

Cosmic Horror and Indifferent Worlds

Worldbuilding in H. P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu"

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Abstract

This paper examines how cosmic horror serves as the primary tool of worldbuilding in H.P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," a foundational work of the genre that Lovecraft often refers to as "weird fiction." In these texts, Lovecraft constructs worlds that exist entirely separate from humanity and emphasize the passing nature of human civilization from a cosmic perspective. In analyzing this story, I argue that cosmic horror arises from the indifference of the universe and the relative insignificance of humanity. In other words, the sense of horror is not caused by creatures or events, but by the universe itself, which is perceived as uncaring and destined to outlast human existence. My paper will explore how Lovecraft's worldbuilding generates a horror that transcends individual experience and evokes a dread rooted in the meaninglessness of humanity and its ultimate doom. My key questions include: How does the universe Lovecraft that builds reduce human concerns to evoke existential horror? In what ways does the revelation of the true nature of the world intensify this horror? Finally, I will show that Lovecraft uses worldbuilding as a narrative device to evoke a sense of cosmic horror, where fear results from the incomprehensibility of the universe he describes.

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Introduction

In this paper, I examine how horror functions as a primary means of worldbuilding in H.P. Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928), an important work of what Lovecraft called "weird fiction." This tale is not simply about monsters and supernatural events, but rather about how the structure of the universe itself gives rise to horror. I will argue that Lovecraft's approach to cosmic horror forms the basis for his worldbuilding.

My main concerns are the two-tiered world structure and the insignificance of humanity in the face of these alien realms. In "The Call of Cthulhu," Lovecraft juxtaposes the familiar world of 1920s America with an alien cosmic world that is slowly revealed through fragmentary narratives. The familiar world is one of reason and rationality, where real universities and academic societies conduct systematic research. But these institutions are confronted with mysteries that alter our understanding of reality. The story illustrates how the human psyche shatters when confronted with the incomprehensible, when characters experience mania, hysteria or madness in the face of an uncaring cosmic order. The fragile nature of humanity is underscored by Cthulhu's cyclical existence, which reminds us of our transient place in the universe.

To set the framework for this paper, I will define first the terms "worldbuilding" and "cosmic horror," based on my available sources. I suggest that cosmic horror in Lovecraft's work not only serves as a backdrop but actively shapes the narrative and his technique of worldbuilding. Cosmic horror, as defined here, results from the revelation of a vast, unfeeling universe populated by entities beyond human comprehension. The essence of this horror is not rooted in individual fears but in the realization of the insignificance of humanity in an indifferent cosmos.

In my hypothesis, the idea of cosmic horror is integral to Lovecraft's worldbuilding, which results in a world where terror transcends personal fears. In analyzing these texts, I will argue that the settings—the Louisiana swamps or the remote island of Cthulhu—are more than mere locations. I will suggest that they are narrative devices that are used to confront characters (and readers) with the horror of the incomprehensible and the eternal. The fragmentary nature of Lovecraft's narrative, which arises as a texture of stories partly told and partly reported by an unreliable narrator, heightens this sense of horror, and the mysteries of the universe remain elusive and beyond our grasp. My paper will show that it is an essential worldbuilding technique that links the real world to the fictional world. In general, I argue that Lovecraft's horror arises from the universe, which constantly reminds us of our ultimate doom and the futility of human effort. The fragmentary nature of Lovecraft's narrative, layered through reports and unreliable narrators, heightens this horror, as the mysteries of the universe remain elusive and beyond our grasp — an essential worldbuilding technique that links the real world to the fictional one. Therefore, I argue that Lovecraft's horror arises from the universe itself, which persistently reminds us of our ultimate doom and the futility of human effort.

Chapter 1

Lovecraft's Cosmic Horror and Worldbuilding

a) Introduction

H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) is chiefly known for his stories written in the genres of weird, fantasy, and horror fiction. Lovecraft's fascination with the uncanny began in his childhood, inspired by the love of his grandfather's Gothic tales and his explorations of the extensive library in his family's Angell Street home. Early influences included *A Thousand and One Nights*, fiction by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, and the travel writings of John Mandeville and Marco Polo, all of which shaped his idea of a world ruled by forces beyond human understanding.

His most significant creation is probably the *Cthulhu Mythos*, which represents an alienated version of the world as we know it: in Lovecraft's fiction, ancient alien beings hiding in the recesses of our world symbolize and contribute to a sense of the insignificance of humanity in a vast and indifferent universe. In his related stories, Lovecraft portrays a universe in which human existence is not directly threatened but overshadowed by the realization of our smallness and the existence of ancient beings beyond human comprehension. These alien beings include Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, and Azathoth—some malevolent, others plainly indifferent to the existence of human civilization. In a letter dated August 14, 1930, Lovecraft writes, "Regarding the solemnly cited myth-cycle of Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, R'lyeh, Nyarlathotep, Nug [...] let me confess that this is all a synthetic concoction of my own, [...] The Necronomicon of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred is likewise something which must yet be written in order to possess objective reality" ("421. To Robert E. Howard," *Selected Letters* 2, 166). The truths about these godlike beings are revealed through (fictional) forbidden books, the most well-known of which in Lovecraft's universe is the Necronomicon. The *Cthulhu Mythos* prominently features in stories written during the 1920s and 1930s, including "The Call of Cthulhu," "The Dunwich Horror," and "At the Mountains of Madness." These stories can be read and enjoyed separately; together, however, they form a cohesive framework collectively referred to by Lovecraft and scholars as the Mythos or the Cthulhu Mythos.

