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Mortal Minds and Cosmic Horrors

A Cognitive Analysis of Literary Cosmic Horror in H.P. Lovecraft's "The Shadow Out of Time"

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A COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF LITERARY COSMIC HORROR IN
H. P. LOVECRAFT'S "THE SHADOW OUT OF TIME"

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Abstract

This essay explores how the reader cognitively reacts to reading H. P. Lovecraft's horror story "The Shadow Out of Time" (1936). I analyse the text to see how it invites readers to be affected by it. I specifically look at invitations to *envisionment*, *subjective experience* and *intersubjectivity*. The literary horror terms *uncertainty* and *uncanniness* are used in conjunction with cognitive theory to explain how the readers may react to reading Lovecraft's stories. These are in turn reinforced by the reader's ongoing envisionment of the story, and their sharing of the character's experiences via subjective experience. For example, the separation between the mind and body of the protagonist creates an uncanny dissonance to his own identity, which disrupts the reader's understanding of the character. This may cause distress in the reader due to the subjective experience that connects the reader to the character. Additionally, the disrupted sense of reality in the book affects the narrator's perceptions of both his surroundings and his own mental faculties. Subsequently, the reader's understanding of the text is also in a state of flux which affects their envisionment of the story. This disrupts understanding and may enhance feelings of unease. My theory is therefore that unease is invited by certain horror techniques, such as uncertainty and uncanniness, which in turn influence the reader specifically through subjective experience and envisionment.

Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. H.P. Lovecraft.....	2
3. Previous Research.....	3
4. Theoretical Concepts:	
4.1. Literary Theory: Reader Response and Scene by Scene Construction.....	5
4.2. Theories of Literary Horror: Uncanniness and Uncertainty.....	6
4.3. Cognitive Theory: Subjective Experience, Intersubjectivity and Envisionment.....	7
4.4. Theoretical Application on the Text.....	8
5. “The Shadow Out of Time”	9
6. How “The Shadow Out of Time” Instills Horror in the Reader:	
6.1. Alien Experience.	11
6.2 Uncanny Insignificance.	15
6.3 Disturbed Envisionment.....	18
6. Conclusion.....	20
7. Works Cited.....	22

Introduction

During the modernist era, the writer H. P. Lovecraft's became known for his cosmic, horror stories that were to become his most prominent, literary legacy. These stories frequently revolved around themes of madness, body horror, loss of control, alien monstrosities and human insignificance (Joshi 157-161). The short story "The Shadow out of Time" (1936) was no exception to this. It features a professor who becomes possessed by an alien intelligence from the past. While the alien takes control of Peaslee's human body, he is in turn transported to the past, trapped in its alien's physiology. When Peaslee is returned to his own body and the amnesia ends, it ultimately results in an intense mental dissonance, as he tries to remember and accept what happened to him during the possession. Slowly, his fragmented memories return to him, and he struggles to accept what he experienced while living in the ancient civilization.

Anne Radcliffe, who was influential in her use of supernatural, suspenseful and gothic literary techniques, claims that horror "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates" (N.p.) the soul and the faculties. She describes it as a fearful sensation that can be almost overwhelming for the experiencer. Yvonne Leffler describes the horror genre as a "...well-defined form of popular fiction, arousing expectations of something terrifying depicted so suggestively that the audience attains a state of horror" (10). While this establishes the basic effect of horror fiction in the reader, she later elaborates on H.P. Lovecraft's own view on horror. He states that "...fear of the unknown is mankind's oldest and strongest emotion" (75-76). She elaborates on this by stating that "This means that horror fiction has an important function: it demands of the reader 'a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from everyday life'" (Ibid). Linking her work to this view, Leffler claims that horror activates our imagination and may takes us beyond the confines of our daily lives.

This essay's purpose is to explore how the horror and conveyed unease in "The Shadow out of Time" (The Shadow) affects the cognitive functions of the reader. With this in mind, I will look at literary techniques common to the horror genre, such as *uncertainty* and *uncanniness*, together with literary cognitive theories about what happens during reading, such as *subjective experience* and *envisionment*, to analyse how the text enables the reader to experience the horror. For example, by creating dissonance in the narrator's sense of identity and reality, I will show how the text conveys his lack of knowledge and uncertainty to the reader who is invited to share his distress. I will also show how the evocation of dreadful

surroundings or a lack of sense of reality directly affects the understanding of the fictional world which can be linked to readers doubting the veracity of what they are reading. I will argue through the analysis, that how the text is constructed yields insights into how they instill unease and, as a result, how the reader reacts to the reading experience.

H.P. Lovecraft

H. P. Lovecraft was born in 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island, and died in 1937. Although his literary works would vary in form, and include poetry and essays, it would be his supernatural horror stories, which were published in pulp magazines like *Weird Tales*, that would become his most prominent literary legacy. These encompass Gothic stories and eventually his signature cosmic horror stories known as the “Cthulhu-mythos,” which was coined by his associates (Joshi 529-30). The particular style of *cosmic horror*, with its focus on human insignificance and horrifying alien gods, is the reason why I found Lovecraft’s stories worthy of study. Specifically, the effects that the horror in “The Shadow” may or may not invite in the reader.

Lovecraft’s literary style can be understood better when one studies his life and ideologies. For instance, he lacked interest in human conditions, and he instead favored cosmic and scientific ones. He explains “I could not write about ‘ordinary people’ because I am not in the least interested in them” (Joshi 157). This lack of interest and indifference may be a crucial element in how to view the immense forces and horrific fates his literary characters are subjected to. These forces render the characters’ actions miniscule and futile.

