



## “That Innsmouth Look”

A Study of First-Person Narration and the State of Uncertainty in “The Shadow over Innsmouth” by H. P. Lovecraft

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the present essay has been to study how narration and focalisation generate the reader's state of uncertainty in "The Shadow over Innsmouth" by H. P. Lovecraft. It has been accomplished with the aid of Yvonne Leffler's narratological analysis on horror fiction and, to some extent, Mieke Bal's narratological theories. A pedagogical reflection has been provided before the analysis as to demonstrate how to teach narration and focalisation with the help of horror fiction. The analysis has four sections. The first section demonstrates how the narrative strategies used by Lovecraft in the narrative progression affects the reader's state of uncertainty by making it difficult for the reader to solve the horror mystery. The second section shows how the narrator's insecurities in his abilities and use of language affect the reader's state of uncertainty as well as his or her interpretation of events. The third section illustrates how the narrator's subjective and coloured perception generates the reader's state of ambiguity by challenging the reader's interpretation of events in relation to what is true or false. The final section demonstrates the problems of vision – "seeing too little", "seeing too much" and "being seen" – complicate the reader's interpretation of events.

Key words: Narratology, narration, focalisation, H. P. Lovecraft, pedagogy

## List of Abbreviations

<b>Concepts and Titles (preliminary)</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>
“The Shadow over Innsmouth”	SOI
Character-bound narrator	CN
External narrator	EN
Character-bound focalisor	CF
External focalisor	EF

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Horror fiction is one of the most popular forms of entertainment today. Horror literature grew out of the Gothic novel during the 19<sup>th</sup> century – from the works of Edgar Allan Poe to contemporary authors, such as Stephen King. Since the success of the director, William Friedkin’s horror motion picture, *The Exorcist* (1973), the horror genre has found an ever-increasing audience in the motion pictures, which has recently led to an entry into television with series such as Allan Ball’s *True Blood* (2008), Frank Darabont’s *The Walking Dead* (2010), Ryan Murphy’s *American Horror Story* (2011) and most recently, Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan’s *The Strain* (2014).

According to Sharon Begley, the author of “Why Our Brain Loves Horror Movies” (2011), the main contributor to horror fiction’s popularity is the young audience – namely adolescents and young adults – because they have a “tremendous need for stimulation and excitement” (para. 4) and are therefore “more likely to look for intense experiences” (para. 5). This stimulation theory is largely supported by the conclusions submitted in the psychological study of Marie-Louise Mares et al., “Age Difference in Adults’ Emotional Motivations for Exposure to Films” (2008). They found that “[y]oung adults expressed a greater interest... in watching... films with dark, violent, scary and sad content” (504), whereas older adults “were more interested in... watching [films with] heart-warming content” (505). This knowledge may help teachers in choosing a novel or a film that is in line with his or her students’ interest. If used appropriately in the classroom, the novel or the movie might generate an adequate amount of motivation for students to become more actively engaged in their learning process.

Despite its popularity in our everyday life and its appeal for younger audiences, horror fiction is rarely found in the classroom. In “Conquering the Fear” (1998), Daniel Compore states that students and teachers face “a widespread misconception... [that] if something is enjoyable, it can’t be any good” (5). As an attempt to contradict that misconception, I aim to argue that horror fiction can be both good and enjoyable. Since it is characteristic of horror

fiction to evoke paradoxical emotions such as disgust, fear and joy that most readers can relate to and/or enjoy, it provides an opportunity to centre the teaching upon those reader experiences. By teaching how the authors use different narrative strategies to elicit these emotions, the students can become more aware of the reader’s role and what happens when reading narratives.

In the present essay, I aim to demonstrate how narrative technique – specifically, narration and focalisation – works to elicit a particular adverse emotion in a horror short story written by H. P. Lovecraft; the “state of uncertainty” or terror. This adverse emotion is particularly characteristic of H. P. Lovecraft’s work. Yvonne Leffler describes terror in *Horror as Pleasure*, as “the evocation of an atmosphere of fear with no object”,<sup>1</sup> or “the fear of something uncertain, inexplicable and indefinable” (20). First, a pedagogical reflection will be presented.

### **Pedagogical Reflection**

The focus of the present section is to demonstrate how reader experiences can help develop student awareness of narrative strategies of progression. The horror story is particularly effective in eliciting the adverse emotions that define the genre and distinguish it from other genres. This makes it especially useful for focusing on reader experience (Leffler 22-23). James Phelan’s “voice-loop”, which is described in detail in “Voice; or, Authors, Narrators, and Audiences” (2010), will be used to present a teaching method to help teachers go back and forth between the students’ reading experiences and teachings of narratology (138).

Narratology is a rather advanced literary theory, which requires students to be able to comprehend and work on an abstract level. Due to the challenging nature of abstract thinking, the recommended courses to teach this literary theory are English 6 and 7, which are

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<sup>1</sup> According to Leffler, the ”object” often involves the monster or other supernatural creature or phenomenon that evokes great fear for the main character(s) (18, 20).

equivalent to English B 2.1 and B 2.2 according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, CEFR (“Alla Kommentarer” 5). These two courses run during the second and third year at the Swedish upper secondary school. In the English curriculum for English 6 and 7, the goals that are relevant for the purposes of the present essay are following:

### **English 6**

- How structure and context are built up and how attitudes, perspectives and stylistic levels are expressed in oral and *written language* in different genres.

### **English 7**

- Strategies for drawing conclusions regarding oral speech and *texts* when it pertains to attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values and in order to comprehend underlying meanings.
- Practice of fundamental stylistic and rhetorical terms. (“Engelska” 6, 9. My emphasis)

According to the curriculum of the English courses, the students are required to learn how to detect and comprehend different stylistic elements across a wide range of both oral and written productions. Those goals – the first goals of English 6 and 7 – support the teaching of narration and focalisation, which are both stylistic elements in narratives, in the classroom. In essence, all three goals illustrate that the students are – or should be – sufficiently prepared to comprehend and grasp the abstract content of the present literary theory – given that the teacher uses appropriate teaching methods.

Teaching narratology can help the teacher guide his or her students towards accomplishing these goals. Mieke Bal explains in the Introduction to her book, *Narratology* (2009), how the narratological concepts such as narration and focalisation can help students’ understanding of the underlying structure in stories:

These tools are useful in that they enable their users to formulate an interpretive description in such a way that it is accessible to others. Furthermore, discovering the characteristics of a text can also be facilitated by insight into the abstract narrative system. But above all, the concepts help to increase understanding through encouraging readers to articulate what they understand, or think they understand, when reading or otherwise ‘processing’ a narrative artefact (Bal 4)

According to Bal, narratology is a language that enables the students to communicate their understanding of certain aspects of the narrative. By having the appropriate terminology for communication and tools for analysis, the students can be encouraged to feel more confident and competent in detecting and comprehending certain narrative elements. Furthermore, teaching narration and focalisation via horror stories (or other genres) will also permit students to understand their role as the reader and how a reader is subsequently affected by the narrator’s strategies and devices – in particular, the focalisor’s subjective perception.

As mentioned previously in the introduction of the present essay, horror fiction is rarely found in the classroom due to its low artistic value – or as Daniel P. Compora has stated: “if something is enjoyable, it can’t be any good” (5).<sup>2</sup> However, several critics argue for the benefits of implementing horror fiction in the curriculum. In the “Introduction” of the essay collection, *Fear and Learning: Essays on the Pedagogy of Horror* (2013), Alaya Ahmad and Sean Moreland argue that horror fiction can offer a greater insight into reader experience or reader response by providing a different pattern of thoughts and ideas that students are not accustomed to (8-9). Leffler acknowledges that the “horror genre can be seen as a special genre within suspense” in comparison to detective or thriller fiction by putting the reader in a

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<sup>2</sup> Compora explains that “good” is referred to as artistic value – i.e. worthy of academic discourse and attention – whilst “enjoyable” is referred to the emotional rewards that the readers embraces when reading horror fiction such as the adrenaline rush and the paradoxical combination of fear, disgust, aversion, fascination and joy (1-5).

constant state of uncertainty via mystifications and so forth (106). By dismissing horror fiction, the teacher prevents the students from experiencing and learning something different and valuable from what they are used to.