"The Call of Cthulhu" is a short story written in August and September 1926 and first published in the February 1928 issue of *Weird Tales*. It is the only story by Lovecraft in which Cthulhu makes a significant appearance. Presented as a manuscript "Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston," in the story Thurston investigates the strange death of his grand-uncle, Professor Angell, and finds clues about an ancient being called Cthulhu, leading to the realization that this being is a great danger to humanity, and the knowledge of its existence brings fear and madness. The story is presented as three interlinked stories: a young artist named Henry Anthony Wilcox is tormented by nightmares that correspond with reports of global hysteria and strange phenomena; Inspector Legrasse tells his discovery of a cult in the Louisiana swamps that worships the monstrous entity Cthulhu; and finally, Thurston learns of the harrowing experiences of Gustaf Johansen, the sole survivor of a Norwegian crew that stumbled upon a remote island where Cthulhu momentarily awakened. Johansen's manuscript describes the horrors that followed, the result of which was the death or

madness of several of his crew mates. Although Cthulhu submerges in the sea again, the story ends with the realization that he remains a threat, only waiting for the stars to align once more to wake up again.

Despite the groundbreaking nature of his work, Lovecraft was relatively unknown during his lifetime. His stories appeared in the popular magazines of his time, such as *Weird Tales*, and he never achieved critical fame. However, his influence grew posthumously, in part through his widespread correspondence with other writers such as Clark Ashton Smith and August Derleth, members of the “Lovecraft Circle,” who further extended his mythos. As Simmons argues:

...in contrast to the scholarly elision of the writer’s work, during the last ten years Lovecraft’s standing among producers and consumers of genre fiction has undoubtedly been in the ascendancy. This turnaround may be a result of the fact that as time passes there is now a whole generation of academics who grew up with the author’s stories. Often having read them as children or young adults, these readers have sought to incorporate their love of the author’s work into their teaching and research, with the net result that Lovecraft has reemerged in recent years as an increasingly vital figure in the contemporary critical landscape. (3)

Today, Lovecraft’s legacy even extends into film. His stories have inspired numerous film adaptations, although his abstract notion of “cosmic horror” often presents a challenge for visual media. Direct film adaptations include *The Call of Cthulhu* (2005) and *The Whisperer in Darkness* (2011) by the H. P. Lovecraft Historical Society, both of which were designed in the style of the period to preserve the atmosphere of the original texts. Stuart Gordon has directed several films based on Lovecraft’s works, including *Re-Animator* (1985), which is a cult classic that combines horror and dark comedy. John Carpenter’s *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994) and Frank Darabont’s *The Mist* (2007) are not direct adaptations, but were strongly influenced by Lovecraft and emphasize cosmic horror. A highly anticipated adaptation, Guillermo del Toro’s *At the Mountains of Madness*, is unproduced at the time of writing this paper, although del Toro has continued to express his hopes for the revival of his project.

b) Worldbuilding in fiction

Worldbuilding refers to the construction of a fictional world that forms the background of a narrative. It can include everything from political and social systems to geography, economics, and cultures within an imaginary or imagined space. Hergenrader defines it as follows: “Worldbuilding is the process of creating a representation of a fictional world. It encompasses more than just the setting where a story takes place. It includes the political and social forces at work, logistical questions pertaining to geography and economics, and much, much more” (17). This definition emphasizes that worldbuilding goes beyond the mere physical or spatial setting and incorporates underlying structures that can give both depth and coherence to a fictional world.

In a looser sense, worldbuilding is found in almost all forms of fiction, from Homer’s *Odyssey* to J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, where a fictional world is constructed that is either more or less recognizable or contains elements of the fantastical. These worlds often mix

realistic features with more imaginative or unrealistic ones, creating a space similar to our experiential and rational understanding that is expanded and reinvented in fiction.

From a theoretical perspective, fictional worlds are often described as “possible worlds”—a concept borrowed from philosophy. Paolo Bertetti explains that we can create a fictional or possible world by starting from our actual world and changing one or more of its properties: “In particular, we can create a possible world starting from our ‘real’ world (the so-called Actual World, in opposition to Possible Worlds) by altering (i.e., activation or narcotization) even a single property” (48-49). These possible worlds often overlap with the actual world, thus creating familiarity while deviating in ways that serve the story. Bertetti also notes that “fictional worlds are, by their very nature, largely incomplete” (49), which means, in my interpretation, that they contain only the details necessary for the narrative.

Umberto Eco provides a more theoretical definition: “A possible world is a possible state of affairs expressed by a set of relevant propositions where for every proposition either p or non-p; as such, it outlines a set of possible individuals along with their properties; since some of these properties or predicates are actions, a possible world is also a possible course of events” (219). Eco makes it very clear that fictional worlds are not real but depend on the propositional attitudes of those who imagine, believe or desire them.

Although narratological perspectives consider worldbuilding as part of a “storyworld” that evolves according to the events in the narrative (Ryan 33), my investigation will not address this aspect in depth. While acknowledging the relevance of the storyworld theory, I will focus on how worldbuilding serves as a structural tool that is meant to evoke horror in Lovecraft’s work.

In a narrow sense, worldbuilding is about the creation of entire fictional universes that often begin with a basis in the real world and develop into parallel existences with their own ontological and narrative rules. This approach is widespread in modern fantasy, horror, and science fiction literature. J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* laid the foundation for the construction of modern fantasy worldbuilding, and the genre has since grown into similarly complex universes such as George R. R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones*, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, and the *Star Wars* saga.

