

01

LOVECRAFT'S TERRESTRIAL TERRORS: MORALLY ALIEN EARTHLINGS

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Abstract: Lovecraft's cosmic horror led him to create aliens that did not exist on the same moral spectrum as humanity. That is one of many ways Lovecraft's work insists humans do not matter in the cosmos. However, most of the work on Lovecraft has focused on the space aliens, and how they are necessarily alien to humans, because they are from other worlds. Lovecraft's terrestrial aliens, such as the *Deep Ones*, the *Old Ones*, and the *Shoggoths*, are less alien, but just as morally strange. Lovecraft used biological horror to create his terrestrial aliens, and in turn used them to claim that morality was a product of human evolution and history. A life form with a separate evolutionarily history would necessarily have a separate and incomprehensible morality. Lovecraft illustrates that point with narrators who are ultimately sympathetic with the aliens, despite the threat they pose to the narrators and to everything they have ever known.

Keywords: Fiction; Cosmic horror; Biologic horror.

Resumo: O horror cósmico de Lovecraft o conduziu a criar alienígenas que não existem no mesmo escopo moral da humanidade. Esta é uma das muitas formas que a literatura de Lovecraft usa para insistir que o ser humano não importa no cosmos. No entanto, a maioria dos trabalhos sobre a literatura de Lovecraft se volta para os alienígenas espaciais e como eles são considerados estranhos pelos seres humanos, devido ao fato de serem de outros planetas. Os alienígenas terrestres de Lovecraft como *Deep Ones*, *Old Ones* e *Shoggoths* são menos estranhos, mas tão moralmente estranhos. Lovecraft faz uso do horror biológico para criar seus alienígenas terrestres e por sua vez o usa para afirmar que a moralidade é um produto da evolução e história humana. Uma forma de vida com uma história evolutiva separada de tal conceito necessariamente possui um tipo de moralidade incompreensível e separada. Lovecraft ilustra tal ponto de vista com narradores que são em última análise simpatizantes dos alienígenas, apesar do perigo que estes representam ao narrador e a qualquer coisa que eles já conheceram.

Palavras-chave: Ficção; Horror cósmico; Horror biológico.

Brian Aldiss, in *Trillion-Year Spree*, said that H. P. Lovecraft: “developed a demoniac cult of hideous entities, the spawn of evil, which were seeking to take over Earth, Cthulhu, Shub-Niggurath, Yog-Sothoth, Nyarlathotep, the Magnum Innominandum, and other titles like anagrams of breakfast cereal names” (p.212). Not only is this judgment of Lovecraft unkind, it is inaccurate. The creatures in the bulk of Lovecraft’s stories are not demoniac, but alien, usually literally. They come from other planets or dimensions. Only some wish to take over Earth. Few want to subjugate humanity, as they generally have not noticed humans at all. This misreading of

Lovecraft was once common, likely because his stories' narrators often used such terms as "demoniac". Otherwise acute critics suddenly fall down when Lovecraft uses an unreliable narrator – they assume his speakers are all in their right minds – despite their right minds being the condition they are never in! The issue with Lovecraft's aliens is not that they are alien, but that they are intensely grotesque. Given that, and given the narrators' tendency to use loaded language, many readers have assumed that the aliens are evil. They are not evil – or good. They are not on the human scale of morality at all. Much has been written about Lovecraft's use of cosmic horror to illustrate humankind's dismal position in the universe. However, many readers and critics still use human morality to deal with the creatures in Lovecraft's work. They exist totally outside human conceptions of language, including morality and ethics. They are totally unhuman, and serve to remind readers, through their grotesqueness, of the abstract nature of human morality. Lovecraft's monsters are monstrous inasmuch as they remind the reader that every idea of human decency and goodness is as abstract and fictional as the monsters themselves.

Most of the attention paid to this theme in scholarship in Lovecraft's work has focused, rightly, on the cosmic scale and the philosophical determinism in his work – the cosmic canvas he worked on and the deterministic monism that influenced his thought. However, the alien appears in other ways within Lovecraft's work. The problem in Lovecraft criticism, which this essay seeks to solve, is that everyone associates these themes with the space aliens. Several Lovecraft stories portray alien beings who are born on, or adapt themselves to, Earth itself. These alien races are still

totally foreign to human experience, but come from the same ecology. They adapt themselves to the same environments, and as a consequence might be expected to have similar moral views, given Lovecraft's taste for social evolutionary arguments. Simply, Lovecraft wrote stories about alien morality and how foreign it would be to humans. But he was not satisfied only with space aliens. His terrestrial "aliens" are nearly as foreign to the human experience as the space aliens. Lovecraft drives home that human morality is not even simply a local phenomenon – it is a specifically human one. Even creatures evolved on the same planet, using the same resources, have totally different points of view.

LOVECRAFT'S SCIENTIFIC MINDSET

Lovecraft had an early fascination with science. Before he was ten he read treatises on anatomy, geology, and chemistry, and wrote his own treatises on the subject of chemistry (JOSHI, *Dreamer*, p.28-9). A few years later, around the age of thirteen, he produced his own hectograph magazines on astronomy (JOSHI, *Dreamer*, p.41). His early interest in science stayed with him throughout his life, ensuring his biological horror fiction would deal in some way with the theories of evolution. He was likely drawn to such themes by his racism as well – China Miéville calls him a "bilious lifelong racist" and points to his pronouncements about the fundamental inferiority of "the Negro" as well as his early – pre-Holocaust – endorsement of Hitler (p.xviii). He goes on to say that Lovecraft's racism was not simply a product of his time – but that it was also "a central engine for what we admire in Lovecraft's art" (p.xviii-xix). Finally, despite Lovecraft's fascination with biology, Miéville determines that

Lovecraft's racism was not biological, but cultural, given his belief that some races or cultures – Jews, specifically, given his marriage to Sonia H. Greene, a Jew – could be “well assimilated” (p.xviii) into white, Anglo-Saxon culture.

