



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**  
Hugvísindasvið

# **H.P. Lovecraft**

*The Enlightenment & connection to the world of Cosmicism*

*Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs*

**Kristjón Rúnar Halldórsson**

**September 2010**

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Leiðbeinandi: Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir  
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## Summary

This essay will explore the works of the famed horror writer Howard Philips Lovecraft, from the angle of the Enlightenment and its influence on Lovecraft, most notably the philosophy of the materialism and the religious theories that conflicted with it. The focus will be on a collection of his stories known as the Cthulhu mythos, three stories in particular: „The Call of Cthulhu“, “The Color out of Space“ and one of his longest stories *At the Mountains of Madness*. Chapter one will explore the concepts of the Enlightenment in relation to Lovecraft, in order to understand the basis of his ideological formation. The second Chapter will focus on the concepts of the enlightenment that Lovecraft opposed; the place of humanity in the nature, in particular and religion. Furthermore it will start to explore the basics of Lovecraft’s Cosmicism and the iconic spiritualists such as the theosophist which Lovecraft so often mentions in his stories with strong tones of irony. The third chapter will explain the core of it all, the Cosmicism of Lovecraft, which is the framework around the so called Cthulhu mythos. Possible reasons as to its creation will also be explored, such as the aforementioned opposition versus the spiritualists in the second chapter. The fourth chapter will study the sublime at work in Lovecraft, his relation to Edmund Burke and how it helped with his formation of horror, a necessary thing in order to understand the nature of his literary universe. The fifth chapter is split up into three separate case studies where each of the stories mentioned above are explored to the core, in order to coin it all together. Most of the research was done through the internet, through the mediums of journal libraries such as Proquest and Ebscohost, some collected manuscripts were used such as Burke’s manuscript *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and of course the greatest focus was on Lovecraft’s own stories.

<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
Who was Lovecraft? .....	4
The Enlightenment and Lovecraft .....	5
Humanity place in nature .....	9
The theosophists.....	9
The world of Cosmicism.....	11
The sublime at work in Lovecraft.....	14
Case studies.....	19
<i>Call of Cthulhu</i> .....	19
<i>Color out of space</i> .....	21
<i>At the Mountains of Madness</i> .....	23
Conclusion .....	27
Works cited .....	28
<i>Internet Research</i> .....	29

## **Introduction**

The cult horror writer Howard Philips Lovecraft born in 1890 is well known for his eccentric horror tales amongst those who have any interest in horror literature. His fiction mostly consist of horror tales and here will be discussed the so called Cthulhu mythos, so termed by the iconic monster Cthulhu, from the story “The call of Cthulu”. This monster Cthulu and the mythos bearing its name are a part of a universe that is uniquely Lovecraft's own creation, which details amongst many things, ancient beings and aliens, older than even the earth itself. Its philosophy contains a mechanical world view as cold and cruel as the aliens of his tales. More often than not we witness a protagonist who discovers some truth about these aliens or so called elder beings. Often it includes them being worshipped as gods by age old cults. The subliminal madness which follows forces the reader to acknowledge a world of cosmic proportions in which the human being is a mere fly on this small speck of earth. These stories have had a remarkable influence on many modern writers and some are still grappling with the contents of his tales.

The popularity of his Cthulu mythos does not reside only with the readers of the horror novel. The universe as presented in his tales has been translated into various media having had its influence on the comic- , movie-, and even the board gaming culture, so that gamers can experience the eerie horror of his mythos up close. It has even spawned groups such the Lovecraft historical society, a fan group which uses the world of Lovecraft as a marketing scheme, selling novelty items and all sorts of peculiarities that the Lovecraft fan can enjoy, from posters depicting the Cthulhu monster to 'fake' artefacts mentioned in his stories.

The focus here is on the nature and origin of that peculiar universe which Lovecraft presents to his reader. This world of his called the cosmicism will be explored, its philosophical background and possible reasons to its creation.

## Who was Lovecraft?

Howard Philips Lovecraft was born in the year 1890 and died 1937. From early age he was an industrious boy with many interests and hobbies, and being of wealthy heritage he indulged in every one of them. Thanks to his nature as a remarkably curious individual when it came to questioning and understanding the world around him. For example by the age of twelve he had already learned Latin, astronomy and even some chemistry.

Lovecraft's works have their obvious mark of his inquisitive scientific mind and reflect his curiosity on almost every academic subject, as he wrote treatises and papers on countless subjects. Amongst his chief curiosities were history, mythology and astronomy. His stories include not only horror tales, but detective stories as well and even some proto-science-fiction-tales. In many of them this interest of his in the academic subject is obvious. One of his most popular ways of narrating his stories for example, was through an academic protagonist, as a result it allowed his scientific mind to have its mark on his tales.

It cannot be said that he ever had an ordinary life; his father was deemed insane by what is now known to be syphilis. His relationship with his mother was quite demented, characterised by an emotional abuse on her behalf and his marriage was quite hectic and did not last long. These events coupled with a life of eclecticism, must have had its effect on the psyche of Lovecraft. From this life of solitude he ventured into the world of amateur journalism, which acclimatized him to the present world that he had become so secluded from. As he gained friends in the literary field<sup>1</sup>, he started to express and discuss his thoughts on the various academic fields, which prepared him for his career in pulp literature. In 1917 his earliest tales first appeared in the pulp magazines, the first of many stories that soon followed. It was in the period around and after 1926 when he wrote most of his so called Cthulu Mythos; the focus of the exploration of this paper. His interest in the many academic fields, helped him to form his literary philosophy, which he used to portray what he viewed as the ideal image of horror. It came to be termed as 'Cosmicism', and it was the universal setting that he portrayed in the Cthulu mythos. Its desired effect upon the reader is to make him realize his

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<sup>1</sup> S.T. Joshi, *The annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, P, 7.

insignificance, by showing him how small he is in face of this incomprehensible universe of Lovecraft, as he can but glimpse some subtle hints of its true monstrosity.