Lovecraft’s *Cthulhu Mythos* occupies a place between loose and tight worldbuilding, in my opinion. While it has a fragmented narrative structure that introduces seemingly unconnected stories and settings, it gradually reveals a coherent framework dominated by these ancient, alien entities. This multi-layered structure gives the myth a sense of narrative incompleteness while creating, at the same time, a sense that there is an overarching world order, which is driven or glued together by cosmic fear.

c) Cosmic horror

“Cosmic horror,” a term coined by and often associated with the work of H. P. Lovecraft, is a kind or effect of horror that emphasizes the insignificance of humanity in an incomprehensible and indifferent universe.

The phrase appears only once in “The Call of Cthulhu,” although the story repeatedly evokes the theme through the use of the word “horror,” which occurs twelve times in the story. The single appearance of the phrase is in Thurston’s account of Johansen’s adventure, where the landing on an unknown island leads to death and madness among the crew. This event in Thurston’s narrative is linked to a reference of the sculptor Wilcox’s delirium as well as other,

seemingly supernatural and/or inexplicable forces and events. His rhetorical question, “Was I tottering on the brink of cosmic horrors beyond man’s power to bear?” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”) encapsulates the central idea: an encounter with an unnarrated and probably unnarratable experience that leaves only madness in its wake. This monstrous, unspecified threat is too vast and incomprehensible to be faced with sanity. Like in Edgar Allan Poe, Lovecraftian horror derives from an undefined fear, which offers a glimpse into the deepest recesses of the human unconscious, strengthening the sense of horror through its lack of rational explanation.

Lovecraft’s horror stories, however, differ from Poe’s fiction, which often rewrites or continues traditional Gothic horror, often incorporating its thematic and spatial elements such as necrophilia, dungeons, insanity, and madness. Instead, Lovecraft’s tales evoke a deeper, more existential kind of horror that arises from our confrontation with forces that are beyond human comprehension. Simmons argues that “[t]he best of Lovecraft’s tales present the reader with a brand of cosmic horror reliant on a kind of existentialist terror (which Lovecraft referred to as ‘indifferentism’) that is arguably much more relevant to a twentieth-century reader than the standard Gothic tropes of haunted houses, maidens in distress, vampires, and werewolves” (2).

Lovecraft himself defines the nature of cosmic fear in his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature”:

This type of fear-literature must not be confounded with a type externally similar but psychologically widely different; the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome.... The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present [...] a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror in Literature”)

In his essay, Lovecraft himself emphasizes the importance of the atmosphere and sense of dread that cosmic horror evokes, distinguishing it from more conventional, plot-driven horror narratives. At the heart of cosmic horror, then, is the fearsome idea that man is powerless in the face of the vast, unfeeling cosmos. Accordingly, Lovecraft’s stories often depict the clash between human curiosity and the terrifying reality of the universe. David Peak explains: “When faced with horror, we must accept that reality is at least partly unknowable [...] horror seeks to offer direct knowledge of the real. It strips away comforting or cosmetic surface realities and lays bare indifferent inner workings” (165). This confrontation with the unknown often leads to a mental or existential breakdown, as understanding the true nature of reality can fracture a character’s sense of self and the world.

The inability to comprehend these cosmic truths is probably the most important source of horror. S. T. Joshi emphasizes this point in his analysis of Lovecraft’s story *The Colour Out of Space*, suggesting that the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the alien entities underline the feeling of terror that comes from our realization that the universe is not only vast and uncaring but also fundamentally unknowable: “The fact that we can answer none of these questions very clearly is by no means a failing; indeed, this is exactly the source of terror in the

tale [...] it is precisely our inability to define the nature — either physical or psychological — of the entities [...] that produces the sense of nameless horror (2001, 256).”

The development of cosmic horror is also evident in Lovecraft’s departure from the early stories that focus on physical horror and the dissolution of boundaries to the later works that emphasize a metaphysical sense of horror. This development marks a deepening of Lovecraft’s existentialist and psychological concerns, from the horror of physical decay to a more abstract horror, which is rooted in the nature of existence: “Lovecraft’s early stories [...] foreshadow his later works of more overtly cosmic horror in their metaphysical implications conveyed through the affect of disgust [...] Lovecraft’s later works bridge a gulf [...] between the animate and inanimate cosmos, between the human and the more radically non-human” (Newell 182).

Moreover, as Peak notes, Lovecraft’s cosmic horror was informed by his materialist worldview, i.e., his atheism, so that he “used horror, particularly its aspects of speculation, as a means of making the unreal real” (168). By linking speculative horror to his atheistic understanding of a universe, which is without any inherent meaning or purpose, Lovecraft sought to confront readers with the unsettling reality of the cosmic irrelevance of mankind.

Cosmic horror, then, is based on a deep sense of existential dread and the idea that the place of humanity in the universe is insignificant. Lovecraft’s fiction challenges readers by exposing them to the incomprehensible and indifferent, which is supposed to fundamentally change their perception of reality, thus emphasizing the fragility of human understanding in the face of a universe that is vast and hostile.

In the following chapters, my investigation will focus now on how Lovecraft uses this genre to create a fictional world in which horror emanates not from that which we can understand, but from that which is forever beyond our grasp.

Chapter 2

The Juxtaposition of the Human and Cosmic Realms

“The Call of Cthulhu” is significant not only because it introduces elements that would later define the so-called *Cthulhu Mythos*, but also because of its coherent and plausible depiction of alien races living beneath the known world and originating from space. As S. T. Joshi notes, this allows Lovecraft to avoid the dilemma of fitting these entities within the constraints of earthly evolution that he struggled with in earlier stories like “Dagon,” “The Temple,” and “The Nameless City” (Joshi 2010, 186-87). Moreover, this story introduces almost all the elements that would be central to Lovecraft’s later Mythos tales, including a web of cross-references to his constantly developing pseudo-mythological work.