Lovecraft was very interested in astrophysics, Newtonian physics, and complex geometry. An interest that would lay the foundation for the metaphysical elements his stories are built upon (Sperling N.p.). To Lovecraft, these scientific discoveries proved the insignificance of humanity and its achievements in comparison to the universe's infinity. In *Collected Essays, vol 5*, he states:

By my thirteenth birthday I was thoroughly impressed with man’s impermanence and insignificance, and by my seventeenth, about which time I did some particularly detailed writing on the subject, I had formed in all essential particulars my present pessimistic cosmic views. (Joshi 194)

Because of new discoveries at the time, such as the *Theory of Relativity*, Lovecraft considered human knowledge to be indefinite, inadequate and ultimately bound to be disproven, as the

old physical laws and fundamental outlooks were put into question. He claimed, and reflected in his stories, that humanity and its knowledge were in fact meaningless in the grander scope of the cosmos. This can be seen in his essay, *Notes on Writing Weird Fiction*, where Lovecraft explains his uneasiness regarding the scale of the universe and its natural laws. He elaborates specifically on time:

The reason why *time* plays a great part in so many of my tales is that this element looms up in my mind as the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. *Conflict with time* seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression. (N.p.)

This worldview led him to further refute the idea that humanity had a special place in the infinite universe, and to claim otherwise were to delude oneself (Joshi 160-169, 184-187, 191-193). As I will show, this is important for the analysis because time is an important horror element in “The Shadow”. The alien races flaunt natural laws and seem unbound by time itself. As a result, the protagonist is rendered miniscule in comparison to the forces of the universe, and the creatures who act beyond them. In my reading of Lovecraft, *insignificance, isolation and alienation* are considerable themes in many of his stories, as the characters are assailed by powerful entities beyond human comprehension. Human achievements, actions and preconceptions are defamiliarised or are presented as meaningless, and Lovecraft’s existential angst is perhaps reflected in the human frailty that advances the plot. These themes and techniques are especially common in “The Shadow” where they are used to cause distress in the reader. In this essay, I will explore these techniques and how the text instills the horror effects in the reader.

Previous Research

Previous research about H. P. Lovecraft and his literary works is plentiful and varied in form, perhaps due to the long-lasting legacy of his stories and his personal, controversial opinions. For example, in his book *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (2005), Michel Houellebecq studies not only Lovecraft’s life but also how his existential angst and bleak sentiments affected his opinions and ideologies. He claims that Lovecraft’s disdain for materialism, sex, religion etc. was noteworthy in comparison to his contemporaries, and that it subsequently influenced his worldview. In extension, it shaped his poems and stories as well. Houellebecq’s thus studies the integral way that Lovecraft’s mentality, way of life and

literary works were interconnected parts of a greater whole that affected and mirrored each other (117-122).

Timothy H. Evans analyses Lovecraft's use and stance towards tradition and folklore in his study "A Last Defense against the Dark: Folklore, Horror, and the Uses of Tradition in the Works of H. P. Lovecraft" (2005). Evans emphasises Lovecraft's opinion of tradition's insignificance and insubstantiality when compared to modern science. He discusses how these views may be reflected in Lovecraft's personal ideologies and possibly the creation of the mythos. Lastly, and most importantly as a frame for this essay, Evans elaborates on how Lovecraft's views on the importance of the maintenance of tradition lessened during his later years due to his increasing interest in socialism. Furthermore, he remarks on the significance of Lovecraft's grim fascination in monstrous hybridity and how it later led to a reluctant acceptance of cultural mixing.

In "Lovecraft and Influence: His Predecessors and Successors" (2013), Robert H. Waugh describes Lovecraft's legacy as the "invention of the modern weird tale" (7). The Waugh anthology collects the writings, of numerous scholars on Lovecraft's literary influences. The collection also includes authors, such as Stephen King (145), who was influenced by Lovecraft and inspired by his literary style.

S.T. Joshi has been studying Lovecraft since the 1970s. He has also compiled an in-depth study of the life of Lovecraft in his book *A Dreamer and a Visionary: H P Lovecraft in His Time* (2001). Due to this, Joshi's texts encompass a large number of essays on a wide array of topics, such as Lovecraft's textual structures and his contemporary influences. Joshi's studies of Lovecraft's personal sentiments, found in his texts have been especially fruitful for my own analyses, e.g. how his fear of the unknown and the insignificance of mankind influenced the creation of cosmic horror in his stories.

Current studies on Lovecraft include the website *rhizomes: cultural studies in emerging knowledge*, where Ali Sperling analyses Lovecraft's works through feminist new materialism. In her article "H.P. Lovecraft's Weird Body" (2017), she explores the representations of the "weird" human bodies encountered in Lovecraft's stories, and how they relate to modern views of embodiment, personal agency and the philosophy of speculative realism. These analyses have been incorporated in my own analysis as they feature, e.g. the estrangement of otherwise familiar human physiologies (N.p.).

Although considerable research on Lovecraft and his work has been conducted, I have had trouble finding studies that specifically feature cognition in relation to his stories. The essays of Joshi and Sperling have provided some information, which have been useful for my

own analysis. However, studies of horror and cognition in Lovecraft's works, were not something I found comprehensive data about. This essay thus makes a contribution to Lovecraft studies and situates it within modern theories about the effects of fiction on the reader.

Theoretical Concepts

Literary Theory: Reader Response and Scene by Scene Construction

By looking at how the mind is affected by reading literature, one can presumably also understand how it is affected by horror fiction. More precisely, by first studying how the horror is invited by the text, through for example uncanniness, one can then study how the reader reacts to the horror. Theories regarding reader response and scene by scene construction are important to this essay, since they enable the study of how the text and its construction can convey information to the reader. In his book *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Wolfgang Iser studies the relation between text and reader. As a result, his work is seminal to what would become known as *reader response theory*. He cites Norman Holland who states that, "The mental process embodied in the literary work somehow becomes a process inside its audience" (Iser 42).¹ By this he means, that the text conveys meaning that the reader then interprets according to their own views and psychological structures. The implications of the text may reflect processes or reactions that the reader mentally recognises or can relate to. Iser builds upon this by stating that information is actualised into meaning by "the need to familiarize the unfamiliar" (43). He claims that meaning is not only found in what the reader recognises but also in what they do not, which prompts them to contextualise the text's contents into deeper meaning. This contextualisation is based on the reader's need to understand what is unknown and yet to be understood. This ties in to *uncertainty*, *subjective experience* and *envisionment*, as they also concern the reader's understanding of the text's meaning.