In order to analyse the origin of Lovecraft philosophy and its related cosmicism, there are a number of factors to take into consideration. To begin with Lovecraft had clear distaste for religion and the pedestal it puts man upon, as he was a hard line atheist and a devoted academic. Opinions such as the idea of man being the supreme being of all due to having been appointed as the master of nature by God when he created Adam and Eve, were something which was clearly to his disliking. Will be discussed later on, when the subject of religion and his philosophy of cosmicism will be explained. As well, his intellectual curiosities lead him to the romantic period of the Enlightenment. Ideas such as materialism helped him to formulate his philosophical argument against the religion and the superstition which so often came as a result. However before we start looking into those ideas the beginning needs to be examined first, the origins and the nature of the Enlightenment itself.

## **The Enlightenment and Lovecraft**

The Enlightenment was amongst other things an ideological awakening that took place in the eighteenth century, which had many things contributing to it, both individuals, philosophical theories, and historical turning points such as the French revolution. The period of the Enlightenment from 1715-1792 was a period in the history of Europe which witnessed more political and social transformation than had ever been witnessed in a single lifetime. The philosopher Immanuel Kant himself said about the Enlightenment that it was man's "intellectual coming of age" (David 1).

The central concepts of the Enlightenment were faith in nature and the human progress, where the naturalistic view evolved that nature was composed of complex interacting laws that governed the universe, rather than being governed by any spiritual laws as the church would claim. This was a step up from the complete trust that man had placed in the church. As the trust in its doctrines faltered, man started to think for himself and question the world around him. As the organized structures of religion had throughout the ages suppressed the sciences, the Enlightenment was the age when man

began to question everything, not only the church but also the tyrannical institutions of monarchy, as a result it led to many reforms due to this criticizing of the ancient structures of both authority and religion<sup>2</sup>. Free to use his reason, it was believed that man could exercise it to achieve greater things than were possible before this age.

Some of the more important individuals who influenced the philosophies of this century were men such as Isaac Newton 1643-1727, John Locke 1632-1704, David Hume 1711 - 1776, Voltaire 1694-1778 and Immanuel Kant 1724-1804 with his text *An answer to the question; what is enlightenment?*, where he argued for the sake of reason and that man should step away from immaturity with his words "Have courage to use your own understanding!" (An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?). These words are a perfect example of the idea mentioned above that man should use his own reason instead of trusting blindly in the instructions of the state and its religious institutions as mentioned here above. Therefore it was necessary to cease bowing to the power of the totalitarian structures of religion and government as not doing so was exactly what hindered the idea that was the enlightenment. Instead man should have the courage to think for himself, by using his own reason and logic, being therefore completely free to express himself as he threw off the shackles of the institutions and other control factors<sup>3</sup>.

A dominant theme of the enlightenment was the search for the science of man. That is to say the quest to understand the human body and the spiritual mechanism behind it, as finding a place for the human soul amongst the emerging sciences such as the theory of evolution became increasingly difficult. This led to raging debates as to the nature and role of spirituality and the exact place and the extent of the material sciences. It was the natural law versus the divine law, as during the Enlightenment there were many emerging scientific schools which undermined the place of religion and spirituality such as the theories of the materialists<sup>4</sup>. Exploring these arguments, Lovecraft found in the materialistic philosophy of the enlightenment something which greatly appealed to him, as it helped him finding the stance he needed versus the spiritualists. Influenced by the theories of thinkers such as Thomas Henry Huxley (known as Darwin's bulldog for

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<sup>2</sup> "Enlightenment The Age of."

<sup>3</sup> Williams, David, *The Enlightenment*, P. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, David, *The Enlightenment*, P. 8.



advocating his theories further) and other materialists he adopted his own philosophy of what can be termed as mechanistic Materialism<sup>5</sup>.

In short the materialism of the enlightenment was a scientific philosophy which explained the universe as a complete mechanical and natural system and that it ran independently without any external aid such as god or spiritual beings. Appreciating the achievements of the scientific revolution, it sought to explain every single phenomena in the universe “*entirely* through the motion of matter under physical laws, then just as surely as the gears of a clock completely determine that it will strike 2:00 an hour after it strikes 1:00.” (“Mechanistic materialism”) This triumphant discovery of the enlightenment was only possible when scientists disbanded the religious doctrines of the church in order to explain the workings of the universe. It gained considerable momentum with men such as La Mettrie, Descartes and Hobbes who evolved the materialism philosophy during the age of enlightenment<sup>6</sup>.