Joshi emphasizes, however, that the “Cthulhu Mythos” is a term that was not coined by Lovecraft himself, and that Lovecraft used this pseudo-mythology primarily as a means of communicating his philosophical worldview rooted in cosmicism (Joshi 2001, pp. 243-44). However, I quoted in the previous chapter a very similar phrase, “myth-cycle of Cthulhu,” from Lovecraft’s letters, which seems to suggest that he was very much aware of and intent on creating what appears to be a complete cycle of myths.

I suggest that Lovecraft creates a blend of real and fictional details, which reinforces the immersive sense of his worldbuilding. He constructs, basically, a world with two distinct but interconnected layers: the familiar human world and an underlying, incomprehensible cosmic realm.

On the one hand, Lovecraft links the story to real events, which is supposed to increase the credibility of the narrative. For example, the earthquake mentioned in the story is based on an actual earthquake. Steven J. Mariconda, renowned Lovecraft scholar, notes that in New York “lamps fell from tables and mirrors from walls; walls themselves cracked, and windows shattered; people fled into the street” (cited in: Joshi 2001, 243). In general, the human world is presented as a space dominated by reason and scientific inquiry, populated by academics, researchers and ordinary people. Real universities and institutions anchor this world in reality: Professor Angell works at Brown University, and Inspector Legrasse consults with experts at the annual meeting of the American Archeological Society. As S. T. Joshi notes, Lovecraft’s vision, however, is uncompromising: “Humanity is not at centre stage in the cosmos, and there is no one to help us against the entities who have from time to time descended upon the earth and wreaked havoc” (Joshi 2001, 246).

In contrast to this is the alien, cosmic world, which penetrates reality through the fragmentary revelations of the narrative. The cosmic world is characterized by remote and inaccessible places: the lost island where Cthulhu slumbers, the swamps where the cultists perform their dark rituals, and the inexplicable “wrong” geometry of the alien structures under the sea. These places are not completely separate from Earth but coexist with the human world while remaining hidden from the sight of most people. In contrast to what Marie-Laure Ryan says about the interesting element of worldbuilding—“The greater the distance of a fictional world from ordinary reality, the more the interest of the reader or spectator will be directed toward the world, at the expense of the plot, because the invention of a world that differs from reality is a true feat of the imagination” (41)—Lovecraft’s creates a sense of cosmic horror by constructing a fictional universe that differs only slightly from ordinary reality.

In the story, this imaginative blending of the real and the fantastic draws readers into a world that is at once familiar and alien. The everyday life of 1920s America is slowly overshadowed by the strange presence of an ancient, mysterious reality that makes the reader curious and amazed. The detailed descriptions of this alien world, like the huge Cyclopean buildings of R'lyeh and the strange hieroglyphics on the Cthulhu bas-relief, also show how Lovecraft focuses on the limits of what human understanding.

The terror of the cosmic world stems from its hidden presence, a reality so alien that it defies human comprehension. The bas-relief discovered by Wilcox embodies this clash between the modern and the ancient. This artifact is an example of how remnants of the cosmic intrude into the familiar: "The bas-relief was a rough rectangle less than an inch thick and about five by six inches in area; obviously of modern origin. Its designs, however, were far from modern in atmosphere and suggestion [...] cryptic regularity which lurks in prehistoric writing" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu").

The bas-relief also features a monster that defies rational description and is described as "a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu"). The narrator's imagination produces a grotesque mixture of "an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu"), illustrating the fear of the unthinkable. Behind the creature looms "vague suggestions of a Cyclopean architectural background" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu"), reminiscent of an ancient and incomprehensible civilization that is not from this world and is a reminder of the insignificance of humanity in the face of cosmic history. This juxtaposition, heightened by Lovecraft's descriptions, creates a sense of dread as the familiar world is destabilized by the alien.

In my opinion, Lovecraft's worldbuilding emphasizes this contrast through gradually revealing the alien reality. The narrative suggests that the horrors of the cosmic world have always been present, they just have not been noticed yet, or they have been noticed or perceived by just a few people. It is a hidden layer of existence that undermines the familiar as soon as people notice it. As Thurston pieces together the accounts of Wilcox, Legrasse, and Johansen, the surface of the human world cracks, revealing the terrifying truth: Earth is just a speck in a universe filled with ancient beings like Cthulhu. As Joshi explains, Lovecraft's mythical deities "are perhaps best understood as symbols of cosmic outsidership [...] entities of pure and unknowable horror, unconcerned with human life" (Joshi 2001, 166). Cosmic horror arises from this collision, as human curiosity and scientific exploration accidentally discover a reality that shatters our belief in the significance of human civilization.

The story also emphasizes that the unknown world is not completely separate from humanity, but occasionally intrudes into the human realm through dreams, madness and cultic rituals. The artists, such as Wilcox, are portrayed as "psychically hypersensitive" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu") and experience nightmares, which suggests a connection to cosmic reality. This also emphasizes the fragility of human beings, since even a fleeting awareness of the cosmic can lead to madness. David Peak picks up on this idea by suggesting that the monstrous beings of the *Cthulhu Mythos* exist "outside an earthly, moral or ethical understanding" and evoke pure horror (166). The cults that worship Cthulhu and embody the primitive acceptance of human insignificance represent another bridge between the human and cosmic worlds.