Kenneth Hite, like Miéville, views Lovecraft's racism as a powerful motivator of Lovecraft's fiction, and in writing on “The Horror at Red Hook” (1925) – Lovecraft's most overtly racist story – Hite says that “the racism is fully intentional [and not accidental...] that sheer drive, [sic] to indict his neighbors for the crime of inspiring his hatred, [sic] makes the story just compelling reading” (p.52-3). Michel Houellebecq claims Lovecraft's racism began in earnest in New York – around the time he wrote “Red Hook” – and that

[i]t first appears in a most banal form: unemployed, threatened by poverty, Lovecraft had more and more trouble tolerating the hard and aggressive urban environment. Furthermore, he began to feel bitterness toward immigrants of diverse origins, who he saw blending easily into the swirling *melting pot* that was America in the 1920's, while he himself, in spite of his pure Anglo-Saxon origins, was unable to find any work. (p.100)

Houellebecq locates Lovecraft's racism in jealousy and an inability to fit in. This reading does not take Lovecraft's upbringing into account, but may explain Lovecraft's particularly violent racism in writing.

Joshi points out that Lovecraft's family were all virulently racist – his father once had hallucinations that a “negro” was “molesting his wife” and Lovecraft's most hatefully racist letters were reserved for family, rather than friends (*Dreamer*, p.55). But Lovecraft, by his own account, was an “anti-Semite”. Those feelings flared to life

apparently when he entered high school, long before he moved to New York: Hope Street High School had what he called “a considerable *Jewish* attendance”. He goes on to say that “[i]t was there that I formed my ineradicable aversion to the Semitic race. The Jews were brilliant in their classes – calculatingly and schemingly brilliant – but their ideals were sordid and their manners coarse” (qtd. in JOSHI, *Dreamer*, p.55). These are the old, traditional racist assumptions about Jewish people. Lovecraft was a brilliant youth but could barely function in a public school, given his frequent nervous breakdowns. His racism, then, seems to come from the confluence of his pride in his racial heritage and his inability to compete with the people around him. So long as they stayed out of his way, then, he would be relatively accepting – as he was with his own wife. Lovecraft’s racism made him fear cultural intermingling and deterioration – Lovecraft was, in fact, a fan of Ernst Haeckel’s (*SLII*, p.160) and believed cultures could and would fall because of too much mingling of disparate cultures.

In his exploration of the interplay of races and cultures, Lovecraft created extrapolated entities and races to contrast with humanity. These figures abide by codes they have built up in the same way humans build them up, but these codes are alien because of their origin on another branch of evolution altogether. That helps to illustrate Lovecraft’s idea of “cosmic indifferentism”¹. In “The Shadow over Innsmouth” (written 1931; published 1936), “The Call of Cthulhu” (written 1926; published 1928), and *At the Mountains*

1 Simply that the universe does not and cannot care about humanity; belief that it does constitutes an anthropomorphizing fallacy regarding nature and the universe. Joshi Decline 3, Joshi A Life 205, Lovecraft *SLII* 150, Mariconda 188. Colavito speaks of it as “scientific materialism” (p.185).

of *Madness* (written 1931; published 1936) a group of aliens are contrasted with humanity to illustrate human dependence on codes that have nothing to do with the natural order, and to show the weak foundations of those beliefs and how easily they could collapse. Morality, like behavior, is an artifact of evolutionary history. Cultures value what they do for specific reasons, and not because nature itself decrees those things to be good. Lovecraft's aliens value different things, and are opposed to the humans of his stories, but the reader cannot claim either group to be evil. In Lovecraft's fiction this always helps to highlight "cosmic indifferentism".

The cosmic canvas Lovecraft worked upon is widely recognized. His stories reflect his view of an "indifferent and unknowable universe" which behaved like a "vast, purposeless machine" (MARICONDA, p.188). It is an atheist's universe. Lovecraft described his position as "mechanistic materialist," deriving from "Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius – and in modern times, Nietzsche and Haeckel" (*SLII*, p.160). Joshi has pointed out that Lovecraft was hardly original in his philosophical stance (*Decline*, p.6). He did not come up with his own ideas, or even his own interpretations of the ideas of others. However, he synthesized these ideas into his fiction, creating monsters so alien and so much more powerful than humanity that they drive home the point that humanity cannot affect the cosmos in any real way. It clicks on without us, just like a vast machine, and our lives play out without any hope of intervention from a kind Nature or a benevolent god. Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, and the other "pantheon" creatures impress humanity so much that some people worship them. They represent nature, and humans misunderstand so badly they layer their own

beliefs onto them. For instance, in “Call of Cthulhu,” a band of cultists believe Cthulhu will rise and teach them new ways to revel and fight (*Cthulhu*, p.105), while readers understand Cthulhu has no interest in these people or any others. He lies dormant because of an accident in tectonics.

These ideas of materialism define the way Lovecraft’s fiction portrays the relationship between humans and the universe around them. But Lovecraft was not satisfied with focusing wholly on the universe at large, though most of his fiction does so. He also wrote stories of biological horror. Sometimes nothing comes from space at all in Lovecraft’s fiction; it grows on Earth, but differently than humans. The Deep Ones of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” are one example. The alteration, breeding, and evolution of these life forms summons to mind the Darwinian and post-Darwinian conception of nature as either morally neutral or morally evil, opposed to the ideal of nature as inherently good.

In the chapter of *A Life* dealing with Lovecraft’s materialism, Joshi points out that “Darwin, Huxley, Haeckel and others who [...] brought more and more phenomena under the realm of the known and the natural” (p.204) were some of the most important writers and philosophers Lovecraft used to form his materialist worldview. Particularly, he disavowed the presence of an immaterial soul, asking those who claim humans have souls but animals do not

Just how the evolving organism began to acquire ‘spirit’ after it crossed the boundary betwixt advanced ape and primitive human? It is rather hard to believe in ‘soul’ when one has not a jot of evidence for its existence. (qtd. in *A Life*, p.06)

This question, with its evolutionary scale in place between apes and humans, implies that there is no significant difference, save possibly the level of development in intelligence – something that, in the vast, cosmic view Lovecraft adopted, mattered little.

