’s creations and the facts of his life) a loving homage. As in most pastiches which employ the *Necronomicon*, the use of the book itself cannot match Lovecraft’s malevolent tone. Rather than employing the evil text as a peculiar prop, Wilson has the spellbook fulfill a purpose integral to the narrative.

“The Big Fish” (1993) by Kim Newman

A private detective, in Los Angeles during the early 1940s, takes on a case to find a kidnapped infant. Cult members of the “Esoteric Order of Dagon” (*Cthulhu 2000* 148) have taken the baby as a means of controlling the father and for the purpose of sacrifice to their god.

In keeping with much of Lovecraft’s fiction, Newman’s detective narrates the tale yet remains nameless throughout. The P.I. soon tracks down a *femme fatale* named Janice Marsh, a film actress and head of the cult. He describes Marsh as looking like “Peter Lorre” (because she is of a race of Deep Ones—half human, half fish) but concedes that “maybe if Lorre put his face on a body like Janice Marsh’s, he’d be up for sex-goddess roles too” (*C 2000* 151). During their brief encounter, Marsh shows the detective the chapel area of the Order. On the altar, he sees a copy of the *Necronomicon* and notes his discomfort at being in such close proximity to the forbidden text.

Soon afterwards, the P.I. meets a secret cadre of government agents from Great Britain and the United States who are also interested in the missing father and the odd cult. The story concludes with the detective rescuing the child, allowing Janice Marsh to escape and the secret agents planning to destroy the worshippers of Dagon.

In “The Big Fish,” Kim Newman (an award-winning author for both his non-fiction analyses of cinema, as well as his horror and science fiction writing) borrows liberally from the elements of Lovecraft’s narratives. Newman’s tale owes an even greater debt to the novels of Raymond Chandler, which the reader perceives from well-

placed hints throughout the tale such as when the detective calls on his friend, “Bernie at the District Attorney’s office” (*C 2000* 154) and acknowledges that he once worked in that same office. Chandler’s famous shamus Philip Marlowe mentions a similar friend and past in *The Big Sleep* (1939).

The tone of “The Big Fish” is hard to take seriously—a wise-cracking detective pitted against a Lovecraftian menace from the sea—but Newman handles the Cthulhu Mythos with delicate precision, combining them with other historical, literary, and cinematic references. His inclusion of historical events such as the interment of U.S. citizens of Japanese heritage into concentration camps, the naming of magazines such as *Black Mask* (where Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were originally published) and *Weird Tales* (where Lovecraft published the bulk of his fiction), and the mentioning of a long list of film stars from the period, elevates “The Big Fish” above the level of most pastiches. Although the *Necronomicon* appears only briefly in the narrative, Newman crafts the scene to provide an expectation of horrors yet to come. Similarly to the best of Lovecraft’s tales, the conclusion of “The Big Fish” leads the reader to believe that the end is just another beginning and that the cult of Dagon will never die.

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The effect of Lovecraft’s fiction on serious contemporary fiction is less obvious yet far more interesting. Purveyors of horror, science fiction, and even suspense have little difficulty fitting HPL’s concepts into their narratives (even when such attempts produce clichéd results). But contemporary novelists generally employ specific liminal and cultural aspects. Rarely do the tropes of genre fiction fit in. Thus the frequency with

which authors of contemporary fiction cross the fine line between these literary distinctions is surprising. I provide here some less likely examples of the spellbook's influence on serious contemporary fiction.

*The Club Dumas* (1993) by Arturo Pérez-Reverte

Book detective Lucas Corso is hired to authenticate a rare chapter from *The Three Musketeers*. His experiences throughout the novel mirror those of D'Artagnan's many adventures. The reader also learns many details concerning the life and writing habits of Alexandre Dumas, which are told through Corso's research. During his journey, Corso encounters a young woman who calls herself "Irene Adler" (*The Club Dumas* 139), who seems to possess supernatural abilities. *The Club Dumas* also introduces a subplot in which its protagonist must also determine whether or not a magical text, called *The Book of the Nine Doors to the Kingdom of Shadows*, is a forgery. The spellbook reputedly allows a person the means to conjure the Devil and grants the user tremendous power. The novel concludes with Corso having authenticated both items, but he is unable to collect his fee from his client. He ends up instead with the strange girl (who, as readers of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle will recognize, borrowed her name from the only person to ever outwit Sherlock Holmes), and one is left with the assumption that she might be a demonic familiar who will henceforth aid Corso in his future dealings.