The worldbuilding in Lovecraft's story is best understood with the help of Umberto Eco's concept of possible worlds as cultural constructs. According to Bertetti's interpretation

of Eco, fictional worlds have a “semiotic and textual nature” rather than an ontological existence, yet they feel “real” because they consist of recognizable entities and properties (Bertetti 48). Lovecraft’s cosmic world is a carefully constructed collection of such properties: the alien landscapes, the cryptic symbols, and the ancient beings like Cthulhu. By altering just a few features of our known world, such as introducing an ancient, slumbering god in the ocean or creating a cult that worships this god, Lovecraft constructs a parallel world that seems both plausible and terrifying. This blending of reality and cosmic horror inspires the reader to consider the possibility of such forces and entities.

In “The Call of Cthulhu,” it remains uncertain whether this intrusion of the cosmic into human consciousness is intentional. While the cultists claim that “the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by molding their dreams; for only thus could Their language reach the fleshly minds of mammals” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”), their sanity is already in question. Having come into contact with the cosmic, they are prone to delusions, which cast doubts over their interpretation of these supposed messages. The idea that “the sensitive among them” could communicate with the Great Old Ones mirrors the earlier depiction of mass hysteria, where artists, being more sensitive and attuned to dreams, involuntarily received visions of Cthulhu and his city. These individuals are passively observing the world of the cosmic, not actively conversing with the entities, suggesting that there is no engagement between the two worlds in a meaningful way.

Beyond this, Cthulhu’s concern for humanity appears nonexistent. Lovecraft’s portrayal of human insignificance is not only rooted in the limitations of human understanding but also in the fundamental indifference of the cosmic entities. To Cthulhu and its kin, humanity is no more important than any other species of animal. This disregard is shown by the cultists’ reference to themselves as “mammals,” a term that highlights humanity’s inconsequential place in the grand, indifferent cosmos.

To summarize, Lovecraft juxtaposes the human and cosmic worlds in “The Call of Cthulhu” to create a fictional world that both resembles our own and is fundamentally different from it, at least beneath the surface. This juxtaposition evokes in the reader a lingering sense of dread and insignificance. By anchoring his narrative in the familiar world of rational inquiry and scientific exploration, Lovecraft stresses the idea of the fragility of human understanding in the face of the vast, incomprehensible forces of the cosmos. The gradual revelation of the situation, from the unsettling bas-relief to the terrifying descriptions of Cthulhu’s awakening, illustrate how even the smallest glimpse into the cosmic realm can destabilize reality. Lovecraft’s detailed construction of a world that seems both familiar and profoundly alien serves not only to immerse the reader in the world, but also to reinforce the central theme of cosmic horror: the vulnerability and irrelevance of humanity in an indifferent and incomprehensible universe.

Chapter 3

Fragmented Narrative and Unreliable Narration

Lovecraft uses an ingenious narrative structure that relies on reports and multiple interpretive layers to create an atmosphere of mystery and fragmentation. This approach not only reinforces the reader's sense of disorientation but also emphasizes our limited understanding of the cosmos. The story is presented through a series of nested stories, with each layer introducing additional barriers between the reader and the central horror. The subtitle—"Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston"—immediately hints at this layered, self-referential nature, suggesting that the text itself is a construction pieced together from incomplete sources. As critic Donald R. Burleson notes, the framework is "many layers deep," with each narrative thread interweaving and creating a structure similar to Lovecraft's unsettling descriptions of non-Euclidean geometries: "all wrong" and "irreducible to simple, stable terms" (79-80).

The narrative begins with Thurston's account of his role as executor of his great-uncle Professor Angell's estate: "As my great-uncle's heir and executor, for he died a childless widower, I was expected to go over his papers with some thoroughness; and for that purpose moved his entire set of files and boxes to my quarters in Boston" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu"). This responsibility introduces the theme of inheritance and the burden of knowledge. By inheriting Angell's research papers, Thurston unwittingly becomes the custodian of cosmic secrets that perhaps should remain buried. The locked box he discovers among Angell's belongings serves as a metaphor for forbidden knowledge. His reluctance to reveal the contents—"I felt much averse from showing [the box] to other eyes" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu")—foreshadows the dangerous and unsettling truths he is about to uncover.

The contents of the box, including "the queer clay bas-relief and the disjointed jottings, ramblings, and cuttings," reflect the fragmented and chaotic nature of the evidence (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu"). It emphasizes the theme of human ignorance, as Thurston struggles to make sense of the disparate and confusing information left to him by his great-uncle. As David Peak explains, "By remaining cosmically outside human knowledge, the Cthulhu Mythos comprises a purposely incomplete body of lore. [...] Lovecraft's goal was to establish 'the conveyance of terror at the thought of human insignificance in a boundless cosmos'" (167).