By studying the way literary scenes are structured, one can also study how the text is used to convey additional meaning. In his book *Such stuff as dreams: The Psychology of fiction*, Oatley defines the term *scene by scene construction*:

¹ Norman N. Holland has written numerous works concerning how people react and relate to literature and the arts. His work is generally based in psychoanalytic psychology and cognitive science (N.p.).

When we read, we make mental models of each scene. This helps our understanding of events and it is essential to running the mental simulation of the story. Writers do well to assist readers in this. In ways that may not occur with a history, metonymic juxtaposition of scenes carries far more than mere temporal sequence. Most importantly it carries causation, but it also carries emotional flow of fulfillments, contrasts, commentaries, echoes... (138)

Whether intentionally structured or not, scenes can be compared to each other, in order to extract additional information from them. For example, the events of one scene may be juxtaposed against another, to emphasise the contrast between them. Through this technique, events, actions and literary themes may be established and enhanced, since the reader can study their correlation to the greater whole of the story. Thus, it enables the reader to form a deeper understanding, as they can interpret the meaning for themselves.

Theories of Literary Horror: Uncanniness and Uncertainty

Before looking at cognitive theory, it is first necessary to understand how literature invites horror. Subsequently, it is also possible to look at what the reader is invited to experience and what is expected to induce fear, that is, how the text may cognitively affect the reader through these horror techniques.

One such technique is defamiliarisation, which Viktor Shklovsky defined as “...to make the familiar unfamiliar, to renew the old, or make the habitual appear fresh or strange” (Bennett and Royle 321). Similar to this, Bennett and Royle define the *uncanny* as, “the thoughts and feelings that may arise on those occasions when the *homely* becomes the *unhomely*, when the familiar becomes uncomfortably strange or the unfamiliar becomes strangely familiar” (40). These two concepts, defamiliarization and the uncanny, are related, in such a way that defamiliarisation can instill feelings of uncanniness in the reader. The uncanny can be experienced when concepts or objects are altered into forms that rebel against our preconceptions, which results in a sense of wrongness or distress. For example, the form of defamiliarisation known as *telepathy* encompasses when a character’s personal thoughts, identity and secrets are disclosed; *animism*, which means when inanimate objects are given unnatural life-like qualities, or *anthropomorphism*, where the inanimate objects are attributed human qualities (Bennet and Royle 35-43). These techniques are used in Lovecraft’s texts to affect the reader via the narrator’s perceptions: either through the character’s loss of mental control (during possession), or through the representation of inanimate objects (such as

surroundings) as animated and as menacing threats to the protagonist. Both are meant to unnerve the reader through a sense of uncanniness and alienation.

Radcliffe defined the term *uncertainty*, which is based in psychological horror. She describes it as follows, in her article “On the Supernatural in Poetry”:

... his image imparts more of terror than of horror; for it is not distinctly pictured forth, but is seen in glimpses through obscuring shades, the great outlines only appearing, which excite the imagination to complete the rest; he only says, ‘sat horror plumed ;’ you will observe, that the look of horror and the other characteristics are left to the imagination of the reader. (N.p.)

Therefore, by not defining the horror in minute detail, she states that the reader is likely to fill in the blanks and imagine what is most frightening according to their own experience.

Yvonne Leffler further defines uncertainty as those unspoken or unexplored elements that generate horror in the reader through what is hidden and unknown, rather than what is overtly understood. The reader is forced to interpret what they do not know, and what that implies, due to the suspension of information (Leffler 124). She also states that Lovecraft’s horror is particularly built on uncertainty as the reader fear what it does not understand, and their lack of knowledge further expands the horror (75-76). The invitation to fear or horror rests on the cognitive idea that the mind does not like information gaps and has a tendency to fill them in, and the psychological idea that sometimes what the reader imagines is worse than what the author can conjure, due to the individual nature of fear despite its collective similarities.

Cognitive Theory: Subjective Experience, Intersubjectivity and Envisionment

By first defining what invites the unease, such as uncanniness, it is possible to study how the reader may react to the horror of Lovecraft’s stories. I chose cognitive theory, in order to analyse how the text’s disconcerting elements may be expected to affect the reader in terms of their thinking and emotionally. *Theory of Mind* or *mind reading* is the term that describes our inherent ability to understand people’s behavior, thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires. Conversely, depending on the reader’s own experience and individual understanding, the same process enables us to correlate otherwise inanimate, literary constructions, such as characters, with implied thoughts and actions (Palmer 1-3). As an extension of this theory, an

unreadable mind is logically, for whatever reason, a mind that is unable to be read and understood (Palmer 44-45).

The process of mind reading can also feature a chain of interconnected minds in order to imagine what people are thinking, feeling and perceive about each other, through other people's minds. This is known as *intersubjectivity*, and Zunshine explains it as "having a character perceive the reaction of another character to the first character's mental state" (1). This *mental embeddment* features the "processing multiple mental states embedded within each other" (2). Thus, several characters can be stringed together with one mental state embedded within another, in order for the characters to imagine the others' perceptions and thoughts. Intersubjectivity can be seen in some of Lovecraft's stories. For example, the narrator of "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928) tells the story through up to two layers of mental embedment, as the narrator reads a journal of a relative who in turn interview and read other people's retellings. It therefore connects several minds in order to tell the story.