If the teacher chooses to use the horror genre in his or her classroom, he or she has to face another challenge: the (over-whelming) emotional impact. John Edward Martin, the author of “Skin and Bones: The Horror of the Real” (2013), addresses the issue by sharing his own teacher experiences with students, who “are not prepared for the degree of personal emotion or unsettling thought that can accompany... [a] more introspective approach of reading” (242). In other words, they lose control over their negative emotional response towards horror fiction and tend to want to avoid dealing with it. To help these students overcome the overwhelming fear, Martin suggests debriefing – either in groups or in private (ibid.). He offers his students time and space to express and record something... spontaneous and personal during the group debriefings, where he has found that “others [sharing] their reactions, or [having] similar ones, can often be cathartic in itself” (ibid.). With regards to the individual debriefing, Martin allows his students to use notes and journals “for a more private response”, where each student can work through their reactions and personal thoughts (ibid.). These methods can help students cope with their strong emotional reactions during the reading or viewing process of a horror story or movie and during the voice-loop exercise.

One of the methods in teaching narration and focalisation with the help of this essay is James Phelan’s “voice-loop” (hereafter loop),<sup>3</sup> which is a teaching method that moves back and forth between practice and theory (138). As the name of the method indicates, the teaching and learning process of the loop is circular. First, the teacher and his or her students read a certain part of the narrative that addresses a particular theory such as narration or focalisation. Following the collective reading of the text, the teacher provides the students

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<sup>3</sup> The term, ”voice”, is the equivalent of narration or more specifically, the narrator (Phelan 137).

with the theory by illustrating how it can be applied. After this, the teacher and his or her students “loop back to” the narrative and together apply the theory to it (139-40). Although Phelan uses other theories concerning narration such as Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism and double-voiced discourse, the teacher does not need these to use the voice-loop method (138).

To enter the loop, the teacher needs to find one or a few extracts that help illustrate an aspect of narration and/or focalisation. In this case, the teacher may choose the part of the horror narrative, where the character-bound narrator (hereafter abbreviated as CN) unveils himself by confessing to have appealed for governmental inquiry and by describing his intentions to off-load his story (Lovecraft 808). Here, the teacher has the opportunity to teach the students about the difference between an external and a character-bound narrator. To facilitate the students’ understanding of theory, the students can engage in a short writing task, where the students first write for five to ten minutes about themselves and then write about the person next to them for five to ten minutes a text. The task can initiate discussions about the differences in access to information – i.e. that the narrating person has access to his or her own thoughts, feelings and opinions, whereas he or she does not have access to someone else’s thoughts, feelings and opinions. The teacher can help the students return to the start of the loop – i.e. the narrative – by instructing them to list what information the narrating Robert yields about himself and how it is communicated in the rest of the narrative. For instance, his lack of confidence can be seen in the language and content of the extract. Instead of letting the students work individually with this task, the teacher can divide them up in groups and ask them to show other extracts that demonstrate Robert’s lack of confidence.

The main benefit of the loop is that it has a great degree of flexibility in terms of what to teach and how to teach it (Phelan 148). The above demonstration of how to use the loop may require one or two lessons, but it can also be extended by including new extracts and teaching new aspects of narration and focalisation.

## Previous Criticism

Lovecraft criticism has faced some considerable speed-bumps, which has delayed its advancement for two to three decades following Lovecraft’s passing in 1937 - according to both Philip Smith, the author of “Re-visioning the Romantic-Era Gothicism: An Introduction to Key Works and Themes in the study of H. P. Lovecraft” (2011), and S. T. Joshi, the author of *Lovecraft and a World in Transition: Collected Essays on H. P. Lovecraft* (2014).<sup>4</sup> First, some critics – amongst them the renowned literary critic, Edmund Wilson – have condemned Lovecraft as a poor writer and a pulp hack, which has discouraged literary scholars from studying the author’s work. Secondly, the co-founder of Arkham House, August Derleth, had set up an “overprotective” policy, which has prevented complete access for literary scholarship (*Lovecraft and a World in Transition* 503; Smith 832). In addition to his policy, Derleth had also made “posthumous collaborations” with Lovecraft that were, according to Joshi, not true to Lovecraft’s original work (*Lovecraft and a World in Transition* 502; Smith 832).

Following Derleth’s passing and the decline in popularity of Lovecraft’s work during the mid-seventies, some literary scholars – amongst them, S. T. Joshi himself – began building up Lovecraftian scholarship. After the publication of the essay anthology, *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism* (1980), which summarises the literary scholarship following Lovecraft’s passing, Joshi established the semi-annual periodical, *Lovecraft Studies* (1980-2001),<sup>5</sup> which has enabled literary scholars’ critical essays on Lovecraft to be published – amongst them, Sam Gafford’s “The Shadow over Innsmouth’: Lovecraft’s Melting Pot”

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<sup>4</sup> Hereafter shortened to *Lovecraft and a World in Transition*.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the closure of *Lovecraft studies* (1980-2001), Hippocampus Press has quite recently launched a new periodical regarding Lovecraft criticism, *Lovecraft Annual* (2007-).

(1991). The scholarship has slowly developed in size from this point to today, where the highest peak was during the 1990’s.<sup>6</sup>

The topics or subjects of academic discourse within Lovecraftian scholarship are broad with few exceptions. One of the most common topics is of the biographical kind – that is, how Lovecraft’s life and philosophies are shown in his literary legacy. For instance, Timothy H. Evans discusses how H. P. Lovecraft’s passion for antiquarianism and folklore is demonstrated in his works and James Kneale, the author of “From Beyond: H. P. Lovecraft and the Place of Horror” (2006), explores how “space” in Lovecraft’s works contributes to horror via Lovecraft’s letters and field notes during his many travels. Another common topic is the racial aspect, which is discussed readily, for instance, in Tracy Bealer’s article, “’The Innsmouth Look:’ H. P. Lovecraft’s Ambivalent Modernism” (2011). Bealer studies the ambivalent modernism and how “The Shadow of Innsmouth” (hereafter abbreviated SOI) “literalizes the racial anxieties activated by modernist social change” by using the concept, “the racialized othering” (Bealer 44-45). Another example is Gafford’s article that focuses on five critical themes that occur throughout SOI, amongst them the racial aspect. Taking on similar ideas concerning racism in his article, “Travelling into the Shadow of Innsmouth” (2004), Eduardo García Agustín develops the idea of journey – that is, “the idea of change, of transformation, of metamorphosis” – and how it affects the reader’s sense of dread in SOI (25).

In this essay, I aim to use some of these articles to strengthen and develop my arguments in the analysis by showing how their ideas can also contribute to the reader’s state of uncertainty. Kneale’s article will be used, because he provides an interesting study regarding limits of language in Lovecraft’s works that proves to be relevant for the second section of the present essay’s analysis. For the discussion of how “being seen” generates the

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<sup>6</sup> This scholarship progression is based on the article search in Google Scholar, using the key term, H. P. Lovecraft.

reader's state of uncertainty, I will be using Bealer's study of "the racist gaze" as it complements my argument. Both Gafford's and García Agustín's interesting interpretations on how the climax of SOI affects the reader's horror are relevant in discussing how the reader's state of uncertainty is generated by Robert Olmstead's trustworthiness.

### **The Synopsis of "The Shadow over Innsmouth"**

Written in 1931 and finally published in 1936, "The Shadow over Innsmouth" is one of Lovecraft's longer first-person short stories. According to Sam Gafford, the author of, "'The Shadow over Innsmouth': Lovecraft's Melting Pot" (1991), SOI is a part of the Cthulhu mythos, which is an intertextual shared fictional universe created by Lovecraft. It is also suggested that it is a partial sequel to *At the Mountain of Madness* by several critics (6-7). The leading character of the short story is not revealed in the text, but according to the editors of *An Lovecraft Encyclopedia* (2001), S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, the character's name is Robert Olmstead (194). This name for the protagonist and the outline of his family tree are revealed in one of Lovecraft's notes, "Notes for The Shadow over Innsmouth", which is featured in *Something about Cats and Other Pieces*, edited by August Derleth and others in 1949 (Joshi and Schultz 194). Although the name of the character is not present in the horror narrative, it will be used in the analysis for the benefit of having a named protagonist.