Lovecraft's fiction usually hinted at his cosmic indifferentism, so it follows that some would follow his twentieth century Darwinism. "Shadow over Innsmouth" certainly does. The narrator is unnamed in the story; Lovecraft's notes reveal his name is Robert Olmstead (JOSHI, "Notes", p.410). Olmstead goes on a trip to research his family tree. While stopping over in Newburyport he hears about Innsmouth and the strange ways of its citizens – he even sees some examples of the strange jewelry the women sometimes wear. He decides to detour into Innsmouth. He's told the bus breaks down once he arrives. While he is stuck for the night, he investigates the town's history and learns that the patriarch Obed Marsh brought back rites and rituals that could call from the ocean floors a race of fish-frog people, called the Deep Ones, who help Innsmouth people by increasing the fishing off the coast. As payment the Deep Ones demand inter-marriage, the chance to continue their race using Innsmouth people as breeding stock. The final shock of the story is that Olmstead is descended from the hybrid Innsmouth people. He considers killing himself, only to come to terms with his heritage and dream of returning to his people and his ancient Deep One matriarch.

The common view of the story is that Olmstead's submission and return to his Deep One roots is a moment of supreme horror, especially for the famously-racist Lovecraft. Maurice Lévy says that "[t]he monster is revolting not only because it escapes logic

and constitutes a disturbance for the reason, but also because it is propagated and, little by little, *corrupts the individuals of a healthy race*" (p.57, emphasis added). Joshi has said the story "is about the inexorable call of heredity" ("Notes", p.411). In that light, he leads his reader to the conclusion that one is to feel endangered by Olmstead's giving in to heredity – everyone is at risk of reverting to an older, hereditary type. Joshi has said elsewhere that Olmstead

can certainly flee his pursuers, but he cannot flee so easily from his own past [...] Lovecraft surely means us to see his transition as an augmentation, not a diminution, of the horror – a seemingly 'normal' person [...] has become an alien!. (*Weird Tale*, p.224)

This view has its problems. Kenneth Hite has said that the story has Olmstead "welcoming the kind of miscegenation that is supposedly one of HPL's unbreakable taboos" though it could be that he expresses "empathy with Olmstead without sympathy" (p.85). So it is true that Olmstead's slipping into the waters of the Deep Ones is not a moment of celebration; it also is not as intensely terrible as Lévy or Joshi imply. Certainly some of a reader's horror comes from the threat the protagonist suffers, and the end of the story lightens Olmstead's fear to almost nothing. How might the reader take this transformation, if not as a threat that he or she could succumb to biology?

"Shadow over Innsmouth" washes away human moral order by claiming it has nothing to do with biology and the surrounding world. There is no morality, only biology. Both cultures in the story, human and Deep One, have their own codes, equally artificial. The Deep Ones are grotesque, as they are ancient fish people, but the

hybrids are worse. They are born looking mostly human and change over the course of their lives until they can live under the water as well as their aquatic parents. Their faces change and anyone nearly through the transfiguration must be hidden from the sight of strangers. Despite this grotesqueness, the Deep Ones do nothing more than most species would do – seek to propagate their race. Readers are forcefully reminded that the grotesqueness lies in perception, particularly when Olmstead changes his mind and is no longer horrified. It is perspective that makes the fish people awful, not some inherent monstrosity.

The story opens not with a scene setting, or a philosophical musing on human curiosity, or even anything regarding race and horror. Instead it begins with an almost-newspaper-like account of the results of Olmstead's escape from Innsmouth.

During the winter of 1927-28 officials of the Federal government made a strange and secret investigation of certain conditions in the ancient Massachusetts seaport of Innsmouth. The public first learned of it in February, when a vast series of raids and arrests occurred, followed by the deliberate burning and dynamiting – under suitable precautions – of an enormous number of crumbling, worm-eaten, and supposedly empty houses along the abandoned waterfront. (*Cthulhu*, p.268)

The careful, news-worthy reporting of the story distances readers from the events, allowing them to take in any atrocity through the lens of what it means to the populace. The opening passage frames the whole story as a rational and moral investigation: Olmstead appeals to the “Federal government” as an authority. They apparently felt the need to destroy part of the town, in total

secrecy, in the middle of winter. A higher authority has decided these things are terrible. What appears to be an obvious moral decision – the destruction of criminals – is in fact the arbitrary decision of the government apparatus.

The rest of the story represents Olmstead's narrative making-sense of things; he is an antiquarian and a student of his genealogy (p.269-70). He is a calm person, and shrewd – one of the first interactions he has in the story is with the man who tells him about the Innsmouth bus. Olmstead asks about it because he is trying to save money by avoiding the expensive train (p.270). Not the most compelling character trait, but it serves to get him into the town of Innsmouth as well as show readers he carefully weighs every decision and chooses based on the greater good – even if the best thing is just to save a little money.

The Innsmouth residents, on the other hand, are consistently characterized through most of the story as evil and malevolent. It begins back in Newburyport, when the ticket agent provides the first of several narratives about the Innsmouth people delivered by an outsider. He says that

[s]ome of the stories would make you laugh – about old Captain Marsh driving bargains with the devil and bringing imps out of hell to live in Innsmouth, or about some kind of devil-worship and awful sacrifices in some place near the wharves. (p.271)

He goes on to bring up Devil Reef. All these assertions turn out to be true. Marsh did strike a bargain, he did bring up Deep Ones to live in Innsmouth, they do worship a creature – Dagon – in the town, and there were terrible sacrifices back in 1846 when Marsh led his

loyal followers and Deep One allies against those who balked at the deal. It is not just a screen to hint at what Olmstead will learn later in the story – the language is equally important. It starts connecting the Innsmouth residents, especially those who mate with the Deep Ones and their hybrid children, with images of devilry and evil. The human town of Newburyport views Innsmouth as the devil's place. This impression grows on Olmstead soon after he arrives, as he spots a figure in church vestments. This figure burned "into [his] brain a momentary conception of nightmare which was all the more maddening because analysis could not shew a single nightmarish quality about it" (p.283-4). Olmstead points out that was nearly the first person he sees in town, and this nightmarish conception, tied to the church's pastor, heightens the devilish, evil quality of the town. If the church is so evil, one might ask, what can the rest of the inhabitants be like?

They are creepy, too, which suits a group of people equated to devils. The ticket agent also gives readers the first account of the famous Innsmouth look, the appearance that the hybrids take on as they change from human to Deep One.