Professor Angell's documentation of his findings serves to emphasize the academic and methodical approach to the cosmic mysteries, an approach that lies at the heart of the story:

The writing accompanying this oddity was, aside from a stack of press cuttings, in Professor Angell's most recent hand; and made no pretense to literary style. What seemed to be the main document was headed "CTHULHU CULT" in characters painstakingly printed to avoid the erroneous reading of a word so unheard-of. This manuscript was divided into two sections, the first of which was headed "1925--Dream and Dream Work of H.A. Wilcox, 7 Thomas St., Providence, R. I.," and the second, "Narrative of Inspector John R. Legrasse, 121 Bienville St., New Orleans, La., at 1908 A. A. S. Mtg.--Notes on Same, & Prof. Webb's Acct." The other manuscript papers were brief notes, some of them accounts of the queer dreams of different persons, some of

them citations from theosophical books and magazines (notably W. Scott-Elliot's *Atlantis and the Lost Lemuria*), and the rest comments on long-surviving secret societies and hidden cults, with references to passages in such mythological and anthropological source-books as Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Miss Murray's *Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. The cuttings largely alluded to [...] outbreaks of group folly or mania in the spring of 1925. (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu")

His manuscripts are divided into neatly organized sections with specific headings, suggesting something about his scholarly effort to understand the inexplicable. The references to recognized anthropological and other texts such as Frazer's *Golden Bough* lend a semblance of rationality to the research. While this semblance places the narrative in the context of a familiar world of academia, rationality, research, and science, the organized and rational framework stands in contrast to the chaos and incompleteness of the evidence. The reader is left with a sense that knowledge is fragmented and that even the most methodical approaches are insufficient to understand the cosmic horrors that lurk under the surface.

The complexity is further emphasized by the framing, which creates a sense of distance and mediation between the reader and the events described. Burleson notes that Cthulhu is "framed several times over" by these layers, simultaneously enclosed and emphasized by the narrative structure (82). This paradoxical framing serves to contain the horror while simultaneously drawing attention to it. The layering of perspectives—from Thurston's account of Angell's notes to Legrasse's account of the cult's rituals—deepens the sense that true understanding is just out of reach.

Lovecraft's narrative style, which was heavily influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, reinforces this atmosphere. As S. T. Joshi notes, Lovecraft's prose is "dense, a little overheated, laced with archaic and recondite terms" and focuses almost exclusively on exposition and narration, with little emphasis on realistic character portrayal or dialogue (2001, 108). This lack of character-based realism turns the reader's attention away from personal experience and places the emphasis on the cosmic forces that overshadow human existence. The prose style itself, thus, becomes a tool to alienate the reader from familiar human concerns and drawing them deeper into the world of the *Mythos*.

Moreover, the narrator's skepticism lends the narrative a convincing tension. Thurston at first doubts the supernatural implications of his great-uncle's research and wonders whether Angell has become "credulous of the most superficial impostures" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu"). This rational skepticism drives the investigation of the story, as Thurston examines each piece of evidence. But as the narrative progresses, his rational worldview begins to falter.

It is possible to view Thurston as an unreliable narrator, one who might have delusions about the connection between Professor Angell's research and Johansen's journey, or perhaps selectively interpreting or misinterpreting the events. Was Professor Angell truly killed because of his research? Was the stone image retrieved by Johansen as similar to the bas-relief as Thurston thought it was? Was Johansen's testimony of his journey reported faithfully, or the "cloudiness and redundancy" Thurston sought to summarize contained information that would contradict his interpretation? The questions to these answers cannot be answered with confidence based on only the short story alone, but the world itself does not exist in "The Call

of Cthulhu” alone. This potential unreliability, however, can be another feature of Lovecraft’s fragmented worldbuilding.

Thurston is the sole narrator, recounting the events through his limited perspective. Yet, the presence of Cthulhu and related mythological elements extends beyond this story, appearing in other works such as “At the Mountains of Madness.” These interconnected narratives build upon each other and offer additional details on Cthulhu’s origins, its nature and the city of R’lyeh, whose emergence is the key event of “The Call of Cthulhu.” A different narrator describes similar ideas, names and places the two stories acting as proof for each other that neither of them are mere figments of imagination for their respective narrators, amplifying the sense of fragmentation that runs through Lovecraft’s universe.

Just as Thurston and Professor Angell are forced to assemble incomplete and seemingly unreliable information to make sense of the cosmic horrors they encounter, readers too must piece together the scattered details of the world across multiple texts. Thus, both characters and readers are faced with the elusive and dangerous nature of knowledge.

The act of Thurston’s investigation, then, becomes a journey into the unknown. The dangerous curiosity takes a psychological toll on him when he confronts cosmic horror. The description of the bas-relief—a monstrous figure with a “pulpy, tentacled head” and a “grotesque and scaly body” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”)—embodies this erosion of reality. The unclassifiable nature of the artifact reflects the limits of human understanding and suggests that even when confronted with concrete evidence of the alien existence, the human mind struggles to make sense of it.

Lovecraft’s decision to structure the story as a series of interlocking or layered stories and situation, each adding to the sense of horror and incomprehension, makes his worldbuilding all the more disorienting. As Burleson points out, the different layers of narrative create a geometry of storytelling that resists easy interpretation and reinforces the idea that the boundaries between the known and the unknown can be easily crossed (80). This structure emphasizes the uncertainty of human understanding. It reminds us that that the fictional world of the story not merely an imaginative construct, but also a philosophical statement about how we can or cannot fully understand reality.

To summarize, the fragmented narrative structure in “The Call of Cthulhu” is not just a narrative device, but an essential part of Lovecraft’s worldbuilding. By assembling the story from multiple layers of incomplete and unreliable accounts, Lovecraft constructs a fictional universe that is both expansive and lacking in detail. This fragmentation suggests that the universe is more complex and indifferent than the human mind can comprehend. The reader is drawn into this fragmented world and experiences the same confusion as the characters try (and fail) to understand the inexplicable but curiously linked events, from New Orleans voodoo rituals to earthquakes and “Eskimo” cults. The layers of the narrative contribute to worldbuilding as they illustrate the characters’ struggle to make sense of the world around them. This way, the story reinforces the haunting nature of Lovecraft’s universe.