The story begins with a reported episode of horrific events that took place in the New England town of Innsmouth after Robert Olmstead's appeal for a government inquiry. During his visit in Newburyport, Robert learns that the town gained a poor reputation mainly due to the late Captain Obed Marsh, who is responsible for inviting a strange cult into town and for encouraging the Innsmouth residents to worship and interbreed with the Deep Ones. The Deep Ones are an ancient, extra-terrestrial, aquatic race, who worship the god, Dagon. Guided by curiosity, Robert's intention is to limit his observations of the ill-rumoured town to the

ancient architecture, but the brief, innocent visit drastically changes when Robert learns the dark secret of Innsmouth from the native resident, Zadok Allen. Knowing too much about the town’s past, Robert tries to escape the pursuit of the infected Innsmouth residents to avoid a confrontation with the Deep Ones. He manages to escape and appeal for governmental action, but he soon discovers, via genealogical findings, that his family has the infected Innsmouth genetic strain. The story has an open ending, where Robert – now slowly transforming into one of the Deep Ones – makes a fateful decision: to free his cousin, who is also carrying the Innsmouth strain, from the mental hospital and together flee to Y’ha-nthlei, the aquatic dwelling of the Deep Ones outside the coast of Innsmouth.

### **Mieke Bal’s Narratology**

Narratology is commonly known in literary theory as the study of narrative structure.<sup>7</sup>

Starting in the prime period of structuralism in Russia during the 1920’s, scholars discovered that numerous elements, themes and patterns re-occurred across a vast number of stories. All of these features made up – what scholars would later call – the narrative structure. These features, according to Mieke Bal, the author of *Narratology* (2009), helped scholars and readers “understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives”. (3)

A prominent late structuralist scholar in France was Gérard Genette, who had performed an extensive narratological analysis of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* based on five important concepts in Genette’s own book, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988). Genette was first to suggest that narration (“who speaks?”) and focalisation (“who sees?”) were two separate concepts and thus should be analysed as such (65). Mieke Bal has done a critical analysis and reinterpretation of Genette’s work on narration and focalisation in her essay

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<sup>7</sup> See definition of narratology at the following website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/>.

collection, *On Story-Telling* (1991),<sup>8</sup> and because of Genette’s overly complicated terminology, I will use Bal’s terminology as it offers a clearer understanding for the teacher, the student and the reader. In the following section, the two concepts – narration and focalisation – will be explained more thoroughly by describing the functions of each concept.

Narration is, according to David Herman, Brian McHale and James Phelan, the editors of *Teaching Narrative Theory* (2010), “[t]he process by which a narrative is conveyed” (305). This narrating or story-telling process is performed by the agent of narration – the narrator (Herman, McHale and Phelan 307; Bal 15). Bal discusses the difference between the ‘first-person’ and ‘third-person’ narrator by claiming that “[t]he difference rests in the object of the utterance” (21). In other words, it depends on whom or what the narrator narrates. Bal continues by explaining that the narrator “is always a ‘first-person’”, but in the case of ‘first-person’ narratives, the “‘I’ [the narrator] speaks about itself”, whereas in the case of ‘third-person’ narratives, the “‘I’ [the narrator] speaks about someone else” (Bal 21). In order to illuminate this distinction, Bal offers two terms – character-bound and external narrator. The character-bound narrator (hereafter abbreviated CN) is the narrating agent that is “identified with a character”, while the external narrator (hereafter abbreviated EN) is the narrating agent that “never explicitly refers to itself as a character” and can therefore be seen as “omniscient” (Bal 21).

The narrator is the agent of narration, which in other words means that he or she is in charge of the telling of a chosen story. Manfred Jahn, who wrote the chapter “Focalisation” in David Herman’s *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (2007), provides a concise summary of the narrator’s functions: “[The] narrator is the functional agent who verbalizes the story’s nonverbal matter, edits the verbal matter, manages the exposition, decides what is to be told in what sequence, and establishes communication with the addressee” (96). Jahn

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<sup>8</sup> For more information concerning the criticism towards Genette’s theory, see chapter 4 in Mieke Bal, *On Story-Telling: Essays in Narratology* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1991).

stresses that the narrator manipulates the narrative progression in terms of what he or she decides to include as well as exclude, and when and how to tell the narrative. Susan Stewart, the author of “The Epistemology of the Horror Story” (1982), explains that because the reader “[derives his or her] confidence in the reliability of the ‘I’ ... [and] its articulation of itself as an ordinary human voice, a voice telling a true experience narrative”, it makes the reader “particularly vulnerable to the narrator” (44). This in turn entails a power discrepancy between the narrator and the addressee, in which “[the] narrator holds an absolute... authority over the reader” (Stewart 43). The linguistic style and choice of words that the narrator uses can influence the reader’s empathy towards the main character (or the narrator him or herself) and affect his or her emotions – i.e. placing the reader under the influence of the narrator (Bal 51-3, Leffler 186).

Focalisation is, according to Bal, “the relation between the vision and that which is ‘seen’, perceived” (145-146). She continues to explain that “whenever events are presented, they are always presented from within a certain ‘vision’” (Bal 145). The agent of focalisation – the focalisor – “is the point from which the elements are viewed” (Bal 149). As with narrators, there are two types of focalisors – one, which concurs with a character, and the other, which lies outside the story world. The focalisor that coincides with a character is called character-bound focalisor (hereafter abbreviated CF; Bal 151) and the other focalisor that does not coincide with any of the characters is called external focalisor (hereafter abbreviated EF; Bal 152).

The main difference in these two focalisors is the degree of information to which the reader has access. A CF allows the reader to have access to that specific character’s inner thoughts and feelings, which enables the reader to get to know that specific character and thus obtain unique information about him or her (Bal 149). The level of insight into the focalised character encourages the reader to empathise with him or her more readily as the reader gets

to know him or her. However, by having the vision of the narrative aligned with a character, the reader discovers that the vision entails certain disadvantages – namely, limitation and bias (Bal 149-150). The vision or representation of the story world is limited as the events and characters are only seen through the eyes of the focalised character. Furthermore, the vision entails a certain alignment with or bias towards that character, which brings about “an advantage over the other characters” in the story world (Bal 149). While the reader gets acquainted with the focalised character, he or she is not encouraged in the same manner to bond with the other characters. Since the representation of the story world is both limited and biased, the reader is consequently denied an objective image of the story world. This objective account of events and characters is the advantage of the EF.

Another important aspect of focalisation, which Bal highlights in the section, “Focalisation”, is memory. She explains that “[m]emory is an act of ‘vision’ of the past but, as an act, situated in the present of the memory” (150). What this indicates is that the act of remembering a memory is an act of re-experiencing or being present in the time and space of that particular memory. The past focalisation overlaps with the present focalisation – meaning the older character or narrating agent (that is, the CN) re-experiences the events and the vision of the younger self. When putting the past event into words, the CN takes on the role of both story-teller and commentator. As the story-teller, the CN tells the past events via the past self’s focalisation as if they were happening right now – i.e. describing in detail the past self’s experiences and feelings he or she had at the time. While he or she is narrating the past events, the CN can also add comments about the memories he or she has narrated down – meaning the CN re-interprets or reflects upon the memories with the present self’s focalisation. In simpler terms: when the CN retells memories, he or she is narrating via the focalisation of the past self, whereas when the CN comments on memories, he or she does so

via the focalisation of the present self. This narrative situation occurs in the text, when there is a “flashback” (Bal 58-61).

The problem with re-experiencing a past event as an attempt to tell that memory is two-fold. First, when recalling a memory, the narrating agent or a character has to undergo the emotional as well as mental impact of it. This is particularly apparent and challenging, when it comes to trauma. Trauma is a case, where the narrating agent or character is incapable of both comprehending and experiencing the memories “at the time of their occurrence” (Bal 150). Recalling a traumatic event therefore results in an illogical picture composed of bits and pieces, which the narrating agent attempts to make sense out of. Secondly, memory is reconstructive. The story “the person remembers is not identical to the one [it] experienced” (Bal 150). Bal explains that when a narrating agent aims to retell the memory, he or she is “rhetorically [over-working the experience] so that [it] can connect to an audience” (ibid.). This implies that the narrator makes choices of what to include and what to exclude in order to make the memory cohesive to his or her addressee.

Apart from referring to narration and focalisation with regards to Bal’s terminology throughout the analysis, Bal’s theory concerning memory will be discussed in the last two sections of the analysis.