I do not know how to explain it, but it sort of makes you crawl [...] Some of 'em have queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy, stary eyes that never seem to shut, and their skin ain't quite right. Rough and scabby, and the sides of their necks are all shriveled or creased up [...] Animals hate 'em – they used to have lots of horse trouble before autos came in. (p.272-3)

Olmstead finds later that this is accurate. It hints at their oceanic origins. The references to the look making people "crawl"

when they see it, as well as animals hating them, cements in the readers' minds the idea of the Innsmouth people as unnatural, evil beings. As Bennett Lovett-Graff put it, this is the "mythic image of animals as accurate indicators of what is 'right' in the natural order" and it suggests "the profound wrongness of the inhabitants of Innsmouth". The story's beginning uses many traditional mechanisms to associate the Innsmouth people with evil.

This association seems to bear out over the course of the story. Olmstead has an "evil reaction" to Joe Sargent, the bus driver, so strange he has to observe him carefully to make sense of it. The picture is disconcerting – Sargent is an unpleasant sight to the narrator, especially his skin, which was "queerly irregular, as if peeling from some cutaneous disease" (p.279). A result of the advance of his transformation into a Deep One. To Olmstead it is merely repulsive. The town of Innsmouth itself, like Sargent, is an unpleasant sight. The town is decayed, especially near the waterfront, and the wharves are in ruins (p.281-2)². Both Sargent and the town appear to hide a moral failing within themselves.

Zadok Allen, the drunkard who reveals the true history of the town, begins by calling Devil Reef a "gate o' Hell" (p.295). Later he also tells Olmstead that the Deep Ones like human sacrifices (p.296). Zadok is the reveals how Marsh found out how to summon the Deep Ones from Kanakys natives; how no one wanted to mix with the Deep Ones, but did anyway, because of Marsh; how Marsh's family hid themselves away; that he was probably the first to intermarry; and how Marsh led a revolt in town that ended up killing many of

2 Lovecraft's architectural passion has been well-documented and analyzed by Timothy H. Evans, who has looked both at Lovecraft's travelogues and the role of architecture in his fiction. See his "A Last Defense against the Dark" and "Tradition and Illusion".

those who rejected the Deep Ones, including Zadok's father (p.297-303). Near the end of Zadok's story, he warns Olmstead that the Deep Ones have been bringing things up from the ocean, and that Main Street is "full of 'em – them devils *an' what they* brung – an' when they git ready... I say, *when they git ready*... ever hear tell of a *shoggoth*?" (p.306). Everything in this account builds up the image of the Deep Ones as evil. So far, "Innsmouth" is a typical horror story.

That feeling continues into Olmstead's overnight stay. He discovers Gilman has trapped him in his hotel room, and has to flee a mass of townspeople in a famous chase scene³. Joshi, in writing on this scene, has said that he finds it "somewhat ridiculous," and that the townspeople pursuing Olmstead likely "recognized him and merely wished to bring him back into the fold" (*Weird Tale*, p.223). Whether the scene is ridiculous or not, Joshi brings up a valid concern: could the townspeople recognize Olmstead? Nowhere does the story imply they can tell "one of their own" without the visible signs of change. The end of the scene where Olmstead questions Zadok provides another, simpler reason for the pursuit: Olmstead knows too much of their story. Zadok says, "[g]it aout o' here! *They seen us* – git aout fer your life! Dun't wait fer nothing' – *they know naow* – Run fer it – quick – *aout o' this taown*" (p.307). At this point in the story Olmstead does not believe the Deep Ones and their progeny are real, so he discounts Zadok's warning, but Zadok has apparently seen a Deep One out in the water, watching them speak. He does tell Olmstead that "them that

3 So well-known among Lovecraft fans, at least, that the video game adaptation, *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* remakes it blow by blow. In fact, if players do not block up the doors in the same order as Olmstead, with dressers and bookshelves, they will be killed.

lives here shoo off as many strangers as they kin, an' encourage the rest not to git very cur'ous, specially raound night time" (p.305). It is at least possible that the simplest explanation is true, and that the townsfolk, portrayed as evil throughout the story, want to capture Olmstead so he cannot let anyone outside town know that an alien race of fish people have taken over Innsmouth and appear to be mobilizing toward spreading through other cities as well.

What one might expect, as Olmstead escapes, is for him to make it out of town – else how could anyone be reading his account? – tell the authorities about Innsmouth, and worry about whether or not they are all cleared out and if humanity is still in danger. And the story suggests all that. But the final horror of the story is that Olmstead is really descended from the Deep Ones as well. In his genealogical research he finds his grandmother and some other relatives came from Innsmouth – his uncle Douglas killed himself, presumably after discovering his heritage, and his grandmother disappeared soon afterwards (p.331). He also sees his grandmother's jewelry, made in the same style, from the same materials, as the Innsmouth gold he saw on the priest and in the museum (p.332-3). These discoveries are all horrible to him, but the story's ending represents his coming to terms with his heritage. He dreams of his grandmother, out in the ocean, and learns that "some day [...] they would rise again for the tribute Great Cthulhu craved. It would be a city greater than Innsmouth next time" (p.334). And Olmstead, the narrator who called down the Federal government on Innsmouth, does nothing. He wakes with "exaltation instead of horror" (p.335). He decides not to wait for his transformation to complete – he

intends to rescue his cousin, also transforming, from an asylum. Then the two of them will go to “Cyclopean and many-columned Y’ha-nthlei, and in that lair of the Deep Ones [they] shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever” (p.335). That is the final line of the story. Olmstead accepts the Deep Ones as his own people, and looks forward to seeing them.

Some critics, such as Joshi, see this moment as the final push toward terror. If Olmstead could fall prey to these things, if he could be one of them, then anyone could be. That would be an effective ending for a story. However, it hints at even more. Olmstead suddenly revalues the Deep Ones. He thinks of them as family and runs to them, even though he knows they will punish him for how he brought the government down on them (p.335). He chooses the Deep Ones over his human life.

Is it possible the story implies that the Deep Ones are not evil, even though the humans and Deep Ones are at odds? Despite the careful and consistent characterization of them as devils and monsters, can they be a species rather than a supernatural menace? This idea would undermine the reader’s sense of self, showing a world where humans are not the only sentient and intelligent creatures. It would also show that the universe is indifferent – evil cares about good and wants to destroy it, but indifferent creatures simply try to fulfill their own needs in whatever way they think best – in the same way Huxley and other Darwinists claimed that our ethics were, in part, reactions to or products of our evolutionary history. The Deep Ones behave in the way they do because of their own evolutionary history, which is almost (but not entirely) alien to humanity.