Judith Langer's theories about reading fiction and *subjective experience* and *envisionment* are the most important theories for my analysis of the text. Subjective experience refers to when readers absorb perceptions, concepts and ideas from the text, perhaps due to vivid descriptions or convincing characters. Langer describes it as "when we look inside ourselves for meaning and understanding, when we bring new experiences and ideas closer to ourselves in ways that let us "see" them from the inside" (7). This may enable the reader to experience the text more closely, as they are immersed in the story.

Envisionment concerns the reader's total understanding of the text at any given time, which may change in the face of additional information or be susceptible to later interpretation. Langer defines envisionment as "the understanding a student (or teacher) has about a text – whether it is being read, written, discussed, or tested. Such envisionments are subject to change at any time as new evidence emerges and new ideas come to mind" (11). Therefore, the reader's envisionment is dependent on their current interpretation and understanding of the text. However, it can change as the story progresses and they re-evaluate the information provided to them by the text.

Theoretical Application on the Text

To determine how the text invites distress in the reader, it is necessary to study the way the horror techniques influence the reading experience, and how this relates to existing cognitive theories. The establishment of what invites the horror in the first place is also necessary for

this essay, in order to analyse how the reader reacts to the reading experience. “The Shadow” primarily features its horror in three distinct ways, which I claim are found in other Lovecraftian stories as well: the insignificance of mankind in comparison to cosmic forces, the isolation of the protagonist and, finally, the alienation of familiar elements. These themes are central for the story, and they work to instill fear in the reader by using horror techniques such as uncanniness or uncertainty. These techniques may in turn affect the reader through the connection to the text provided by subjective experience.

The previously mentioned theories of cognition will be used to analyse how the reader reacts to and experiences the text. As a result of this, the reader may immerse themselves in the character’s situation or feel for them due to the perils they undergo. Through subjective experience, the closer connection to the text would also make the sense of horror or unease more personally experienced. Furthermore, the reader can interiorize the feelings of uncertainty that are invited by the narrator’s failing perception or the text’s lack of information. This makes the reader dependent on the information provided by the text. If the information is insufficient in painting a comprehensive picture, the lack of understanding can subsequently result in uncertainty and distress. This may therefore yield results in the way the reader cognitively experiences and reacts to Lovecraft’s stories.

“The Shadow Out of Time”

The Lovecraft story that I have chosen to analyse is complicated in terms of both the continuity of the story and the portrayal of the protagonist’s identity. The story is told through a first-person narrator, as a written confession, which may enable a closer connection to the text and the protagonist, since the story is told from such a personal perspective. Because the narration is also very unreliable due to the narrator’s warped sense of reality, the narration makes it hard for the reader to accurately envision the story. These are contributing factors for why I found “The Shadow” worthy of study.

The protagonist and narrator of “The Shadow” – a professor named Peaslee – starts to experience odd visions. He subsequently falls into an amnesiac state that lasts for five years as the visions increase. The source of the amnesia is an alien consciousness that travels through time and possesses his body, in order to explore the time period in which Peaslee inhabits. While the intruding consciousness controls his body, Peaslee’s consciousness inhabits its body in turn in the distant past from which it originates. As a result, Peaslee – or the individual that appears to be Peaslee – becomes alienated from his family save for his

son, because of his strange behavior. Early on, this serves to establish the protagonist's isolation. Not only is he separated from other people and from the stability of his own body, he is also forced to live several years in an utterly alien and traumatizing environment. Afterwards, the memories return to Peaslee as dreams. At first, he infers no deeper meaning to them, but eventually they yield information about his life among the aliens. Due to their convincing nature, he begins to fear that they may actually be resurfacing memories.

Part of what contributes to the intensity of the memories is the excavation of an ancient city that Peaslee and his colleagues take part in. The second half of the story is focused on this city and the ruins are revealed to be the place Peaslee inhabited during the mind exchange: ergo, his mind was transported to earth's distant past. Due to his resurfacing memories, he descends into the ruins where his visions become so intense that he can no longer separate what is real, and what is not.

The aliens are later contrasted to other entities in the form of shapeless, sentient winds. These entities were entombed by the "benign" aliens, in Earth's past, and Peaslee encounters them during his exploration of the underground. The entities are hostile and dangerous towards mankind and in comparison, with this new menace, the original creatures are presented as relatable and almost human-like, which subverts the earlier impressions. Peaslee subconsciously seeks out a text he wrote in the past, while living in the alien's body, to verify his dreams and their implications. Unfortunately, he loses it while fleeing from the creatures. The story concludes with a mentally harrowed protagonist who is unable to differentiate between dream and reality. Without the ability to verify anything, Peaslee must live with the knowledge that his dreams may have been true. Furthermore, that alien races therefore also exist as a direct threat to humanity.

In order to analyse "The Shadow," I will also compare its themes, structures and possible effects on the reader's cognition with two other Lovecraftian stories: "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928) and "The Outsider" (1926). In "The Call of Cthulhu" (The Call), the protagonist studies the journal of a close relative who investigated a strange cult, before dying mysteriously. The relative follows the trail of the cult all over the world, and, at the end of the story, accounts written by a Norwegian sailor tell of the sunken city of the eponymous Cthulhu. The sailor's crew subsequently dies, while exploring the city, and he goes insane as a result of the encounter. The story concludes grimly when the narrator is left, mentally scarred, awaiting a death similar to that which befell his relative. Since he now knows of the cosmic forces that threaten humanity, he seems to prefer death over a life cursed with terrible knowledge.