### **Horror Stories and Leffler’s “State of Uncertainty”**

In her book, *Horror as Pleasure* (2000), Leffler has done a thorough investigation to “show how horror stories... produce an enjoyable sense of horror in their audience” by using a combination of genre theory and narrative theory (10). The fourth chapter in her book is dedicated to explaining the mystery structure of horror stories and how horror stories elicit a certain type of suspense that is different from other genres. This certain type of suspense is the “state of uncertainty” or terror, which is described as an atmosphere of suspense without any

concrete object of fear (Leffler 20). Apart from clarifying the definition of state of uncertainty, I will also outline Leffler’s analysis of how narration and focalisation can create a specific form of suspense.

The state of uncertainty is the reader’s response or state, which is aroused by the atmosphere in the horror narrative. In her book, Leffler uses Lovecraft in explaining the impact of atmosphere on the reader’s state of uncertainty (75-77). Lovecraft explains in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927) that the most important element of the horror story or specifically the “weird tale” – a sub-genre of horror fiction – is the atmosphere: “[a]tmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing plot but the creation of a given sensation” (1043). The horror narrative or the “weird tale” can only be merited as a good story once it “[excites] in the reader a profound sense of dread” (Leffler 76; Lovecraft 1044). For evoking uncertainty in the reader, Lovecraft asserts that the narrative requires an element of the unknown or the supernatural that threatens the “fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos” (1043). When the laws of nature are insufficient to explain the threat, the reader feels a sense of danger and uncertainty (Lovecraft 1041).

Although Lovecraft maintains that there has to be a supernatural, or cosmic, unknown threat to create the atmosphere, the literary scholar Will R. Rockett, quoted in Leffler’s book, suggests otherwise. He asserts that power of suggestion is sufficient enough to evoke atmosphere of dread and uncertainty:

In fact, terror is always of the indeterminate and incomprehensible, of the unseen but sensed and suspected, or of the imperfectly seen. One imagines what is really there, based upon the evidence actually in one’s possession, and what one imagines seems inevitably both more terrifying and more real than what might be shown on the screen.  
(qtd. in Leffler 20)

Here, Rockett implies that it is the narrative technique, not themes such as the supernatural or the cosmos, that is the basis to generate suggestions. The flawed vision and the lack of sufficient information produce a sense of uncertainty and anxiety in the reader, who needs to use his or her imagination to compensate for the inadequacy in vision and information. These inconsistencies that evoke the state of uncertainty in the reader are the premise of Leffler’s analysis of narration and focalisation.

First-person narrative technique, or character-bound narrator and character-bound focaliser coinciding with the main protagonist, is a common device used in horror fiction. There are mainly two reasons for this choice of narrative device. Firstly, it encourages empathy and closeness to the leading character (Leffler 107). The main protagonist is the forward-moving object, which operates as a guide for the reader to enter and explore the mysterious world and as an object of identification (Leffler 107-108, 125). The reader can readily identify with the main character’s wish to approach the unknown as well as the reactions of certain events, *if* those reactions are interpreted by the reader as realistic (Stewart 44). Secondly, the narrative device sustains ambiguity in the story, because every event in the story world is told and circumscribed by the CF’s “subjective perception, selection and cognitive and emotional assumptions” (121). The limited, subjective vision leaves the reader with the problem of interpreting if the events or situations are real – i.e. objective truth – or not – i.e. subjective experience (Leffler 125).

The “subjective perception, selection and cognitive and emotional assumptions” of the CF affects what, when and how events are told by the CN at a later stage (Leffler 121). When the main character narrates his or her past events as a narrator, the piece of memory that he or she tells is a “product of [his or her] knowledge, perception and psychological assumptions” at the time of the experiencing (Leffler 123). This often brings about the problem of reliability

in the focalised main protagonist. The reader consequently has difficulties in interpreting certain events as either objective truth or as a product of the main character’s imagination. In addition, because the main protagonist narrates the story at a later stage, the reader faces the problem of selection. As the CN is in charge of telling its past experiences, it can decide (1) what experiences it wants to include, (2) when to include a certain episode, and (3) in what way to tell a particular event. These three options are based upon the CN’s intention (e.g. to offload something terrible) or re-interpretation (e.g. it might reinterpret a certain event with a different perspective) (Leffler 123).

Under the heading of focalisation, Leffler stresses the importance of “to see is to know” (125). One of the characteristic elements of horror narratives is the flawed or imperfect vision. When the view of a certain event or object is obstructed, the reader is left to imagine what that object is or how the episode plays out. Leffler describes the problems of seeing as: “seeing too little and therefore not knowing, or seeing too much, or so much that it leads to trauma or madness” (125). That is, the more the focalised character sees, the greater the risk will be of insanity and degrading health. This is because he or she sees objects or occurrences that are either too horrific or incomprehensible for his or her mind to handle. These destructive effects of “seeing too much” can alter the main protagonist’s interpretation of future events due to emotional and mental impact they have on him or her – meaning that he or she sees items or events in a different, skewed manner than what they actually are. Another issue that Leffler brings up is the threat of “being seen, observed by someone else” (127). This threat initiates a fear in the main protagonist as well as the reader – especially when it cannot see the observer (Leffler 127-128).

## Analysis

### **Narrative Progression in relation to the "State of Uncertainty"**

In the chapter, "Narrative Progression", in the essay collection, *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames* (2002), James Phelan explains that narrative progression "refers to a narrative as a dynamic event, one that must move, in both its telling and its reception, through time" (211).<sup>9</sup> When studying the narrative progression, he explains that the scholarly interest lies in "how authors [through their narrators] generate, sustain, develop, and resolve reader's interests in the narrative" (ibid.). Since the reader's response to "The Shadow over Innsmouth" is very much a product of the author's choices, the aim of this section is to analyse the narrative strategies Lovecraft adopts in SOI through the narrator to mystify the plot and thus engage the reader. By highlighting these particular strategies, the analysis will demonstrate what Leffler concludes in her book, *Horror as Pleasure* (2000), namely that: "it is what remains unsaid, the empty space in the narrative or between the narratives, which generates the atmosphere of horror" (124). By the narrator's excluding or procrastinating vital information in the narrative, the reader is left not only to trust in the evidence he or she possesses, but also to visualise what is implicitly told or denied in, what Leffler refers to as, the "empty space" – or "gaps". The result of this strategy helps generate and sustain the reader's state of uncertainty as a way of creating suspense – i.e. push the narrative forward. Before addressing the narrative progression, the narrator type in SOI needs to be explained.

SOI is presented as a personal and emotional account (similar to a diary entry) of an event, narrated by a first-person narrator (who has been identified as Robert Olmstead). The character-bound narrator tells the reader his past experiences in Innsmouth in the form of a long flashback, which continues up to the present. This means that the character-bound

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<sup>9</sup> For more in-depth information about narrative progression, read James Phelan's chapter, "Narrative Progression", in Brian Richardson (ed.), *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002).

narrator acts as both a story-teller of his past experiences, where his younger self is the protagonist, and a commentator, who reflects and revises certain aspects of the story at the time of the narrating.

When discussing the narrative progression of a horror tale, Leffler uses Noël Carroll’s question-answer structure, or the erotetic structure,<sup>10</sup> to explain the common narrative strategy of withholding information from the reader and how it affects him or her (Leffler 98-103). The principle of the theory is that the story is made up of several questions, which “are answered as events unfold” (Leffler 99). Put in simpler terms, a scene generates a question due to a “gap” or a lack of information, which is then answered or filled in the scenes to come. According to Leffler, this entails that “a powerful element of uncertainty [in the reader] is required” in order to maintain his or her interest in the narrative – in other words, to sustain suspense (101). The state of uncertainty encourages the reader to search for answers to questions that have been posed in order to reach the resolution of the story – or, to restore certainty. The erotetic structure can readily be observed in the present short story, when Robert tries to fill in the “gap” about Innsmouth by asking other characters for information. Robert learns about Innsmouth from the ticket agent, but it leaves him with more questions or “gaps” to fill in about Captain Obed Marsh’s gold refinery, the abundance of fish outside the coast of Innsmouth and the “devil worship and awful sacrifices” (Lovecraft 809-10). In order to fill those new “gaps”, he continues his search for information, which leads him to the next character, Miss Tilton, the museum attendant at the Newburyport Historical Society. She gives him limited information about the gold refinery and the devil worship, but to the degree that it raises more questions about other things for Robert to continue his search to the next character. This question-answer pattern repeats itself, when Robert corresponds with the grocery boy in Innsmouth and finally to Zadok Allen, the infamous town’s drunkard. The

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<sup>10</sup> For more information about this theory, see Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, the Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990) 130-36.

over-whelming amount of questions in the light of the under-whelming amount of answers places the reader in a state of uncertainty. Not only does it encourages him or her to use his or her imagination to fill in the “gaps” for the time being, but it also intrigues the reader to continue the reading due to curiosity.