This distinction between evil and alien shows up early in the story, mainly through the descriptions of the Deep One jewelry. When Olmstead first sees examples of it, he says,

It took no excessive sensitiveness to beauty to make me literally gasp at the strange, unearthly splendour of the alien, opulent phantasy that rested there on a purple velvet cushion. Even now I can hardly describe what I saw, though it was clearly enough a sort of tiara [...] It was tall in front, and with a very large and curiously irregular periphery, as if designed for a head of almost freakishly elliptical outline. The material seemed to be predominantly gold, though a weird lighter lustrousness hinted at some strange alloy with an equally beautiful and scarcely identifiable metal. [...] The longer I looked, the more the thing fascinated me; and in this fascination there was a curiously disturbing element hardly to be classified or accounted for. At first I decided that it was the queer other-worldly quality of the art which made me uneasy. All other art objects I had ever seen either belonged to some known racial or national stream, or else were consciously modernistic defiances of every recognised stream. This tiara was neither. It clearly belonged to some settled technique of infinite maturity and perfection, yet that technique was utterly remote from any – Eastern or Western, ancient or modern – which I had ever heard of or seen exemplified. It was as if the workmanship were that of another planet. (p.276)

When Olmstead sees his grandmother's jewelry he repeats some of these ideas, such as the exquisite workmanship and that "no one seemed able to define their exact material or assign them to any specific art tradition" (p.332). These descriptions highlight in

art what the story hints at with biology. The jewelry is well-made, and thus not strange because it is bad; it is strange because it is different, from an artistic tradition wholly unknown to Olmstead and any art historian. They are entirely alien, and difficult to judge because of their removal from the histories and traditions of art. They are not strange because they are modernist and therefore rebelling against an artistic tradition. That would require them to be aware of and related to the artistic traditions of humanity. These works of art are not new, they are very old, and yet even more alien than the strangest creations of the avant-garde artists at work at the beginning of the twentieth century.

What the jewelry and their artistic alienness reflect from the story in general is a sense of things gone down divergent paths. These things are strange to each other when they meet again. It is true of the art and the Deep Ones themselves. They appear to have an entire society under water, and their own resources, including access to the fearsome shoggoths, which appear again in *Mountains of Madness*. Humanity and the Deep Ones are the two things diverging from a single historical point, unable to judge each other properly because of their totally different evolutionary and social histories. Zadok Allen implies as much when he tells Olmstead that it “[s]eems that human folks has got a kind o’ relation to sech water-beasts – that everything alive come aout o’ the water onct, an’ only needs a little change to go back agin” (p.297). The two worlds that are so alien to each other, human and Deep One, started in the same place long before the events of the story. The mechanisms of evolution’s variation separated them, and it was so long ago that they appear to be wholly alien. But they are not, not

quite; they were originally one. Both sides want to destroy the other – in the case of the humans involved, because the Deep Ones seem so horrible. To the Deep Ones, humans may look just as horrible. The story never presents a reason the Deep Ones wish to spread across the land. The entire morality and system of society for both cultures are deeply different, but they started as the same species. Evolution separated them biologically, and from that separation stems the gulf between cultures.

In depicting this gulf and the reasons for its presence between human and Deep One, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” demonstrates the evolutionary idea that human cultures, ethics, and morals stem from changes in evolutionary history, even when morals are meant to stop an instinctive habit. Just as the modernist artists Olmstead mentions rebel against art history, so a moral system may rebel against evolutionary history. But these things that supposedly separate humans from nature emerge from nature. The Deep Ones and humans were once the same, and by the time of the story they want each other dead, and mixtures of the two races horrify those who look on them. Olmstead’s acceptance of his heritage does support the common idea that the story speaks to the horror of implacable lineage, but it also speaks to the varied and different histories of every branch of evolution. Olmstead can accept the Deep Ones because his branch stems from them as well as from human origins. The Deep Ones are presented as so horrible as to be unacceptable, but they are literally as natural as humans, since both humans and Deep Ones were once related.

“Call of Cthulhu” also has an underwater monster, but its presence is less marked even than the Deep Ones, who are

hidden behind closed doors for most of their story. “Cthulhu” is a detective narrative; the narrator, Thurston, pieces together what has happened from newspaper clippings, a relative’s notes, dream journals, and an interview with a sailor. This combination of narratives allows the story to draw in elements of traditional Gothic frame stories as well as the pursuit narrative of detective stories. Thurston’s grand-uncle, Professor Angell, began to piece together the story, and much of the narrative is directly or indirectly from his notes. An artist had terrible dreams that turned out to replicate images found on an ancient sculpture that Angell, as an archaeologist, had examined years earlier. He had examined it to help a police inspector from Louisiana deal with the “Cthulhu Cult,” who appeared to be abducting people and sacrificing them in evil ceremonies in the woods. In fact they were giving the people to creatures that came in the night and ate them. The entire cult existed independently of their “deity,” Cthulhu, a creature trapped in the Pacific Ocean by accidents of tectonics. It came to Earth from space, making it a peculiar kind of alien species. Its dreams affect the dreams of others – that is how the artist saw images of the creature in his dreams, because Cthulhu’s dreams infected him. The sailor, Johansen, saw the creature rise from the ocean only to sink again. The story ends with Thursgood saying Cthulhu “must have been trapped by the sinking whilst within his black abyss, or the world would by now be screaming with fright and frenzy [...] What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise” (*Call of Cthulhu*, p.169). Thursgood insists that members of the cult are likely looking for him because he has gotten too close to the truth, as Angell did before him.

The language of the story is old-fashioned – not in narrative, but in the terms used to deal with Cthulhu and his deluded followers. Even at the end, when Thursgood understands somewhat the nature of the creature, he calls the cultists Cthulhu’s “ministers” (p.169). The language is not precisely mystical, but it is mystified – cults dominate the story. Cthulhu rules a city, rather than being trapped in one, and his dreams invade the minds of others, demonstrating his power even while asleep.