There was of course great variation in the exact nature of the materialism, and different theorizes evolved as a result of the arguments that followed as it became one of the battlegrounds about man's place in nature. The nature of that argument being how much of the human being was a mechanical thing and how much of it was spiritual. The hard core materialists claimed that the human being was a pure mechanical construct and a result of random chance, but was not the result of some divine plan of God. The spiritualists argued versus this notion as they were not at all at ease with the idea of man being purely a mechanical thing, because if these claims of the hard-lined materialist were true, they would render the notion of the soul false. However there were some who sought to compromise the two theories, by joining the spiritual with the mechanical. If true, the claims about man being a completely mechanical being would render the bible's claim irrelevant about him being the master of nature. As a result he would be put in the same position as the animals of the earth, and no better but for his intelligent. This was exactly the point which raised Lovecraft's interest, and it is visible in his tales through his universal setting of cosmicism, which presents the reader with a world where man is exactly that: just another tiny insect on the insignificant planet earth.

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<sup>5</sup> S.T. Josh, *The annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, P, 11.

<sup>6</sup> "Mechanistic Materialism."

Descartes was one of those who sought to join the two theories together, in a dualism theory of materialism and spiritualism, which explained that the universe was composed of two different substances: the corporeal and the mental. He was satisfied with the mechanical principles used in explaining the behaviour of animals and inanimate objects but he said that it did not explain the workings of the human being. By claiming that the human mind could not be explained by pure material substances he referred to proofs such as the human speech. He concluded therefore that every individual had along with his corporeal substance, had a spiritual element that was supposed to be the soul<sup>7</sup>. While Descartes saw these as a separate identity, Julien Offray de La Mettrie in his paper *L'homme machine* (Machine Man) combined the two. While not dismissing entirely the notion of the soul, he combined the materialistic with the spiritual theories but explained it purely as a materialistic element. What other compromised with, within the terms of materialism, Lovecraft did not. He adopted the version of the hard-line materialists that were somewhat close to the theories of La Mettrie. Being a pure and a simple atheist he believed only in the physical and scientific aspects of this world and as such the scientific notions of the materialist theories appealed to him, along with any other related scientific theories that could disprove the notion of the spirit. He found for example relation in Einstein's theory of relativity, concerning energy. Lovecraft himself said in one of his letters; "For matter, it appears, really is exactly what "spirit" was always supposed to be. Thus it is proved that wandering energy always has a detectable form-that if it doesn't take the form of waves or electron-streams, it becomes matter itself." Following his own words about the theory being that it was "an absolute coup de grace to the primitive and irresponsible myth of "spirit" (Qtd. In Joshi 12). This shows the considerable passion that Lovecraft had for any attempts to show to the spiritualists the non-existence of the soul, ghosts, god, or any other super-natural things.

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<sup>7</sup> Rosenthal, *Materialism and the Mind-body Problem*, P, 8.

## Humanity's place in nature

It was from these materialistic principles, which Lovecraft adopted from the Enlightenment, that he evolved a philosophy that could be termed as cosmic materialism or Cosmicism. It was the evolution of his mechanical materialist's views into a framework fitting for his literary works. Unique to Lovecraft this cosmicism became the centrepiece in his horror literature: used in the so-called Cthulu mythos.

In this fictional universe of Cosmicism was coined the philosophy that in the grand scheme of the universe, the human species is nothing but mere insects that plague the surface of this insignificant planet we dare call our own. He presents a world where instead of any heart-warming spirituality there is nothing but the cold dark void between the stars and the elder beings that await there. Them being so ancient that even the earth's age is but a tiny fragment of their lifetime. However the exact nature of this cosmicism of his will be discussed later in further detail, as first its origin will be explored.

Lovecraft being the scientific atheist that he was, dealt with the question of religion rather brutally in his literature, a view which will be examined by starting with Lovecraft relation to Thomas Henry Huxley. Though separated by a nearly sixty year gap, they shared quite common ideals. It was in Huxley that Lovecraft may have found his mentor when it came to criticizing religion and this super-belief in the human individual, and his so called psyche such as the theosophists did. Lovecraft openly admitted his admiration of Huxley's work, both had in common that they opposed the creationist perspective and any metaphysical connection between evolution and religion. Huxley being an agnostic and Lovecraft an atheist they had no need for any religious meaning to life<sup>8</sup>, they were therefore free to criticize those who had so much need for it. The mechanistic viewpoint which Lovecraft adhered to allowed him to claim that religion and spirituality was a pointless thing in life, a viewpoint which during his lifetime was not so

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<sup>8</sup> Abel, "Humanity's Place in Nature, 1863 – 1928: Horror, Curiosity and the Expeditions of Huxley, Wallace, Blavatsky and Lovecraft.", p, 74.

widespread. He shared the view of the scientist and maintained that with every new step of scientific discovery it became harder for the spiritualists to maintain their claims, as they had to constantly adapt their religious claims to the rapidly evolving sciences. Huxley attempted to show in his text *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, that the difference between man and animals was not as great as most people claimed. However he did separate the morals of man and the animals, giving man therefore a spiritual advantage over the animals. But on the physical difference he said that the brains of a man and a Chimpanzee were very much alike<sup>9</sup>. By saying that he was rendering the spiritualist's claim of the soul as something quite insignificant, and giving the materialists and Lovecraft an added point to use in their arguments.

The cosmicism that Lovecraft had created in his literature seems to have arisen from his desire to prophesise a version of the universe, which was devoid of any spirituality to those who believed so fanatically in their religious scriptures. Perhaps he hoped that the spiritualists would be humbled in the face of such possibilities and perhaps accept the scientific truths, but one can only speculate about his exact reasons behind the cosmicism. However that much is clear from his literature and letter writings that he did indeed believe in the mechanical universe of the materialists. Being such a hard lined atheist, he seems to have found it foolish for others to think otherwise, but his own words can describe it much better:

All notions of cosmic consciousness and purpose, and of the importance of man in the limitless pattern of the universe, are plainly myths born of the imperfect information of man's early days. (qtd. in "Against Religion: The Atheist Writings of H. P. Lovecraft.").