“The Outsider” features a bewildered individual who awakens in a dark ruin, seemingly bereft of identity and memories. The person is in truth a monster despite that it does not know so itself. Because the story is told through first person narration, the creature’s gender is never stated. I will therefore refer to the protagonist as an “it”. Eventually, the narrator escapes the ruins into a foreign world, fearful and alone. When it approaches a group of joyous people, they suddenly flee in terror. Looking around, the protagonist is struck by the vision of a ghoulish creature that causes it to flee as well. However, the narrator later realises that it had looked into a mirror, and that it was in fact the beast, without realizing it. The story concludes with the unnamed protagonist’s acceptance of his monstrous nature, which he had previously repressed for so long.

How “The Shadow Out of Time” Instills Horror in the Reader

Alien Experience

The portrayal of the narrator’s sense of embodiment and the uncertainty of his perceptions is important for how “The Shadow” instills horror in the reader. Because of subjective experience, the reader can be immersed in a story and feel for the characters, in part, due to the perils they undergo. Therefore, when the protagonist of “The Shadow” is possessed and loses control of his body, the reader can share the protagonist’s fears and receive insight into the horrors that afflict him.

The text seems to be constructed intentionally for the purpose of causing uncanniness and uncertainty in the reader. In the beginning of “The Shadow,” the protagonist and narrator, Peaslee, is completely robbed of his agency, when he is displaced from his body and the alien mind takes over his life. His new self is described as emotionless and distant, and the language becomes dislocated and dependent on retellings from outside observations. This kind of technique ties into what Bennett and Royle claim about uncanniness, where characters act unnaturally or lose control of their mental faculties (35-43). In “The Shadow,” it is used to defamiliarise the protagonist as his thoughts are rendered unfamiliar and strange in comparison to his true identity. This is illustrated when the possession is accentuated through Peaslee’s use and subsequent absence of descriptive language. It conveys and mirrors his states of mind, e.g. “The collapse occurred about 10:20 a.m., while I was conducting a class in Political Economy VI... I began to see strange shapes before my eyes, and to feel that I was in a grotesque room other than the classroom” (557). As can be seen above, before the

possession, Peaslee is exact, to the point and scientific regarding his perceptions. However, afterwards, he still describes his possessed body in the subject form, although he has lost all control of himself “My eyes gazed strangely at the persons around me, and the flexions of my facial muscles were altogether unfamiliar” (557). The defamiliarisation of the character’s thoughts and identity creates an uncanny representation of his mind, which is rendered inconstant and inhuman. Therefore, when the protagonist is presented to the reader, he is also, at the same time, portrayed as something uncertain and alien that is perhaps not meant to be understood. The text initially reflects processes that the reader mentally recognises or can relate to, so if that understanding is disrupted it can instead invite uncanniness as the protagonist is defamiliarised for the reader.

The unreliability of the narrator’s perceptions and his disrupted embodiment rob the reader of something that is generally regarded as a stable and accepted story element: who the protagonist’s truly is. In “H.P. Lovecraft’s *Weird Body*,” Sperling claims that Peaslee’s loss of his memories and control of his body puts focus on the horror of one’s own form. Peaslee is acutely aware that his body no longer belongs to him but to “other forces who invade his consciousness and take over his capacities at their whim” (N.p.). When he loses his memories and his sense of himself, his familiarity with his human form is erased. Sperling also quotes Trigg who states that, “The creature we are faced with in Lovecraft... is thus a synthesis of the human and the nonhuman, the personal and the impersonal, the possessor and the possessed” (N.p.). This means that the invading influence becomes a continuation of Peaslee’s mind and body, and the two entities start to blend. Ergo, where the man ends, and the monster begins is hard to discern.

One can view the narrative text as written specifically with Peaslee’s mental aversion to his own body and identity in mind. Both a sense of self and other exist at the same time: the alien controlling Peaslee’s human body, and his human mind that is trapped in the monstrous form. Neither of which represent his true identity. During the possession, Peaslee describes the event without mental insight, agency or even self-awareness. The text emphasises the connection of Peaslee’s identity to his body even though he is utterly removed from its actions. His mind and body are described as entities that exist separately from each other, and the body is subsequently seen as distant and unfamiliar. The concept of who and what the character is becomes uncertain when his embodiment and identity are disrupted and defamiliarised. This can instill feelings of uncertainty and uncanniness in the reader, due to their need to familiarise the unfamiliar. Peaslee’s mind is defamiliarised further when some of the insights concerning the alien (in Peaslee’s body) must be gleaned from outside

perspectives to be understood. Specifically, intersubjectivity is used for Peaslee to understand the intentions of his own body instead of those of other people. As Peaslee loses consciousness during the possession, in the beginning of the story, he listens to retellings of those who witnessed his actions during the incident. He says that "...it seemed to the doctors that I had lost interest in my proper personality..." (557). He is forced to study other people's observations of himself, in order to understand the actions of his own body. As a result, his own thoughts are made foreign to him and must be estimated from an outside perspective to be understood. The unreliability of his body creates a disruption in his social relationships; his private mind must be accessed through others and would, logically, not be private anymore (Palmer 105-107).

Intersubjectivity is used in a similar way in Lovecraft's earlier story "The Call". It specifically enables insight into personal madness from outside perspectives, since many of the insane revelations are not experienced directly by the narrator but instead retold by others. During the reading of the Norwegian sailor's account, the story is told with up to two layers of mental embedment. Firstly, the reader experiences the narrator's writings; who retells his relative's journal "The writing accompanying this oddity was, aside from a stack of press cuttings, in [the relative's] most recent hand..." (204). Secondly, towards the end of the story, the relative in turn has studied an insane sailor's notes "... I bore the document away and began to read it on the London boat. It was a simple, rambling thing—a naive sailor's effort at a post-facto diary—and strove to recall day by day that last awful voyage" (221). This last layer may be especially hard for the reader to interpret, since it is described through the relative who tries to understand the mad ravings of the sailor:

Then came the storm of April 2nd, and a gathering of the clouds about his [the Norwegian sailor's] consciousness. There is a sense of spectral whirling through liquid gulfs of infinity, of dizzying rides through reeling universes on a comet's tail, and of hysterical plunges from the pit to the moon and from the moon back again to the pit, all livened by a cachinnating chorus of the distorted, hilarious elder gods and the green, bat-winged mocking imps of Tartarus. (225)

As seen here, the relative cannot properly convey what the sailor has written, because he cannot himself understand the writings. Instead, he describes the last entries with metaphorical and disturbing imagery that mirrors the madness. In contrast to "The Shadow," where the reader perceives the "mad" protagonist from the perspective of outside observers, the protagonist in "The Call" experiences the madness of others through interconnecting

minds. Because the relative, who conveys the story to the narrator, does not understand the sailor's journal, that part of the story becomes harder to envision for the reader as well. Through the narrative, the madness is distanced since it is not described directly and becomes even more disturbing for the reader. Subsequently, that lack of understanding may make the text more discomforting and uncertain for the reader.

The portrayals of madness in the two stories are telling in the sense of how the texts distance unreadable minds. The insight into the main character of "The Shadow," through mind reading, is affected by his lack of knowledge and alienation from himself. The reader does not receive direct insight into the mind of the entity in Peaslee's body, and it thus feels all the more distant and unknowable. Similarly, in "The Call," the mad ravings of the sailor are described through an intermediary. By creating this distance, the alienation of the mind is maintained, and the resulting lack of information invites uncertainty and uncanniness. Because meaning is contextualised from what the reader does not understand, the lack of knowledge results in the reader's need to understand what is yet unknown. If the reader had full access to the thoughts of the characters, the lack of uncertainty would decrease the horror effect. Comprehensive knowledge may therefore result in less unease than what the reader's imagination creates without it.

The text's usage of alienation as a horror technique can also be studied through a physical aspect. Because of the disconnect between his mind and his body, Peaslee's perceptions start to affect his sense of embodiment, when the border between his human and his alien bodies is erased. During the time when control of his body has returned to him, he reflects that "I developed a queer fear of seeing my own form, as if my eyes would find it something utterly alien and inconceivably abhorrent. When I did glance down and behold the familiar human shape in quiet grey or blue clothing I always felt a curious relief..." (563). It may of course indicate that Peaslee is fearful that he will once again be possessed, and that the alien body will replace his own. However, as Trigg reads it, according to Sperling, Peaslee fears not only the lost ownership of his body, but also that he will lose the ability to recognise what it means to be human. It is the transformation of his body into something unrecognizable, and the prospect of losing the ability to remember himself that Peaslee fears the most (Sperling N.p.).

Similar body horror and dissonance between the body and the mind are mirrored in Lovecraft's story "The Outsider," which also blends the monstrous and the human. Whereas "The Shadow" is a story about a man made into a monster beyond his control, the protagonist in "The Outsider" is a monster beyond its own control *and* knowledge. Due to its lack of self-

awareness, the protagonist does not even register any details of its own body and clings to old human notions and instincts. It cannot understand human speech yet does not realise what that fact implies “I had never, seemingly, heard human speech before; and could guess only vaguely what was said” (145). After all, the narrator does not say “foreign speech” but specifically says “human speech” even before the self-revelation. This may be hinting at a subconscious repression of its true knowledge. Even when it is faced with his own reflection, the creature cannot, at first, come to the conclusion that it is watching itself. This alludes to a similar dissonance in the subjective and objective self that Peaslee experiences, because of the monster’s mind’s dislocation from its body. “The Shadow” feature similar overlapping of what is the human and what is the monster, until the two concepts become blended and maybe even indistinguishable from each other. By erasing this border, in conjunction with the protagonist’s lack of knowledge and agency, the reader’s expectations can no longer be relied upon because previously established categorisations no longer apply.

Peaslee’s dislocation from his mind, worldview and identity thus mirrors his dislocation from his body. Furthermore, the erected distance between the reader and the character complicates the definition of what is the monster, what is the human and, ultimately, what is true. A notion that is exacerbated by the fact that the character, disturbingly enough, does not know himself. If the knowledge of the characters and the story are uncertain, the envisionment would also change, resulting in a situation of unease and incomprehension of what the text in fact conveys, implies and means. If the one telling the story cannot be taken for granted, what in the text truly can?

Uncanny Insignificance

The narrator’s unreliable perceptions not only blur the lines of past and present, but it also warps how he experiences the environment around him. By rendering the surroundings uncanny, the protagonist is isolated and physically alienated. For example, during the excavation, otherwise inanimate objects are given animate characteristics. The moon is described as “...slightly past full, shone from a clear sky and drenched the ancient sands with a white, leprous radiance” (588). The normally neutral light is defamiliarised and given an uncanny, sickly connotation. Later, the moon is even described as “sardonic” (604), moving away from animism into true anthropomorphism.

Subtler yet telling, is the animalistic descriptions of the subterranean landscape. The opening is described with words that allude to an open maw or gullet “Now it lay open—

black and yawning, and giving forth a current of cool, damp air” (596). The mentioned air current might be regarded as breath, and the ruin’s continuously mentioned stone arches were reminiscent of ribs seen from the inside, as if Peaslee walked inside some gargantuan monster. During the later escape, he is tugged backwards by the wind-like entities. “Then I saw the chasm’s edge, leaped frenziedly with every ounce of strength I possessed, and was instantly engulfed in a pandaemoniac vortex of loathsome sound and utter, materially tangible blackness” (604). In other words, he falls into the belly of the metaphorical beast.

Another important theme, featured in “The Shadow,” is time. Vast temporal expanses are used to further distance Peaslee from himself. Peaslee’s human present and alien future collide in the climax, and his connection with both a distant past and a far future make him isolated in the present. The narrator observes, “There, said the dreams and legends, had reposed the whole history, past and future, of the cosmic space-time continuum....” (594).