The reality of the story is that Cthulhu would probably be bad for humankind, but he is not actively trying to destroy anyone. He is simply trying to escape his accidental confinement. Hite writes of the story that

the threat to order is not villains [...] but the actual circumstances of reality. Lovecraft has taken all the core Gothic tropes [...] and brought them out of the ‘shudder tale’ and into the world of science, and hence into science fiction. For Lovecraft, the Gothic ruin is the universe, and vice versa. (p.59)

Hite keys into the strong Gothic flavor of the story. It is that horrific Gothic element that underpins the alien in “Call of Cthulhu”. Joshi writes that

[w]hen Cthulhu suddenly emerges from the depths of the Pacific, he effects an unprecedented union of horror and science fiction. Cthulhu is a real entity [...] It is also material [...] by manifesting itself in the real world it embodies the quintessential phenomenon of the weird tale – the shattering of our conception of the universe [...] Cthulhu’s existence means that humans have somehow horribly misconstrued the nature of the cosmos and our place within it...(Weird Tale, p.190-1)

Like a Gothic monster Cthulhu frightens because he appears to go against nature, to be supernatural or preternatural – but he is an entity from space, not a spirit or devil. What breaks, then, is not nature, but the characters’ conceptions of nature.

Cthulhu is the familiar monster from Lovecraft’s fiction, and for good reason: it represents that destruction of one’s conception of the universe. “Call of Cthulhu” was not Lovecraft’s SF masterstroke, but he was already laying the groundwork for it. In a letter he explained the creature Cthulhu’s name by saying it was meant to represent sounds made by an alien race with wholly non-human language and physiology; he took such care partly in

protest against the silly and childish habit of most weird and science-fiction writers, of having *utterly non-human entities* use a nomenclature of *thoroughly human character*; as if alien-organed beings could possibly have languages based on *human* vocal organs. (qtd. in STRAUB, p.830)

So Cthulhu is a wholly alien creature, outside human standards of judgment, that horrifies because it violates entirely the common view of nature through its mere existence. It has its own wants and needs that may conflict with humanity’s, and pursuing those wants and needs could destroy all humans, or even all life on Earth.

But Cthulhu does appear to be malevolent. He does tries to pursue and attack the boat Johansen and his companion use to escape the island. In this story and some others there are hints that Cthulhu will destroy the world or the human race if ever awakened permanently, though some of the hints imply that will be by accident, in the way a person might kill an animal or an

insect because it is in the way. The hint of evil in Cthulhu prevents it from being wholly “alien.” It is grotesque – wings and tentacles and reaching arms; it can coalesce together when smashed by a steamboat. It is alien, and possibly evil, or at least ill-disposed to humans. While it would be possible for a science fiction work to have an alien with these elements, the story does not spend enough time naturalizing these abilities and traits. Cthulhu may be an alien, and he certainly represents a stride toward the frightening and grotesque alien entity, but he retains some of the “shudder story” elements in his frame.

Lovecraft’s best portrayal of the entirely alien and its ramifications on human worldviews is *At the Mountains of Madness*. The story features a geological survey team from the fictional Miskatonic University. They go to Antarctica and find shaped stones, buildings, and the remains of alien creatures. The team dissects some of the creatures. The remains are not dead, but only in suspended animation due to the cold; the freshly-woken Old Ones (one of the team members dub them so) kill the humans they see as their captors and killers, experiment on the bodies in the way the scientists did to their friends, and disappear to their city. Two of the surviving team members, Professor Dyer and his assistant Danforth, venture into the city, knowing nothing but that some of their team members are dead. They examine the architecture and murals that depict the history of the Old Ones on Earth, and eventually sympathize with them and their declining civilization. The Old Ones were overthrown by their shoggoth slaves, and the scientists loath the shoggoths for destroying such a great people. They find, deep in the city, a still-living shoggoth and flee from it.

Danforth goes insane. Dyer claims they had sworn to keep their story a secret – he reveals it only because another team, the Starkweather-Moore expedition, plans to go to the same place and may discover the same things, or things even worse. They will also be taking a drill powerful enough to possibly release the shoggoths from their underground labyrinth.

One of the recurrent questions about *Mountains* is whether or not it is science fiction. It was first published in *Astounding Stories*, after all (JOSHI, “Notes”, p.420). Opinions differ. Lévy claims it is not science fiction because Lovecraft does not portray space as positive, but as a “reversed abysm” (p.70). Kenneth Hite is just as sure it is SF, saying the core idea is one of “alien contact” and that the story exists “at the real-world fringe of scientific exploration” (p.81). Chia Yi Lee describes the story as a marriage of horror and science fiction, describing it as a horror story presented in the form of science fiction, using the style of scientific realism (p.4-5; 1). Joshi calls it “quasi science fiction,” and says this category features stories of supernatural horror in which the supernatural elements are “rationalized in some way,” made to appear natural (JOSHI, “Introduction”, p.7).

The debate ranging around the classification is instructive. What it highlights is that *Mountains*, perhaps more than any other Lovecraft story, is concerned with science itself. It uses the style of a scientist’s report, delves deeply into the study of geology, mentioning eras and terms without explaining them – it is so entrenched in the language of science that Joshi includes a table of geological eras in his explanatory notes (p.423). The scientific background is appropriate, as this story explores the biological origins of humankind.

That origin comes from the Old Ones. In part vii of the narrative, Dyer writes about the scientific abilities of the Old Ones:

It was under the sea, at first for food and later for other purposes, that they first created earth-life – using available substances according to long-known methods. [...] They had done the same thing on other planets; having manufactured not only necessary foods, but certain multicellular protoplasmic masses capable of moulding their tissues into all sorts of temporary organs under the hypnotic influence and thereby forming idea slaves to perform the heavy work of the community. These viscous masses were without doubt what Abdul Alhazred whispered about as the “shoggoths” in his frightful *Necronomicon* [...] When the star-headed Old Ones on this planet had synthesised their simple food forms and bred a good supply of shoggoths, they allowed other cell-groups to develop into other forms of animal and vegetable life for sundry purposes. (p.299-300).