Despite the truth staring straight in the eye of an individual, some can find it hard to acknowledge as the need for religion has always been strong in the roots of man, be it the need for some sort of superstition, just plain old luck, or the divinity of God. One of the

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<sup>9</sup> Abel, "Humanity's Place in Nature, 1863 – 1928: Horror, Curiosity and the Expeditions of Huxley, Wallace, Blavatsky and Lovecraft.", p, 76.

first steps in this argument to oppose religion began with the astronomy theories when it was theorized that the planet revolved around the sun, but not the other way around. Then along came theories such as the evolution theory by Charles Darwin and later the hard core materialists as a result from the Enlightenment, and the opposed thinking versus the church that it started. What this meant to the religiously inclined Christians, was that people suddenly had to face the fact that the pedestal which man had been placed on was false. As according to the book of Genesis when God supposedly created Adam and Eve, he granted Adam the power over all other animals on this earth, meaning that man was not only supposed to be the lord over nature and any animal on the earth, but he was also far more superior due to his soul. The scientific truth meant that man in essence was not that much better than the mud crawling animals, besides the fact that he had mastered the use of language and the written language. If the Christian church accepted these theories as the truth, they would immediately render man and God as an insignificant thing when compared to the cosmos, just as Lovecraft was trying to depict. The ideological war of mans superiority over nature was lost as the sciences became a predominant cultural value, although not all did accept it as such. These attempts to maintain this spiritual superiority over nature by ignoring the sciences could be viewed as blatant arrogance, especially when compared to the so called cosmic 'truth' which Lovecraft presented to his readers so exaggeratedly in his tales, within his universal philosophy of cosmicism. Through the materialism he had found his place in nature, and though the results were exaggerated and not at all scientific, it allowed him to vent his ideological frustration in the enclosed environment which was his own medium. With his stories he tackled the arguments of the enlightenment, with the theories before mentioned as his guides. Perhaps his frustration towards the spiritualist was what urged him to create this world of his.

## **The theosophists**

When discussing Lovecraft's opinion towards religion and how it affects his stories, there is a certain belief that is the perfect example to use in explaining his disposition towards spirituality, and that is Theosophy. Theosophy is a doctrine of religious philosophy, which

upholds the belief that every religion of the world contains a portion of some sort of a universal truth. By finding this grain of truth in them all and combining them, the theosophists believe that this so called universal spiritual truth can be discovered, and as a result man can reach his spiritual potential. In order to investigate every religion of the world, the theosophists therefore had to abandon all organized religion, as not to be shackled by the restraints that the traditional organized religious structures are, much in the spirit of the Enlightenment. However, the theosophists obviously ignored the materialistic principles of the Enlightenment, that the universe could be explained scientifically. Instead they proclaimed that the universe was some sort of a spiritual consciousness, in which the planets, solar system and every single living thing in it were joined in some spiritual way. Amongst the things they sought to investigate were the so called; "... unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man" ("Objectives & Fundamentals."). Meaning that according to their view, science did not explain the wonders of the universe, and therefore they would have to explain it by religion. The part about "powers latent in man" meant that they searched the spiritual upheaval of the human being. In order to discover the necessary truths they believed they would have to discover this universal truth of theirs. Being a religion after all, it conflicted with the theories of the materialism and related scientific breakthroughs. Lovecraft had a clear dislike for their theories. Theirs was a spiritual fulfilment which they sought by finding these so called "powers latent in man". It was based on pure ideology and wishful thinking, like all religion, instead of relying on scientific facts.

There is a passage in his story *The Call of Cthulu* (to be discussed later) that seems to have been written specifically for people such as the theosophists and other religiously inclined. In this passage he openly insults the theosophists though first he gives them credit for having discovered the hint of the "awesome grandeur of the cosmic cycle" (Elliot 34). The commonality of the theosophist with the cosmicism of Lovecraft is in knowing that there is some sort of a universal truth. Though he notes that if this so called truth of theirs had not been masked by their bland optimism, it would freeze their very blood if they would find out about it.

Theosophists have guessed at the awesome grandeur of the cosmic cycle wherein our world and human race form transient incidents. They have hinted at strange survivals in terms which would freeze the blood if not masked by a bland optimism. But it is not from them that there came the single glimpse of forbidden eons which chills me when I think of it and maddens me when I dream of it. (Elliot 34).

Here, this mocking does not stop at the mere notion that they have guessed at the awesome grandeur of it, but goes on in an attempt to convey the message that their universal truth is not as glorious as they think it to be. Not only that but he also shows how hopeless he deems their optimistic efforts. For instance where he describes fits of madness all around the earth, connected to the rumblings of Cthulu in *The Call of Cthulu* he writes the following; “A dispatch from California describes a theosophist colony as donning white robes en masse for some 'glorious fulfilment' which never arrives” (Elliot 40). He even captions the words *glorious fulfilment* adding even more to his insulting sarcasms. However the theosophists were not the only religion that Lovecraft openly mocked in his literature, religion in general was a thing he seemed to have ill disregard for. Cults were one of those religious groups that got quite a harsh treatment in his tales and in cases such as *The Call of Cthulu*, the cult worshippers are described as dark degenerate things. It is possible that this might be tied to some racial prejudices, as their worshippers are never whites, but the aforementioned wickedly degenerate blacks. But the matter of racial prejudices could be case for a whole different research. The irony being that the degenerate voodoo cults seem to be the only ones with any real idea of what is out there, as they worship the dark things, such as Cthulu or the Old Ones. Mockingly they are far from rewarded by worshipping what seems to be the only thing near to some sort of religious truth. They therefore gain nothing to the likes of any spiritual fulfilment most people get from praying to the supposed real religions of the universe not belonging to the literary world of Lovecraft's.