However, when it comes to the horror story, Leffler states that “the uncertainty and lack of information... [...] are to some extent permanent”, because the narrative “is structured in such a way as to conceal, rather than reveal, the mystery and the monster” (107, 113). This implies that the questions that the reader has posed are either not at all answered or unsatisfactorily answered. One aspect of the story that demonstrates a “gap” that is never quite filled in SOI is the Deep Ones. Apart from their appearances, there seems to be very little information about their origin, culture and way of life. What can be gathered by the short story is that the Deep Ones is an alien aquatic race that have presumably been on Earth for a very long time, but there is no information on how they arrived here. They appear to believe in a god, Dagon, and perform rites in his name, but the reader does not learn more about their religion, their culture or their way of living. Another “gap” that remains unanswered is whether Robert will succeed in his plan of rescuing his cousin from the sanatorium and escape to Innsmouth. Leaving questions unanswered prevent the reader from restoring certainty. This leaves him or her “trapped” in a state of uncertainty, which conforms to Leffler’s explanation: “[the] primary function of the questions is not to be answered, but to leave the reader... in expectant uncertainty” throughout the horror story (107). It is also a way to discourage the reader from focusing on details regarding the mystery and instead encourage him or her to “empathise by closeness to the main protagonist” (ibid.).

An additional component to help create suspense with the help of the erotetic structure is the use of “a variety of deviations and digressions”, which delays the suspense-generating question (Leffler 100). An example of a diversion is when a question has “binary or

alternative answers” (ibid.). This can be observed in SOI, when the ticket agent’s version of an event conflicts with Zadok Allen’s concerning the sudden drop in the Innsmouth population in 1846. On the one hand, the ticket agent claims that there was a “big epidemic” in 1846 that killed off half of the Innsmouth population due to “some foreign kind of disease” (Lovecraft 810). Zadok Allen, on the other hand, claims that Captain Obed Marsh was behind the drop in population. Driven by the wish to regain the profitable trade with the outer-worldly, aquatic cult, Obed starts performing rituals and human sacrifices to please the cult’s god, Dagon, on the Devil Reef. Although many Innsmouth residents joined with him due to the profit the town and they themselves were gaining, many – amongst them the Selectman Mowry – did not appreciate the growing presence of the cult. On that particular night in 1846, Obed announced an ultimatum to everyone to either join him or die. Riots took place in the city against Obed and the Deep Ones, which resulted in a massacre.

Conflicting versions of an event creates even more uncertainty for the reader as he or she has to decide which version is more credible. On one hand, since the ticket agent “wouldn’t care to go to [Innsmouth]”, the information he provide mainly contains other people’s stories and local rumours (Lovecraft 810, 814). When the ticket agent converses with Robert, he tells him “what some of the old-timers tell...” and what “[this] fellow – Casey, his name [is] – [has] a lot to say...” about Innsmouth (Lovecraft 810, 811). The problem with sharing other people’s stories is that Robert and the reader has no opportunity to verify the ticket agent’s sources. The stories that the ticket agent have been told could be tampered with, for instance, to create a dramatic effect such as the local people believing that “old Captain Obed [drives] bargains with the devil and [brings] imps out of hell in Innsmouth” (Lovecraft 809). On the other hand, Zadok may appear to be telling the truth about Innsmouth, but he is also “ninety-six years old and somewhat touched in the head, besides being the town drunkard” (Lovecraft 822). Old age, trauma and alcoholism undermines the objectivity and

veracity of his story. The issue of reliability creates even more uncertainty for the reader, which complicates his or her efforts at solving the mystery.

The inconsistency between the characters’ stories and claims as well as the unreliability of the characters’ stories emphasise the sense of ambiguity in the narrative. Robert’s quest for knowledge, in essence, “leads to ambiguous answers [which are] open to many interpretations” (Leffler 107). The inconsistency causes the reader to be insecure regarding whether the ticket agent’s claim is more truthful than Zadok Allen’s. If Zadok Allen’s assertion is regarded as more truthful, can the reader trust his judgement – knowing that he is an old, somewhat crazy drunkard? Questions pertaining to credibility enhance the ambiguity of the horror narrative, because it challenges the reader’s efforts to get closer to the heart of the mystery. In line with Leffler’s statement, for every piece of information or answer Robert and the reader get, the issues of consistency and credibility make the information or the answer appear vague or ambiguous in terms of interpretation. In simpler terms, the reader is left unsure whether the story Zadok tells Robert is a product of his experiences or a product of his imagination. Even if the reader gains the full extent of the mystery at the end of the story, the information and the answers provided by the characters are undermined as a result of too many interpretations concerning veracity. In other words, the reader can never be perfectly certain that the information or the answers are the “right” ones.

### **The Narrator and the Use of Language in relation to the “State of Uncertainty”**

In the previous section, the analysis has shown how ambiguity is generated by the narrator’s manipulation of the narrative progression. The aim of the present section is to examine how the narrator himself can elicit uncertainty in the reader. This will be done by analysing the narrator’s intentions and/or values, tone of voice and the impact of trauma. All of these factors will touch upon the reliability of the narrator.

Learning the intentions of the narrator can enhance the reader’s understanding of his values and encourage closeness to him. The character-bound narrator’s intentions of reproducing the past events and experiences he formerly had in Innsmouth are revealed immediately after he has described the governmental action against Innsmouth, which has been brought on by his appeal after his escape from the infamous town:

The mere telling helps me to restore confidence in my own faculties; to reassure myself that I was not simply the first to succumb to a contagious nightmare hallucination. It helps me, too, in making up my mind regarding a certain terrible step which lies ahead of me. (Lovecraft 808)

Two intentions are represented. The first intention concerns Robert’s mental health. Having experienced the horrific events in Innsmouth and revealed the connection between the Marsh family and his ancestry, Robert’s mental health is doubtful. This idea is especially clear at the end of the short story, when he has attempted to kill himself before deciding to write his story down: “I bought an automatic and almost took the step” (Lovecraft 858). By writing down the traumatic discoveries, Robert wishes to regain trust in his senses and to share it with others as a way of reducing his isolation. The second intention of reproducing the past events is to make a choice regarding his future direction. After the revelation of the family connection, Robert is gradually realising and accepting his own physical transformation into one of the Deep Ones. Knowing that his cousin is going through the same transformation at a sanatorium, Robert retells his past experiences in order to make a decision whether to rescue his cousin, flee together to Innsmouth and “take to water” – meaning to live amongst the Deep Ones in the aquatic city, Y’ha-nthlei, by the Devil Reef (Lovecraft 858).

Presenting intentions baldly as Robert does can increase the reader’s sense of certainty, but it can also go the opposite direction – i.e. to elevate the reader’s sense of ambiguity and

empathy towards Robert. Leffler states that “[subjectively] coloured representation from within the focaliser complicates the reader’s interpretation of external course of events, yet simultaneously facilitates the reader’s emotional insight [into the character]” (125). Learning that he as the CN is “going to defy the ban on speech about this thing” (Lovecraft 808), the reader builds up expectations concerning Robert and the story he tells in terms of credibility. When Robert doubts that his experiences are real, the reader becomes more encouraged to adopt the same level of insecurity onto him as a narrator and the tale he narrates – i.e. he or she expects Robert’s tale to be more or less unreliable. Despite the expectation of interpretation problems, the reader gains insight into Robert. Experiencing events through Robert helps the reader to get closer to him, because he or she is getting to know the character (Leffler 167). In his article, “Travelling into The Shadow over Innsmouth” (2004), García Agustín states that the honesty or “the plain truth” with which Robert expresses in his intentions and the emotional and mental stress of having to retell the experiences facilitates the reader to empathise with him (26).