Shortly thereafter Dyer says that brute labor was performed by the shoggoths and, on land, a species of vertebrate, and that

[t]hese vertebrates, as well as an infinity of other life-forms – animal and vegetable, marine, terrestrial, and aërial – were the products of unguided evolution acting on life-cells made by the Old Ones but escaping beyond their radius of attention. They had been suffered to develop unchecked because they had not come into conflict with the dominant beings. Bothersome forms, of course, were mechanically exterminated. It interested us to see in some of the very last and most decadent sculptures a shambling primitive mammal, used sometimes for food and sometimes as an amusing buffoon by the

land dwellers, whose vaguely simian and human foreshadowings were unmistakable. (p.302-3)

Dyer will only hint around the issue, but these passages make clear that the Old Ones made life on Earth and let it run free when it was not irritating. The force of evolution worked on some of the vertebrates, eventually creating humans. The Old Ones used the creatures ancestral to humans as circus animals and food. This fact is buried among all the other revelations. It is not central to the plot about scientists discovering aliens frozen in the ice and cautioning others to leave them be.

But strange parts of the narrative are clear, or clearer, when once one understands that humans originated as by-products of the Old Ones. One of the significant details is that Dyer's attitude towards the Old Ones changes over time. Dyer's teammate Lake is the one who discovers the bodies of the Old Ones frozen in the ice. He makes detailed reports and vivisects a few of them. He cannot even determine if they are animal or vegetable (p.263). Lake never passes judgment on them. They are specimens to him. So Dyer's emotional reactions are contrasted with the calm, objective reports of his colleagues. When he discovers the dead bodies in Lake's camp Dyer describes them as "loathsome," and points out that not only were the bodies mangled, but "some were incised and subtracted from in the most curious, cold-blooded, and inhuman fashion. It was the same with dogs and men" (p.277). He goes on to say many were missing organs. He is describing the vivisection, but cannot draw back from his personal perspective enough to see it in that light; instead he views it as "cold-blooded" and "inhuman". Of course the entities that have done this *are* inhuman, or unhuman

at any rate. Dyer is passing judgment on them, saying they are not as good as humans, who would never do these things. The reader can see the irony, in that humans *did* exactly the same things to the Old Ones. Dyer ends his description with the finding of the Old One corpse, buried, and says of it that it had a “peculiarly hateful odour” (p.278). Similar to the way horses react badly to Deep Ones, dogs and men alike experience the smell of the Old Ones as hateful.

Dyer first describes the city of the Old Ones he explores as “monstrous” and is reminded of the “daemoniac plateau of Leng, of the Mi-Go, or Abominable Snow-Men” (p.283; p.284). The Old Ones and their city are terrible to Dyer, and exist as things that disprove his vision of the world. In disrupting the universe, from Dyer’s point of view, the Old Ones act as monsters, threatening him as though they were trying to kill him. They are grotesque because intelligent animal/plant hybrids with tentacle limbs fall entirely outside his discriminatory grid. And though he later realizes the misunderstanding that has caused the Old Ones to kill the men in Lake’s camp, at this early stage in the story Dyer does feel threatened by the presence of the Old Ones.

Dyer does not always feel this way about the Old Ones. He is fascinated by their history and in awe of their physical properties (p.301). In speaking of their scientific prowess he can only marvel at what they accomplished and hope humans, too, might someday aspire to such heights. He points out that humans have yet to understand the physical principles that allowed the Old Ones to build their cities and architecture (p.294). The Old Ones had counters used as money, and their government “was evidently complex and probably socialistic” (p.302). Given Lovecraft’s turn to

socialism late in life, the Old Ones' socialist state would be the best possible, increasing the goodness of the Old Ones.

Dyer spends a great deal of time discussing the art of the Old Ones. It is appropriate that he does so, as all the history he divines comes from their murals, but it illustrates his growing fascination and love of the Old Ones. Their technique

was mature, accomplished, and aesthetically evolved to the highest degree of civilised mastery; though utterly alien in every detail to any known art tradition of the human race. In delicacy of execution no sculpture I have ever seen could approach it. (p.294)

Like the Deep Ones, then, the Old Ones are superb artists, but alien to humanity in a similar but presumably more extreme way, as the Old Ones are genuine aliens from outer space. Dyer approves of this alienness in a way Olmstead does not. It is indicative of their superiority. They are not evil. Joshi has noted this as well, speaking particularly of their vivisection of humans as mirroring the human vivisection of aliens; he points out both groups perform the same act, but Dyer attributes evil to the Old Ones until he begins to identify with them (*Weird Tale*, p.201).

Eventually Dyer is so enthused about them that he says they were

the beings whose substance an alien evolution had shaped, and whose powers were such as this planet had never bred. And to think that only the day before Danforth and I had actually looked upon fragments of their millennially fossilised substance... and that poor Lake and his party had seen their complete outlines. (p.297)

Far from being monstrous and hateful, now even the physical forms of the Old Ones are limned with respectful and reverent language.

Dyer's final opinion of the Old Ones comes when he realizes the survivors who destroyed Lake's camp and killed the team there have in turn died at the amorphous hands of the shoggoths. He says,

[p]oor devils! After all, they were not evil things of their kind. They were the men of another age and another order of being. Nature had played a hellish jest on them – as it will on any others that human madness, callousness, or cruelty may hereafter drag up in that hideously dead or sleeping polar waste [...] They had not been even savages – for what indeed had they done? That awful awakening in the cold of an unknown epoch – perhaps an attack by the furry, frantically barking quadrupeds, and a dazed defence against them and the equally frantic white simians with the queer wrappings and paraphernalia... poor Lake, poor Gedney... and poor Old Ones! Scientists to the last – what had they done that we would not have done in their place? God, what intelligence and persistence! [...] Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn – whatever they had been, they were men! (p.330)

The language here portrays Dyer's sympathies with the Old Ones. But his sympathetic feeling goes past feeling bad for them; he identifies with them. He slips into the objective language of science to describe things intimately familiar – dogs and humans – because it is the only point of view the Old Ones might have been able to adopt. They would not have known what dogs or men were, and could only have conceived of them in terms such as “quadruped” and “simian”. Finally, Dyer declares that the Old Ones were scientists and men. The identification is complete; Dyer

relates better to the scientific but totally alien Old Ones than he does other human beings. He even lets slip at this point that one of the reasons he does not want people going to the Antarctic is that they may thoughtlessly and callously disturb more Old Ones in their sleep and play on them a “hellish trick”.