What was peculiar to the theosophists is that they had something in common with Lovecraft, this notion of some sort of universal truth. But this truth in the eyes of

Lovecraft was something which he used to mock this religious pursuit of theirs to the extreme, by using the same concept but within the far more horrific and darker parameters of his literature. It could be said therefore that the theosophy is somewhat the antithesis of Lovecraft's cosmicism, due to this mirroring of the universal truth and the ironic similarities the both have, the heart warming spirituality of the theosophists versus the cold cosmic universe of Lovecraft.

## **The world of Cosmicism**

This cosmicism of Lovecraft has been mentioned before, but the large concept that it is, it cannot be fully explained in a few sentences. It has been hinted that Lovecraft's desire to put the theosophists, and other spiritualists in their place had something to do with the formation of his cosmicism, and his disdain towards the ideas of superiority that religions often inspire in people. Example of this superiority is the Christian notion of man being the lord of earth and all its animals, or when unproven religious claims are held in higher esteem than hard scientific facts. If he sought to humble those who adhered to such ideas by presenting something grander than their faith, he partly succeeded. By envisioning in his cosmicism a universe which was devoid of all spirituality and so cold that it freezes all hopes of man with a mere momentary glimpse into this unknown of his.

But what is this Cosmicism of his really? It is present in the Cthulu mythos and it is the framework that ties those tales together, a sort of a universal central concept which allows him to tell different stories in a consistent universe. This universe of the cosmicism is a cold and a mechanical one, in which the human being is as an insignificant thing as the ants of this earth. Rendered so by things such as the existence of some sort of cosmic beings, he calls the Old ones who wait somewhere in the space beyond. As Lovecraft puts it; "The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be. Not in the spaces we know, but between them" (Joshi 132). Then until one day, they can be freed from these dimensions unknown to us and return to the earth and reign over it as they did some untold eons ago. These Old ones are close be to gods, as they are mentioned being the centre of worship for the cults in his stories. However they are something else entirely, they are too cold and mechanical to be anything near spiritual



beings. They are the envisioned beings of a mechanical universe, so far beyond the human understanding that to understand anything of it will turn any man insane and beyond from the merest glimpse of it, as often happens to his protagonists.

They walk unseen and foul in lonely places where the  
Words have been spoken and the rites howled through at  
their seasons. The wind gibbers with Their voices, and the  
earth mutters with Their consciousness. They bend the  
forest and crush the city, yet may not forest or city behold  
the hand that smites. (Joshi 132)

This quote here from the story the “Dunwich Horror”, is a testament to how grand and powerful these gods are supposed to be. To reach and worship these gods the antihero of his tales uses some sort of diabolical magic as they connect to the portion of the universal truth, and in return it inflicts in every instance some hellish harm and insanity upon those connected to it. In the story “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” that is exactly what happens; the main character of the tale perishes because of his dabbling with this cosmic some sort of cosmic magic. Whatever the nature of this magic, it is not in itself evil. Like most things in the tales of Lovecraft, it merely operates on an entirely different plane of understanding. It is too far beyond the human comprehension to understand, as it warps and twists the human mind incapable of handling it. Its grandness will with certainty drive any man beyond the brink of sanity and into madness far beyond anything which is normal. Often his tales centre exactly on that, the maddening knowledge and the contents of that revelation when the human mind realises its insignificance in comparison to the universe of Lovecraft.

These grand revelations of Lovecraft have to do with the concepts that are mentioned before, about religion and spirituality being trivial things. He explains it in the following words; "All my tales ... are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large."(Qtd. In Kneale 110) This is precisely what the Cosmicism allows him

to portray to his reader, and as the subject of his tales realises its limitations and irrelevant place in the cosmos, Lovecraft demands that the reader does so as well.

One of his tools to help bring that realisation about is the morality of these elder beings, and the aforementioned grand purpose of the Old ones when compared to the scope of what the mind of man can realize. These horrific alien beings he portrays are therefore so far from the human thinking patterns that their actions could not in any way be categorized as evil. Even though they cause death, confusion or mind shattering madness, those things are mere side effects of their existence, not evil actions in themselves. By saying that they are evil, would mean after all that they would have human morality, which these beings have not<sup>10</sup>. Transferring our human like qualities upon beings which have nothing to us in common, is a recurring tendency for the human mind to do, it implies our automatic attempts to control and categorize the world around us, so what we can feel like we are in control. And if one thing is for sure, it is that the beings of the Cthulu mythos do fall under the category of human terms.

Declaring that a predator is evil merely because it kills another animal is not a justifiable explanation. The predator does not live in the same semantic universe that man has constructed for himself therefore it cannot be assumed that the act of an animal killing another is an evil act; it is merely the course that nature runs. Much like the course of the cosmic universe runs, in the stories of Lovecraft, the difference between the human species and the aliens of Lovecraft is too great to categorize them as evil.