When time is combined with the ominous and large spaces mentioned earlier, the threat of the natural forces can be viewed as a symbolic representation of humanity, that is miniscule in the face of indomitable and unknowable elements. Peaslee observes that he feels uncertain; “Whether I was dreaming, or time and space had become a mockery” (601). Used as interwoven concepts, space and time are described as vast and looming over Peaslee who is isolated and insignificant in comparison. The threatening elements are likely deliberate in order to strengthen the reader’s subjective experience, and the uncanniness serves to unsettle the reader as characteristics applied in unnatural and defamiliarising ways. The environment renders Peaslee’s existence unsafe, which in turn influences the reader’s sharing of the unease. What is generally considered to be tangible and reliable is reduced to mad constructions, and the environment’s loss of stability is joined with the uncertainty of the protagonist’s perceptions.

As the story concludes, the protagonist’s hopelessness is emphasised even further. Peaslee is left with the realisation that with his text lost, which was his written accounts from the past, he is unable to verify his claims to anyone. He reflects that, “Mercifully there is no proof, for in my fright I lost the awesome object which would—if real and brought out of that noxious abyss—have formed irrefutable evidence” (555). He even fears that his own son, and last remaining family member, will not believe him. This serves to highlight the isolation of the protagonist yet again: that he alone is aware of the mind-boggling forces that threaten mankind. Yet, he seems relieved that he cannot verify the events, as can be seen in the word “mercifully”. Perhaps, he finds relief in the fact that if the events remain unproven then they may have been figments of his imagination. Once again, Peaslee is distanced from his old

humanity and is instead drawn to his new identity. The fact that he chooses madness over truth leaves him in a broken state that is still dislocated from his own identity, perception and sense of reality. The saying “ignorance is bliss” comes to mind, and Peaslee seems to prefer the comfort of insanity over the proof of the cosmic threat’s existence (Joshi 105-114). If Peaslee chooses insanity and ignorance over knowledge, the reader can only assume that the prospect of knowing about the aliens is more terrifying than they can even imagine. The protagonist’s horrible fate may thus invite feelings of sympathy and hopelessness in the reader as well.

The theme that the protagonist is cursed with incredible information about the fate of mankind, without the capacity to disclose it, is one that Lovecraft has used previously. The same theme is established in “The Call” where the narrator uncovers horrible truths, but he is unable to convey that which would be deemed insane by others; “He could not tell—they would think him mad” (225). The experience weighs down on him because of the terrifying information he now bears about the world and beyond it. The story opens with a similar *in medias res* opening as “The Shadow,” where the narrator laments his terrible discoveries:

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. (The Call of Cthulhu 201)

Here, the narrator again expresses relief in his own death and in the prospect that the information will never be disclosed to the public. Subsequently, at the chronological end of the story, the protagonist reflects over his coming demise and what his knowledge will bring “A time will come—but I must not and cannot think! Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye” (225). Here, once again, clashing words such as “peace and safety” describe something terrible, yet it is painted in a positive light in comparison to the alternative. Humanity only retains its sanity in the face of the universe due to ignorance, and the insight of its own unimportance would shatter the collective world image (Joshi 105-114).

The lack of knowledge and madness of the two protagonists enhance their isolation from the rest of mankind as they cannot share their plight with anyone. Due to their inability to disclose his knowledge and fears, they are isolated from the rest of humanity. A fact that supposedly leaves them utterly alone to face the horrible truths that they have uncovered. This would affect the reader's subjective experience, as it makes them share the characters' distress and hopelessness. Presumably, it also affects the reader's interiorizing, as they share the character's stressful unease, and, specifically, their isolation from the rest of humanity. Specifically, the reader is invited to share the feelings of insignificance that are so indicative of Lovecraft's stories. By sympathising with fictional constructions and sharing their distress, the reader may be susceptible to an enhancement of the horror experience.

Disturbed Envisionment

Due to the possession by the alien identity in "The Shadow," the protagonist is driven insane when he is trying to reconcile his past with his present. He is separated from the stability of his own anatomy, and his sensations come to be utterly disrupted when his different lives converge into a singular entity. Because the text conveys meaning to the reader, they are subjected to the narrator's deterioration and can witness his loss of identity and grip on reality. As the alien memories become more and more pervading, Peaslee keeps referring to himself as mad, and to the visions as dreams, "What tormented me most was my momentary inability to feel that my surroundings were a dream. The sense of reality was hideous—and again becomes so as I recall the scene" (600-01). The dreams that Peaslee previously considered to be figments of his imagination are now frightening to him since he cannot separate them from reality. His recollections and perceptions become increasingly worse throughout the story, and the climax culminates in an intense flight from the entities that hunt him:

Afterward there were visions of the Cyclopean city of my dreams—not in ruins, but just as I had dreamed of it. I was in my conical, non-human body again, and mingled with crowds of the Great Race... Then, superimposed upon these pictures, were frightful momentary flashes of a non-visual consciousness involving desperate struggles, a writhing free from clutching tentacles of whistling wind... (604)

When he is swallowed by the abyss, it seems to afflict him with madness and nightmarish visions. Due to the revelations and events of the climax. his dreams and realities merge, and

he becomes unable to separate the two. In the epilogue, he describes his experience in the ruins in the following way:

Full consciousness returned very slowly, and at no time could I tell just where true memory left off and delirious dream began. There had seemed to be a mound of titan blocks, an abyss beneath it, a monstrous revelation from the past, and a nightmare horror at the end—but how much of this was real? My flashlight was gone, and likewise any metal case I may have discovered. Had there been such a case—or any abyss—or any mound? Raising my head, I looked behind me, and saw only the sterile, undulant sands of the waste. (604-05)

Consequently, Peaslee's perception is intermingled with his visions of madness, and the sense of continuity and reality becomes so disturbed that his entire worldview is put into question (Lovecraft 604-06; Sperling N.p.). The reader cannot fully rely on the account since Peaslee admits to not being sure of the veracity of his own memories. Because the story is presented through his unstable mind and ambiguous observations, all sense of the protagonist's identity, memories and sense of reality is made uncertain. The character's deranged perceptions directly affect how the text influences the reader's envisionment; who shares the protagonist's experiences even if they find it disconcerting. The subjective experience may be a process that happens as an involuntary reaction since it is invited by our sympathy of the character and the immersion in the story. The horror and the plights of the protagonist may therefore be inferred by the reader despite the unpleasantness of the reading experience.