Many of Arturo Pérez-Reverte's novels, including *The Flanders Panel* (1994), *The Seville Communion* (1998), and *The Fencing Master* (1999), feature elements drawn from mystery fiction. Even so, the author's literary style (influenced by his years as a

journalist) does not fall neatly into a particular genre. Pérez-Reverte appears adept at sampling from a range of fictive modes, his work exemplifying the tropes of historical romance, adventure, and intrigue, while maintaining a quality that sets his writing above the stylistic limitations to which such narratives are generally prone. The inclusion of *The Book of the Nine Doors to the Kingdom of Shadows* reveals the connection between Pérez-Reverte's dark tome of occult wisdom and the *Necronomicon*, but the writer contributes a dynamic element lacking in Lovecraft's *grimoire*—a series of illustrations featuring the “nine doors” by which one may pass into the “Kingdom of Shadows.” By not relying on preexisting mythologies, such as those described by HPL, Pérez-Reverte creates an intertextual element which mimics the *Necronomicon* in its historical description yet surpasses it in its sense of realism.

*Wonder Boys* (1995) by Michael Chabon

Creative Writing instructor Grady Tripp finds himself trapped in a literary dilemma of his own making. Tripp is of that breed of writers who suffer from what he calls “the midnight disease” (*Wonder Boys* 5): writers who share the compulsion to write simply for the sake of writing—a thing they *must* do, whether others read their work or not. Just prior to a weekend-long literary event hosted by his college, Tripp's young wife moves out. On the surface, this seems a good thing. Her leaving simplifies his life since he is in love with the Chancellor of the college, Sara Gaskell, who is also his boss' wife. Sara informs Tripp that she is pregnant with his child, adding yet another complication to a growing list of problems.



Tripp avoids the various issues by drinking, smoking marijuana, and trying to complete his novel *Wonder Boys*, which his agent is eager to examine during the weekend's literary festivities. The novel, originally conceived as a three hundred-page family chronicle, has grown to over two thousand pages. Tripp feels he is close to completing the work, but the text remains unfinished, having plagued him for seven years.

Tripp is accompanied on his misadventures by one of the students from his Creative Writing class, a brilliant young writer named James Leer. The young man further complicates Tripp's life by stealing an expensive item from the Gaskells' home and killing their dog, Dr. Dee. James later falls in love with Tripp's editor and quits school to complete revisions of his own novel, *The Love Parade*. Tripp loses his job, loses the pages of the novel in a bizarre accident, divorces his wife, marries Sara, and continues to write and teach as much as child-rearing allows. Tripp continues to discuss the lives of famous authors with young writers in the local pub, and cautions them about that "disease" (*Wonder Boys* 367) they all seem to share.

Pulitzer Prize-winner Michael Chabon introduces the unusual element of "the midnight disease" very early in the text. Chabon adds to the novel's macabre tone through his description of the first writer Tripp ever knew, a boarder at his parents' small hotel named Albert Vetch. Vetch wrote under the pseudonym of August Van Zorn (Chabon's nod to August Derleth), publishing the majority of his tales in the pages of *Weird Tales* and similar magazines. Chabon also acknowledges a collection of Van Zorn's (fictional) published by Arkham House. Tripp remarks how Van Zorn's work was

“in the gothic mode, after the manner of Lovecraft” (*Wonder Boys* 3), thus establishing a direct link to HPL, and to the pulp magazines.<sup>2</sup>

Tripp keeps his never-ending novel locked away from prying eyes, but the text continually haunts his life until it is accidentally destroyed by his literary agent. Chabon based *Wonder Boys* on his own inability to complete a long novel titled *Fountain City*, and on a lengthy non-fiction book which one of his instructors was working on during his period of instruction.<sup>3</sup> While the intertextual version of *Wonder Boys* does not function as a book of magical reference, the virtual novel’s propensity to act as a literary albatross, which dogs Tripp’s existence, mirrors the *Necronomicon*’s own madness-inducing characteristics. The overall tone of Chabon’s narrative is humorous, but the novel clearly demonstrates the kinds of tragedy and insanity that words can inspire.