The story *Color out of Space* is the perfect example of this cosmic lack of human morality. It centres on a meteor that fell down in western Massachusetts and a surveyor who is investigating the area. The story is told to the reader as the protagonist discovers the tale of that meteor, as the incidents after its fall of the meteor are recounted. After its fall it spread some sort of blight in the surrounding soil, poisoning the vegetation, animals and eventually everything around it falls prey to brittle death as it crumbles into dust. This meteorite is a representation of the Lovecraft cosmic horror, a completely unknowable factor, as it seems that no matter what analysis the meteorite is exposed to, nothing can be revealed about its nature. It then not only perverts its surrounding countryside, with its growth of alien vegetation and deaths of all nearby organic matter,

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<sup>10</sup> Kneale, "From Beyond: H. P. Lovecraft and the Place of Horror.", p, 110

but it also causes the death of the inhabitants of the nearby farm. As before, to imply that the meteorite and the events that it causes are evil acts would be a mistake, the actions it causes are meant to be beyond the comprehension of the reader, operating on a plane of laws far beyond our own. Therefore all the injustices it causes are mere side products of its cosmic actions, be it some act of reverse-terraforming, exploration, or a mere picnic-trip in which our planet just happened to be the perfect spot.

These beings in his stories that operate on completely different principles help (widen) the gap of non-comprehension. Being one of the tools which therefore make the theory of cosmicism much more effective, coupled with the concept of universal truth it makes for an effective image. That and this dark mysterious universe create a powerful background for his stories.

## **The sublime at work in Lovecraft**

The philosopher and idealist Edmund Burke, who lived during the 18th century, was an influential man during the Enlightenment. His treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* explains the working of the sublime and the beautiful on the human mind. When Lovecraft's ideas about horror are examined, it seems that Burke's ideas have had some effect on the formation on Lovecraft's ideas about horror. Therefore Burke's explanations on the sublime in his aforementioned paper will be briefly explored, in order to understand better what it is that H.P Lovecraft is trying to achieve with his tales of horror.

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary describes the sublime as something being "of such excellence, grandeur, or beauty as to inspire great admiration or awe" (Soanes "sublime"). Lovecraft however focused on the subliminal as a source of terror so the part about inspiring great admiration or awe is something that Lovecraft did. What Burke said about the sublime, that it "is what has the power to both compel and destroy us, while the beautiful is what is visually and aesthetically pleasing"( Burke "sublime"). He speculated also that the subliminal terror was the one of the strongest emotions possible for the mind to experience, quoting his own words; "No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear" (Burke "Terror"). When coupled with the

sublime this terror becomes all too powerful, much more powerful than the idea of any pleasant feelings. It is so strong that it can completely dominate the mind. Therefore, in short the sublime in the case of Lovecraft writings is something so grand that it inspires great admiration in the mind of the viewer while terrifying him by the power it has to compel and destroy him within the framework of the literary world. This resonates so perfectly with the grandeur and horrible world of Cosmicism in Lovecraft's tales. The grand things within it, is something that fits perfectly within the workings of the sublime. As an example of this, Burke said the following about grand things within the sublime.

And to things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror, they become without comparison greater. A level plain of a vast extent on land, is certainly no mean idea; the prospect of such a plain may be as extensive as a prospect of the ocean: but can it ever fill the mind with anything so great as the ocean itself. (Burke "Terror")

How could Lovecraft not have been inspired by this, after all his whole idea of cosmic terror is built upon this empty vastness of space and the obscure horror that it might contain. In cases such as the story *At the mountains of madness*, he applies this principle to locations such as the empty Antarctic wastes and the hidden city of the Old ones. In *The Call of Cthulu* it is the sunken city R'lyeh that lies somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. In those tales, the true vastness and grandeur of these places help make them more horrifying. These locations and the idea of cosmicism are something so grand that they inspire great admiration in the mind of the viewer, while also terrifying him by the power they have to both compel and destroy him within the framework of the literary world.

One of the more important aspects in creating an effective horror tale, is giving rise to the things you cannot wholly see, so that the imagination can take care of the rest, as the things we create with our imagination are often far more horrific than those we see with our eyes. Thus one of the more powerful tools in the toolbox of the horror writer is the obscure, which Lovecraft uses often, as an attempt to instil the feeling of awe and submissiveness towards his grand creations. The obscure was what Burke said that truly

could make things appear terrible to the human mind. However when we realize the full extent of things as they are brought to light, we get accustomed to them and they lose much of their horrific appeal. Lovecraft used these ideas of Burke's, in his philosophy of cosmicism and subliminal terror. Therefore he adopted the idea of obscurity on a grand scale, by presenting this cold and unknowable truth to his reader, along with all the cold harsh factors of the cosmicism.

What this has to do with Lovecraft is that it seems that Burke's theories on the sublime obviously contained something which Lovecraft could relate to, in his portrayal of terror and grandeur. This he did with the purpose of making his cosmicism grander, to further humble his target groups, both the spiritualists and his honest readers.

## **Case studies**

### ***Call of Cthulhu***

The cosmicism of Lovecraft is not always presented in the same manner in his tales; sometimes it can be quite subliminal in tales such as "Color Out of Space", while in others such as *At the Mountains of Madness* it is slightly more direct and straightforward. In the light of the aforementioned themes of the enlightenment, three tales of Lovecraft will be explored in reference to those subjects, and how they connect to those stories.