The thing Dyer is missing is that he is more related to the shoggoths than the Old Ones. Both humans and shoggoths derive originally from the experiments and scientific procedures that the Old Ones used to make life from inanimate matter. Joshi describes this common origin as “the utter decimation of human self-importance by the attribution of a grotesque or contemptible origin of our species” (*Weird Tale*, p.197). He even points out that the Old Ones are simply superior to humans, and that humans could likely never attain the heights they reached (*Weird Tale*, p.227). Humans are more akin to the shoggoths than the Old Ones, and Dyer never sympathizes with the shoggoths. He is more and more disgusted by them as the story progresses.

The shoggoths are described as slaves several times, but Dyer never feels they were justified in their attempts to gain freedom. He says that they acquired “a dangerous degree of accidental intelligence” and that eventually they outgrew total hypnotic control and “developed a semi-stable brain whose separate and occasionally stubborn volition echoed the will of the Old Ones without always obeying it”. He goes on to describe the ruthless “war of re-subjugation” while still wholly on the side of the Old Ones, pausing over the carnage only to comment on the “headless, slime-coated fashion in which the shoggoths typically left their slain victims” which still “held a marvelously fearsome quality despite the intervening abyss of untold ages” (p.304).

In the same passage he says “even the [s]culptured images of these shoggoths filled Danforth and me with horror and loathing” (p.304). This description is repeated several times. The shoggoths are squamous creatures with no fixed form. They are disgusting, slimy, and Dyer never brings himself to view them in any other way, despite the reverential way he sees the dismembered bodies of the Old Ones by the end of the story. Lévy says that

the Lovecraftian monster [...] is less frightening than... repugnant [...] The extreme panic [...] that seizes the characters is less explained by their fear of death than by their instinctive refusal of all contact with the monster. It is much more terrible to see it, to sense it, to smell it – *touching* it being at any rate out of the question – than to actually face death. (p.60)

This repugnance and revulsion is the whole of Dyer’s feeling toward the shoggoth. He and Danforth flee almost mindlessly near the story’s end from a shoggoth. They figure out, over the course of their explorations, that the Old Ones Lake dug up must be alive. Even after finding the Old Ones’ camp site, scattered with goods taken from Lake’s camp, they do not turn back. They believe they may meet the Old Ones but do not flee. Even as they do run back, Dyer thinks the Old Ones may spare him and Danforth out of scientific curiosity if for no other reason (Lovecraft *Thing*, p.332). They are not repulsed by the Old Ones as they are the shoggoths. The shoggoths are apparently evil and the Old Ones are good, at least according to Dyer’s awe of the Old Ones and his disgust with the shoggoths.

This feeling of his is strange because he is disgusted by something that is closer to human than the Old Ones. The shoggoths are not

human, but they emerged from the same evolutionary starting point as humans did. Dyer feels no sympathy at all for them because of this shared ancestry; he is more concerned with the pursuits of the Old Ones – he loves them because they were great artists and thinkers. The shoggoths, in Dyer’s mind, simply supplanted the Old Ones and lived a crude imitation of their betters’ lives.

Dyer should not necessarily have felt for the shoggoths, though the hints of slavery might lead one to at least some sympathy. It is more important that Dyer, his objectivity gone but his love of science intact, sides with the Old Ones, who were great scientists. His slow conversion to this point of view moves him away from sympathy with humanity. It would not be entirely inappropriate to think he views everything resulting from the accidental evolution on Earth as bad and foul, and the shoggoths are the epitome of awfulness. He can sympathize with humans insofar as they strive for science and understanding, but in the end humans can never measure up to the Old Ones.

In this case humans share no commonality with the totally alien species. Humans are not linked in any genetic way to the aliens, as they are in “Shadow over Innsmouth,” with the Deep Ones. And that thing humans are not connected to at all is great. One should aspire towards its achievements and lament its passing. One should also hate those who usurp their position, and humankind certainly does, having spread across the planet as the Old Ones once did before the glaciation. That is how Dyer feels.

The shoggoths, on the other hand, are totally vile, not just as usurpers, but also because of their physical properties. They are disgusting. But they share their origins with humanity. Readers

cannot look to any genetic markers to orient themselves in this story. Certain actions and attitudes are held up as good, but they have nothing to do with nature – only with how one behaves and perceives. The same evolutionary system that produced humans produced the shoggoths as well, while the beings that emerged from an entirely alien evolution are paragons of goodness in the minds of Dyer and Danforth. Morality, goodness and badness, cannot be located in nature. They are located, if they exist at all and are not simply relative, in behaviors.

In “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” “The Call of Cthulhu,” and *At the Mountains of Madness*, Lovecraft portrays beings who are products of evolutionary branches different from humanity’s own. In “Shadow over Innsmouth” the beings are related to humans, distantly, but viewed as evil until the narrator finds he is like them and their life has certain lures. In “The Call of Cthulhu” the alien is assumed to be a mystic creature but is really just an alien, malevolent by accident and without any evil intent; the story is horrific depiction of an alien shattering human views of nature. In *At the Mountains of Madness* one race of beings is totally separated from humanity, having evolved on another planet, and the narrator views them as supermen and geniuses, while the beings evolved on Earth from similar stock to his own simply revolt him with their bodies and their behavior. Lovecraft portrays a collapsing morality that juxtaposes good and evil to something else, something other. This device allows him to portray the anthropocentric, human-invented nature of moral systems by taking natural morality to its farthest extremes and questioning them with narrators who, in some cases, side against the human race.

Lovecraft produced the entirely alien, the Science Fictional alien, no longer figurative but literal. Grotesque creatures come from space, or the oceans, and they are not animals or animal-like, but entirely new sentient and intelligent species. Their grotesqueness highlights their alienness, illustrates how the characters must react to something so different, and in the end underscores the lack of monstrosity in these creatures. They are merely built for their original conditions. Even purely terrestrial “aliens” like the Deep Ones and the shoggoths are grotesquely outside humanity’s moral systems, because they are on such a completely different evolutionary scale. They are as grotesque as we. And therefore the horror cuts both ways. We can’t assume anything about the goodness – or even the badness – of nature. Those ideas are, themselves, products of our evolutionary and social histories.

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