*House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski

Mark Z. Danielewski’s debut novel presents a simple story clouded in academic obfuscation. The narrative deconstructs a fictitious documentary called *The Navidson Record* (*House of Leaves* 1) by incorporating scholarly footnotes and citations (equally fictitious), creating a book about a book about a film—none of which is real.

The reader suspects early on that things are not as they seem. When award-winning photographer Will Navidson comes home to stay with model Karen Green (the mother of his two children), the family moves into a rural home somewhere in Virginia, only to find that the house is larger inside than out. And it continues to grow.

Soon a seemingly limitless hallway appears and Navidson is nearly imprisoned in its ever-changing maze as he attempts a brief exploration. Concurrent with the *Record* are the notes of one Johnny Truant, a sometimes tattoo artist who finds a collection of notes concerning *The Navidson Record* and tries to piece them together into a logical manuscript. The notes belonged to a deceased blind man named Zampano, who produced hundreds of pages about a documentary he presumably had never seen.

The text chronicles Navidson endeavors to enlist the aid of others to help explore the hallway. His relationship with Karen increasingly deteriorates as his obsession with the house continues. Simultaneously, Johnny Truant's life seems to parallel the bizarre events occurring in the manuscript until he feels so haunted by some unknown presence (which stalks the hallway in the house) that he can no longer go out or function normally in society (a fact equally reflected in the life of Zampano, who died under mysterious circumstances—perhaps killed by a wild animal).

The house eventually destroys several of the investigators and nearly kills Navidson during his attempt to solve its mystery. Karen returns and saves Navidson. While not a happy conclusion, the two reunite and are more in love than before. In additional footnotes, Truant explains how he tried to burn the book, but failing that, ultimately hid it in a storage unit. Somehow the book found its way to the Internet and became a cult icon.

The many elements of the classic horror novel come together in Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. However the author seems less intent on frightening readers than he is on inundating them in documentation. Just as Lovecraft imposed his journalistic style on

his own narratives, with the purpose of creating a verisimilitude worthy of a hoax, Danielewski's inclusion of reference materials (not only the aforementioned footnotes, personal asides, and literary digressions, but also photographs, illustrations, interviews, and appendices filled with poems and letters) persuades the reader of the overwhelming realism of its scholarship. In his review of the novel, Allen B. Ruch notes how Danielewski's text reminds one of an author who has "binge[d] on Borges' *Ficciones* and Nabokov's *Pale Fire*." Ruch compares *House of Leaves*' faux, documentary style with the film *The Blair Witch Project*. The reviewer asks the reader to imagine

the work . . . a materialization of dread, a disorientation slowly blooming from the 3 a.m. spaces at the edges of your bedroom, feeding on your doubts and fears during the insomniac hours before dawn. All the carefully constructed meanings you've created in your life seem under invasion by an encroaching emptiness, winding its way closer to your center as you wonder, increasingly nearer to panic, 'Is this just me?' There is a lurker at the threshold, and whether it's your own personal emptiness, a shared void common to all, or Lovecraft's Yog Sothoth [*sic*] himself, is perhaps just a matter of perspective. (*The Modern Word* October 24, 2000)

*House of Leaves* is obviously not a book filled with spells, but its intertextual qualities are very much in keeping with Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos in presenting to the reader virtual materials that may, at least in part, be examined, and whose history can be examined and deconstructed. Ruch's comments concerning the "encroaching emptiness" and "shared void common to all" allow one to understand another way that HPL's tales influenced *House of Leaves*, through the abject desolation conveyed by Lovecraft's cosmicism, updated by Danielewski into a modern literary milieu.

*The Shadow of the Wind* (2004) by Carlos Ruiz Zafón

*The Shadow of the Wind* is set in Barcelona during the 1940s. The Spanish Civil War has come to an end, and a bookseller named Sempere shows the Cemetery of Forgotten Books (*The Shadow of the Wind* 5) to his motherless son Daniel. The “Cemetery” is an enormous library-like repository (yet one without order) which fills several levels of a massive system of catacombs. The books are by authors whom the public has mostly forgotten. Daniel’s father, a bookseller by trade, knows of the place through his antiquarian and bibliophilic contacts. He initiates his son into a secret group of individuals who know of the cemetery’s existence and may enter at their own discretion. According to tradition, those few who learn of the Cemetery of Forgotten Books may take one book from the collection. But acceptance of the book comes with a price. The individual must keep and protect the book for life.