This investigation will begin with the story "The Call of Cthulu". The typical Lovecraft story is almost always told from a fictional second hand narrative, and "The Call of Chtulhu" is no exception to that rule. Its narrator, a some sort of a journalist is piecing together the puzzle of his dead uncle's research. The story is told from the perspective of that narrator as he recounts the information which has lead him to that state of mind he is currently in, as the story begins. Immediately it is noticeable that his mind is not at ease, but tormented by some unspoken terrors he dares not to mention. The passage which here follows, does better justice at describing his thoughts than any recount can do.

But it is not from them that there came the single glimpse of forbidden eons which chills me when I think of it and maddens me when I dream of it. That glimpse, like all dread glimpses of truth, flashed out from an accidental piecing together of separated things - in this case an old newspaper item and the notes of a dead professor. I hope that no one else will accomplish this piecing out; certainly, if I live, I shall never knowingly supply a link in so hideous a chain. I think that the professor, too intended to keep silent regarding the part he knew, and that he would have destroyed his notes had not sudden death seized him. (Elliot 34)

These are the first glimpses the reader gets into the horrors that will be revealed to him, a subtle brainteaser, which leaves the narrator guessing. Eventually Lovecraft slowly peels off the layers from the horrendous truths that the narrator uncovers from his uncle's research, with his typical subtle hints in the nature of Burke's obscurity. Using the uncle's research as the skeleton that holds the structure of the story together as the narrators tells those who would listen about what he has glimpsed from his uncle's manuscripts. From those manuscripts of his, the story switches to mentions of strange and freakish dreams all around the globe, connected to the rumblings of Cthulhu. Next it switches to an inspector as he investigates some horrendous voodoo Cthulu cult, and the last part is the diary of a Norwegian sailor who encountered the Chtulhu monster on the monstrous island city R'lyeh. The reader follows the narrator throughout the story as he slowly uncovers the realities of his uncle's discoveries and by each bit of paper he reads, the reader slowly realizes the full extent of these horrors that the narrator hints at in the beginning. As this journey becomes clearer, the subtle insanity of the story becomes all the more real as the narrator recounts his realization of the true horrors which his uncle uncovered. Still those truths are not as direct so that Lovecraft explains every detail of it to the reader; instead he attempts to build upon the so-called unknown knowledge of

Burke. The theory that the things that we cannot know, nor fully explain are those we fear the most.

Lovecraft usually has about three different endings to all of his tales. As the world known to the subject is deconstructed and destroyed it always succumbs to one of three almost equally horrible fates which are; total insanity, death, or some sort of depraved tormenting existence. In looking at the nature of those fates let us start with the total insanity; it is usually the fault of the subject having glimpsed this universal truth, which it cannot fathom. The death is usually due to some mysterious circumstances, never fully disclosed. The third fate is usually some tormented existence that follows after having glimpsed some portion of the cosmic world, but not enough to succumb to complete madness.

In the instance of “The Call of Cthulu” the narrator ends the tale with the following words as he indicates that he too will soon perish in the same manner as his uncle. The exact nature of his uncle’s death is not mentioned but for the mention of some “nautical-looking negro”(Elliot 35) having jostled him on some street corner and soon after he met his death; probably due to some dark Cthulhu magic. Therefore the message is that those who catch such glimpse of what lies behind the curtains of this world into this cosmic ether, suffer one of those fates. Be it the Old Ones. Such are the horrors that the cosmic sublime can inflict on the fragile human mind. The horror in the story is an enlightened horror spawned from the ideals of the materialist in the hope to humble the religiously inclined such as the theosophist. Disregarding the notion of religion, as almost every mention of a cult or a religion contains in one way or the others some sort of an insult.

### ***Color out of space***

The story *Color out of Space* (as discussed before) is an excellent sample of the cosmic sublime at work in the Cthulhu mythos, and is the perfect example of the insignificance of the real world in face of this cosmic universe of Lovecraft. To sum up the story, it tells

the tale of a strange meteorite, the nearby farm to where it crashed to the earth and the peculiarities surrounding it. The tale begins with the meteorite itself, and the examinations concerning it. As scientists attempt to analyse the meteor it strangely seems to thwart every test that the scientists attempt in order to analyse it, so that no knowledge of the object is attainable. Even the very meteorite colour seems to be something which no man can understand, not even the most learned scientists and their equipment<sup>11</sup>. As its colour is something which Lovecraft describes as being outside of any known spectrum to man, it becomes to the reader a completely unknown factor. The story builds upon this element of the Burke's sublime that we are fearful of that which we do not know. The meteor and the event it causes is the perfect example of this.

It was just a colour out of space - a frightful messenger  
from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we  
know it; from realms whose mere existence stuns the brain  
and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws  
open our frenzied eyes (Joshi 99)

The narrator is here awestruck due to his lack of knowledge, where his normal understanding fails and the subliminal takes hold. The horror of not understanding the thing frightens him as, and meanwhile it also captivates him. Just as the effects which Burke describes of the sublime. However by itself the meteor could not function as an object of terror, it is merely the cause for other far more horrific things to occur in the tale. The growth of some sort of alien plants and other freakish occurrences which cause unspeakable horrors to the Gardner family which resides on the farm, made so horrible by the fact that so little is revealed of the nature of these horrors. All that is known is that some sort of strange plants started to grow after the fall of the meteoroid and the livestock fell due to some horrible plague and was literally disintegrated in the end. While eventually the family itself fell victim to freakish Lovecraft insanity, plague and some form of mutation.