Chapter 4

Madness and the Subconscious

Facts as such mean *nothing* to me. Not because I have the maniac's or religious mystic's tendency to *confuse* reality with unreality, but because I have the cynic's and the analyst's inability to recognize any difference in *value* between the two types of consciousness-impacts, *real* and *unreal*. I know which are which, but cannot have any prejudice in favor of either class. (Lovecraft, *Selected Letters* 2, 125, original emphasis)

In his letter to James Ferdinand Morton dated March 12, 1930, Lovecraft expresses a philosophical view that blurs the distinction between reality and unreality in the context of cosmic horror. It shows his indifference to objective reality, a theme that runs through his fiction. By rejecting the notion that one type of experience—whether rooted in physical reality or the imagination—has more value than the other, Lovecraft taps into the idea of psychological instability that cosmic horror often evokes.

This perspective reflects a detachment from the conventional human need to categorize experiences as either real or unreal and mirrors the psychological dissonance faced by the characters in “The Call of Cthulhu.” The attitude of cynic and analyst that Lovecraft claims for himself indicates his skepticism and recognition that human consciousness is limited and easily stunned when confronted with the cosmic. This philosophical detachment is similar to what Lovecraft's characters experience, whose minds are often broken when they meet the incomprehensible. The inability—or refusal—to privilege one form of consciousness over another illustrates a central concern in Lovecraft's work: the vulnerability of the human mind in the face of a universe that resists logical and sensory comprehension.

In his weird stories, Lovecraft connects the themes of madness and worldbuilding, thus creating a universe whose overwhelming nature threatens the stability of the human mind. At the beginning of his narrative, Thurston says: “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 Call of Cthulhu”). This emphasizes the idea that our limited understanding of the universe serves as a protection against madness. The “placid island of ignorance” symbolizes the fragile balance of human consciousness protected from the destabilizing truths that lie in the “black seas of infinity.” Stepping beyond this island can lead to a psychological breakdown, which I think is a theme that plays a central role in Lovecraft's worldbuilding.

The universe Lovecraft constructs in his fiction is characterized by a sense of cosmic indifference. However, the cosmic setting is more than just a backdrop; it causes psychological horror, which comes forth from the subconscious. As David Peak notes, Cthulhu, the ancient being imprisoned in the sunken city of R'lyeh, exerts a “constant anxiety for mankind at an unconscious level,” transmitting its influence through thought rather than direct action (175).

In “The Call of Cthulhu,” Lovecraft explores the psychological and social effects of subconscious horror, for example, through the figure of Henry Anthony Wilcox. Wilcox, who is described as “psychically hypersensitive,” is a fictional sculptor known for his eccentricity. His dreams, which are more disturbing than those of the average person, set him apart from

society and make him a figure of curiosity. The citizens of Providence consider him “merely ‘queer’,” and the conservative Providence Art Club finds him “quite hopeless” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”).

When Wilcox visits Professor Angell, he reveals that the strange clay bas-relief he has brought with him was inspired by a dream of “strange cities;” he claims, “It is new, indeed, for I made it last night in a dream of strange cities; and dreams are older than brooding Tyre, or the contemplative Sphinx, or garden-girdled Babylon” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”). Wilcox’s “dreamy, stilted manner” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”) suggests his alienation from everyday experience. His poetic language evokes a sense of timelessness: those who are sensitive to the cosmic realm become estranged from the familiar world.

Wilcox’s role as an artist is particularly significant in the context of Lovecraft’s exploration of madness and cosmic influence. Wilcox’s ability to bring cosmic visions into physical form—through his sculptures—demonstrates that artists and other imaginative people are more receptive than average people to cosmic forces. The bas-relief he created is a manifestation of his engagement with the alien reality of Cthulhu. Yet, this sensitivity also makes artists more susceptible to the psychological consequences of such awareness.

The reference to Ardois-Bonnot, a fictional French painter invented by Lovecraft, reinforces the impact of the cosmic disturbances on artists on a global scale. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” Ardois-Bonnot is described as having exhibited a “blasphemous Dream Landscape” at the Paris Spring Salon of 1926, a work of art that embodies the worldwide psychic disturbances that herald the reawakening of the alien god Cthulhu. Like Wilcox and his bas-relief, Bonnot’s painting is a reflection of the subconscious connection between certain sensitive humans and the cosmic forces at play.

The portrayal of collective unrest and cosmic influence on humanity, then, goes beyond individual experiences. The accounts of widespread mental illness and “group folly or mania” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”) suggest that the effects of cosmic horror are not limited to isolated cases but can affect society as a whole. It turns out that the psychological effects of encountering cosmic truths are devastating, as Lovecraft illustrates with the choice to either “going mad from the revelation or flee[ing] from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age” (“The Call of Cthulhu”). The narrator mentions the “recorded troubles in insane asylums” and the “miraculous avoidance of medical professionals” to draw definitive conclusions about these “strange parallelisms” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”).

Whether characters speak of dreams, hallucinations, or the effects of madness, the psychological horror and subconscious fears in “The Call of Cthulhu” warrant a connection more with a Jungian rather than Freudian perspective when examining the subconscious elements. The concept of global dreams, hallucinations, and mass hysteria suggests a Jungian collective unconscious—a shared reservoir of archetypes and images that transcend individual experience. This idea is particularly evident in the almost Coleridgean notion that artists, poets, and other gifted individuals with visions can tap into this shared unconscious and bring to light universal fears. This stands in sharp contrast to the scientific or rational approaches represented by Professor Angell’s scientific research and Inspector Legrasse’s methodical investigation. In this context, the Great Old Ones, particularly Cthulhu, can be interpreted as symbols of archetypal fears of the unknown and chaos, shared universally by humanity, regardless of creed, geography, or cultural background.