Daniel wanders around the mysterious place until he finally selects a volume by Julián Carax titled *The Shadow of the Wind*. After taking the book home, Daniel stays up all night reading it. He is so enchanted by the novel that he tries to find out all he can about the author. Daniel also attempts to locate more of Carax’s books, only to find that they are no longer in print and impossible to find.

Soon Daniel’s pursuit attracts the attention of one of his father’s friends, a rare book dealer named Barceló who offers to buy the book for a large sum. Daniel refuses to sell to Barceló, but the older man befriends him and assists Daniel during the early stages of his search. News of his quest spreads and a strange man who calls himself “Laín Coubert” (*TSOTW* 70) finds Daniel and asks to purchase the book. Daniel recognizes

Coubert as the name of a character from Carax's *The Shadow of the Wind*; in the novel Coubert represents the Devil in human form.

Daniel's research reveals an even stranger story than that of the novel. Julián Carax disappeared under odd circumstances, and his books have either been destroyed in a mysterious series of fires, purchased by private collectors, or stolen from the world's libraries. Daniel eventually learns the truth: Coubert and Carax are one and the same. Carax believed the woman that he loved had died and attempted to kill himself by setting fire to a warehouse full of his books. He spent the rest of his life, from that time until the present, tracking down copies of his novels and destroying them. Daniel tells Carax that the woman is still alive, and he helps him find his former love. Carax then disappears, but the reader is left with the implication that the writer will once again try his hand at fiction.

On the surface, *The Shadow of the Wind* owes more to the rich tradition of European romantic adventure literature than to the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft. Yet one can draw parallels between Zafón's work and that of pulp fiction through the author's use of traditional elements of the gothic and mystery genres. Apart from obvious references to witchcraft and the Devil, Zafón makes use of eerie settings such as crypts, cemeteries, and haunted castles, and he structures the text in a similar fashion to that of the best hardboiled detective fiction by providing readers with clues and sub-plots.

In his review of *The Shadow of the Wind* for *The Washington Post*, Michael Dirda calls Zafón, "Half Georgette Heyer, half H.P. Lovecraft" (paragraph 1). Dirda points out how the novel's plot hinges on "a book about a mysterious book" (paragraph 3), and it is

this, more than any other element, that resembles Lovecraft's fiction. Zafón merges the eeriness of horror literature with an intellectual pursuit for knowledge. He also uses intertextual references (*The Shadow of the Wind* in particular, but additional works by Carax and other authors whose writing resides in the Cemetery of Forgotten Books) which are seemingly forbidden (either consumed by flames or otherwise no longer extant). Such books-within-books and the price paid by reading them take on the aspects of legend and power found in Lovecraft's best writings—particularly those which feature the *Necronomicon*.

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Consciously or perhaps subconsciously, the *Necronomicon* functioned as Lovecraft's cultural lens, emphasizing the shortcomings he observed in society and his seemingly puritanical and too-often prejudiced and cynical ideas about humanity's decline. I have demonstrated how HPL's attitudes reflected those of his era, and how his unusually pessimistic perspective of cosmicism (which pervades the majority of his writing) sometimes resembled the work of modernist writers whose stylistic level he would never achieve. The spellbook also functioned as an historical record, delineating what Lovecraft saw as mankind's greatest achievements: the exploration of previously untouched areas around the globe, the discovery of new planets in the solar system, and the startling advancements in the fields of mathematics and theoretical physics.

For writers of both modern genre fiction and serious contemporary literature, the *Necronomicon* continues to function as a morbid means of self-analysis. The dark dreams prophesized in its forbidden pages reflect not only their creator's pessimistic

vision but the attitudes of today's society—our realization that Lovecraft's horrors of identity loss, cultural degeneracy, and the inadequacies of scientific understanding to cure such ills are all too much our own.