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<sup>11</sup> Bradley, "H. P. Lovecraft and the Semiotic Kantian Sublime.", p, 11



All these horrors which plagued the Gardners and lead to their demise had this unknowable factor, despite having an obvious source. The exact nature of their ailments and the events of the story is something that completely eludes the reader of the tale, and is thus all the more terrifying. This central theme of the story, failure of understanding is also central concept in Lovecraft's works as he constantly plays with some sort of embodiment of the unattainable knowledge. It is also a perfect testament about the truth of Burke's theory about the obscure.

### ***At the Mountains of Madness***

*At the Mountains of Madness*, is one of the few short stories written by Lovecraft, being one of his latter tales, it is where his style of writing becomes quite polished and to the point. It follows a geologist named William Dyer as he embarks on a scientific mission to explore the Antarctic, as his group finds some sorts of ancient life forms that date back to about fifty million years and have no other precedent in the history of the earth. Life forms that we later discover that are the Old ones themselves. The unusual thing to this story is its directness, along with the accomplished subtleness of the subliminal fear. Continuing the gradual slow revelation of the cosmic horror as it evolves from the typical subliminal Lovecraft hints of monstrosity, to a more direct confrontation and an unravelling of his universe to the reader. Where the narrator enters the so-called Mountains of Madness and discovers that the mountains are the long abandoned city of the Old Ones. At that part it becomes the bluntest, as it turns into some sort of a proto science fiction story. As our protagonist enters these mountains, he encounters the chronicles of the Old ones, describing their arrival at the earth and their story until the fall of their civilization. These chronicles not only tell us about the Old ones, but as well their wars with the Cthulu spawn and their slave creations the so called Shoggoths, along with the fungi like race the Mi-go.

It is in effect the backgrounds of the cosmic universe of Lovecraft coming to light as the creatures whose racial story we are told, are beings we encounter in many of his tales. But their nature has always been hidden in the shadow as a part of the subliminal source of terror. Still these chronicles and the grandeur of the things in *At the Mountains*

*of Madness* such as the mountains themselves are quite impressive. Coming face to face with the powerful race of the Old ones, has without a doubt a powerful effect on the avid reader of Lovecraft. The Old ones are so strong and resilient that they seem to be capable of coming back to life after having been frozen stasis for about fifty million years. About those beings Lovecraft writes:

They were the Great Old Ones that had filtered down from the stars when the earth was young the beings whose substance an alien evolution had shaped, and whose powers were such as this planet had never bred. (Joshi 268)

Still despite the grandeur of those Old ones, even they talk of some beings which they dare not mention. That phrase “daring not to mention” something is a very iconic phrase of Lovecraft, used to describe horrors such as the Old ones themselves in many stories. Therefore to the reader that knows the tales of Lovecraft, is used to imagine unimaginable horrors when he reads this phrase. By using this phrase in conjunction with the Old Ones, he plants the idea that even the horrible Old ones can be afraid. By going to the extent of having the expedition partner of the protagonist glimpses those said horrors that are mentioned in the chronicles of the Old ones, he makes them quite tangible to the reader. That coupled with the grand awestruck feelings that the mountains of madness inspire, make up for a very powerful subliminal effect that almost humbles the reader.

This racial tale of the Old ones is a part of the cosmicism theory of Lovecraft, in its most direct form, transferred into some sort of a science fiction tale. As such with this story, he turns any thoughts that his cosmic universe might be a supernatural one, or the idea that the gods mentioned in his stories before might be actual gods, aside. He effectively makes the universe of his a rational and a scientific one, by chronicling the tales of these ancient races who have been the fuel of his horror stories he completely forgoes any notion of supposed spirituality or religious nature. So that any of those cults he mentioned in his stories never worshipped any spiritual beings, merely something that was beyond their tiny minds and was a result of a misinterpretation, adding even more to

the irony of how spirituality is presented in his tales. It is a grand story like most of his tales, attempt to humble the reader by making him awestruck.



## Conclusion

Being this keen academic thinker, Lovecraft's keen scientific mind allowed him to create a world so peculiar that no one had ever before imagined such vast horrors. So unique was his creation, that even today, the writers of horror look to him for inspiration as this grand vision of the cosmicism has taken on a life of its own. Having had its influence on much of today's media, the grand vision of cosmicism has lived beyond the lifespan of Lovecraft not only in literature but as well in comics, movies, video games and even board games. The reason for the uniqueness of his creation comes from this atheist hard liner values, his scientific mind had a hard time accepting the babble of the religious types. By venting his frustration into his literary work, he managed to create the unique world of cosmicism. Within that framework he was free to hassle and criticise anyone he wanted. The pure philosophy of it was enough to be marked as blasphemous by any church. Being such a mechanical and cold creation, Lovecraft marked man as an insignificant thing, just as the academic schools of sciences made him out to be, as the materialism for instance. Despite having brought such a harsh message across, the Cosmicism was not an entirely scientific thing, after all it was a world within the works of literature, and not some treatise of scientific essays. However it was at least as scientific as one can get within the parameters of a literary universe. It included dark cosmic magic, cold cosmic beings, horrendous fates to those who glimpsed it, grand places of obscurity and many horrible and unmentionable things. All together it created a universe so powerful and unique that it has had its effect on any reader of his tales. He wanted to scare his readers, and without a doubt as has been explored, a part of his reason was some desire to humble the spiritualists and non-scientific believers to their senses with a combination of the Burke's sublime and the Cosmicism. No matter what however, Lovecraft wrote because he enjoyed it.

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