Moreover, Cthulhu primarily “communicates” through dreams, using them as a channel to exert influence over humanity. While it is artists and highly sensitive individuals who are

affected the most, the average person, though affected significantly less, according to Professor Angell's research, "scattered cases of uneasy but formless nocturnal impressions appear here and there," and even among some scientific minds, there are rare but notable instances of "vague description[s]" involving "fugitive glimpses of strange landscapes" or "a dread of something abnormal" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu").

However, Thurston's "callous rationalism" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu") and stubborn skepticism also illustrate the tendency to resist the inexplicable. Although confronted with unsettling evidence—disturbing dreams, inexplicable art, and widespread mental distress—Thurston remains reluctant to abandon his rational worldview.

This reluctance to acknowledge the supernatural or cosmic is related to the recurring theme of human ignorance as a shield in the story. Thurston's rejection of Wilcox's experiences and the bizarre global phenomena reflects a general denial. As the narrative progresses, however, this rationalism begins to crumble, only to foreshadow the inevitable confrontation with the horrifying realization that our understanding of the universe is far from being complete.

To summarize, Lovecraft uses themes of madness and the subconscious to create a world of cosmic horror in "The Call of Cthulhu." Dreams, hallucinations and bouts of madness become channels through which the alien and incomprehensible forces of the universe enter human consciousness. Sensitive individuals, such as artists, serve as a medium for these cosmic influences and translate or transform their terrifying visions into tangible, though disturbing works of art. This technique blurs the line between reality and the subconscious and emphasizes the fragility of the human psyche when confronted with the unknown. By placing madness and subconscious experiences at the center of his worldbuilding, Lovecraft ultimately creates a universe in which the boundary between the familiar and the alien is constantly unstable.

Conclusions

In this paper, I examined how horror serves as a primary tool of worldbuilding in H. P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," with a focus on how cosmic horror forms the basis of his fictional universe. My hypothesis was that Lovecraft's approach to worldbuilding is special or idiosyncratic because it uses horror not just as a narrative element, but as the very structure of his fictional universe. I suggested that the horror in Lovecraft's work arises from the incomprehensibility and indifference of the cosmos. By exploring the themes of cosmic dread, the juxtaposition of human and alien worlds, fragmented narratives, and the psychological effects of the cosmic on the human mind, I demonstrated that Lovecraft constructs a world that mixes detailed descriptions of the familiar with the fragmented description of an alien reality that causes a sense of our insignificance in a vast and unfeeling universe.

In the first chapter, I examined how Lovecraft's concept of cosmic horror is central to his worldbuilding. I showed that the horror in his stories does not come from direct physical threats but from the realization that the universe is indifferent to humanity and beyond human understanding. The Great Old Ones, especially Cthulhu, symbolize this indifference and the vast scale of existence. Lovecraft's worldbuilding, through the fragmented but extensive *Cthulhu Mythos*, mixes reality with fiction, thus creating a sense of unease and mystery that supports his central theme: the smallness of humanity in the face of cosmic forces.

In the second chapter, I analyzed the contrast between the human and cosmic realms in the story. Lovecraft builds a familiar world, set in the realistic environment of 1920s America, and then slowly reveals the alien, incomprehensible layer beneath it. This contrast is seen in examples like Wilcox's bas-relief and the descriptions of R'lyeh's Cyclopean architecture, which defy human logic and comprehension. Lovecraft uses these details to show how the cosmic world intrudes on the human one, destabilizing the familiar and creating a growing sense of dread when people are confronted with the vast and uncaring universe.

The third chapter focused on Lovecraft's use of fragmented storytelling and unreliable narrator. The story is pieced together from journals, reports, and eyewitness accounts, which creates a disjointed structure that mirrors the incomplete and mysterious nature of the universe. Thurston's investigation into his great-uncle's papers reflects the reader's own experience of trying to make sense of these scattered clues. This approach emphasizes the limits of human understanding, as even the most rational methods cannot fully explain the incomprehensible truths of the cosmos. The fragmented narrative not only builds suspense but also reinforces the central theme of the unknowable nature of the universe.

In the fourth chapter, I examined Lovecraft's use of madness and the subconscious. Dreams, hallucinations, and mental instability become channels through which the alien and cosmic influence enters human consciousness. Wilcox and other sensitive individuals are mediums, who receive visions of Cthulhu and the alien world, which they express through art and poetry. This idea connects to Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, where universal fears and archetypes surface in the minds of certain people. The story also shows how this knowledge affects the human mind, often leading to madness or despair. The line between

reality and imagination becomes blurred, which again emphasizes the fragility of human understanding when experiencing the unknown.

In conclusion, Lovecraft's worldbuilding technique undermines the reader's sense of reality by mixing detailed descriptions of familiar settings with hints of an alien, incomprehensible universe to create a world that feels both believable and terrifying. My analysis has shown that Lovecraft uses cosmic horror as a key tool for worldbuilding. By combining existential dread, fragmented stories, and psychological themes, Lovecraft creates a world that pulls readers in while also making them feel deeply uneasy. The horror in Lovecraft's world comes not from what we can understand but from what we can never fully comprehend. This unresolved tension forces us to confront our small and fragile place in a vast, indifferent universe. "The Call of Cthulhu" is not just a story about monsters but a profound meditation on human existence, knowledge, and fear, which leaves readers with a sense of awe and vulnerability as the boundaries of what we can understand are pushed to their limits.

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