In much of the fiction I have discussed in this conclusion, the *Necronomicon* serves only as a cheap, literary gimmick, and a means of establishing a liminal bond to Lovecraft, his Cthulhu Mythos, or to gothic and horror literature in general. But metaphorically speaking, the *grimoire* mirrors many of our current cultural modalities, pointing out our collective dejection and the sad fate of our unfulfilled future. Pulp fiction and the comic books which soon followed promised a twenty-first century filled with hover cars, jet packs, and visits to the moon in private rocket ships. Likewise, the “magic” of theoretical physics could easily have simplified the lives of the average individual. Instead, geniuses like Albert Einstein unintentionally contributed to the creation of increasingly more devastating weapons.

Whether or not one acknowledges the *Necronomicon* as an important literary contribution to the fields of horror and science fiction writing is irrelevant to the present argument. The spellbook represents far more than a physical incarnation of some tired cliché of evil. The *Necronomicon* allows those who use it in their narratives to forge a connection between their writing and pulp fiction, and also to bond with the deeper roots of gothic literature, which, in part, inspired its creation. Lovecraft understood, through his research into supernatural literature and through his own personal experiences, how the spectral grasp of the past reaches forth to haunt the present. The *grimoire* also reflects HPL's “indifference toward mankind in aggregate, but . . . ironic pity for his



eternal tragedy of aspirations beyond the possibility of fulfillment” (*Selected Letters I* 302). The reader sees this mirrored by the *Necronomicon*’s use in novels like *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, where the protagonist discovers the frightening potential of the spellbook and the terrible consequences which can sometimes accompany the fulfillment of one’s aspirations, and in *At the Mountains of Madness*, where alien beings embody an “indifference” toward humanity that will eventually lead to our destruction.

H. P. Lovecraft gave the *Necronomicon* a seemingly genuine historical background to aid in the suspension of disbelief. Although it fails to convince us to totally dismiss reality, the spellbook casts a lingering spell over genre literature. This enchantment continually makes its way into popular culture and sometimes into the pages of serious contemporary fiction. Thus, the *Necronomicon* is far more than a textual hub where fiction and verisimilitude meet. It is also a nexus where art and life collide and, ultimately, converge.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Simon” is the pseudonym listed on various translations of purported material from the “real” *Necronomicon*. Copyright registration for the books proclaims them the writings of Peter Levenda, an expert on Nazi occultism.

<sup>2</sup> In 2001, Chabon wrote a more overt homage to Lovecraft in a story titled “The God of Dark Laughter.”

<sup>3</sup> Chuck Kinder, who was Chabon’s instructor for Creative Writing at the University of Pittsburgh. Kinder’s autobiographical account of his long-time friendship with the writer Raymond Carver originally tallied up to over three thousand pages. The book was eventually published in a much-edited format.

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## APPENDIX A

### THE *NECRONOMICON* IN LOVECRAFT'S FICTION

This appendix is meant to function as a research aid for those who wish to further explore Lovecraft's tales featuring the *Necronomicon*.<sup>1</sup> The stories and novels are listed in chronological order and the entries include the first publication, and the year of first publication. The appendix also amend excerpts from Lovecraft's fiction wherever the work quotes directly from the *Necronomicon*.

#### "The Statement of Randolph Carter" (1919)

First published in *The Vagrant*, 1920.

"The Statement of Randolph Carter" includes no direct mention of the *Necronomicon*. Some critics conjecture that a reference by the narrator to a book written "in Arabic" (77) might be an early incarnation of the evil spellbook.

#### "The Nameless City" (1921)

First published in *Fanciful Tales*, 1936.

Again, Lovecraft's narrator does not mention the *Necronomicon* by name, but the story features the first appearance of the famous couplet:

That is not dead which can eternal lie  
And with strange aeons even death may die. (141)

Lovecraft later locates the couplet in the *Necronomicon*.

“The Hound” (1922)

First published in *Weird Tales*, 1924.

“The Hound” marks the first appearance of the *Necronomicon* and of its author “the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred” (218). The *Necronomicon* functions as a literary prop, operating in the text more as a demonology, recording the ancient knowledge of those who learned to control the forces of evil described in its “forbidden” (218) pages.

“The Festival” (1923)

First published in *Weird Tales*, 1925.