The lack of confidence that Robert as the CN explicitly presents in his intentions is further discernible via the language and content of the text. Bal stresses that one of the characteristic linguistic signs of first-person narration is “modal verbs and adverbs, which indicate uncertainty in the speaker” (52). In “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, modal verbs of uncertainty are most frequent. The verbs “thought” and “seemed” often occur during situations where the CN attempts to express his own opinions, suspicions or impressions of various things: “I *thought* I detected in them...” and “*seemed* to have a tendency to curl...” (Lovecraft 816, 815. My emphasis). The verbs are frequently included in most horror narratives. The verbs “[create] uncertainty as to whether what is being described really is true or has been happening” (Leffler 186). With regards to adverbs or adverbial phrases, the words that express uncertainty are “hardly” and “as if” (for clauses of comparison). “Hardly” is used

in sentences, where the CN expresses difficulty in describing certain items or emotions as a result of a lack of language and knowledge: "I can *hardly* describe the mood..." and "*hardly* to be classified..." (Lovecraft 813, 837. My emphasis). The CN uses "as if" in clauses of comparison during occasions, where he presents a situation that may not be true, but that is likely, or when he describes something: "[it] seemed *as if* many bulging, watery, unwinking eyes looked oddly at me..." and "the surface seemed queerly irregular, *as if* peeling from some cutaneous disease" (Lovecraft 815, 838. My emphasis).

The struggle to express or describe certain things occurs occasionally in the narrative, where Robert as the CN realises the limits of language. In his article, "From beyond: H. P. Lovecraft and the place of horror" (2006), Kneale explains that "the difficulty of utterance" or "the impossibility of naming the unnameable" is a common theme across Lovecraft's stories as a way of generating horror (110). When Robert discovers or views fantastic creatures, he often expresses difficulty in describing the appearance of them: "the face for whose horror *my conscious mind could not account*" or "the bobbing heads and failing arms were alien and aberrant *in a way scarcely to be expressed or consciously formulated*" (Lovecraft 839, 847. My emphasis). When required to describe the Deep Ones, he often resorts to using different animals to construct proximal descriptions of them such as "*fish-frogs*", "*dog-like sub-humanness*" and "*simian way*" (Lovecraft 849, 853). These comments strengthen the sensation of ambiguity and horror in the reader, because Robert's inability to verbally express or even comprehend the supernatural entities stimulates the reader to use his or her imagination to the fullest. Furthermore, his indecisiveness in using different animals to form a seemingly complete picture of the Deep Ones complicate the reader's ability to construct the appearance of the Deep Ones in his or her mind. The very combination of strongly dissimilar animals imbedded into one entity appears even more alien and irrational to the reader (Kneale 110-11). As a result, it enhances the sensation of ambiguity and fear in the reader.

The aspects of content, which indicate uncertainty, are the occasions, where Robert as the CN questions his own faculties. This occurs particularly during the episode, where the appearance of the Deep Ones is about to be exposed. The CN repeatedly asks the question of whether what he saw was real or illusory as a consequence of his declining mental health:

I am not even yet willing to say whether what followed was a hideous actuality or only a nightmare hallucination... [...] Where does madness leave off and reality begin? Is it possible that even my latest fear is sheer delusion? (Lovecraft 852)

These occasions, where the narrator overtly expresses his loss of confidence, produce an even stronger sense of doubt in the reader. If the narrator is unsure whether what he has experienced was reality or a hallucination, then the story and his utterances are condemned to be perceived as unreliable and ambiguous by the reader as a result of the narrator’s own insecurity.

The sense of uncertainty is further strengthened, when the narrator loses faith in and denounces his ideologies: “It was the end, for whatever remains to me of life on the surface of this earth, of every vestige of mental peace and confidence in the integrity of Nature and of the human mind” (Lovecraft 853). Both science and the laws of Nature are usually viewed upon as our “safeguard against the assaults of chaos” (Lovecraft 1043). Not only do they bring order in a seemingly chaotic world, but they also represent a high degree of veracity and objectivity. Objectivity and veracity are both two important factors of certainty. When the narrator condemns both science and the laws of Nature, the reader is thus denied a “safeguard” and potentially “chaos” will prevail. This generates even more horror, because the reader is left with nothing certain or stable to rely on in the narrative and is therefore defenceless against whatever he or she will witness when the Deep Ones are exposed.

### **Coloured Perception in relation to the “State of Uncertainty”**

The previous sections have dealt with how Lovecraft uses a character-bound narrator to create ambiguity in the plot of the story and how he uses intentions, language and content to emphasise uncertainty. In this section, I will analyse the aspects of Robert’s subjective perception or the ‘vision’ that the reader gets access to, which contribute to the prevailing ambiguity in the horror narrative. In addition, this section will also include further discussion on reliability – especially concerning the discrepancy between subjective experience and objective truth.

One of the ways that Robert’s perception affects the reader’s state of uncertainty is through “power of suggestion”. This narrative device, which is suggested by Rockett, is about creating a situation “which arouses [the reader’s] expectations and conceptions of something incomprehensible and frightening” (qtd. in Leffler 79). This means, according to Rockett, that a situation needs to engage the reader’s imagination to such a degree that what he or she imagines is more frightening than what is written (Leffler 20, 79). Such a situation occurs when Robert and the reader allow “evidence... in [their] possession” work on their imagination (ibid.). An example of this is when Robert and the reader learn from the grocery boy that the worst-looking Innsmouth residents or the Deep Ones are presumably living in “hidden tunnels” connected to all the abandoned houses (Lovecraft 822). This “suggestion” or piece of information in both Robert’s and the reader’s possession sends Robert immediately into “[thinking] *uncomfortably about the hidden tunnels suggested by the grocery boy*”, when he hears “few faint sounds” such as “creakings, scurryings, and hoarse doubtful noises” (Lovecraft 824. My emphasis). The reader identifies and empathises with Robert’s feelings of dread and suspicion, because Robert deduces that there is possibility that the grocery boy’s belief might well be true and if so, it poses a greater danger to his life (more about this later). However, given that the noises are unclear, there is also the likelihood that Robert may have

jumped to conclusion concerning what he has heard. These two conflicting possibilities arouse the reader's state of uncertainty, because the text yields no evidence of truth in them. Nevertheless, the example shows that the grocery boy's belief has acted on Robert's and the reader's imagination, which as a result has transformed the formerly quiet and calm scenery of Innsmouth into a more oppressive one due to the prospect that the adversaries may be hiding in the boarded-up houses. Knowing that Robert may let previous knowledge affect his perception increases the reader's sense of ambiguity, because it obstructs his or her interpretation of events.

The mounting concern the reader deals with in the horror narrative is that Robert's internal, emotional struggle is starting to become externalised, which in effect complicates the reader's reliability in Robert as the CN. In her book, *Horror as Pleasure* (2000), Leffler states that horror stories "[illustrate] particularly well the problematic relationship between objective truth and subjective experience" (125). She continues by explaining that "[uncertainty] prevails as to whether the main character has been a victim of an external or internal threat, whether the unknown is something external or something inside the character" (124). In "The Shadow over Innsmouth", the reader grows unsure about whether what Robert recounts is true or a product of his declining emotional and mental health. According to Leffler, "[the] reader's only opportunity for comparison occurs at points where [the CN's] description of an event conflicts with the conclusions [he or she] draws" (123). The clearest example of this conflict is when Robert's interpretation of an event does not agree with the description he gives the day after. Having managed to escape out of Innsmouth and hide amongst the bushes by the abandoned, incomplete railway to Rowley, Robert witnesses the pursuing mob of the Deep Ones pass in front of him in the middle of the night. The horrific sight of the adversaries shocks the already emotionally and mentally distressed Robert to such an extent that he faints.

However, as he wakes up the following day, Robert finds no trace of the horror he has just experienced:

It was a gentle daylight rain that awaked me from my stupor in the brush-grown railway cut, and when I staggered out to the roadway ahead I saw no trace of any prints in the fresh mud. The fishy odour, too, was gone. Innsmouth’s ruined roofs and toppling steeples loomed up greyly towards the southeast, but not a living creature did I spy in all the desolate salt marshes around (Lovecraft 854)

This innocuous scenery right after the horrific experience complicates the reader’s interpretation of whether the horror Robert experienced was indeed external or internal as a result of the “nightmare hallucination” (Lovecraft 852). There is an inconsistency between what Robert has experienced before and after he fainted, which challenges the reader’s reliability in Robert as the CN.