A sense of apprehension and separation from the normal world is established even further as Peaslee's grip of what is real, and what is not, unravels, due to his failing perceptions and warped sense of past and present. However, his madness later takes on a positive light when he during the exploration of the ruins starts to accept the suggestions of his dreams. The causality that can be inferred in the scene by scene construction reveals the juxtaposition of the story's initial possession and the climax (Oatley 138). Peaslee's views on his dreams and his fear of his possible insanity is contrasted with how he later views his discoveries in the ruins. At first, shortly after the possession, the dreams are synonymous with madness and Peaslee describes them as "dreams and impressions which were growing so clamorous I still almost fear to speak. They seemed to savour of madness, and at times I believed I was indeed going mad" (563). Even during the decent into the ruins, he fears the dreams and the possibility that he might in fact be insane. He describes it as "I shut my eyes and put my hand to my head in a vain, pitiful effort to drive these insane dream-fragments

from my consciousness” (594). However, he later accepts the drive of the alien suggestions even though he refers to it as madness “It was sheer madness that impelled and guided me” (596), and he allows himself to willingly be guided deeper by the suggestions. Here, he has begun to accept them even though he previously resisted their influence. He even outright describes himself as insane when he observes that he has “stumbled into a nighted world as mad as I?” (594). The fact that he now considers himself mad as well may indicate a mental acceptance or merging with the alien force. The hideously recognisable places later become familiar because he remembers them from his past, yet his human body does not belong in the alien ruins. The mental models of the scenes are perhaps contrasted in order to juxtapose Peaslee’s state of mind. When he comes to accept the dreams and suggestions, it can be argued that it is his humanity that is now the invading and alien element. Peaslee is no longer the invaded but is transformed into the invader, which inverts the initial premise and subverts the reader’s expectations. Human and alien, dream and reality, as well as self and other all become interchangeable when the established parameters are unraveled, and the ensuing uncertainty instills horror in the reader.

The text rarely stays the same or remains logical for long, before the reader is subjected to new information that replaces the old: in the form of Peaslee’s shifting perceptions of past and present, reality and dream. This invites uncertainty of what is true and what is not. If the reader’s knowledge and understanding of the text is in flux, they remain in a state of ignorance. As a result, due to the reader’s need to contextualise the text into deeper meaning, they must constantly interpret and reevaluate what it has already conveyed, and, subsequently, what they truly know of its contents. Since the reader’s envisionment is in constant change, they are affected by uncertainty throughout the story.

Conclusion

The above analysis of “The Shadow Out of Time” sheds light on how Lovecraft’s horror stories may affect the reader’s emotions or thoughts, and how this is done specifically by using the cognitive theories of intersubjectivity, envisionment and subjective experience. The story distances and alienates Peaslee’s identity, in order to immerse the reader in a sense of unease. By erecting this distance, the exact nature of the protagonist becomes alien and uncanny. As a result, Peaslee’s distress may be inferred by the reader. Through subjective experience, the reader may envision and experience the text more closely as they immerse themselves in the story and the character’s actions. Consequently, if the subjective experience

makes the reader share the protagonist's experiences, they may also infer his discomfort and uncertainty. This loss of stability and control affects them since the understanding of the protagonist is a literary element, which is usually taken for granted, but that is denied the reader in this story.

Whether intentional or not, the horror the characters experience can be shared by the reader through various means. Through the connection to the text, a sense of insignificance is conveyed to the reader. This is a recurring element in Lovecraft's stories in general, but it is especially prominent in "The Shadow Out of Time" and "The Call of Cthulhu". The horror is also invited by the defamiliarisation of natural elements. Since the objects deviate from their natural states, they are experienced as uncanny. By rendering the surroundings unnatural, the protagonist is immersed in unsafe environments. Additionally, the reader may also infer not only what the protagonist perceives but also what he fears. In combination with the defamiliarised elements, the protagonist's safety is eroded. Due to subjective experience, the reader's sympathy and sharing of the narrator's hopelessness is subsequently invited. Therefore, subjective experience may also enable the horror to be more vividly experienced if the reader feels for the character and personally envisions the dangers that assail him.

However, the horror is driven not only by the connection the reader shares with the characters, but also by the dissonance that is created in the cognitive relationship. By disrupting the protagonist's knowledge, identity and sense of reality, the reader's understanding becomes uncertain as they cannot rely on what the narrator is conveying to them. The reader's knowledge is thus made unreliable; their envisionment constantly undergoes change, due to uncertainty, which affects the unease of the reading experience. What the reader cannot understand becomes unsettling to them.

In this essay, I have shown how cognitive theory highlights how the relationship between text and reader affects and enhances a horror experience that is invited purposefully. Lovecraft himself said, "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents" (201). This sentiment introduces "The Call of Cthulhu," and also serves as a fitting representation of cosmic horrors in general. What is horrific is not always possible for the mind to fully comprehend or, vice versa, what one does not know, or cannot know, is frightening. Consequently, the act of purposefully triggering that mental aversion is to turn the mind's functions against itself. The evocation of fear is perhaps not as complicated when one manipulates what the mind knows or, perhaps more pertinently, how it reacts when it does not know enough.

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