Here the *Necronomicon* functions more as an historical reference in which the narrator reads about “a legend too hideous for sanity or consciousness” (264). “The Festival” is the first of Lovecraft’s tales to reproduce a quotation from the spellbook:

The nethermost caverns, wrote the mad Arab, are not for the fathoming of eyes that see; for their marvels are strange and terrific. Cursed the ground where dead thoughts live new and oddly bodied, and evil the mind this is held by no head. Wisely did Ibn Schacabao say, that happy is the tomb where no wizard hath lain, and happy the town at night whose wizards are all ashes. For it is of old rumour that the soul of the devil-bought hastes not from his charnel clay, but fads and instructs *the very worm that gnaws*; till out of corruption horrid life springs, and the dull scavengers of earth wax crafty to vex it and swell monstrous to plague it. Great holes secretly are digged where earth’s pores out to suffice, and things have learnt to walk that ought to crawl. (268-69)

“The Call of Cthulhu” (1926)

First published in *Weird Tales*, 1928.

The *Necronomicon* maintains its status as a magical text but also manifests prophetic powers, as it predicts the return of the Great Old Ones, who it claims will regain their lost mastery over earth. This appearance also begins the transformation of the spellbook into an historical record documenting the Great Old Ones as travelers from the stars. The famous couplet (see above) is also repeated here.

*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927)

First abridged publication in *Weird Tales*, 1941. First complete publication in *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, 1943.

Lovecraft utilizes the *Necronomicon* in its previous role as a book of magical lore, spells, and incunabulae. HPL presents the *grimoire* as the key to resurrecting the dead and to transferring souls from one body to another. A quotation from the *Necronomicon* describes this process:

The essential Saltes of Animals may be so prepared and preserved, that an ingenious Man may have the whole Ark of Noah in his own Studie, and raise the fine Shape of an Animal out of its Ashes at his Pleasure; and by the lyke Method from the essential Saltes of humane Dust, a Philosopher may, without any criminal Necromancy, call up the Shape of any dead Ancestor from the Dust whereinto his Bodie has been incinerated. (502)

“The Descendant” (1927)

First published in *Leaves*, 1938.

This fragment features the *Necronomicon* as a spellbook and repository for forbidden knowledge. The text functions as a societal lens through which Lovecraft

reveals his anti-Semitism when his protagonist visits “the squalid precincts” of the Jewish neighborhood to purchase the “infamous” (618) book.

“History of the *Necronomicon*” (1927)

First published as a pamphlet by Wilson Shepherd, 1937.

This brief essay, sometimes called a “fiction” by critics who point out the fictitious nature of its subject, served as a means for Lovecraft and his associates to maintain a clear idea of the *Necronomicon*’s historical timeline. The document also assists in recording the locations of the various known copies of the non-existent spellbook in libraries around the world.

“The Dunwich Horror” (1928)

First published in *Weird Tales*, 1929.

The *Necronomicon* continues its role as spellbook. An interesting dichotomy arises in “The Dunwich Horror” as HPL uses the volume here to negate its own evil. By employing a counter-spell, documented in its pages, the “horror” ravaging Dunwich is prevented from fulfilling its destiny as the opener of a gateway between dimensions. The *Necronomicon* also functions as a kind of bestiary in which the reader can find examples of the various monstrosities such spells might loose upon this dimension. “The Dunwich Horror” also contains the longest quotation that Lovecraft would ever attribute to his sardonic creation:

Nor is it to be thought, ran the text as Armitage mentally translated it, that man is either the oldest or the last of earth's masters, or that the common bulk of life and substance walks alone. The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be. Not in the spaces we know, but *between* them, They walk serene and primal, undimensioned and to us unseen. *Yog-Sothoth* knows the gate. *Yog-Sothoth* is the gate. *Yog-Sothoth* is the key and guardian of the gate. Past, present, future, all are one in *Yog-Sothoth*. He knows where the Old Ones broke through of old, and where They shall break through again. He knows where They have trod earth's fields, and where They still tread them, and why no one can behold Them as They tread. By Their smell can men sometimes know Them near, but of Their semblance can no man know, *saving only in the features of those They have begotten on mankind*; and of those are there many sorts, differing in likeness from man's truest eidolon to that shape without sight or substance which is *Them*. They walk unseen and foul in lonely places where the Words have been spoken and the Rites howled through at their Seasons. The wind gibbers with Their voices, and the earth mutters with Their consciousness. They bend the forest and crush the city, yet may not forest or city behold the hand that smites. Kadath in the cold waste hath known Them, and what man knows Kadath? The ice desert of the South and the sunken isles of Ocean hold stones whereon Their seal is engaven, but who hath seen the deep frozen city or the sealed tower long garlanded with seaweed and barnacles? Great Cthulhu is Their cousin, yet can he spy Them only dimly. Iä! *Shub-Niggurath!* As a foulness shall ye know Them. Their hand is at your throats, yet ye see Them not; and Their habitation is even one with your guarded threshold. *Yog-Sothoth* is the key to the gate, whereby the spheres meet. Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where Man rules now. After summer is winter, and after winter summer. They wait patient and potent, for here shall They reign again. (645)