The short story’s climax – the revelation of Robert’s ancestry – further strengthens the reader’s state of uncertainty by putting more stress on Robert’s trustworthiness. As the narrative progressive, the reader identifies with and empathises with Robert’s horrific experiences with the help of his subjective perception. However, as Gafford, the author of “The Shadow over Innsmouth’: Lovecraft’s Melting Pot” (1991), and García Agustín, the author of “Travelling into The Shadow of Innsmouth” (2004), have pointed out in their respective article, when the reader finds out that Robert is transforming into a Deep One, he or she realises that he or she has come to confide, sympathise and identify him or herself with a monster (Gafford 12; García Agustín 29). Both Gafford and García Agustín agree that this realisation is not only the true horror of SOI, but it also functions as a form of betrayal (ibid.). It is a betrayal, because the reader has put all trust and empathy into a character, who has more or less “tricked” him or her from the very beginning of the short story (García Agustín

26). The reader’s state of uncertainty is affected by this acute mistrust, because he or she cannot be sure whether Robert has withheld more vital information or skewed previous information to put him in a “better” light.

The state of uncertainty is not only generated by challenging the reader’s interpretation of events, objects and entities, but it is also generated via the reader’s empathy towards Robert. Leffler explains the two sides of character-bound focalisation: “[subjectively] coloured representation from within the focaliser complicates the reader’s interpretation of the external course of events, yet simultaneously facilitates the reader’s emotional insight” (125). Since every event is recounted via the past character-bound focaliser – i.e. the younger, experiencing Robert – the reader thus “enters the fictional world through an internal focalisation<sup>11</sup> and is therefore emotionally present... in the fictional present” (Leffler 167). Leffler later explains the effect of this: “[Imagining] how it might feel to be in the character’s situation”, the reader “[responds]... with horror at the potential danger” (Leffler 170). The closer Robert and the reader gets to the heart of the mystery, the more danger Robert will be in and the stronger the sensation of horror becomes (Stewart 44). When Robert hears “Innsmouth” for the first time, the ticket agent gives him a warning about visiting Innsmouth: “[you] can bet that prying strangers ain’t welcome around Innsmouth. I’ve heard personally of more ‘n one business or government man that’s disappeared there” (Lovecraft 812). Henceforth, this initial warning is then repeated by the grocery boy, who states that “[some] strangers [have]... disappeared” in certain areas in the town and during the night (Lovecraft 821). The final warning is given by Zadok just before he runs off in panic: “Git aout o’ here! *They seen us---*git aout fer your life!” (Lovecraft 821, 837). The mounting horror the reader feels is the result of the reader’s empathy towards the main character (Leffler 107, 112). As the reader’s empathy grows and the reader learns more about the main character, the reader’s

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<sup>11</sup> Internal focalisation is when the reader has access to the thoughts, emotions and dreams of the focalised character, Robert – that is, the reader is allowed “inside” the mind of the focalised character.

feeling of uncertainty relates to Robert’s safety – i.e. will Robert manage to escape his adversaries or will he be captured by them? The suspense is strongest during the flight episode, when the mob of the Deep Ones pursue Robert along the streets of Innsmouth.

Because the story is narrated at a later stage, there is also the problem with memory, which affects Robert’s reliability as CN. Bal explains that “[memory] is unreliable... and when put into words, [the memories] are rhetorically overworked so that they can connect to an audience” (150). In the present horror narrative, the unreliability of memory concerns the time span between the time of experiencing and narrating, and the impact of traumatic or tragic events. In the case of SOI, the period between the time of experiencing the Innsmouth events and the time of narrating is approximately three years. The long time period can affect the CN’s accuracy in remembering events – meaning that he may have difficulties remembering certain details and recollecting them in a correct way. This “blurriness” is connected to what Bal means by “the ‘story’ the person remembers is not identical to the one [the CN] experienced” (ibid.). For instance, Robert recounts the ticket agent and Zadok’s tales in direct speech as if to quote their monologues. It is highly unlikely that Robert remembers every word that they have said given the effect of long time span. It is more likely to believe that Robert has acquired the general gist of each character’s story and then used the gist to guide his writing of their speech.

Moreover, the long time period allows other events or experiences to occur in the meantime, which may affect Robert’s perception and health. In her book, Leffler discusses the issue of selection stating that certain events may cause the CN to “select and reinterpret earlier events in the light of [them]” (123). This is the case in SOI, when Robert experiences another traumatic event – the revelation of his ancestry – during those three years. Could the moments of “pseudo-memory” have been added or reinterpreted by Robert in the light of that particular

revelation (Lovecraft 814, 819)?<sup>12</sup> Questions such as this affect the reliability of the narrator and create greater a sense of uncertainty, as the reader’s efforts at solving the horror story’s mystery grow more futile.

### **Limits of Vision in relation to the “State of Uncertainty”**

Previously, I have discussed how the character-bound focalisor’s subjective perception can induce ambiguity in the horror narrative by illustrating how knowledge and experiences affect perception and reliability of the CF. In the following section, the problems of “seeing” will be addressed and how it can elicit uncertainty and make the reader question the reliability of the CF’s conclusions about what he sees. In “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, there are two main aspects, which Leffler brings up in her book, *Horror as Pleasure* – namely, “seeing too little” and “seeing too much”, that complicate Robert’s perception of the Deep Ones (125). In addition to this, the idea of “being seen”, which is also proposed by Leffler, will be used in relation to ambiguity as it affects Robert’s mental state (127).

The closer Robert gets to the heart of the mystery, the more ambiguous his perception becomes in terms of being prevented from seeing perfectly. Not only does the reader have to cope with the problems of biased perception – meaning, perception being coloured by knowledge – but he or she also has to deal with imperfect perception – i.e. being prevented from seeing objects and events clearly or fully (Leffler 125-126). The idea Leffler proposes is that “the route to knowledge is via the eye” – in other words, by not seeing adequately enough, the main character misses out on information (Leffler 125). Imperfect perception – or “seeing too little” – is especially noticeable in the flight episode, which is the long written account of Robert’s escape from the Deep Ones’ pursuit. The flight episode is set in the middle of the night under a bright moon. Earlier in the narrative, the reader learns from

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<sup>12</sup> In this essay, ”pseudo-memory” is interpreted as moments of déjà-vu (Lovecraft 814, 819).

Robert’s observation in Innsmouth that “[lamps are] depressingly few and small – all low-powered incandescents”, which makes the reader anticipate that darkness will be a factor that contributes to imperfect vision (Lovecraft 820). At the onset of the flight episode, Robert tries to switch the light on in his hotel room at the Gilman House, but finds instead that “the power [has] been cut off” and “all the street-lights [are] turned off” (Lovecraft 841, 845). Even though the moon is bright, the tracking mob still needs to use lit lanterns in the search for Robert and Robert himself needs to use a flashlight to find his way (Lovecraft 844, 845). These signs suggest that the brightness of the moon is not sufficient enough to facilitate vision in the darkness. Robert needs to rely on the moon light and his night vision to distinguish any features in the dark, which makes the reader question the descriptions and conclusions he draws about objects, entities and events.

Alongside the issues of darkness, there is also the problems of distance and time – i.e. how far away is the object from the observer and for how long does the observer view the object. During the flight episode, there are several occasions when the character-bound narrator describes the mob of the Deep Ones via the past CF’s perception. However, the problem is that Robert sees the moving horde either “a block away” or “at vast distance”, which tells the reader that the portrayal of the adversaries will be vague as the great distance would blur out the details and outlines (Lovecraft 847, 849). In addition to physical distance, Robert often sees these creatures for a “single moment” or in a “momentary glimpse”, which makes the reader question if Robert has allowed enough time to observe them properly (Lovecraft 847, 853). The problems of distance, time and darkness make sense, when the reader is provided with descriptions of shapeless, liminal entities: “a large crowd of doubtful shapes”, “[their] features were indistinguishable”, “bestial abnormality of their faces and the dog-like sub-humanness of their crouching gait” (Lovecraft 845, 849). Since all factors complicate the Robert’s vision, it prompts the question whether Robert as the CN has used his

imagination to complete his imperfect visual memory of the Deep Ones in the revelation scene.