“The Whisperer in Darkness” (1930)

First published in *Weird Tales*, 1931.

Use of the *Necronicon* in “The Whisperer in Darkness” as a chronicle of legends and history of an alien race demonstrates a marked improvement over its appearance in stories such as “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Dunwich Horror.” The *Necronomicon* takes on greater complexity as it transforms from spellbook, to folklore encyclopedia, and



finally to historical record. However the story does not provide additional details of the *grimoire*'s ritual qualities.

*At the Mountains of Madness* (1932)

First serialized in three issues of *Astounding Stories*, 1936.

Although Lovecraft provides no direct quotation from the *Necronomicon*, here the spellbook reaches the height of its powers, adding to its abilities the additional quality of societal lens. The *grimoire*'s evil reputation prevails, as does its stated purposes of recording history and legends. Harkening back to "The Call of Cthulhu," the *Necronomicon* also regains the property of providing prophetic insight, relating the terrible fate that soon awaits mankind.

"The Dreams in the Witch House" (1932)

First published in *Weird Tales*, 1933.

By this point in his career, Lovecraft had mentioned the theoretical research of Albert Einstein in many of his narratives. In "The Dreams in the Witch House," HPL once more uses the *Necronomicon* as a spellbook with the added twist of including the concepts of Einstein's space-time. Thus, the *Necronomicon* exhibits the role of dimensional gateway which it possesses in "The Dunwich Horror," yet here Lovecraft provides a logical, mathematical basis for the book's menacing power. This addition of non-Euclidean geometry and quantum mechanics presupposes that Abdul Alhazred

understood these concepts, revealing another instance of the spellbook's power to seemingly "predict" or anticipate the future.

"Through the Gates of the Silver Key" (1933)

First published in *Weird Tales*, 1934.

Once more Lovecraft returns to the traditional role for the *Necronomicon* as spellbook, and here again he relies on Einstein's theories to explain the story's plot of interdimensional time-travel.

"The Thing on the Doorstep" (1933)

First published in *Weird Tales*, 1937.

Lovecraft continues his use of the *Necronomicon* as spellbook. While touching upon Einstein's theories, the *grimoire's* appearance in the narrative seems more like a gimmick for explaining the concept of soul transference. This plotline mimics similar scenes exhibited in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*.

"The Book" (1933)

First published in *Leaves*, 1938.

This fragment, while complete enough in rough form to provide a cogent narrative, would undoubtedly have been extended by Lovecraft if he had thought it important enough to salvage. "The Book" does not actually name the *Necronomicon*, as the title might imply, yet the continued references to magical formulae and to "something

black and forbidden” (945) reflect similar appellations given to the spellbook in other narratives.

“The Shadow Out of Time” (1935)

First published in *Astounding Stories*, 1936.

The *Necronomicon* seems more problematic here. Existing in similar states as an historical chronicle, bestiary, and oracle of future events, the spellbook feels superfluous to the incredible scenes of time traveling entities who take over other species.

“The Haunter of the Dark” (1935)

First published in *Weird Tales*, 1936.

The *Necronomicon* appears only briefly. Lovecraft returns to the idea of the spellbook as a demonology. This lackluster use of the *Necronomicon* marked its last appearance in this, HPL’s final completed piece of fiction.

## END NOTES

1 Note: Inclusion of “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” “The Nameless City,” and “The Book” is done at the author’s discretion. None of these stories feature the *Necronomicon* by name, but each seems relevant in the overall context of Lovecraft’s *oeuvre* and in relation to investigations performed by other critics.