The question is further encouraged, as the revelation scene of the Deep Ones presents the problem of “seeing too much”. Leffler explains that the more the main character sees or learns, the more disintegrated his or her inner state will be (125). Having learnt a lot about the history of Innsmouth and seen a lot of troubling, fantastic images of its secret, Robert is growing more anxious and frightened. The flight episode leaves him in an even more dismal, frantic state – trying to save himself from being captured by his adversaries. At the very peak of his mentally and emotionally distressing state, Robert witnesses the Deep Ones at a close distance. As discussed in the previous section, the momentary sight of the adversaries overwhelms Robert to such an extent that he loses consciousness and faints, which establishes the event as traumatic (Lovecraft 853). The idea of trauma is supported by his deliberate delay of revealing the appearance of the Deep Ones: “I have tried to hint what it was in order to postpone the horror of writing it down baldly” (ibid.). The quote also hints at the emotional and mental distress (“horror”) Robert, as the CN, experiences in having to tell the traumatic visual memory in the present. In her book, *Narratology* (1985), Bal explains that memories of trauma are often fragmented with bits and pieces that do not cohere into a wholesome picture (150). There is a strong possibility that Robert has not only reflected upon his memory previous to the narrating, but also “rhetorically over-worked” the memory to create a cohesive story – meaning that imagination or after-the-fact reflections may have taken part in completing the flawed traumatic memory (Bal 150). This notion complicates the reader’s interpretation of the reproduced events and the reliability of Robert as the CN.

Apart from the problems of seeing, there is also the problem of “being seen” (Leffler 127). SOI illustrates particularly well the impact of being watched by someone else or something. In Newburyport, Robert is initially warned about the sensation of being watched

via Casey’s experience, which is told by the ticket agent: “[Casey] had a lot to say about how the Innsmouth folks watched him” (Lovecraft 811). The warning of the Innsmouth residents’ watchfulness is strengthened by the grocery boy’s suggestion that “many specimens even worse than the worst visible ones [are] kept locked indoors in some places” – thus, turning the deserted houses into a threat for Robert as the worst deformed Innsmouth denizens may watch him during his tour (Lovecraft 822). This idea is supported by Robert’s observation of the deserted houses after the grocery boy’s tale: “black, gaping windows of deserted hovels... [...] [staring] so spectrally that it took courage to turn” (Lovecraft 823-24). At the end of the tour, Robert grows more and more anxious due to the oppressive atmosphere of the town: “Furtiveness and secretiveness seemed universal in this hushed city of alienage and death, and I could not escape the sensation of being watched from ambush on every hand by sly, staring eyes that never shut” (Lovecraft 825). Here, Robert’s sense of horror is not what he sees, but instead being seen when he *cannot* see his observer (Leffler 127). His sensation of being watched does not only apply to the denizens in Innsmouth and the deserted houses, but the town as a whole.

Another aspect that enhances the sensation of being observed by somebody is the physical deformity of the inter-bred Innsmouth residents. Joe Sargent and many of the inter-bred Innsmouth residents have “bulging, watery blue eyes that never [seem] to wink”, which intensifies the sensation of horror and watchfulness (Lovecraft 815). The largeness along with the absence of winking enhances the idea of staring and the watery surface of the eyes gives the impression of emotional indifference. In her article, “”The Innsmouth Look: Lovecraft’s Ambivalent Modernism” (2011), Bealer makes an interesting observation regarding the Innsmouth resident’s staring eyes that has a more oppressive effect on the reader and Robert (48-49). When discussing the “racist gaze”, which is the objectifying and demeaning gaze upon those who are racially different (in this case, the Innsmouth residents), Bealer explains

that the "staring" quality of the Innsmouth resident's eyes resists this form of objectification by Robert and the neighbouring town people, because of "the Innsmouth citizens' capacity to return [Robert's and the local people's] gaze" (49). This creates, what Bealer concludes, "a masterful and threatening authority" over Robert as well as the reader, which in essence means that he becomes the object, rather than the subject, of the "racist gaze" by the Innsmouth residents (48-49). As a result, Bealer explains that the Innsmouth's staring eyes "creates an atmosphere of ominous omnipresence", which both Robert and the reader cannot escape from (48). It increases the reader's and Robert's anxiety and suspicion towards the Innsmouth denizens and the sensation of being watched as a result of the ever-returning gaze. This idea can contribute to Robert's declining mental health as he allows his imagination or emotions to see "things no-one else [not even he] can see" (Leffler 126). The sense of uncertainty reside in the reliability of the CN. Is Robert observed by the Innsmouth residents or is it a product of his imagination due to his growing anxiety? These types of questions also challenge the reader's interpretation of what is happening in the narrative (Leffler 130).

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the present essay has demonstrated how the character-bound narrator and the character-bound focalisor alone can contribute to the prevailing ambiguity that encapsulates every horror narrative. It is not the 'jump-scares' (unexpected scares such as saying 'boo') that creates the horror, but the ambiguity in the progression from the beginning to the ending of the horror narrative that invites the reader to solve an insoluble mystery, which makes the horror narrative horrific. In conclusion, what makes a horror story successful in terms of eliciting the adverse emotions is the author's ability through the limited narrator to trap the reader in a constant state of uncertainty.

The analysis of the short story has shown that the story structure is meant to conceal rather than reveal the mystery and the adversaries. Leffler’s interpretation of Noël Carroll’s question-answer structure has been used to demonstrate how “gaps” or lack of information can be observed in “The Shadow over Innsmouth”. As has been demonstrated, these “gaps” produce more questions than answers, which generates the reader’s sense of uncertainty and prompts the reader to use his or her imagination to fill in the missing information. Another way of concealing the mystery has been to create inconsistencies between characters’ stories by presenting different versions of a single event and to highlight the unreliability of those stories such as Zadok’s health condition. All of these factors work together to challenge the reader’s wish to solve the mystery, because the ambiguity undermines the truthfulness of the information the reader has acquired.

The examination of the narrator’s persona has shown that the reader’s sense of ambiguity is mainly a result of the CN’s lack of confidence in his own faculties. When Robert states that he is offloading his story as means of restoring confidence in himself, the reader anticipates that the story will be more or less unreliable and ambiguous due to the CN’s insecurity. This notion is supported by the language the CN uses and the information he provides and fails to provide. The analysis has found that the CN frequently uses modal verbs and adverbs that denote uncertainty such as ‘think’ and ‘hardly’. Furthermore, the text also reveals that the CN has difficulties describing the Deep Ones as a result of lack of language and therefore resorts to proximal descriptions with the help of different animal features. The content of the text shows that the CN repeatedly questions his perception and his ideologies – especially when he approaches the description of the Deep Ones. These analytical findings puts the reader in a state of uncertainty throughout the narrative due to the CN’s inability to trust and believe in himself.

The reader’s state of uncertainty is also contributed to by the CN’s subjective perception. With the help of the narrative text, the analysis has shown that the information Robert receives from the characters such as the grocery boy affects his perception towards Innsmouth and the town’s residents. Rockett’s “power of suggestion” demonstrates that information can act on Robert’s and the reader’s imagination, which as a result make certain scenes more menacing than they actually are. This makes the reader question whether Robert is truly experiencing events as menacing or if he deduces the events as menacing as a result of what he knows or believes. The border between subjective experience and objective reality in the narrative blurs as Robert’s inner struggle is externalised, because it becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to interpret the events as true or false as he or she approaches the revelation of the Deep Ones. The reader’s problems of interpretation and reliability in Robert as the CN become even more acute, when the short story’s climax reveals that Robert is a monster at the time of narrating. This analysis also reveals that empathy can place the reader in a state of uncertainty by making him or her concerned for Robert’s safety. Since the story is narrated at a later stage, the reader also questions the narrating Robert’s ability to recall his experiences due to the long time span that has elapsed and potential bias.

The last section of the analysis brings up the problems of seeing – “seeing too little”, “seeing too much”, and “being seen” (Leffler 125, 127). The analysis has shown that the reader’s sense of uncertainty is generated by three factors – darkness, distance and time – which complicate Robert’s view. Darkness, long distance between the CF and the focalising object and the momentary glimpse blur the outlines of objects and entities, which is demonstrated by, for instance, the shapelessness of the pursuing mob of the Deep Ones. It forces the reader to use his or her imagination to compensate for the ‘blurriness’. Being observed by visible or invisible entities affects Robert’s emotional and mental health by making him more suspicious of his surroundings. This is particularly shown by Bealer’s

analysis of the "racist gaze". The analysis has shown that his problems related to seeing complicate the reader's interpretation of the depicted objects and entities.

For future research, it would be interesting to further analyse narration and focalisation in other short stories written by Lovecraft and how these two narratological concepts create horror.

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